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Atmosphere and Religious Experience in American Transcendentalism

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Abstract

I propose a new intellectual history of how the aesthetic obtains religious value in the American literary tradition. According to the account that prevails from Perry Miller to Tracy Fessenden, the Transcendentalists collapse scripture and literature into a single secular category. I argue instead that the Transcendentalists redraw the distinction along aesthetic criteria. A text's sacred status has little to do with who wrote it when, and everything to do with a particular aesthetic quality expressive of divine inspiration. Scholarship has neglected two concepts instrumental to this development: the religious sentiment and atmosphere. Unitarian and Calvinist norms held all religious practice to the test of scripture and empirical reason. The Transcendentalists found scripture too polyvocal, reason too limited, to ground religion. They championed an alternative standard: the religious sentiment, an intrinsic spiritual impulse. Like other impulses, the religious sentiment compels expression and satisfaction, both of which proceed not only from devotional practices, but from divinely inspired literature as well. The second concept, atmosphere, develops primarily through Emerson's essays and lectures to explain how the religious sentiment manifests in aesthetic form. Inspired literature is intensely atmospheric. And only intensely atmospheric literature can satisfy the religious sentiment. Ultimately, I hope to lay the methodological foundations necessary for a robust scholarly inquiry into atmospheric form among such twentieth-century poets as Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery, all of whom continue to associate atmosphere with a heightened clarity of mind and depth of experience.

Summary for Lay Audience

The Transcendentalists make literature religious. First, they say that we all have a faculty called the “religious sentiment.” The religious sentiment is like hunger, except where hunger makes us crave food, the religious sentiment makes us crave spiritual fulfillment. Just as we get more and more hungry the longer we go without eating, so the religious sentiment craves more and more the longer we go without spiritual fulfillment. Prayer satisfies the religious sentiment. So does reading the Bible. But what makes the Transcendentalists so revolutionary is that they say *art* can satisfy the religious sentiment, too. Not all works of art—only art that is divinely inspired. To make this argument, they needed a new concept for some aesthetic quality that only inspired art can have. They found their concept in “atmosphere.” By “atmosphere,” they meant more or less the same thing we mean today when we say, “this restaurant has a nice atmosphere,” or “old houses have more atmosphere than the new cookie-cutters”: a feeling, a mood, haunts about a certain place or object. For the Transcendentalists, atmosphere is not spiritual. Neither is it material. It is *both* spiritual *and* material. Just as a prism refracts a beam of light into shapes and colours that play upon the wall, so matter refracts spirit into atmosphere. Just as the shapes and colours are not *just* light or *just* prism, so atmosphere is not *just* spirit or *just* matter, but something that happens when spirit and matter come together. Now, the Transcendentalists wrote a lot of literature. And they wanted their literature to satisfy the religious sentiment. So they developed ways of writing atmospherically. I consider what some of these ways of writing are, and how they work.

Acknowledgements

The greatest challenge I faced in writing this dissertation involved refining my deviant new-critical tendencies into a more historically-informed formalism. I was desperate for models to emulate—formalists are hard to come by these days. I consider myself lucky to have found two in my supervisors Joshua Schuster and Kate Stanley, who showed me how I could observe disciplinary standards without compromising my principles. Prof. Stanley taught me that method does not necessarily inhibit the spontaneity necessary to read and write, but can actually enhance it. Her calm and welcoming temperament sets the perfect tone for thought and discussion. Prof. Schuster convinced me to renounce some of my more tenacious old-soul prejudices: it's not necessarily a *bad* thing to be fashionable, I now realize. I still return to *The Ecology of Modernism* (2015) as an example of how wow-appeal can be more than just a gimmick, how it can enhance the reading experience without tarnishing clarity of expression.

I am conscious of a hypothetical reader which functions as a kind of conscience, admonishing me when I write something fluffy or self-indulgent. I anticipate how it might react or not react, and this helps me decide what to keep and what to cut. It corresponds to no one person I know in every-day life. It is rather a composite perspective made up mostly of past readers who have made an impression on me and whose opinions I care about. The degree to which a personality figures in the composite has nothing to do with whether or not they are likely to read the finished product. The real determinant involves the imaginative clarity with which I grasp their sensibility, and the extent to which I have felt charitably and justly evaluated by them. Professors Stanley and Schuster have

both left deep indentations in my hypothetical reader that I'm sure will persist long after graduation. On the merit of her precise feedback and direct personality, Alison Conway's voice has predominated in my readerly conscience for long stretches of writing, especially throughout the chapter on Jonathan Edwards.

Additional thanks are due to Bryce Traister, for generously agreeing to serve as my second reader even after leaving Western, and to Alyssa McLean, for her clear supplementary feedback. I owe my fellow graduate students an enormous debt for their conversation and emotional support: Christine Campana, Timothy Golub, Mikyla Hindson, Ian Hynd, Taylor Kraayenbrink, Jackie Reed, Andrew Sargent, Jeffrey Swim, and Lisa Templin, among others.

Without Ryan Harte, I probably would not have gotten my Ph.D. in the first place. And if I had, my dissertation would have struck an inferior standard. I would have continued to reject clarity and system for the familiar post-structuralist arguments, and I would not have learned to admire simplicity and flow in prose.

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Introduction

In his treatise *On the Nature of True Virtue* (1765), Jonathan Edwards denies worldly art any relation to religion more exalted than mere analogy: “for who will affirm that a disposition to approve of the harmony of good music, or the beauty of a square, or equilateral triangle, is the same as holiness, or a truly virtuous disposition of mind!” (105-106). By the 1840s, many of the Transcendentalists felt comfortable calling Edwards’ bluff. John Sullivan Dwight includes a virtuous disposition foremost among the “practical effects” of a “love of beauty”: “It disposes to order. It gives birth in the mind to an instinct of propriety. It suggests imperceptibly, it inclines gently, but irresistibly, to the fit action, to the word in season” (“Religion of Beauty” 3). By the time Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, art could take a seat at the very heart of religion: “the priest departs, the divine literatus comes” (*CPP*, 932). How do we get from Edwards to Whitman? How, in the United States of America during the first half of the nineteenth century, did literature go from being a supplemental to an essential part of religious experience?

According to a tradition of Americanist scholarship that stretches from Perry Miller to Tracy Fessenden, the Transcendentalists collapse scripture and literature into a single secular category. I argue that the Transcendentalists keep the distinction in place, but revise its constitutive criteria. What determines whether a text is sacred or not has less to do with who wrote it when than whether or not it is divinely inspired. The concept of atmosphere develops, first through Emerson’s essays and then through the criticism of

other Transcendentalists, to distinguish between inspired and uninspired literature at the level of aesthetic form rather than historical origin.¹

Towards a Genealogy of Atmosphere

My story begins with the seventeenth-century Protestant enthusiasm controversies in Europe.² “Enthusiasm” circulated as a derogatory term for modern-day prophets who mistook their own transient mania for divine revelation, superseding and elaborating upon the Bible. A source of enormous insurrectionary danger, enthusiasm was identified with the millennial sects that incited the Peasants War and the Anabaptist rebellion in Germany and, in England, Oliver Cromwell’s regicide (Pocock, 10). The Thirty Years’ War and the English Revolution both fed upon proliferating millenarian movements and other radical religious sects (Heyd 14). Theologians and philosophers committed enormous intellectual labours to discredit and regulate enthusiasm. In Germany, Heinrich

¹ I want to avoid representing transcendentalism as a monolith. At the same time, it is awkward to say, “a certain number of the Transcendentalists, at particular moments of their lives, in particular, historically-situated texts” over and over again. And so when I speak of “the Transcendentalists,” I mean a circle of Boston intellectuals who knew each other, published in *The Dial*, and generally identified as Transcendentalists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, Theodore Parker, Orestes Brownson, and Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, Francis Henry Hedge, and Christopher Pearse Cranch. I also include figures like John Sullivan Dwight and J. A. Saxton who published in *The Dial* and identified with Transcendentalism, but did not attend the meetings of the Transcendental Club. As divergent as this cohort may be, I have tried to limit my analysis to the paradigms they hold in common, marking divergences when relevant. I do not include figures like Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Ellery Channing the elder who were acquainted with the Transcendentalist circle but expressed ambivalence regarding core Transcendentalist paradigms.

² I borrow J. G. A. Pocock’s definition of enthusiasm: “The Greek *enthusiasmōs* carries the Latinate meanings of infusion and inspiration: the in-pouring or in-breathing of the divine, which comes to inhabit the person possessed, as it did the pythoress at Delphi, bringing the power to prophesy, which in turn came to mean both to foretell and to speak with tongues not one’s own. In Christian religion, it is possible to be possessed by the spirit, as the Hebrew prophets spoke the word of the Lord and the apostles at Pentecost were moved to speak with many tongues; but there are also false prophets, and the term enthusiasm very often indicates the delusion or imposture of those who falsely believe or profess that they have been possessed by the spirit” (9-10). I would only add that enthusiasm is associated in Christian religions with overwhelming, ecstatic emotion.

Bullinger, Friedrich Spanheim, and Johannes Hoornbeek declared all modern-day revelations false (Heyd, 25). In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke recognizes only scripture (440) and reason (431) as legitimate sources of religious authority. Any religious claims that contradict either or draw upon alternative sources have no right, in his eyes, to the tolerance of church or state.

In the new world, old-light Calvinists enforced Locke's standards to the extent of a rigid intellectualism that, in its most extreme variants, excluded affect from religious experience. Charles Chauncy decried trances, raptures, and "Exstasies" as signs of false religious joy (130). Even laughter "savour[ed] of too much Levity" for him (127). Jonathan Edwards agreed with the critique of enthusiasm in its broader strokes, but he also thought it went too far. He saw no reason why religious feelings might not augment devotional practice, so long as they conformed to scripture and submitted to reason. In *True Virtue*, he elevates beauty to the status of a pre-eminent religious affect. The unregenerate can discern in the beauty of the natural world a shadow, an analogue, to the beauty of God, preparing the soul for conversion. In "a mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, &c," God makes available to the unregenerate mind an "image" of His excellence (*NTV*, 22-39), but never His excellence itself. That God reserves for the elect. The holy spirit unites with the

regenerate soul, acting through it as an “indwelling vital principle” (DSL, 183), impelling virtuous action and instilling a holy clarity of mind.³

The critique of enthusiasm survived along with Locke’s two-pronged standard of religious authority well into the nineteenth century, finding its apotheosis in the Unitarians and their reconciliation of faith with empirical method. The Transcendentalists resuscitated Edwards’ reaction, this time with a more radical bent. Where Edwards negotiated with the Lockean standard, the Transcendentalists rejected it. “Locke was a great and good man, but his philosophy was defective,” Orestes Brownson quips, “and altogether unfriendly to religion” (“Evidences” 105). Scripture is far too “elastic,” Theodore Parker argues in his *Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion* (265), too indiscriminately accommodating of divergent interpretations, to reliably ground religious truths. And human rationalizing faculties are incommensurate with religious experience. God’s law is “neither an object of sensation nor an operation of the human mind” (Brownson, “Evidences” 108). It comes from elsewhere. Modern revelation may have been suppressed, but it never stopped. In fact, every human being has a natural faculty for revelation that circumvents even Christ’s preeminent mediation. As George Ripley puts it, “There is a faculty in all—the most degraded, the most ignorant, the most obscure—to perceive spiritual truth

³ Nancy Ruttenberg’s *Democratic Personality: Popular Voice and the Trial of American Authorship* (1998) is, in certain ways, a genealogy of enthusiasm in American religious and literary traditions. Democratic personality is her term for a distinctly American model of personality that makes its first appearance during the Salem witch trials and springs up again in the Great Awakening. From there, it enters American literature as a classic theme and archetype, defining fictional representations of Americanness from Cooper to Whitman and beyond (292-294). Democratic personality is multi-vocal and contagious. It leaps from person to person, inhabiting whole masses at once for brief, thrilling episodes before departing for another enlightened host. It originally takes the form of divine or infernal possession (5) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and from there evolves into a secular, Transcendentalist model that substitutes nature or a pantheistic spirit for angels and demons. It levels social hierarchies by appealing to spiritual authorities beyond the *polis*, allowing adolescent girls to counsel their elders and fishermen to denounce public authorities (31).

when distinctly presented” (quoted in Miller, *The Transcendentalists* 255). The Transcendentalists called this faculty the *religious sentiment*. The religious sentiment not only receives, but also craves revelatory experiences: “the religious sentiment is the response to that cry of the soul which nothing can silence, to that yearning after the infinite, which nothing can suppress” (Ripley, *Philosophical Miscellanies* 277). Just as hunger craves food, so the religious sentiment craves those devotional practices, those sermons, those works of art, that put it in contact with spiritual truths.

Upon satisfaction, the religious sentiment precipitates an illuminated state of mind, an exhilarating tranquility. Divinity fills private consciousness and orients it towards virtue. In the words of Theodore Parker,

in the deep silence of the heart, when the man turns inwards to God, light, comfort and peace dawn on him, like the day-spring from on high. He feels the Divinity. In that high hour of visitation, thought is entranced in feeling. We forget ourselves, yielding passive to the tide of soul that flows into us. Then man’s troubles are but a dew-drop on his sandals; his enmities or jealousies, his wealth or his poverty, his honors, disgraces, the sad mishaps of life are all lost to the view, diminished, and then hid in the misty deeps of the valley we have left. It is no vulgar superstition to say man is inspired in such moments. They are the seed-time of life. Then we live whole years, though in a few moments, and afterward as we journey on through life, cold and dusty and travel-worn and faint, we look back to that moment as the source of light, and like Elisha, go long days in the strength thereof. (69)

The ego dissolves. Narrow, selfish affairs disgust. Trivial matters engorged on anxiety shrivel back into the margins of concern, while the great questions of life—mortality, meaning, how to live a good life—weigh upon consciousness with the ponderous gravity they deserve. Thoughts range more daringly across broader fields of possibility. A person is more perceptive, discerning, acute, respectful, and generous than usual. Decisions tend to be a little more judicious, intuitions more precise. The soul rejects temptation. Sluggishness and overindulgence lose their portentous cast along with their appeal. The more immersively a life commits to the religious sentiment and its exalted mood, the more fully, meaningfully, and ethically it consumes its brief allotment of breath and time.

In *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (1836), Brownson declares that it is not reason or scripture, but the religious sentiment, which ought to supply “the criterion by which all sects must be tested” (171). Insofar as a devotional practice excites the religious sentiment, opening the soul to the divine influx and exhilarating the spirit, then it is true and deserves tolerance. Insofar as a devotional practice stifles or suffocates the religious sentiment—like the “spectral,” affectless Unitarian sermon Emerson decries in “The Divinity School Address” (*CW*, 1.138)—it is not true and does not deserve tolerance.

The religious sentiment necessitated a radical new relation between art and religion. Nineteenth-century Unitarians never quite elevated the religious value of literature beyond a purely accessory capacity: “However much the Unitarian critics praised art—especially poetry—in the abstract, when it came to passing judgment they followed Orville Dewey’s stricture that ‘the moral character, or the effect upon the mind, must be

the test” (Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* 28). Literature could allude to, embellish, gloss, represent, allegorize scripture and religious precepts, but it could never in itself supply religious truth, certainly not in contradiction of scripture.⁴ The religious sentiment allowed art to relate to religion as a stimulus relates to an appetite. Just as erotic desire is stimulated by the sight of beautiful bodies, so the religious sentiment is stimulated by beautiful works of art. Human bodies do not represent or refer to or allegorize erotic desire, they are a necessary condition for erotic desire to come about; art need not represent or refer to or allegorize the religious sentiment, it is a necessary condition for spiritual exaltation to transpire. Thus Theodore Parker recommends as “a good test of the comparative value of books... the state they leave you in,” and praises Emerson’s prose for above all engendering a holy, virtuous state of mind: “Emerson leaves you tranquil, resolved on noble manhood, fearless of the consequences” (quoted in Miller, *The Transcendentalists* 420). Art could, through the stimulation of the religious sentiment, claim immediate religious value.

Not all works of art stimulate the religious sentiment, only those which are divinely inspired. But inspiration is imperceptible. It oversees the act of creation, but evaporates from the finished product. The Transcendentalists needed to theorize some cognate that inspiration impresses upon aesthetic form, some trace or footprint it leaves behind, freely available to sensory experience yet witness to presiding transcendent influences. Emerson conceptualizes an intermediate phenomenon between spirit and matter that transpires whenever spirit and matter strike consummate accord. Nature has it, for God harmonious-

⁴ For a thorough comparison of Unitarian and Transcendentalist attitudes towards art, see Lawrence Buell, “Unitarian Aesthetics and Emerson’s Poet-Priest” (1968).

ly shapes the world. Art has it, but only upon the harmonious expression of the religious sentiment. In Emerson's prose, this phenomenon cycles through a fluid succession of tropes: "the silent song of the stars" (*CW*, 1.126), "the divine *aura* which breathes through forms" (*CW*, 3.27), the "musical *dæmon*" of a thing (*CW*, 3.26), and "atmosphere" (*CW*, 2.269). This last trope, atmosphere, achieves in the criticism of Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau the solidity of a term. And of all Emerson's tropes, it is atmosphere which now equips contemporary English idioms: "It is well-known that the atmosphere at lunch is different from that at dinner, that old furniture has more atmosphere than modern...that to paint the walls means to essentially change the atmosphere of a room" (Griffero, *Atmospheres* 2). It is familiar to speak of the serious atmosphere of a meeting room or the tense atmosphere of a family reunion. Restaurant menus and hotel brochures showcase their cosy or relaxed or professional atmospheres. Old houses have more character, more atmosphere, than the new cookie-cutters that proliferate in suburbs. Marilynne Robinson speaks of how "the atmosphere of a house change[s] when some particular person walks in the door" (*What Are We Doing Here?* 105).

When people speak of atmosphere in this way, they generally indicate the ineffable aesthetic impression an environment, a situation, a work of art, effuses as a whole—a pervasive mood or emotional tenor. Atmospheres have a curious sense of being subjective and objective all at once. On the one hand, they are feelings, and like other feelings they happen *inside*. On the other hand, they are tied to certain places, certain situations and works of art. Technically, atmosphere is everywhere, all the time: "there is probably no

situation that is totally deprived of an atmospheric charge” (Griffero, *Atmospheres* 1). But we usually do not *notice* atmosphere, just as we usually don’t notice the smell of home: it’s simply too ubiquitous, too consistent. It limns the margins of attention, the “psycho-physical background” (Böhme 17) of everything we do and think. But there are moments—when, for instance, we enter a new and unfamiliar place, or when the emotional register of a situation abruptly changes, or when we immerse ourselves in a work of art—when atmosphere is striking and forceful enough to penetrate conscious awareness. In such moments, atmosphere “grip[s]” us with a quasi-mystical sense of “*something-more*” (Griffero, *Atmospheres* 5), a feeling that attends sensory perception yet somehow transcends it at the same time. In their textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren define atmosphere as “the general pervasive feeling which may be said to condition the treatment of the subject in any literary work” (629). Atmosphere cannot be pinned down to “the setting or background,” the “rhythm” or the “imagery.” It is a general impression that effuses from all of a text’s formal characteristics taken as a whole.

For the Transcendentalists, atmosphere carries additional, theological significances. It occupies an intermediary position between spirit and matter, and it transpires when spirit and matter achieve harmonious integration—through God’s shaping of nature, through the inspired artist’s shaping of her materials. It establishes the definitive link between the religious sentiment and aesthetic form. Inspired art is richly, profusely atmospheric, and atmosphere supplies the aesthetic stimulus of the religious sentiment *par excellence*. Thus John Sullivan Dwight praises a series of orchestral performances in

Boston for, above all, their atmosphere: “they make you feel as you would if you were lying on a grassy slope in a summer’s afternoon, with the melancholy leisure of a shepherd swain, and these things all around you without your noticing them” (“Concerts” 128). Margaret Fuller places William Cullen Bryant ahead of all other American poets (Whitman had not published *Leaves of Grass* at the time) because “the atmosphere of his verse refreshes and composes the mind, like leaving the highway to enter some green, lovely, fragrant wood” (*PLA* 2.131). For Thoreau, “A true poem,” which is to say a truly inspired poem, “is distinguished, not so much by a felicitous expression, or any thought it suggests, as by the atmosphere which surrounds it” (“Homer. Ossian. Chaucer.” 304).

In his ambition to write a “New Bible” (*NUPM*, 1.353) expressive and precipitant of religious experience, Whitman brings atmosphere to the centre of his poetics: “It is not when matched with other verse and tested by the ordinary intellectual or esthetic lineaments” that the poems in *Leaves of Grass* “compare favourably with that verse,” but by the “impalpable atmosphere which every page of *Leaves of Grass* has sprung from, and which it exhales forever” (*NUPM* 5.1541). However, atmosphere had not, until very recently, existed as a term available to criticism. Emerson and Thoreau presented models of how to treat atmosphere as a theme. But no American poetics before Whitman had taken

atmosphere as its central governing principle.⁵ Whitman had to develop new formal strategies to write atmospherically. First, he makes atmosphere his primary principle of cohesion. A coherent atmosphere is what holds many of his poems together, what connects his images and his cadences and his thoughts and his tropes. Second, Whitman deliberately de-emphasizes competing principles of cohesion. He often suppresses logical or analogical or chronological relations among parts. His poems draw unremitting attention to their meandering, digressive structures, promising teleologies they rarely deliver: secrets undisclosed, purposes elided, destinies sealed only with an insouciant gesture of withholding. Whitman reminds us again and again that the point, the moral, the end of his poems is secondary to the drift, the lull, the mood of the movement. An “impalpable diffuseness and atmosphere or invisible magnetism, dissolving and embracing all” constitutes “the final proof of song” (CPP, 1253). At the end of the day, what we should take away from *Leaves of Grass* is not a portable wallet of insights, but a distinct, pervasive, compelling atmosphere. For it is in atmosphere that the ultimate spiritual significance of a poem resides.

Long after Transcendentalism dispersed as a cohesive movement, atmosphere continued to arrest the interest of American poets through the twentieth century. In *The*

⁵ I would, if I were more audacious, say that no *Western* poetics before Whitman’s made atmosphere its primary organizing principle. East Asian traditions, particularly the poetry and poetics of the Chinese Tang dynasty (ca. 600–900 C.E.), places enormous weight on atmosphere. Although omnipresent in East Asian aesthetics, the concept of atmosphere *per se* has not received explicit scholarly treatment. For a general overview of Chinese poetics, see Stephen Owen’s *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (1992), of which, chapters 6 and 7 deal with atmosphere. Watson (1971) is a standard survey of Chinese poetics and touches on the importance of atmosphere in the tradition. Chang (1986) and Kao (1986) deal with general Tang dynasty aesthetics and the atmosphere of landscape poetry respectively. Varsano 2017 treats what may be the most distilled (but ambiguous) text on traditional Chinese poetics: Sikong Tu’s *Twenty-Four Modes of Poetry*. Finally, Jullien (2007) is a somewhat idiosyncratic look at Chinese aesthetics, with chapters VII, VIII, and XII touching on atmosphere in particular. For Japanese poetry, see Makoto (1997) and Yasuda (1989). The best articulation of atmosphere in East Asia may be Tanizaki (2007).

Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics (2015), Joshua Schuster documents Gertrude Stein's extensive "experiments with ambience and immersive environs" (57). In particular, Stein's mechanical repetitions, "He is very certain to be sure to be sure to be sure to be sure not to be sure not to be sure not to be sure to not to be sure to be sure to be sure not to be sure not to be sure not to be sure not to be sure to be sure," lull the reader into a half-conscious automaticity in which meaning and image dissolve and all that's left is a vague atmospheric quality (48). Atmosphere retains for Stein its privileged capacity to engender deeply meaningful states of mind. It "moved her towards a kind of transcendence in immanence that has a distinct aura of religious feeling and meditative composure" (73). Similar commitments unify such poets as Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, and Jorie Graham, all of whom develop new ways of writing atmospherically, and all of whom associate atmosphere with rare, illuminated states of tranquility and reflection. And yet, aside from a few rare exceptions, criticism has more or less overlooked atmosphere as a potential angle from which to engage twentieth-century American literature.⁶ I hope to lay the genealogical foundations necessary for such an engagement.

Transcendentalism and the Postsecular.

I align my study with the aims and methods of postsecularism, an interdisciplinary field which generally follows two complementary approaches. The first

⁶ See, in addition to Schuster's *Ecology of Modernism*, Kate Stanley's chapter on "Nella Larsen's Novel *Weather*" in *Practices of Surprise in American Literature After Emerson* (2018, pp. 118-147). In *On Leaving* (2010), Branka Arsić also reads mood and perceptual states in Emerson as "atmospheric events" (145).

approach, deriving largely from Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular* (2003), undermines the secular-religious binary. There is not one model of secularity but many, and its meanings—what gets classified as secular, what gets classified as religious—change over time.⁷ “The secular is,” in Asad’s eyes, “neither singular in origin nor stable in its identity, although it works through a series of particular oppositions” (25). How the secular relates to the religious depends on how the sacred relates to the profane, how reason relates to the imagination, how organized religion relates to non-institutional spirituality, and so on. The nomadic meaning of “the secular” is best tracked indirectly, through a shifting body of subsidiary oppositions.⁸

I chart a transition from one historically specific model of secularity—one body of oppositions—to another. Liberal secularity grew out of the critique against enthusiasm and prevailed in New England until the early nineteenth century. It opposes heaven to earth, reason to passion, scripture to worldly texts. It denies modern revelation and favours a rational, dispassionate style of prose and preaching. It denies legitimacy to any

⁷ For specifically Americanist scholarship in this vein, see Michael Kaufmann, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession” (2007) and “Locating the Postsecular” (2010). Also see John Modern’s *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2011).

⁸ *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (2011) facilitates a conversation among four giants in the fields of postsecularism and religious studies more broadly: Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West. Habermas anticipates some of the major themes of postsecularism in *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (2008), and then enters into the conversation more directly with his contributions to the volume of essays, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (2010). Saba Mahmood writes powerfully against secularism in its Islamic contexts. In *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005), she examines the women’s mosque movement of the 1970s as a case study of how Islam can be a source of power for Muslim feminists. Peter Coviello and Jared Hickman’s “Introduction: After the Postsecular” (2014) pronounce the secularization thesis thoroughly dead. They argue that postsecular studies should move on to purging disciplinary practices of latent secularist prejudices. Also see José Casanova’s “A Secular Age: Dawn or Twilight?” (2009); Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood, *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (2013); Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (2013); and Jared Hickman, *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* (2017).

doctrine or devotional practice that does not conform to scripture and reason. The opposition between scripture and literature, then, is foundational to liberal secularity. To expand scripture beyond the exclusive word of Christ would compromise its power to separate true revelation from false.

The Transcendentalists bring heaven and earth into perennial commerce. God speaks to us now with the same intimacy He granted the apostles. They embrace enthusiasm as a necessary sign and stimulant of religious experience. They imbue texts from every age and nation with a sacred status equivalent to scripture. They dismantle the oppositions of liberal secularity and institute oppositions of their own: between religious experience and religious institutions, between the free expression of spiritual impulse and dry inhibitive formalism, between inspired and uninspired literature. Transcendentalism effectively champions an alternative model of secularity founded upon a set of oppositions distinctive to their historical moment. The secular and the religious are predicated on two modalities of experience—one illuminated with the perpetual freshness of the religious sentiment, the other stale with the mechanical complacency of habit and custom. The religious status of a text or a practice or an institution or a value depends on whether or not it successfully elicits religious *experience*. Scholarship must not presuppose continuity between the secular-religious divides that prevail today and the secular-religious divide with which Transcendentalism initiated its departure from Unitarian paradigms.

The second approach, exemplified in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007), revises pervasive historical narratives which posit a straightforward progression out of a

benighted religious past into secular modernity.⁹ I complicate a long-presiding interpretation of Transcendentalism as a transitional stage between eighteenth-century religiosity and fin de siècle secularism. The Transcendentalists, the story goes, preserved religious values and concepts from the onslaught of modernity within the paradigms of secular humanism. They buried God in the material world and demystified the last vestiges of supernaturalism remaining in Unitarianism (such as miracles). Literature usurped the place of religion as America's defining source of wisdom and moral cultivation. In the words of Nicholas Friesner, "it was taken for granted by many [critics] during the twentieth century that Emerson was a leading figure in the secularization of this culture" (2017, 144).

Thus Perry Miller speaks of the Transcendentalists' "precommitment to making literature a substitute for religion" (*Transcendentalists* 14). For David Shumway, "The theological trajectory of New England made it the place where literature would first begin to serve as a substitute for religion," specifically the New England of the Transcendentalists: "It is Emerson who most clearly embodies this transition from religion to literature" (Shumway, 1994, 42). Tracy Fessenden, herself a postsecularist, sees Emerson as an early source for the paradigms she critiques. She traces "from Emerson and Matthew Arnold to Robert Scholes and Gerald Graff" a "supersessionary tale, in which religion cedes authority to forms of truth and suasion that no longer require its grounding" (85).

⁹ Tracy Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption* (2007) too takes a historical revisionist approach. Fessenden argues that the secularization of protestant values allows protestantism to reign supreme under the guise of a universal normativity while continuing to discriminate on the basis of religion. In *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (2008), Molly McGarry carries out a history of spiritualism and explores its precise relation to secularism. Michael Saler's "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review" (2006) anticipated some of postsecularism's central moves. He questions whether it is right to say that modernity is, in fact, disenchanted.

Regardless of their relative position towards the secularization thesis (whether they embrace it like Miller or critique it like Fessenden), Americanists largely agree that the Transcendentalists were among the first to begin supplying religious needs from the secular domain of literature.¹⁰

The problem with this account is that the Transcendentalists did not conceive of literature as an exclusively secular category. Brownson dismisses the traditional distinction between sacred and profane literature as arbitrary: “Profane literature... might be as good as the sacred, as true, as divine... Were we wise, should we not count all literature sacred, and believe that God has never left himself without a witness in any nation, nor in any age?” (“Ancient Profaneness” 386-7). Emerson declares that “The writer, like the priest, must be exempted from secular labor” (*CW*, 8.41), implying that poetry is not necessarily a secular labour in itself. But neither Brownson nor Emerson does away with the distinction between literature and scripture, the labours of the writer and the priest, altogether. Brownson doesn’t really invest *all* literature with sacred status, just that which is “as good,” “as true,” and “as divine” as canonically scriptural texts. That is, only literature of high aesthetic merit, only literature that strikes with the conviction of spiritual truth, only literature which is divinely inspired, counts as sacred. Emerson does not exempt *all* writers from secular labour, only those few rare prophet-poets who conduct the religious sen-

¹⁰ Many critics are anxious to secularize Emerson, to read him as a secular humanist. In *Emerson’s Romantic Style* (1991), Julie Ellison has a tendency to read Emerson’s overtly religious language as tropes for purely psychological content: “It is hard to take these passages seriously as expressions of religious belief. They remind us of Emerson’s attraction to the Calvinism of Mary Moody Emerson, but that attraction too is not religious; it reflects a desire for human intensity, not divine judgment. Here, a religious idiom yields parables of personal anxieties” (35). George Kateb is uniquely frank about his aversion to Emerson’s religiosity: “It is a horror to say so, but it may be rather wasteful to study Emerson unless one shares his religiousness. I repressed this thought until rather late. I still cannot quite believe it” (65). He then considers in detail to what degree it is possible to extract Emerson’s philosophy of self-reliant individualism from religion.

timent through their illuminated cadences. Brownson and Emerson invest *some* literature with sacredness while most literature remains profane. It is, then, not entirely accurate to say that the Transcendentalists supply religious functions from a secular domain. Rather, they adapt literature and criticism themselves into devotional practices, disciplines in spiritual cultivation.

Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism* (1973) presents a more nuanced analysis. Transcendentalism had "only one way of rescuing art from [a] position of subservience" as the seductive embellishment of moral precepts, and that was to "disclaim the specialness of revelation itself, or, in other words, to affirm that the utterance of art is (potentially) just as spiritual as that of the Bible. This is precisely what the more radical Transcendentalists did" (29). The Transcendentalists do not secularize religion into aesthetics, they spiritualize aesthetics into religion. They do not purge scripture of its religiosity, they imbue literature with religious value.

I agree with Buell, generally speaking. I simply believe the concept of atmosphere allows us to refine his account somewhat. First, Buell does not explain how the Transcendentalists distinguish inspired from uninspired literature at the level of aesthetic form. In *New England Literary Culture* (1986), he even goes so far as to suggest that the Transcendentalists failed to establish a clear distinction altogether: "the erasure of the old line of distinction between sacred and secular writing... threatened to deprive the would-be believer of any... secure criteria for determining whether a given utterance, scriptural or secular, was or was not inspired" (168). Their criteria may not have been *secure*, but it was at least speculatively theorized. Inspiration imbues the literary text with an ineffable

but unmistakable halo. Spirit refracts through the prism of aesthetic form and effuses a subtle, radiant atmosphere. It is atmosphere that allows the Transcendentalists to redefine the literature-scripture distinction along aesthetic rather than historical lines. What determines the sacredness of a given work is not its official induction into scripture by the fiat of long-dead Christian authorities, but a pervasive effluvium of spiritual-aesthetic quality.

Second, Buell receives “the Emersonian view that writing... should *be* Scripture” (*Literary Culture* 182) in the specific sense of explicit prophetic exhortation. This leads him to pronounce the project of the American Bible that Emerson assigned posterity a failure: “the new Bible did not get written, unless one counts *The Book of Mormon*” (182). Ultimately, he laments, “the prophetic-bardic model of the writer led in fact mostly to fragmentary results: Alcott’s Orphic Sayings, Thoreau’s collection of ‘ethical scriptures,’ and, on a somewhat larger scale, Whitman’s catalogues” (183). With the exception of Jones Very’s poetry, Buell acknowledges no “complete literary works of the period that can qualify as scripture in the strict sense of the term” (183). The concepts of atmosphere and the religious sentiment prompted a more daring expansion of scripture’s categorical dimensions than Buell recognizes. Atmosphere makes it possible to conceive of religious significance not only at the level of *content*, but also at the level of aesthetic *form*. “An imaginative book,” Emerson declares, “renders us far more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterwards when we arrive at the precise sense of the author” (*CW* 3.23). It is from the immediate surface of the poem that atmosphere divulges itself. Thus, Fuller discerned in the “shallows” of Emerson’s literary style a “melody and subtle fragrance,” an atmosphere, that exceeds the “depths” of philosophical

profundity (*PLA* 2.128), and on this basis confirmed Emerson as a living American prophet. I argue that scholarship needs to include Emerson's essays, Thoreau's "sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them" (*A Year* 174), and the entirety of *Leaves of Grass* among nineteenth-century efforts to write modern scripture.

Third, Buell at certain moments risks slipping into the terms of the secularization narrative due to an insufficiently theorized religious-secular distinction: "the erosion of the Bible's privileged status acted as a literary stimulus insofar as it prompted creative writers to think of secular literature as a legitimate and even rival means of conveying spiritual experience" (*Literary Culture* 167). He does not consider how literature can convey spiritual experience and still remain secular. Perhaps he draws upon the modern distinction between the spiritual and the religious, but this distinction finds no precedent in Emerson, Thoreau, or Whitman. Wouldn't it be more accurate to say that the Transcendentalists classify inspired literature as irreducibly religious? Scholarship would then have to read Transcendentalist aesthetic education as a religious discipline, and regard Transcendentalism as more of a speedbump than a spur to secularization.

The only full-length postsecular study of Transcendentalism to date is Bruce Ronda's *The Fate of Transcendentalism: Secularity, Materiality, and Human Flourishing* (2017). Ronda sees himself as importing M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (1971) across the Atlantic (5). In his account, the Transcendentalists repurpose religious concepts and values into secular humanist paradigms: "Religion has not vanished, but rather has morphed and changed and presents its

own challenges to what appear to be dominant secular narratives” (4). Specifically, the Transcendentalists empty religious tropes of supernatural reference, re-orienting Christianity towards this-worldly forms of human flourishing: “While most transcendentalists make use of religious language and references, they de-divinize that language to stress individual fulfillment and social justice” (5). Ronda distinguishes between the original nineteenth-century Transcendentalism of the Boston cohort and “fluid transcendentalism,” which encompasses “the modern and contemporary work of Annie Dillard, Mary Oliver, and Henry Beston” (35). Fluid Transcendentalism brings classic Transcendentalism to its logical conclusion. Ronda discerns among the Boston cohort a “strong residue of idealist thinking and longing in the nineteenth-century writers, a sense that nature ‘glows’ with a meaning that is somehow imparted to it by some force not itself, the same force that ‘glows’ within selves” while “for proponents of fluid transcendentalism... the material world simply is” (35). Ronda thus frames the overt religiosity of the Transcendentalists as a nostalgic reverence which their legacy redeems. Emerson closes his eyes and makes the sign of the cross while his essays elope with Dillard, Oliver, and Beston to a secular humanism he could not himself embrace.

I have no objection to the idea that later, more resolutely secular writers take Transcendentalism as a point of departure. But I am reluctant to downgrade the Transcendentalists’ commitment to religion as a stubborn residue at odds with the main consequences of their interventions. I also do not agree that religious language circulates through Transcendentalist texts within a merely metaphorical capacity for this-worldly experiences. When Fuller proclaims that ““a spiritual world projects into ours”” (*Summer*

128), she distinguishes openly between the physical and supernatural realm. When George Ripley posits the existence of a natural “faculty for receiving... divine communications,” he explicitly affirms the “supernatural manner” in which “religion has been revealed” (*Miscellanies* 283). All of the major texts in which Transcendentalism consolidates itself as a movement, from Brownson’s *New Views* to Parker’s *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion*, passionately avow a religiosity grounded in the communication between natural and supernatural realms. The Transcendentalists do not secularize religion. They do not adapt religious concepts, tropes, and values to the purposes of a secular humanism. Instead, they redefine terms constitutive of the religious-secular binary. In the religious sentiment, they conceive of religion as a variety of experience to which devotional practices and sect-specific doctrines are encumbrances. In atmosphere, they distinguish sacred from profane literature at the level of aesthetic form instead of historical origin. It is possible to interpret these shifts as secularizing influences only if we project prevailing twenty-first century conceptions of the secular and the religious back upon the Transcendentalists—when we presuppose, for instance, that literature is a secular category. The concepts of the religious sentiment and atmosphere are essential to an accurate comprehension of how the Transcendentalists situate their paradigms in relation to religion and secularity.

Notes toward postsecular style.

As literary scholars, we are trained to trace correspondences, imbrications, inter-twinings, between *what* the text says and *how*—style and substance, form and content. I

would like to take a moment to consider how this principle might apply to *academic* style. “Style itself,” Martha Nussbaum avers, “makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters” (*Love’s Knowledge* 3). Values register at the level of cadence, syntax, and diction, in academic as well as imaginative prose. And secularist values have long governed literary studies.¹¹ Long enough, certainly, to have infiltrated its stylistic conventions. In his recent *Make Yourselves Gods: Mormons and the Unfinished Business of American Secularism* (2019), Peter Coviello discerns “The neutralish, cogitative, deflating, always faintly condescending posture of *tolerant curiosity* proper to liberal skepticism” as one stylistic “guise” secularism assumes in the twenty-first century academy (19).¹² A disaffected academic chic announces the cadences of disenchantment. Religions affirm ends transcendent of human flourishing; secularism denies them. Religions posit criteria of truth transcendent of logic and empirical method; secularism discredits them. Religions worship invisible entities and principles that the senses cannot verify; secularism dismisses them as so many soothing delusions. Religions place enormous store in tradition, the cumulative insights of past prophets; secularism privileges the new, the forward-thinking, the progressive. Thus, the values of secularism have come to be

¹¹ Michael Kaufmann establishes this point in his article, “The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession.” Kaufmann’s central argument is that literary studies has long conceived of itself as a secular source of wisdom and moral cultivation for an increasingly irreligious modern age: “Histories of the profession of literary studies have long been underwritten by a narrative of secularization. It seems generally accepted that while the discipline and its practitioners were once more religious, literary studies is now a decidedly secular enterprise” (607).

¹² Asad distinguishes between “‘the secular’ as an epistemic category and ‘secularism’ as a political doctrine” (1). “The secular” is a way of grouping certain practices, concepts, and values in some relation to religion. (What exactly the practices, values, and concepts are, what the precise relation, changes over time.) “Secularism” is a normative stance that argues for the decline of religion and the ascendancy of purely secular forms of moral conduct. A loose alliance obtains between secularism, neoliberalism, scientism, and technocracy. Steven Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now* (2018) is a recent, representative neoliberal-secularist analysis.

mirrored in a skeptical style that deflates, that distances itself from its objects of engagement, that foregrounds its own sophistication. This style persists long after “the secularization thesis is dead” (Coviello and Hickman, 645). It resides latent in our defiantly jagged cadences, our forbiddingly complicated syntax, the cerebral buzz of our jargon.

What, then, does the style of secularism sound like? I cannot say for certain what Coviello has in mind, but if I were to guess, I would point to Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) as a likely exemplar:

South Africa thus combines, in combustible form, extreme ecological wealth and a postapartheid legacy of extreme economic and territorial inequity. A major flashpoint for the tension between these extremes remains the game reserve, that contradictory, potentially lucrative, historically troubled space that promises encounters with the “timeless” Africa of charismatic megafauna yet risks reinscribing the society’s dominant culture of nature as racially exclusive and hostile to political transformation. Against this backdrop, we need to explore what I call racialized ecologies of looking in relation to environmental amnesia. This environmental dynamic between seeing and not seeing, between remembering and forgetting, is forcefully exemplified by the game reserve.

Nixon critiques the game reserve as a playground where rich white tourists pursue fantasies of masculine assertion in an African wilderness purified of all signs of modern development. I endorse his critique wholeheartedly. My analysis here is purely rhetorical. I cite Nixon as a master of a certain academic style that since the 1970s has grown prevalent, even perhaps dominant, in literary studies. Though Nixon’s cadences are not always

smooth and never mellifluous, they consistently sound *cool*. They display the detached sleekness of technocratic competence, the cerebral wit and fluorescent flair of the urban elite. His syntax is dazzlingly complex. He balances clause upon clause upon clause, each jam-packed with information. The reader has to process a great deal very quickly, and this generates a sense of rapid cognition and compressed, steely intelligence. Nixon draws upon jargon from fields as diverse as poststructuralism (“reinscribing”) and environmental science (“charismatic megafauna”). “Environmental amnesia,” though not technically jargon, exudes the technical panache of a specialist term. These new words for old things—“reinscribing” for “conceiving of,” “charismatic megafauna” for “big cool animals”—sharpen the cutting edge, magnify the wow-appeal. It feels as if we stand on the very frontier of the unknown, and all the old, familiar words are now inadequate to express what now lies before us. It implies a rejection of the traditional and the everyday, an affirmation of the progressive and the new.

Fast, dynamic, radical, technical, specialist, sophisticated, detached, disaffected, *cool*—these are the characteristic attitudes of secularism, of a worldview that disavows a naïve, religious past and takes a bold step forward into secular modernity. I am not saying that Nixon espouses secularism.¹³ In fact, I have chosen Nixon partly for his deep sensi-

¹³ He does, however, speak somewhat dismissively of “transcendentalism” and “the transcendental,” as if these were dirty words. For instance, he denounces “a tradition within American landscape writing of erasing the history of colonized peoples through the myth of empty lands” as a “timeless Transcendentalism” (236). Nixon falls into a tradition of Americanist criticism, with roots in Quentin Anderson’s *The Imperial Self* (1971), that sees Emersonian Transcendentalism as assimilating external realities into a unified, autocratic “I”. The recent interventions of Branka Arsić have redressed this critique. See Branka Arsić’s and Cary Wolfe’s *The Other Emerson* (2010). Associated studies include Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (1999); Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (2007); Branka Arsić, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (2010); Paul Grimstad, *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses* (2013); Kate Stanley, *Practices of Surprise in American Literature After Emerson* (2018).

tivity to the persistent value of religious traditions, as when he passionately decries the effacement of spiritually charged “vernacular” landscapes in the pursuit of corporate greed (17). Nixon’s style implicitly affirms at the level of cadence, diction, and syntax secularist values that he himself would likely disavow. To fully internalize the challenges postsecularism makes to academic discourse, scholars have to change not only the way we *think* but also the way we *write*. Postsecularism necessitates an immersive, susceptible style that does not shrink from the occasional chattiness or flamboyance, an attitude that engages with the sheer oracular *chutzpa* of religious prose without condescension or embarrassment.¹⁴ I cannot say that I have fully developed such a style, but it has been an aim on my horizon from the beginning, and I am hoping that this aim might justify certain idiosyncrasies about the way I read and write. I have consciously avoided the ethos of *cool*. I have embraced a tendency, diagnosed early on in my Ph.D., to come across as a bit of an “old soul.” I have avoided jargon as much as possible, and where it is absolutely necessary I have adapted it from the vocabularies of earlier religious thinkers, eschewing the edginess of neologism. I have cultivated soft, rhythmic cadences wherever I can. And I have indulged in the occasional example and analogy from every-day life that might sound a little folksy.

I want to renounce the postures that distance secular academic writing from the affectively-charged immediacy that Edwards, Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, and Whitman all considered essential to effective religious discourse. They ask to be intimately, susceptible, passionately received, and we do them an injustice if we do not receive them with

¹⁴ Rita Felski points to an affinity between postsecularism and the hermeneutics of susceptibility in “Entanglement and Animosity: Religion and Literary Studies” (2016).

intimacy, susceptibility, and passion. The condescension of a more enlightened posterity is not consistent with postsecular criticism. Though I am not myself religious, I have an obligation to read in light of the possibility that I may be converted, that I may, in fact, experience the religious sentiment. And this requires that I relax my guard somewhat, that I set my prejudices aside and experience each text as fully and honestly as possible, on its own terms. So when Whitman declares, “Camerado, this is no book, / Who touches this touches a man” (“So Long!” 53-54), I must renounce the refuge of “*tolerant curiosity*” and remain open to the possibility that maybe a spiritual connection exists that might, in fact, penetrate the intervening distances of time and place. I am not a believer. I have, until very recently, been myself a secularist. But I have challenged myself in this dissertation to read religiously, to inhabit these texts as they ask to be inhabited. In doing so, I have, at times, departed from certain scholarly conventions that police the boundaries between the voices I read and the voice through which I write. There are certain passages in which I write as if I were citing Emerson or Fuller or Whitman to advance an argument of my own instead of simply interpreting. Only recently have I discovered that this ventriloquial disposition finds an eloquent precedent in Coviello’s “free-indirect proselytizing” (19). Coviello consciously writes with an unconventional, impassioned “investedness” as a way “to resist the strong, the veritably tidal pull of contemporary secular presumption” (19). Just as narrators sometimes speak the thoughts of their characters without explicitly marking shifts in voice, so Coviello sometimes speaks as if he were himself a Mormon citing other Mormons. And so I speak as if I were myself an Emersonian citing Emerson, a Whitmanian citing Whitman. In such moments, I occasionally al-

low a certain anachronism to resolve from my diction and syntax. My goal is neither pure description nor pure evaluation, but something like a particularly engaged trial session. You cannot tell if a pair of shoes is good for you just by looking at them. You have to try them on and walk around for a bit. Certain texts, especially religious texts, demand a certain depth of commitment. They yield nothing to a detached appraisal. You have to give them time to accommodate the shape of your life before you can say whether or not you believe in their truths.

Atmosphere and New Formalism.

Atmosphere is a growing topic of research in the humanities, largely owing to the thought of German philosopher Gernot Böhme.¹⁵ Although Böhme has achieved the status of a public intellectual in Europe, his works remained largely unavailable to English-language audiences until the recent publication of *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres* (2017). Böhme argues for atmosphere as the fundamental concept of a new aesthetics. He writes in response to a Kantian tradition which constrains aesthetics to theories of “judgment on and about works of art” (6), and drives a rift between art and every-day life. An aesthetics of atmosphere, Böhme argues, would heal this rift. Nature has atmosphere. Cities have

¹⁵ The past twenty years especially have seen critical analyses of atmosphere in fields as diverse as architecture, cognitive science, and anthropology. Juhani Pallasmaa is a leading voice in architectural atmospheres. See his “Space, Place, and Atmosphere. Emotion and Peripheral Perception in Architectural Experience” (2014). Jennifer Turner and Kimberly Peters analyze the atmospheres of two prison museums in “Unlocking Carceral Atmospheres: Designing Visual/Material Encounters at the Prison Museum” (2015). For a cognitive approach to atmosphere, see Lüdtke et. al., “Immersing in the Stillness of an Early Morning: Testing the Mood Empathy Hypothesis of Poetry Recognition” (2014). Tim Flohr Sørensen analyzes the atmosphere of archeological sites, specifically Danish burial mounds (2015). For more on atmosphere in general, see Andreas Rauh, “On the Ethical-Aesthetic Potentials of Special Atmospheres” (2015); Tonino Griffiero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (2014); and Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres” (2009).

atmosphere. Situations, historical periods, buildings have atmosphere. Böhme opens up a field of aesthetic experience that brings aesthetic form into deep communication with political and historical realities.

I recommend Böhme's theory of atmospheres as a potentially valuable tool for new formalism. Since the rise of cultural studies in English departments during the 1970s, the formalist methods of new criticism and deconstruction have fallen steadily into disrepute on account of their blindness to the text's historical embeddedness. The historicist and cultural studies methods that took their place have largely swung to the opposite extreme, in many cases ignoring literary form altogether. New formalist critics strive to reconcile a painstakingly detailed analysis of literary form with close attention to the text's historical and political consequences. Thus in *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015) Caroline Levine "aim[s] to show that paying attention to subtle and complex formal patterns allows us to rethink the historical workings of political power and the relations between politics and aesthetics" (xiii). In *Forms of Poetic Attention* (2020), Lucy Alford analyzes the specific ways in which literary forms manipulate readerly attention. She characterizes her method as a historically-situated formalism: "Focusing on the attention dynamics of the text allows us to maintain close formal engagement with the work itself without neglecting the role of historically and subjectively specific reading and writing practices" (15-16). In *The Order of Forms* (2019), Anna Kornbluh argues that literary forms construct models that political actors use to organize common interests and social relations. Aesthetic form, for her, is no less important for radical activism than for oppressive conservative regimes. Atmosphere, as a site of aesthetic expe-

rience coextensive between literary form and historical life, holds great promise for the project of reconciling formalist and historicist methodologies.

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has already carried this promise toward fruition. He argues in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (2012) that the discipline of literary studies is currently divided between two “mutually exclusive... assumptions... about how literary texts... relate to realities outside of works themselves” (2). On the one side, we have deconstruction, which denies the possibility of contact between language and any reality beyond language (2). On the other side, we have cultural studies, which takes the integration of literary texts with social and historical realities as its central point of departure (3). Atmosphere, he argues, “gives form to [a] third position” which neither divorces the text from nor dissolves it into historical reality (3). His method consists primarily in showing how literary texts “soak up the atmospheres of their time” and then effuse them into the brisker airs of contemporary times. Thus when we read Shakespeare’s sonnets we cannot help but experience the atmosphere of Shakespeare’s London around 1600 (39-41).¹⁶

My study advances a formalist discourse of atmosphere in two ways. First, I trace the genealogical contours necessary to engage with atmosphere in one of its foundational contexts, American Transcendentalism. Second, I develop the the critical apparatus necessary to analyze how authors deliberately manipulate textual form to evoke atmospheres

¹⁶ The New Critics mention atmosphere every now and then, but they develop no apparatus to analyze it. William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1949) even goes so far as to suggest that atmosphere cannot be analyzed: “analysis cannot do anything but hope to ignore it... criticism can only state that it is there” (42). Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren carry out an analysis of Edgar Allen Poe’s “Ulalume” as a case study of a particularly atmospheric poem, but they do not consider how, exactly, Poe goes about writing atmospherically (*Understanding Poetry*, 358-362).

from the reader. Atmosphere is a property of literary texts just as character, plot, metre, rhyme, assonance, style, and metaphor are properties of literary texts. But we often, even usually, do not notice atmospheres. They are, as Griffero puts it, very much a “background” phenomenon (17). They inflect our moods, they filter the light of our reception, they limn the margins of the reading experience. But they seldom occupy the spotlight of conscious scrutiny. It is, however, possible for certain literary texts to deliberately draw attention to atmosphere. I identify two specific formal strategies. First, a text is atmospheric when a large number of literary characteristics (image, metre, tone, character, etc.) all evoke a similar set of mental associations from the reader. Second, a text is atmospheric when other principles of cohesion (theme, narrative trajectory, etc.) are de-emphasized or eliminated.

How is it possible to study mental associations? Aren't associations purely subjective? Recent research in the cognitive sciences suggests otherwise. Empirical studies have shown that, by and large, people associate lemons with “fast,” prunes with “slow” (Woods *et. al.*). The letter [i] is lighter and more greenish than [o] (Kim *et. al.*). “Kiki,” a made-up word, goes along with the texture of sandpaper, “bouba” with satin (Etzi *et. al.*). Qian Wang and Charles Spence (2016) have even found correlations between certain red wines and certain pieces of classical music. These “crossmodal correspondences” hold relatively consistently across large populations, among synaesthetes and non-synaesthetes alike.¹⁷ What is the basis of these associations? Lemons do not cor-

¹⁷ For an overview of research in crossmodal correspondences, see Spence, “Crossmodal Correspondences: A Tutorial Review” (2011).

relate with speed in every-day experience. Neither does a Dussek harp with Pellé Pinot Noir.

What *does* seem relatively clear is that crossmodal correspondences often share overlapping bodies of association with *other* things. Studies have found that when people associate a colour with a piece of music, they also associate both the colour and the piece of music with the same emotions (See Palmer *et. al.*, 2013 and Lindborg). Another study found that people tend to prefer round over angular shapes, and to associate pleasant odours with round shapes. This suggests that shared associations between positive and negative hedonic states mediate between taste-shape crossmodal correspondences (Velasco *et. al.*). People associate brightness with high pitch. Although brightness and high pitch are not analogous and do not correlate in every day experience, they do share overlapping correlations with other environmental characteristics. Illumination usually comes from above. Smaller bodies make higher-pitched sounds. Smaller objects are likelier to populate the sky (Spence *et. al.*).

Crossmodal correspondences, then, are bound together through larger bodies of association they hold in common. These associations do not circulate through consciousness one-by-one, but form a unified impression. For instance, the colour blue is associated with coldness, sadness, tranquility, and intelligence. When one perceives the colour “blue,” the mind does not consciously touch down on the association with coldness, then the association with sadness, and so on. Instead, the colour blue elicits a certain impression no other colour elicits. If we analyze this impression, we will see that it is informed by associations with coldness, sadness, tranquility, and intelligence, among other things. I

call this impression the “signature” of a percept, a term I adapt from the German mystic Jacob Böhme’s *Signatura Rerum: or the Signature of all Things* (1657). Many of the Transcendentalists read Böhme, and Böhme’s theory of the signature exerted a powerful influence on Emerson’s thought, as I argue in chapter three. For Böhme, just as every person has their own signature, so every object has its own distinctive feeling. Just as a signature is distinctive of a person’s particular identity, so this feeling is distinctive of an object’s particular identity. No two percepts have exactly the same set of associations, and so no two percepts elicit exactly the same signature. But it is possible for two percepts to share overlapping associations. And overlapping associations suggest a certain degree of complementarity among signatures. Rain and dark, jagged rocks do not have the *exact* same signature, but both images are associated with sadness, fear, coldness, darkness, evil, etc., and so their signatures feel at least somewhat similar.

Just as consonance and assonance draw attention to the sound of language, so congruency among signatures draws attention to atmosphere. When all or most of the signatures in a given literary work are similar, the atmosphere will be more salient than when the signatures are incongruent. The dark, dreary atmosphere of *Wuthering Heights* (1847) would have been less salient if Emily Brontë had set it in humid, sunny Florida. William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) would have approximated the atmosphere of Mississippi during the civil war less adequately if he had written in short, clipped monoclauses. His long, drawling sentences capture the slowness that extreme heat induces and the heavy burden of history. Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985) captures the at-

mosphere of the nineteenth-century American frontier in a focused family resemblance among signatures:

See the child. He is pale and thin, he wears a thin and ragged linen shirt. He stokes the scullery fire. Outside lie dark turned fields with rags of snow and darker woods beyond that harbour yet a few last wolves. His folk are known for hewers of wood and drawers of water but in truth his father has been a schoolmaster. He lies in drink, he quotes from poets whose names are now lost. The boy crouches by the fire and watches him. (3)

Every textual feature—imagery, cadence, setting—suggests a similar mood. And these moods are the products of mental associations. “Rags of snow” and the father drunkenly quoting forgotten poets are not associated directly with one another. They are not analogous, and do not correlate in every-day experience (fathers don’t get drunk and quote forgotten poets any more often in the winter than in the summer). But they do share many points of associative overlap: decline, deterioration, despondency, depression, decrepitude, death, illness, abandonment, filth, unwholesomeness, poverty, sin, vagrancy, violence, ruin, darkness—to name a few. If McCarthy had diluted his prose with incongruous signatures—if, for instance, he had set the scene in summer, or had had the father quoting limericks—the atmosphere would not have been so resonant and distinct.

Authors can also write atmospherically by weakening or eliminating other principles of cohesion. By “principle of cohesion,” I mean any *telos* that organizes multifarious textual elements into a whole. There is a principle of cohesion: diverse textual elements converge upon a single hub of reference—an emotion expressed, a thought revolved.

Chronology is a principle of cohesion: diverse textual elements follow a linear progression through time. And atmosphere can supply a principle of cohesion: diverse textual elements all conform to a unified atmospheric hue. Usually, multiple principles of cohesion cooperate together. A single sonnet can have a theme, a rhyme scheme, and a narratorial personality, and all of these principles of cohesion cooperate in holding the sonnet together. Sometimes, principles of cohesion compete: to strengthen one, the author must weaken another. Atmosphere is almost never the dominant principle of cohesion. And so when atmosphere *does* supply the dominant principle of cohesion, it stands out.

Take, for instance, Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd: / Petals on a wet, black bough" (2005, 82). The colon implies some relationship between an otherwise arbitrary pairing. The second line does not follow from the first logically or analogically or chronologically. They likely do not describe the same setting, since the first draws exclusively upon urban imagery, the second natural. And this sense of arbitrariness is precisely what allows the atmospheric relation to consciously inhere. The first line suggests a certain mood, the second line suggests a certain mood, and the two moods overlap. The attention seizes upon atmosphere as the sole available principle of cohesion. But this is a relatively extreme example. The author doesn't have to *eliminate* other principles of coherence to write atmospherically. It is sufficient to *weaken* them, especially when the atmosphere is already fortified with parallelism. A novelist who wants to cultivate atmosphere might follow a monotonous, meandering plot through numerous digressions and extended descriptive passages. A poet who wants to cultivate atmosphere might deviate often and dramatically from the theme.

Usually, the two strategies collaborate. Complementarity among signatures ensures a strong and distinct atmosphere as a primary principle of cohesion, and the weakening of competing principles of cohesion allows atmosphere to predominate.

Chapter one examines Jonathan Edwards as a precursor to major Transcendentalist interventions. In his efforts to reconcile religious affect with the Lockean standard of religious tolerance, Edwards cautiously extends religious significance to aesthetic experience. But he never grants the worldly beauties of art and nature anything more than an analogous relation to the beauty of God. Chapter two details the emergence of the religious sentiment through the Transcendentalists' own reckoning with the Lockean standard of religious tolerance. In their view, art acquires religious value as an immediate stimulus of religious experience. This gave rise to another concept: the Transcendentalists needed to establish a link between aesthetic form and the religious sentiment. In chapter three, I argue that the concept of atmosphere supplies this link. I show how Emerson draws upon the concept of animal magnetism and Böhme's theory of signatures to theorize atmosphere through his poetry and prose. Fuller and Thoreau join Emerson in championing atmosphere as the stimulus of religious experience *par excellence*. In chapter four, I apply my formalist method of reading for atmosphere to the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1881). Whitman brings atmosphere to the centre of his poetics. He consistently draws attention to atmosphere as the ultimate religious significance of his "New Bible."

In between each chapter, I have distributed an interlude in which I carry out a close reading of a single atmospheric American poem. These interludes break up the exposition of genealogy with brief, relaxed sessions of interpretive play. I regard them as occasions to put my theory of atmospheric form into demonstration. More importantly, they testify to the persistence of atmosphere as a stimulus to transformative states of mind in the American tradition after Emerson and Whitman. I depart from the premise that these poems are fundamentally religious exercises. They are intended to engender states of tranquil reflection, to weaken the ego, to turn our thoughts to deep questions and quarry trivial concerns into the margins of attention. I want to help them do that. My first order of business is not to extract evidence or to contextualize, but simply to enhance reception. I do not constrain the poem to a linear argument. I allow it to unfold as spontaneously as possible under the light of my attention, and carefully record whatever I happen to perceive. I refrain from explicitly integrating the interludes into my genealogy. That would circumscribe their potentialities of meaning. In these interludes I allow myself experimental liberties than in the main chapters. I pursue postsecular style with greater daring, and more self-reliantly develop my ideal of what a formalist reading attentive to atmosphere should look like. The poem elicits a meaningful experience. And the critic's job is to magnify that experience. I consider this as valuable an end as any any to which criticism can aspire.

Interlude: "There's a Certain Slant of Light," by Emily Dickinson.
(*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, pp. 258)

There's a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –
We can find no scar,
But internal difference –
Where the Meanings, are –

None may teach it – Any –
'Tis the seal Despair –
An imperial affliction
Sent us of the Air –

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, 'tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

Dickinson departs from the typical subject matter of lyric as early as the first line. This poem is not about an emotion or an idea, but a “certain slant of light,” a feature of the environment. Maybe it’s a nature poem, then. If so, there’s very little nature in it. The environment *per se* interests Dickinson less than the interaction between the environment and subjective consciousness, the way that light makes a setting *feel*. Everything tinges atmosphere. But there is something characteristically atmospheric about light. Light has a privileged connection to atmosphere, a certain power over it that other signatures lack. We speak of *mood lighting*, but not *mood wallpapering* or *mood furniture arrangement*. Atmosphere is most salient when it changes, and light is perhaps the most common agent of atmospheric change. A cloud passes across the sun, and suddenly a happy landscape is now dreary. The same furnishings that in the afternoon were comforting and familiar take on a dark, uncanny cast in the evening. Light, like atmosphere, is not concentrated in a single part or set of parts, but diffuses throughout the environment as a whole.

Then there is the connection with spirit. The earth needs light, light comes from the sun, and without the sun the earth would be cold and lifeless; life needs spirit, spirit comes from God, and without God life would not exist. The sun is like God. The warmth we carry around in our bodies comes from the light on high; the spirit that animates our bodies comes from God on high. And so when God speaks to us he uses the channel of light. Atmosphere and spirit are both invisible and insubstantial, yet we can feel them. Everything has spirit; everything has atmosphere. A soul makes a thing what it is. The signature of a thing divulges its distinctness in the form of a feeling. All souls blend together in a single overarching holy spirit. All signatures blend together in a single overar-

ching atmosphere. In Emerson's essays, matter refracts spirit into atmosphere. And a symbolic kinship continues to wed light, atmosphere, and spirit together in American literature after Emerson.

Atmospheres subtly coerce. They have power over how a person thinks and feels, what thoughts occur, what matters one dwells upon. They engender receptivity to certain motions of the mind. This is how winter light and "cathedral tunes" oppress (4). They compel contemplation of more serious matters than maybe one would like. The shift comes all of a sudden, like an epiphany: from a winter afternoon to a cathedral, from outside to inside, from muffled snowy distances to echoing walls, from white to dark. The two images could not be more different on the surface. This draws attention to the one element they hold in common: their signatures. Both are sad though calming. Both are associated with death (things die in winter, cathedrals orient our thoughts toward the afterlife) and purity (winter is white, cathedrals are sanctified of fleshly appetites), and with the bareness of a pure life.

And both engender silent, still reflection: "When it comes, the landscape listens— / Shadows—hold their breath—" (13-14). The place does what the speaker does. They silently attend in rapt collusion. Except the pathetic fallacy is not so pathetic here. Yes, Dickinson imbues the land with emotion. The holding of breath suggests anxiety, especially the kind we feel among presences that command respect and reverence. But Dickinson does not project her anxious reverence upon the landscape. The landscape makes her anxiously reverent. Atmosphere brings about shared feelings between person and place. So does the pathetic fallacy. But with atmosphere the feelings originate in the

place, not the person. Atmosphere makes a place contagious. We catch thoughts and feelings from it like a cold. Like atmosphere, a virus travels invisibly, an “affliction... of the air” (11-12). And, like atmosphere, something from outside comes in and troubles our subjectivity. In the slanting light of winter afternoons, I am likelier to dwell on serious topics, like mortality or climate change. The dark takes more than its fair portion of the day. Heavy matters take more than their fair portion of attention.

But atmosphere afflicts to heal, like surgery, which wounds to make whole. Dickinson never mentions surgery. But she sets the surface of the second stanza with surgical utensils. Light suggests warmth. But winter light is purged of warmth, at once bright and cold, like implements that cut and penetrate. And, like implements that cut and penetrate, this light hurts—surgically, with benevolence. This surgeon is so skilled that she leaves behind “no scar, / But internal difference— / Where the Meanings, are—” (6-8). Dickinson’s syntax makes us picture the meanings as if they were organs. We have to imagine the meanings in a certain place. The “scar” prompts us to imagine that place somewhere in the body. This takes effort for Westerners like me. We have been trained to locate meaning in a realm external, outside, beyond. Meaning is abstract, and concrete signs refer to it. In language, concrete sounds and graphs refer to abstract ideas. The concrete bed in my room refers to the Platonic form of a bed in the sky. My concrete body refers to its intangible spirit. We speak of meaning as something to *strive* towards, something beyond the horizon that justifies the trials of every-day life. Now Dickinson comes along and buries meaning in the body. In a sense, she’s right. Meanings are like organs. Meanings and organs both perform functions that keep us healthy. Organs circulate blood and breath

through the body. Meanings circulate beliefs and values through the self. Organs work together: the heart pumps blood to the stomach to aid digestion. Meanings work together in a coherent worldview: beliefs sustain values, values guide inquiry into what we should believe. Sometimes, the organs don't work together as they should. Then a surgeon needs to cut us open and set things right. Sometimes meanings don't work together as they should. Then we need to undergo a surgery of light.

The poem itself administers a surgery of light. Dickinson wounds to make whole. She dislocates certain habits of thought so that we can think more clearly. Consider how the last couplet makes us think of distance. English usually subordinates distance to what it intervenes between, as means to an end, a journey to a destination. Dickinson does the opposite. She could easily have compared the absence of the light directly to the "distant look of death." That would have sounded more natural to the English ear. The distance would have functioned to enhance certain qualities of death. But she doesn't. She compares the absence of the light to the "Distance / on the look of Death" (15-16). The metaphor takes the distance, not the look of death, as its vehicle. The "look of death" enhances certain qualities of the distance. Distance is empty. The "look of Death" makes the distance emptier. We associate long, unbroken distances with monotony. The "look of Death" makes the distance more monotonous.

We tend to think of distance as a uniform quantity, like weight or volume. The only difference between *this* volume and *that* consists in litres. The only difference between *this* distance and *that* consists in however many centimetres, metres, kilometres. But Dickinson invests the "Distance / on the look of Death" (16-17) with a *qualitative*

difference. The light goes. The distances between things do not lengthen or shorten. But they change in a different way. They *feel* different. The atmosphere has altered. Atmospheric quality depends on but is irreducible to what populates an environment. The atmosphere of a distance depends on but is irreducible to what it contains. Let's say a kitchen cupboard has some ginger, garlic, mint, and turmeric inside of it. The ginger smells, the garlic smells, the mint and turmeric smell. And all of them affect the smell of the cupboard. But the smell of the cupboard is not reducible to the smells of ginger, garlic, mint, and turmeric. All these smells combine into a unique synthesis. The cupboard has a smell of its own. In the same way, the distance has an atmosphere of its own. The absent light, the "look of Death," supply its bleak and holy tincturing.

The first stanza transitions from bright to dark: from winter white to cathedral gloom. So does the last stanza: the light goes down, the "look of Death" arises. A winter afternoon and a dark cathedral look different, but they have similar signatures. So do the slant of light and the "look of Death." We picture distance laterally, across the surface of the earth. The distance is "on" the "look of Death." This makes it hard not to picture death on the surface of the horizon, like a black sun at dawn. Western poetry commonly compares gazes to rays of light. The "look of Death" replaces the winter afternoon with a sootier beam. The "slant of light" has diminished. But its atmosphere remains, somehow intensified. The winter light was bleak, but this is bleaker.

Chapter 1. Jonathan Edwards and Liberal Secularity

In the introduction, I followed Talal Asad (2003) in defining the secular according to an evolving constellation of oppositions that structure its relation to the religious. What, then, are the oppositions that define the secular for eighteenth-century Calvinist New England? I cannot list them all, but I can point out a few of the major ones: heaven versus earth, church versus state, scripture versus non-scriptural texts, regenerate versus unregenerate, reason versus passion. Some of these oppositions correspond cleanly to the religious-secular divide. Heaven and the church both categorize a given body of content as religious, while earth and the state categorize a body of content as worldly, for example. Other oppositions, like reason-passion, structure the religious-secular divide in another way: by deciding which inspirations come from heaven and which originate here on earth, which religious practices should be allowed in the church and which should not, which forms of behaviour demonstrate and which counterfeit regeneracy.

These oppositions were organized to combat the insurrectionary power of religious enthusiasm after the seventeenth-century religious wars in England. Theologians policed the boundary between heaven and earth, the spiritual and material realms with increasing theoretical rigour. Old-light Calvinists in New England grew increasingly suspicious of any claim to direct contact with the spiritual realm, a suspicion galvanized in response to the Great Awakening of the 1730s-40s. Reason and scripture regulated religious legitimacy. Any doctrine or devotional practice not in conformity with scripture and

reason warranted the stamp and stigma of heresy. This gave rise to a rigid intellectualism that, in its most extreme variants, excluded affect from religious experience.

I call this particular arrangement of religious-worldly oppositions *liberal secularity*. Jonathan Edwards did his best to work within the boundaries of liberal secularity. He respected reason and scripture as the authoritative standards of religious legitimacy. But he wanted to recuperate a personal, affective link to the holy spirit. His apologetics for the Great Awakening, particularly *A Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections* (1746), refines the theoretical terms of liberal secularity so that they may integrate religious feeling without too much risk. Not all affect is incompatible with reason, it turns out. And an absolute embargo on modern revelation is unnecessarily strict. The threat of enthusiasm does not necessitate such overbearing precautions. Edwards did not want to dismantle liberal secularity. He wanted to hone its oppositions into greater theoretical nuance.

Liberal secularity persisted into the nineteenth century, when the Transcendentalists began to chafe against its rationalistic constraints. Edwards sets the stage for the Transcendentalist reaction in a number of key ways. First, he redefines the Puritan covenant so as to include a perceptual capacity unavailable to the unregenerate soul. The elect acquires not only conviction of God's favour, but also insight into spiritual facts behind Scripture and natural forms. The covenant acquires immediate value *within the world*. It not only promises election, but also confers a heightened state of earthly being. Edwards thus anticipates the religious sentiment, which receives spiritual influx in the form of an illuminated tranquility of mind and enhanced aesthetic receptivity. Orestes Brownson acknowledges this intellectual lineage explicitly: Edwards "grasped some pro-

found and universal truths, which are now almost for the first time finding their true place in our systems of philosophy” (“Evidences” 99-100)—specifically, the “power of seeing, apprehending the truth and reality of the Gospel revelation” through the influence of “God’s light shining in us” (104). The religious sentiment democratizes the divine light, making it available to all, regenerate and unregenerate alike.

Second, Edwards offers a precedent for the spiritualization of aesthetic experience that the Transcendentalists later take to a radical extreme. He sees natural, aesthetic experience as corresponding to spiritual experience the way a symbol corresponds to its referent. In the beauties of art and nature, the unregenerate behold an analogy to the beauty of God. The Transcendentalists retain Edwards’ distinction between religious and this-worldly aesthetic experience, but transfer it from the realm of experience to the work of art. Inspired art stimulates the religious sentiment and is therefore religious; uninspired art does not stimulate the religious sentiment and is therefore not religious.¹⁸

I will begin with a general overview of the enthusiasm controversy during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Britain. Then I will cross the Atlantic and show how the Great Awakening brought similar sentiments, which were already simmering in colonial America, to a boil. I will concentrate on the debate between Jonathan Ed-

¹⁸ Perry Miller made the Edwards-Emerson connection first in “Jonathan Edwards to Emerson” (1941). Since then, Joanna Brooks’ “From Edwards to Baldwin: Heterodoxy, Discontinuity, and New Narratives of American Religious-Literary History (2010) broadens and diversifies the lineage to include James Baldwin. Robert Milder, in “From Emerson to Edwards” (2007), reverses the flow of history, charting Emerson’s gradual drift back to his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson’s Calvinism.

wards and Charles Chauncy. Chauncy accuses Edwards, George Whitefield,¹⁹ and other itinerant preachers of New England (notably Gilbert Tennant and Daniel Rogers) of fomenting enthusiasm and undermining the established church. Edwards, who had a strong stake in the Great Awakening, rises to its defence—not by embracing enthusiasm, but by conceptualizing new kinds of religious affect. I will then turn to Edwards’ religious aesthetics, which I interpret within the context of his typology.

Liberal secularity and the critique of enthusiasm during the Great Awakening.

Michael Heyd (1995) traces the Protestant critique of enthusiasm to the beginnings of the Reformation, with Luther’s attack on the Zwickau prophets of 1522 (11), but it really took off in the mid-seventeenth century: “The Thirty Years War, the English Revolution, and the ‘general crisis’ all over Europe, were all accompanied by an upsurge of millenarian movements, the spread of radical religious sects, and the frequent occurrence of prophetic visions” (14). Heyd’s main representatives of the Protestant critique—Heinrich Bullinger, Friedrich Spanheim, and Johannes Hoornbeek—oppose enthusiasts on two key issues: “the hiatus dividing Heaven from Earth,” and “the doctrine concerning Christ as a central mediating symbol” (25). These two issues are linked: enthusiasts claimed a direct connection to the holy spirit, one that superseded the Bible, trespassing on supernatural territory. They claimed to receive doctrine directly from the holy spirit,

¹⁹ Whitefield was an English Anglican evangelist widely considered responsible for sparking the Great Awakening. See Harry S. Stout’s *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (1991); Frank Lambert, “Pedlar in Divinity”: *George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals* (1994); and Thomas S. Kidd, *George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father* (2014).

invoking an authority that could potentially justify departing from and elaborating upon scripture.

Locke develops the anti-enthusiasm polemic of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) along similar lines. For him, there are two sources of knowledge: reason and revelation. Revelation is knowledge that comes directly from God. Reason is “natural revelation” (431)—that is, God has granted us the natural faculty of reason and has hidden his knowledge in nature, so revelation is constantly available to us through hard work and perseverance without any divine intervention (431). The danger of enthusiasm, for Locke, is that people might mistake their own mania for revelation (430). His basic test is to see whether the prophet keeps their wits or not: “God when he makes the prophet does not unmake the man” (438). In bestowing revelation, God does not diminish reason. The prophet is lucid, keen, and rational, though inspired. He doesn’t assert his own infallible authority, but provides undeniable proof that his truths descend from God (438). Although Locke does not deny that sometimes the Holy Spirit can “enlighten men’s minds” or “excite them to good actions” *without* any halos or miracles or other obvious signs of divine influence, he is Protestant enough to refer all such adjudications to reason and Scripture (440).

After the wars of religion (1642-51), British theologians and philosophers came together to figure out how to prevent the same thing from happening again. They came up with two solutions. The first solution involved rigorously policing the gap between heaven and earth so that no-one could appeal to an authority higher than the king (Pocock, 8). The second solution concerns what we now call the secular. Scholars mostly agree that

the religious wars gave rise to the secular realm as a compromise that allowed competing Christian denominations to co-exist peacefully. As Taylor puts it, “The origin point of modern Western secularism was the Wars of Religion... The public domain had to be regulated by certain norms or agreements which were independent of confessional allegiance” (“Modes” 32). These two solutions are related. The secular sphere demands that different confessions submit to the same common standard—civil authority, reason, and the Bible. In order to uphold this standard, theologians had to delegitimize enthusiasm.

Michael Heyd argues that in their zeal to discredit enthusiasts, theologians incorporated reason more and more into their discipline. Eventually, scripture came to divide with Enlightenment reason its role in mediating between heaven and earth. Protestantism effectively participates in its own secularization (165-90, 274-79). I don’t disagree with Heyd altogether, but I must address a minor anachronism. Reason was not yet intrinsically secular, not yet separate from religion. Neither was science. In fact, eighteenth-century thinkers (Jonathan Edwards included) commonly conceived of theology as “the ‘Queen of the sciences’ and science as ‘handmaiden to theology’” (Zakai, 14). If so, theology could unproblematically incorporate reason without secularizing itself. The church, by mixing in a little more reason, did not also become a little more secular. I do, however, strongly agree that the critique of enthusiasm helps shape the secular. Different denominations needed a common standard of legitimacy and adjudication, a standard constituted (in part) by reason and Scripture. Enthusiasm undermines this standard, disavowing rea-

son as an objective condition of legitimacy and invoking authority beyond Scripture.²⁰ It thus becomes increasingly dangerous after the religious wars.

The critique of enthusiasm divorced heaven and earth. It held any claim to direct spiritual contact under rigorous scrutiny. After the religious wars, suspicion intensified, until the critique against enthusiasm began indicting immediate spiritual communion altogether. With Jakob Brucker's *Historia Critica Philosophiae* (1742), "the concept of enthusiasm was broadening to include all claims to the presence of the divine in human affairs; God might still be the object of belief, but never of experience" (Pocock, 21). Now, Brucker was a Lutheran, Edwards a Calvinist. Calvinism, even at its most orthodox and rational, sees the holy spirit as being involved immediately in human experience through the covenant. Even so, old-guard Calvinists regulated the covenant so strictly that the regenerate soul came into direct contact with God only in name. The covenant did not allow for any revelation beyond scripture. It effected no miracles, and induced a staid, reserved temperament. It stimulated religious affections, but these were ideally private and restrained.

So we see a broad range of opinions regarding the relationship between God and the individual. At one extreme, God literally imbues the individual with holy rapture, inducing seizures and effusive, inspired speech. The regenerate is a modern prophet, free to elaborate upon Scripture with God's blessing. At the other end, we have the hard-nosed Chauncy-types, for whom the holy spirit discloses itself only through good works and

²⁰ For more on the relationship between enthusiasm and secularism, see Rosenberg, 2011. Rosenberg argues that the critique of enthusiasm contributed to a key term of the secularization narrative: that we have moved on from an age of superstition and blind faith, and into an age of reason and enlightened faith.

adherence to Scripture. Jonathan Edwards falls somewhere in the middle. Chauncy declares good actions the ultimate criterion of regeneracy— “by their fruits shall ye know them” (Chauncy, 7)—and so does Edwards: “I know of no directions or counsels which Christ ever delivered more plainly, than the rules he has given us, to guide us in our judging of others’ sincerity; viz. that we should judge of the tree chiefly by the fruit” (*RA*, 185). However, Chauncy seems to think it possible to discern whether or not religious affections are *false*, while Edwards advances a more cautious evaluation. In *Religious Affections*, Edwards exhaustively details signs of true affections and signs that indicate nothing one way or the other, but no definitive signs of *false* affections. This is where the struggle over “the fixed relationship between language and doctrine” takes place. But even that doesn’t quite do justice to the Chauncy-Edwards debate. To bring the contention into greater clarity, I’ll focus on a few key points of difference: (1) physical manifestations of religious affect, (2) the displacement of education by immediate revelation, (3) affect as a means of stimulating the congregation, and (4) the distinction between true and natural religious affections.

Chauncy counts dramatic physical manifestations of religious affect as a severe mark against the enthusiasts. Speaking of the Northampton awakening (in Edwards’s precinct), he finds that all the crying, fainting, going cold, and having seizures do not “tend much to the credit of Religion” (*ST*, 92). Not only does he utterly discount them as evidence of God’s holy work, he sees them as clear signs that Satan is the real hand behind the curtain. While God works on reason and the will, Satan goes after the body (*ST*,

110-111). For Edwards, on the other hand, it's no evidence of or against true religious affections that they induce physical effects. All affects have some influence on the body, whether religious or not (*RA*, 131-34).

Chauncy and Edwards also differ on the issue of whether or not an immediate impression from the holy spirit can take the place of learning. Exhorters with little to no formal education drew massive crowds “under the Notion of *immediate Impressions* from the SPIRIT, and that this *assistance* would more than supply the *Want of Learning*” (*ST*, 258). Chauncy has some relatively extreme examples in mind: itinerant preachers who usurp pulpits “not only without *Book*, but without *Study*; and justify their doing so, lest, by *previous Preparation* they should *stint* the SPIRIT,” as if learning inhibited instead of augmenting a clear understanding of Scripture. This notion in particular, for him, finds a precedent in antinomianism: “this same *Error* was committed in the *Country* in former times. It was then said, they needed no *Books* but the *Bible*; and instead of *using learning*, they must *rely on the SPIRIT*” (*ST*, 259).

Edwards certainly doesn't undervalue learning. He draws no dichotomy between learning and spirit. But learning is not sufficient on its own for a full apprehension of spiritual truths. For that, you need regeneracy. The regenerate soul, educated or not, has access to a more vivid reading of scripture than the most learned unregenerate parson. But Edwards exercises a great deal of caution here. The spiritual light “is not the suggesting of any new truths or propositions not contained in the word of God” (*DSL*, 184). Divine light discloses nothing that is not in the Bible, only a fuller sense of what the Bible says: “there is a difference between having an opinion, that God is holy and gracious, and

having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace,” just as “there is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness” (DSL, 185). This is why the divine light offers something learning simply cannot, and more valuable than anything learning has to offer: “The evidence that is in this way obtained, is vastly better and more satisfying, than all that can be obtained by the arguing of those that are most learned” (185).

Both Edwards and Chauncy draw a distinction between earthly and true affections, but their distinctions differ. Three conditions determine the truth of religious joy for Chauncy: foundation, cause, and effects (ST, 120). The foundation is faith: the new creature experiences a kind of joy the natural man cannot. The cause is the recognition of regeneracy (122). The effects are various. A “*Tongue to praise GOD*” (125), humility, and modesty. Chauncy stresses that the praise inspired by true joy is not ostentatious. Ostentatious praise is a sign of *false* joy (126). Chauncy has a low threshold for ostentation. Even laughter is too much for him: “it savours of too much Levity” and “discovers the Want of due Reverence towards the *divine Majesty*” (127). He draws particular attention to trances, raptures, and “Exstasies” as signs of false joy (130). Here, he voices a number of points clearly aligned with the critique of enthusiasm: “such apprehensions for the *most Part are either Conceptions of distempered Minds, and discomposed Fancies, or Delusions of Satan transforming himself into an Angel of Light*” (131). In the eighteenth century, enthusiasm was widely drawn up to an overweening imagination resulting from melancholia, and so Chauncy here draws a clear link between ostentatious expressions of joy (like laughter) and enthusiasm.

The line where religious feeling crosses over into enthusiasm is by no means clear, and this leaves it vulnerable to exploitation. Chauncy shows how easily the discourse surrounding enthusiasm could slide into a prejudice against outward displays of religious feeling altogether, precisely what Edwards sets out to remedy in *Religious Affections*: “because many who, in the late extraordinary season, appeared to have great religious affections, did not manifest a right temper of mind, and run into many errors, in the time of their affection, and the heat of their zeal... religious affects in general are grown out of credit” (119). The “late extraordinary season” is the Great Awakening, and the final clause is clearly a jab at Chauncy and the Chauncians. Edwards revises Chauncy’s distinction between true and false religious affections. For Chauncy, there is true and false religious joy, and presumably true and false love, true and false hate. While this same doctrine may hold true for Edwards, the conditions of truth are different. True joy may have a different foundation, cause, and set of effects from false, but these factors are not essential to the distinction between the two.

The essential difference consists in what Edwards calls the divine and supernatural light. The holy spirit unites with the individual soul, acting through it as an “indwelling vital principle” (DSL, 183), lending an illuminated eloquence and behaviour. The divine light is not a new faculty, but an enhancement of natural faculties—not a new sense so much as something that allows us to use our senses differently: “the use we make of our eyes in beholding various objects, when the sun arises, is not the case of the light that discovers those objects to us” (DSL, 187). Our reason, our feelings, become capable of perceiving spiritual truths in the same way that our eyes can see only with the help of

light. It is not a new thought, feeling, or perception, but a new condition that allows for thinking, feeling, and perceiving on a spiritual plane. This divine and supernatural light allows Edwards to explain why two people can read the same Scripture and get completely different reactions out of it. Or why the same person can return to a Biblical passage that initially seemed flat and find that the second time around it evokes a vivid and robust apprehension of God's glory. The difference does not consist in the content of the passage, but in its effect upon the mind and soul, an effect made possible by a finer receptivity.

Maybe a secular example will help understand exactly what Edwards is getting at. We all know we are going to die, but for the most part this knowledge doesn't bother us, whether we are believers or not. But every now and then, something happens which shifts our perspective just enough that something clicks in place and the knowledge of our mortality strikes us with full force. The content doesn't change: we don't learn anything *new* about death or the process of dying. It's the same thought, but more complete, striking closer to its fullest realization. No-one knows what happens after you die or what the process of dying is like. And yet, elderly people generally have a qualitatively more robust knowledge of mortality than young people. It impinges more directly upon their interests, weighs more heavily in their feelings, and commands their attention with greater force. So, for Edwards, it is possible for some people to have a fuller apprehension of religious truths than others. Feeling, for Edwards, *is* thinking. It *is* a form of knowledge. Edwards is a counter-Enlightenment thinker insofar as he undermines one governing principle of instrumental reason: stripped of affective resonance, the object does not be-

come clearer or more objective, but emaciated. We obtain objectivity *through* feeling, not in spite of it.

The divine light engenders a true and complete apprehension of spiritual ideas, which for Edwards means they engage the affections. The primary distinction is not between true from false joy, true from natural hate, true from natural love, but between a mode of knowledge infused with God and one without. The difference is subtle, but crucial. For Chauncy, true and false religious affections are necessarily opposed to one another. For Edwards, they are not. The unregenerate soul can experience momentary flashes of divine knowledge. But the regenerate soul incorporates divine light as an indwelling principle. It's always there, and illuminates all her thoughts and feelings.

For Chauncy, unregenerate religious affections are false, and false religious affections are dangerous (they delude the masses and generate confusion). So it makes sense that he would disapprove of the emotionally-charged sermons that became so prevalent during the Great Awakening: "People have been too much applied to, as though the Preacher rather aimed at putting their passions into a ferment, than filling them with such a *reasonable* Solitude, as is the Effect of a just Exhibition of the Truths of GOD to their Understandings" (*ST*, 98). Chauncy tends to see passions and "*reasonable* Solitude" as mutually exclusive. For Edwards, unregenerate affections are *not* necessarily false or dangerous. The holy spirit can momentarily awaken true religious fervour in unregenerate souls. And even if it doesn't, religious affections serve an important purpose. For starters, what better way to motivate piety: "take away all love and hatred , all hope and fear, all anger, zeal and affectionate desire, and the world would be, in a great measure, motion-

less and dead; there would be no such thing as activity... or any earnest pursuit" (*RA*, 101). Getting the passions into a ferment is a fairly direct means to bring about a reasonable solicitude in the first place. Hence the unabashedly fervent "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," which drove the imminence of damnation home so successfully that Edwards had the entire Suffield congregation howling in contortions (Winiarski, 684).

If Chauncy had been present at Suffield, Massachusetts on July 6, 1741, he probably would have put the entire episode down to charlatanism. Ostentatious displays of religious affect were so dangerous in part because they invoked the majesty of miracle, regressing to an age of medieval superstition. He chastises Davenport in particular for promulgating prophetic intimations that the end of the world was at hand, scaring the congregation into self-abasement and atonement (*ST*, 97-100). Chauncy distrusts the pretence behind the Great Awakening in general: the holy spirit moves over the land, and these are God's miraculous works: "'Tis not now as it was in the *first Days* of the Gospel. Men were then assisted in a *miraculous* and *extraordinary* Manner; but they have *now* no reason to expect the *SPIRIT's Help*, only in the *Way* or *Means*...by attending to *Reading*, and *Meditation*, and *Prayer*" (258). So Chauncy's position clearly falls in line with the critique of enthusiasm. He sees the Great Awakening as diverging too much from Scripture and reason but also, more importantly, as neglecting the boundary between heaven and earth. He sees strict, stable restraints on religious practice as the necessary basis for reliable harmony among competing religious denominations.

More reliable—but at what cost? Edwards saw an unprecedented volume of conversions in his own parish at Northampton, and many more as a direct product of White-

field's influence. Souls were saved that otherwise would likely have fallen by the way-side. He had strong motives for not writing off the convulsions and ecstasies as enthusiasm too hastily. What does it matter that there were a few impostors if heaven reaps an overall profit? If passionate, moving, engrossing sermons are what it takes, then preachers should not shy away from them. At the same time, Edwards had to protect religious affect from the dangers of enthusiasm and antinomianism. I have shown how the critique against enthusiasm necessitated a strict boundary between heaven and earth, and how this boundary became embedded in a moral outlook that was deeply skeptical of religious affections. Edwards had to change this outlook somehow to redeem religious affections, and he couldn't embrace enthusiasm. He also couldn't open the boundary between heaven and earth altogether. Instead, he moves it, tracing out a distinction between natural and regenerate feeling.

Of course, this distinction already existed. But the distinction as Chauncy draws it creates a binary opposition that delegitimizes natural religious affect as a preparatory means to receiving the covenant. It also reinforces the boundary between heaven and earth by keeping authentic religious affections private and restrained. It's harder to say, for example, that the holy spirit is not immediately active in the room when the entire congregation is convulsing and prophesying (given that convulsions and ecstatic prophesy are not entirely discounted). The divine light allows Edwards to theorize the possibility of *momentary* authentic religious affections. Religious affections are only true insofar as they are illuminated by the divine and supernatural light, which can also *briefly* illumi-

nate natural affections, though without, perhaps, the same degree of power and clarity. This allows him to clear a place for emotionally-charged sermons.

Jonathan Edwards's theory of beauty.

In this section, I review Edwards's theory of religious affections in greater detail. The main point I want to make is that Edwards draws a distinction between two kinds of aesthetic experience, one earthly, the other spiritual. He has to draw this distinction in order to separate regenerate from natural affections and to defend against charges of enthusiasm. God, the unmoved mover, can act upon the unregenerate soul as an external force. He can stir thoughts and feelings, but in regeneracy the holy spirit becomes a principle of thought and feeling. It's like the difference between a magnet moving a piece of metal and actually magnetizing it. The unregenerate is simply moved, the regenerate fully magnetized. In Edwards's own words,

the spirit of God may act upon inanimate creatures, as, the Spirit moved upon the face of the waters, in the beginning of the creation; so the Spirit of God may act upon the minds of men many ways, and communicate Himself no more than when He acts upon an inanimate creature. For instance, he may excite thoughts in them, may assist their natural reason and understanding, or may assist other natural principles, and this without any union with the soul, but may act, as it were, upon an external object ("DSL," 184).

As God moved upon the face of the waters, so he acts upon the mind of man. He can move upon the water like a reflection or like wind: a thought or a motive, representation

or force. But he does not imbue the water with His will. His image fades, the waves begin to slow. God acts upon the unregenerate as an “extrinsic occasional agent.” Extrinsic: from outside. Occasional: only sometimes, temporarily, in brief flashes. God acts upon the regenerate soul from within, and his influence is always there. As McClymond puts it, “regenerate and unregenerate alike have affective sensibility, and both experience the sense of the heart... Yet, only the regenerate have that spiritual sense or new sense that consists in delight and in a sweet sense of God and spiritual things” (213).

Everyone can appreciate the natural beauties of nature and art. But only the fully magnetized regenerate soul can apprehend true beauty, the beauty of God’s excellence. Edwards theorizes the distinction between true and natural beauty in *The Nature of True Virtue* (1765). He begins with a more basic distinction, between general and particular virtue. True virtue is general: “it... is the general goodness and beauty of the disposition, and exercise of the heart, in the most comprehensive view, considered with regard to its universal tendency, and as related to everything it stands in connection with” (*NTV*, 8). The truly virtuous act out of regard for being in general instead of for anyone or anything in particular. For instance, charity is virtuous. But if you are charitable only to your close friends, you are acting out of a particular regard for them, and so your charity is not *truly* virtuous. To be truly virtuous, your charity would have to be motivated by a regard for being in general.

In *The Nature*, true virtue and true beauty are more or less the same term. A thing is truly beautiful only insofar as it is virtuous. So the distinction between general and particular virtue corresponds to a distinction between general and particular beauty. Particu-

lar beauty is beautiful “when considered only with regard to its connection with, and tendency to some particular things within a limited and, as it were, a private sphere.” A general beauty is that which is most beautiful when perceived in all its connections, in its cosmic environment (*NTV* 5-6). For example, it is possible for a musical note to be beautiful in isolation, but discordant in the whole melodic sequence (*NTV* 6). A person is like a musical note: she can be beautiful on her own, but discordant with the cosmos. And she harmonizes most truly with the rest of creation who acts out of love for being in general. Since being is her object of love, that which has the most being will also receive the most of her love, and God has the most being of all (*NTV* 22-39).

True beauty, then, manifests only in “beings that exist,” which means people and divine entities. There is no such thing as a virtuous rock or a virtuous lake, so rocks and lakes can’t have true beauty. But Edwards acknowledges a secondary, subordinate kind of beauty that rocks and lakes *can* have. This kind of beauty is “an image” of primary beauty. It constitutes an order that reflects the higher, universal harmony of true virtue: it “consists in a mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design; called by the various names of regularity, order, uniformity, symmetry, proportion, harmony, &c” (*NTV* 39). Symmetry is Edwards’s paradigmatic example. A symmetrical face is more beautiful than an unsymmetrical one. Geometric shapes are intrinsically beautiful because they are regular, measured, proportionate.

Edwards acknowledges his debt to Hutcheson, for whom beauty results from uniformity among variety. An octagon is more beautiful than a square, because it brings a greater number of sides and corners into regularity. Edwards applies Hutcheson’s princi-

ple at a cosmic scale. Variety in uniformity pleases intrinsically because consent among many different things is better than among a few. And God made unity in nature pleasing to human minds because it captures in miniature the unity of his complete design. Natural beauty, then, is an image of spiritual beauty—but only an image, only an analogy or figuration. For example, the various parts of a plant or of a building are pleasing because of their analogy to the “consent of mind of the different parts of society or system of intelligent beings, sweetly united in a benevolent agreement of heart” (*NTV*, 80).

Secondary beauty is “an entirely distinct thing” (82) from primary beauty. Whereas primary beauty consists in “concord and union of mind and heart,” the “will, disposition, or affection of the heart” have no concern in secondary beauty. Secondary beauty consists only in a consent of “nature, form, quantity, &c” (82-83). I interpret the difference here as one of source rather than effect. Primary beauty comes from the harmonious union of the individual soul and God’s design. Secondary beauty issues from a purely sensory origin. So when Edwards says that affections have no concern in secondary beauty, he doesn’t mean that secondary beauty can’t stir the affections, but that it does not *derive* from the affective unity of the virtuous soul: “the cause why secondary beauty is grateful to man, is only a law of nature, which God has fixed, or an instinct he has given to mankind; and not their perception of the same thing which God is pleased to have regard to, as the ground or rule by which he has established such a law of nature” (83-84). Both nature and the regenerate soul express the divine law, and this makes them beautiful. But where the regenerate soul captures God’s law immediately, nature conveys only a rough translation, a diminished copy. God impresses nature with his law and then departs,

while the regenerate soul retains a direct channel to the holy spirit. Whereas many people contemplate natural beauty without reflecting upon the divine order from which it derives, primary beauty is inextricable from divine order.

This distinction between primary and secondary beauty allows Edwards to promote the affections (both aesthetic and not) as an appropriate means of opening solicitous souls to the covenant. In *The Nature of True Virtue*, he speculates that “God has constituted nature, that the presenting this inferior beauty... might have a tendency to assist those whose hearts are under the influence of a truly virtuous temper; to dispose them to the exercises of divine love and enliven in them a sense of spiritual beauty” (81-82). By “the influence of a truly virtuous temper,” Edwards could mean true virtue itself: nature can edify the already regenerate soul. But I think it likelier that he means the *inclination* to true virtue, a receptivity to the holy spirit’s saving grace. If so, secondary beauty prepares the unregenerate to receive the holy covenant. Nature becomes a supplement to scripture. Natural beauty can awaken a clearer sense of God’s plan. It can open a window for the divine light to shine through.

Edwards is a bit of an anomaly when it comes to questions of beauty. Calvinism and Puritanism are notorious for their prejudices against aesthetics. This has become a bit

of a truism, but that doesn't mean it isn't true.²¹ Calvinists generally tolerated art as a vehicle for spiritual edification. Poetry was all right, but best when derived from a true premise or event and when it expressed a clear Christian moral. Fiction was a little more dangerous because more likely to excite false notions and romantic fancies that might lead readers astray, especially young women.²² A common, though extreme, Calvinist position considered the aesthetic vain ornamentation, a superficial worldly concern that distracted from rational piety. It had value only as a moral instrument, and even then, only enough flashy rhetoric or fawning sentiment was permitted to get the job done.

The Puritan plain style of sermonizing supplies a good test case to illustrate dominant New England attitudes towards aesthetics. The most famous early account of the plain style comes from Perry Miller's *The New England Mind*.²³ Although *The New England Mind* focuses on the seventeenth century, many elements of the Puritan attitude towards aesthetics survived long enough to find a home in eighteenth-century Calvinism. The plain style evolved in response to what Miller calls the "metaphysical" Anglican

²¹ Like most truisms in the field, this one can be traced back to Perry Miller and Charles Fiedelson. Miller: "the Puritan stylist studiously held his fancy in check, sought his metaphors and similes in the commonplace, and remorselessly extracted the last ounce of meaning by a direct translation of the trope into moral so that nothing would be left to the imagination of the reader" (*ISDT*, 4), and "in the Puritan as opposed to the Anglican tradition, there was an articulated doctrine governing the use of emblems and allegories. Puritanism was a protest not only against the polity of the Church of England but also against its esthetic, against ritual and ornamentation in the worship and elegance of the sermon" (1948, 3); Fiedelson: "the crudity or conventionality of a great part of American literature from 1620 through the third quarter of the nineteenth century may be no more surely attributed to frontier conditions, provinciality, and industrialism than to inherited mental habits which proscribed a functional artistic form" (*Symbolism in American Literature*, 18-19).

²² *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) by William Hill Brown illustrates some of the more prominent views toward literature of the time through a heated discussion among some of his more principled characters. They generally agree that literature is best when true (both true to life and based on historical events) and edifying.

²³ For more on the Puritan plain style, see Norman Grabo (1962), Michael Clark (1978), Jesper Rosenmeier (1980), and Elisa New (2006).

style of preaching. While metaphysical sermons are verbally ornate, the plain style is so rigidly systematic that it reads “more like a lawyer’s brief than a work of art” (332). While the metaphysical style is erudite and aloof, the plain style consciously speaks to the common man. Oratorical flourishes were permitted only within certain limits and qualifications. One of the minister’s central objectives was to stir the emotions and edify the will. Rhetorical embellishment was permitted insofar as it contributed to that end (346). But he must not betray the gravity of his content or slide into the “unrestrained emotional exhortations of Ranters and Antinomians” (348). Rhetoric and feeling were discouraged insofar as they extended beyond their capacity as means and drew attention to themselves for their own sake. Puritans subordinated form to content, manner to meaning, “the only universal requirement being that the eloquence... serve as a legitimate means for exciting good affections, and never become an artistic end in itself” (345). To an extent, plain style principles extended to poetry as well: “Poetry existed primarily for its utility, it was foredoomed to didacticism, and because it was the most highly ornate of the arts, it was always in grave danger of overstepping proper limits and becoming pleasing for its own sake” (360).

Thomas Allen draws a clear distinction between the academic Anglican and the plain Puritan styles of preaching: “the plain and profitable way, by raising of doctrines, with propounding the reasons and uses of the same, or after the mode of the University at that time, which was to stuff and fill their sermons with as much quotation and citing of authors as might possibly be” (quoted in Rosenmeier, 579). In his preface to *The Bay Psalm Book*, John Cotton defends singing psalms in church. Against the charge that

singing is nothing more than “ceremoniall,” he admits that “Some things indeed were ceremoniall, as their musical instruments, &c., but what ceremony was there in singing praise with the words of David and Asaph?” (A2). In *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline*, Thomas Hooker professes what Miller calls “the essence” of the plain style: “As it is beyond my skill, so I professe it beyond my care to please the nicenesse of mens palates, with any quaintnesse of language. They who covet more sauce than meat, they must provide cooks to their minde” (quoted in *The New England Mind*, 349). These three quotations assemble an associative constellation underlying prominent Calvinist attitudes toward art. Aesthetics is associated with ceremony, which is associated with pedantry, with form, with vanity, and so on. This constellation likely has roots in the Protestant reaction to Catholicism, particularly the eschatological checklist (if I do x, y, and z, I will get into heaven). The discrepancy between outward devotional conformity and inward sanctification undergirds a more general prejudice against empty customs, forms without content. In the Cotton quotation above, ceremony is a superficial act of piety. Pedantry is superficial factual knowledge. And ornamentation, in a Puritan context, conveys a sense of superfluous embellishment, of sauce without meat, flavour without substance.

Broadly speaking, prominent Calvinist communities of Edwards’s time placed spiritual and worldly concerns in an oppositional relationship, and classified aesthetic experience as primarily a worldly concern. Edwards revises these distinctions so that the aesthetic supplements rather than opposes the spiritual. He does this by reconfiguring the spiritual-aesthetic distinction into a distinction between two kinds of beauty, one divine and one natural. He associates God’s excellence with God’s beauty so inextricably that

they are more or less the same thing.²⁴ God is excellent because he is beautiful and beautiful because he is excellent. While even Chauncy would have allowed that God is beautiful, for Edwards divine beauty is more than just an attendant quality. It constitutes part of God's essence. This allows Edwards to celebrate primary beauty as an end in itself.²⁵ The aesthetic is not subordinate to the moral, but a condition of morality.²⁶

If we take Edwards's ideas to their logical conclusion, beauty is no longer reducible to an instrumental formal property. It becomes possible to think of the aesthetic not as merely an embellishment that, when detached from moral content, is decadent and superfluous. Primary beauty acquires intrinsic moral value. And although secondary beauty derives value from a higher term (primary beauty) and from its power to elevate the human soul to a higher plane, that does not make it *instrumental* per se. The difference is subtle but crucial. According to the strictest strain of Calvinist hermeneutics, aesthetic form plays a purely accessory role to the moral. Without the moral, aesthetic form is redundant and even harmful. Within Edwards's paradigm, secondary beauty carries an

²⁴ See Mitchell (2003): "*excellency* is the broader term encompassing, among others, such concepts as beauty, holiness, and greatness. *Beauty* is thus a synonym for excellency."

²⁵ See Michael D. Gibson: "This is the *primary beauty* of which Edwards writes in *The Nature of Virtue*: the love of beauty for beauty in itself. The *primary* ground of *primary* beauty is located in God's very being, and it is this beauty which is radiated through the mind or consciousness of God to the created world by the spirit" (2008, 65).

²⁶ Here, I don't mean to say that *all* Puritans had such an instrumental attitude towards aesthetics. I agree with Bercovitch that it's a limiting and unhelpful truism to say that "the New World Puritans were Ramist-bound scholastics who denigrated the imagination, reducing metaphor and parallel, type and trope, to an ornamental gateway into the precise logical structure of their thought" (*Origins*, 4). However, I also agree with Miller that this was a prominent position among Puritans and Calvinists, and one that certainly supplies an important contour to Edwards's context.

intrinsic devotional purchase. There is a necessary connection between secondary beauty and virtue that the traditional Puritan understanding lacks.²⁷

So Edwards promotes beauty to the condition of what Charles Taylor calls a “moral source” (*Sources*, 310). A moral source is Taylor’s term for an end of ends, an ultimate source of the good. Why should you work hard? To get a good job and make lots of money. Why is it good to make lots of money? So that you never have to worry about food. Why is it good to never have to worry about food? This game could go on for ever. Eventually, you have to say, “such-and-such a constitutive good is valuable in itself.” The ultimate moral source, for Edwards, is God. Edwards would say that you should work hard not for the sake of human life, but to glorify God. Since primary beauty is an essential condition of God’s glory, it becomes a moral source in and of itself.

Edwards’s distinction between primary and secondary beauty allows him to reconstitute dominant Calvinist paradigms in a number of ways. First, it helps him make a case for the affections as an appropriate means of preparation for grace. Second, it elevates beauty to the level of content. Thirdly, beauty (secondary and primary) obtains value higher than the instrumental. Finally, beauty becomes a moral source. Later, it will become clear how all four developments contribute to the emergence of Transcendentalism.

Jonathan Edwards’s typology.

²⁷ The connection being that nature is only beautiful to the extent that it corresponds to God’s truth and grandeur. It may sound as if there is a contradiction here. If, as I said earlier, for Edwards it is possible to have a taste for secondary beauty without having a taste for true virtue, how can there be a necessarily link between the two? On the one hand, I am saying there is a necessary link, on the other hand I’m saying there isn’t. My response would be that there are two different links: one representational, the other perceptual. Secondary beauty analogizes true virtue. That’s the first link, which does obtain. The second link is that between the individual’s spiritual condition and her apprehension of beauty, which does not obtain.

How, exactly, does primary beauty intimate itself through the beauties of nature? And what use does the regenerate soul have for the beauties of nature if it grasps the beauty of God directly? In order to grasp the precise relation between primary and secondary beauty, it is necessary to situate Edwards' aesthetics within his typology. Traditionally, typology studies the symbolic prefiguration of the New Testament in the Old.²⁸ Exegetes would comb through the Jewish scripture in search of divinely inspired signs that anticipate the content of the New Testament (Knight, 532), especially the coming of Christ. Typology is not the same thing as allegory. It is possible for, say, Joshua to prefigure Christ, but that doesn't mean that he serves as a symbol that refers to Christ the way that a goat refers conventionally to lust. Critics agree that conservative Puritan exegetes felt the need to enforce the allegory-typology distinction.²⁹ Allegorical exegesis predominated during the middle ages, but declined with the "literal-minded Puritan[s]", who favoured a strict, historical typology (Lowance, 210). Conservative typology justified some of their central doctrinal differences with the Church of England. A covenant of works governed God's true followers until the coming of Christ, when the covenant of grace superseded it. Sacred Old Testament ceremonies only prefigure acts of grace that become possible with the New. They have served their purpose, and are obsolete now that Christ has died for our sins (Brumm, 31-32, 41). Typology also served as the basis of Pu-

²⁸ Auerbach's interpretation is the best I've come across: "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life... Since in figural interpretation one thing stands for another, since one thing represents and signifies the other, figural interpretation is 'allegorical' in the widest sense. But it differs from most of the allegorical forms known to us by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies" (*Mimesis*, 53).

²⁹ Brumm: "from the start typology was in danger of vanishing into an allegoric-symbolic interpretation of the Bible, and so its advocates were concerned to keep it separate from allegory" (23);

ritan exceptionalism: “the ever-present type for the New England Puritans’ view of their own destiny was the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt into the wilderness and then to the promised land” (46). Moses played the type to Winthrop’s antitype, the enslaved Jews to the persecuted dissenters, the old Jewish Canaan to the new American one. Allegory may have posed a threat to Puritan values insofar as it carries the potential to destabilize scripture, opening it up to multiple competing interpretations.³⁰

Brumm and Lowance agree that early New England Puritans associate allegorical exegesis with certain hallmarks of popery. Brumm speculates that it was Samuel Mather’s “Puritan enmity towards symbols that led him to typology” (38) and away from allegory. Mather disapproves of everything remotely idolatrous: musical instruments in church, Christmas, the symbol of the cross, the holiness of places (including churches) (38-39). Allegory follows too similar a logic. It risks investing material objects with a spiritual halo not germane to them. In shrugging off the slough of medieval superstition and ceremony, the Puritans also divest themselves of medieval hermeneutic practices.³¹ Allegory would have smacked too much of monkish navel-gazing and esotericism, landmarks of a place and a time the Puritans had long transcended. According to Perry Miller, the problem with allegory was that it made scripture too susceptible to arbitrary, fanciful interpretations: “the type exists in history and is factual... by contrast, the allegory, the simile,

³⁰ In order to make scripture the centre of religious authority, the Puritans had to promote a univocal, literal exegesis—or at least one that rendered the text as univocal and literal as possible. This seems to be what Lowance means when he calls the Puritans “literal-minded”—they were suspicious of multi-vocality.

³¹ “The late Middle Ages had found the decoding of types so congenial that they had turned interpretation of the Bible into a fabulous game. By the fifteenth century scholastic nominalists had worked out a nine-fold scheme which was so complicated that even they could not keep the levels distinct... The reformers rescued the Bible from this thicket of typology with a round declaration that it contained only one simple, plain teaching. Hence the puritans were still suspicious of typology... They were mainly concerned with extracting from the Bible not types but sound doctrine” (Miller, 1948, 8).

and the metaphor have been made according to the fancy of men, and they mean whatever the brain of the begetter is pleased they should mean” (*ISDT*, 4).

So it’s easy to imagine what Puritans thought about extending typology to nature, not to mention allegorizing it as an elaboration of scripture, as was so common during the Middle Ages and Renaissance.³² This practice “violated the essential Puritan principles of divine sovereignty and mystery” (Knight, 534). The age of miracles was over. God no longer sent emissaries down from heaven, and he didn’t need to, because we had the Bible. Scripture was the sole reliable source of God’s word. So Puritans disavowed any straightforward correspondence between natural forms and religious truths for the same reason they did enthusiasm: it opens an alternative route to divine knowledge unmediated by scripture.³³

Of course, not all Puritans were so uptight. We see a sliding scale between a conservative, historical typology confined strictly to the Bible on one side, and liberal, alle-

³² Foucault’s account of the book of nature in the Renaissance episteme is by far the most famous. See *The Order of Things* (17-44).

³³ This disavowal formed part of a larger shift that goes back at least to the Reformation—a shift from what Taylor calls “axial” to “post-axial” religions. Axial religions are embedded in a hierarchical cosmic order. The cosmos forms a series of ascending planes, from the vegetable to the divine. Each plane reflects the one above it. Flowers reflect the human form, with the pistil corresponding to the head, the richest and most vibrant part for being the seat of knowledge. The human body corresponds to the order of the planets, and so on. The universe conforms to a divine plan, and things go awry when they diverge from it. And the social order is organized to reflect this cosmic order. Just as the relationship between the serf and the monarch is mediated by several intervening roles and titles (squire, Baron, Duke, etc.), so the layman’s relationship with God is mediated by his parish priest, who speaks to the bishop, who speaks to the cardinal, and so on. Post-axial religions come onto the scene as a result of the “great disembedding” (*Secular Age* 146). People were embedded in a social order, which itself was embedded in the cosmos. So they had to deal with “intra-cosmic forces,” spirits from other planes. Certain artifacts had magical powers, certain places were sacred, and this was our way of ritualizing or consecrating our relation to the universe. The material and the divine exist in a continuum, so spiritual presences can infuse matter. Taylor argues that post-axial societies arise from reforming and disenchanting impetuses. They do away with the cosmic order and replace it with a set of instrumental relationships. God creates humanity to worship him, and nature to help us celebrate his glory. This gives rise to a disembedded, individualistic, impersonal relationship with God. Puritanism exemplifies the new, impersonal dispensation. The regenerate soul receives grace directly from God through private revelation, shifting salvation from the clerical chain of command to individual piety. This disembeds the individual from the social order, while disenchantment disembeds the social order from the cosmos.

gorizing exegesis that sometimes spilled over into nature on the other. But critics tend to agree that the conservative disposition predominated: “although there were strong influences toward a transformation of the types into Platonic symbols and allegorical configurations, a mainstream of conservative typological exegesis persisted in New England even into the second half of the eighteenth century” (Lowance, 1980, 6).

Although *Works of Redemption* adheres to a conservative typology, Edwards displays a closeted radicalism in his notebook, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*.³⁴ He has no scruples about blurring the distinction between typology and allegory. The anti-type can be a doctrine or a paradigmatic event, the type dogmatic or prophetic (Knight, 536). This alone would be enough to mark him as a liberal typologist, but he goes further. Edwards believes that God has imbued nature with meaning—dogmatic and prognosticatory—and intends for humans to interpret it: “there is a wonderfull resemblance in the effects which God produces, and consentaneity in His manner of working in one thing and another throughout all nature... why is it not reasonable to suppose He makes the whole as a shadow of the spiritual world?” (*ISDT*, 44). This was a dangerous position for him to advance. If Edwards were to allow that nature provided an avenue to God’s will independent of scripture, he could risk making scripture redundant, or justifying capricious doctrinal departures. He urges the importance of scripture as a cipher. We can read nature like a book, but only if we use scripture to translate it—a caveat that seems conservative and orthodox until we consider *how* Edwards uses scripture. He redistributes

³⁴ There is some debate as to how conservative or how radical Edwards’s typology is. Miller sees Edwards as a chastening influence, while later researchers (Brumm, 1970; Lowance, 1970; Knight, 1991; and most recently Leader, 2006) overwhelmingly read his typology as quite unorthodox. Lowance takes on Miller most directly. I find his argument persuasive.

means and ends, “quoting Scripture to confirm the meaning of natural phenomena, not adducing natural images to confirm the meaning of Scripture” as Miller puts it (*ISDT* 36). Nature goes from a means of illuminating scripture to an object worthy of knowledge in itself that scripture helps illuminate. Nature can serve as both the primary and auxiliary source of revelation, so long as it remains consistent with scripture.

This is Edwards’s official position, the one he would announce at a press conference. But Miller suggests that Edwards privately harbours far more extreme ideas. Miller derives his interpretation from Edwards’s “Miscellany 777”:

The manifestations God makes of Himself in His words are the principle manifestations of His perfections, and the declaration and teachings of His word are to lead to these. By God’s declaring and teaching that He is infinitely powerful and wise, the creature believes that He is powerful and wise as He teaches, but in seeing His mighty and wise works, the effects of His power and wisdom, the creature not only hears and believes, but sees His power, and wisdom, and so of His other perfections. (*ISDT*, 36)

Edwards “secretly confesses” that “the power and wisdom of the revealed word” is “subordinate” to that of nature. I suspect Miller means that, for Edwards, nature manifests God’s power and wisdom more vividly than the Word. Nature offers a more ambiguous but more robust apprehension of divine knowledge than scripture, which loses in affective power what it gains in logical clarity. I don’t know if this counts as subordination, but I do agree that Edwards here seems to present nature as a more effective vehicle for

communicating God's *majesty*, if not His doctrine. Edwards entertains the possibility that the beauty of nature enhances as well as conceals spiritual truth.

For Jennifer Leader, Edwards' link between nature and scripture hinges on the divine light: "the human experience of natural beauty does seem to denote a substantive Personality behind the world's structures," but "to apperceive [it] is to experience within one's own mind the person of God" (164), an apprehension available only to the regenerate. Saints have the divine light, and so they can perceive God's will behind natural objects, while the rest of us remain blind to it. Leader makes it sound too much like an all-or-nothing divide. Edwards's *Miscellanies* entry 108 supports her interpretation when examined in isolation, but within the context of Edwards's theory of primary and secondary beauty, it becomes apparent that God's "substantive Personality" is not wholly unavailable to the unregenerate sensibility (164). Nature retains a trace God's excellency, of the harmony of his plan, and it is possible for unregenerate souls to discern God's footprint, his signature, even without experiencing his spirit immediately. Nature offers to the unregenerate a hint of something they cannot understand, awakening a spirit of inquiry into the mystery that resides behind the face of things, a subtle intimation, a nagging intuition, that there is something more to nature than meets the eye. The regenerate, however, has immediate divine knowledge, and is qualified to translate nature into spiritual facts, to interpret correspondences between the material world and the divine.

Edwards's theory of beauty is imbricated in his typology. Just as secondary beauty is the shadow of primary beauty, the type is the shadow of the antitype. Just as secondary beauty derives from primary beauty, types derive significance from their antitypes. Nat-

ural types and secondary beauty both can awaken a sense of God's magnificence, engendering receptivity to God's grace, even while the spiritual antitype and primary beauty remain remote and obscure. Edwards' typology illuminates his aesthetics, and his aesthetics illuminates his typology: "the beauty of the world consists wholly of sweet mutual consents" (135), the "sweetest and most charming" of which consist of a "resemblance of spiritual beauties." A flower may bring about great consent amid great variety, and this makes it beautiful. But how much greater is the beauty of "the planets continually moving round the sun, receiving his influences by which they are made happy, bright and beautiful," just as we move with God's orbit and are nourished by his influence (*ISDT*, 135). Typological correspondences may not always be beautiful, and beauty may not always be typological, but the highest resemblance between matter and spirit, the very pinnacle of beauty, is a form of typology. Thus the rose, the great Western archetype of beauty, receives imaginative force from its affinity with a wealth of spiritual facts: "roses grow upon briars, which is to signify that all temporal sweets are bitter"; "pure happiness, the crown of glory, is to be come at in no other way than by bearing Christ's cross"; "the rose, that is chief of all flowers, is the last thing that comes out," just as the saintliest life is one of "self-denial, and labour" (*ISDT*, 43).

The most stereotypical, tightly-laced Puritan conception of aesthetics is relatively flat. Beauty is superficial. It lacks conceptual depth. Edwards endows beauty with a sense of profundity. Beauty is greater the more obscure its cause. "Palpable and explicable" beauties please us, and we can easily tell why (*ISDT*, 136). The cause is immediately apparent: jewels are beautiful because they glitter and are symmetrical. "Such are all artifi-

cial regularities”: man-made art wears intentionality on its sleeve, and so its beauties are superficial. Then there are other, “hidden” beauties, which are “by far the greatest,” because “the more complex a beauty is, the more hidden.” This setting is beautiful because fed by some significance beyond our ken. Edwards does not mean obscurity is beautiful for its own sake. The relation between beauty and obscurity is correlative, not causal. The greatest beauty tends to be the most obscure because the highest spiritual truths are obscure. If we were to found a hermeneutic procedure on Edwards’s aesthetics, we would not end up with anything like traditional Puritan reading practices. A clear moral would earn less merit and would be less edifying than solicitous and open wonder.

Secondary beauty signifies that somewhere, here, in this particular arrangement of things, resides a spark of divine knowledge. And our job is to interpret this sign. Already, we have Edwards’s first infraction: nature must be allegorized. Typology would have provided the readiest method and vocabulary for this allegorizing. But Edwards first had to conform it to his aesthetics—he had to redeem allegory and extend typology to nature. And it would not have sufficed to use nature simply as an instantiation of scriptural doctrine. He had to use the Bible as a cipher. Armed with scripture, the exegete could roam through nature, translating its symmetries into spiritual facts—which is exactly what Edwards does:

A corn of wheat is sown, then arises and flourishes considerably, but before it rises to its height, before the perfect plant arises or the proper and perfect fruit produced, a long winter comes upon it and stunds it, and then, when those many days of severe cold and frost are past, when the spring comes on, it revives and flourishes far

beyond what it did before and comes to its height a perfect plant. Then comes the harvest. So is it with Christ: he was slain and arose, and his church flourished glorious in the days of the apostles, and afterwards then succeeded those many days of affliction, persecution, and darkness and deadness. But we know the spring is coming. (*ISDT* 139)

Here, Edwards blends typology with allegory, scripture with nature. Wheat presages the Great Awakening, the new millennium. Just as wheat must undergo a season of cold and sterility before achieving its full height, so Jesus and his word, after centuries of “darkness and deadness,” will finally achieve full muster with the revivals just begun in New England. Just as wheat is harvested in the spring, many souls will be harvested in the upcoming millennium (Edwards and his father both called mass conversions “harvests”). The “fruit” of the wheat alludes to the famous “know the tree by its fruit,” and this along with the more obvious Biblical references (Christ, the apostles—not to mention, agricultural tropes in general) establish the passage firmly in the language of the Bible.

Edwards adapts Francis Hutcheson’s aesthetics into a providential theory of beauty.³⁵ That is beautiful which fits most harmoniously with God’s plan and corresponds most accurately to spiritual truths. Although I’m too cautious to say that Edwards takes the neoplatonic fusion of truth and beauty to heart, he certainly brings them into deep affinity. And these affinities redeem aesthetics from certain Puritan prejudices. If secondary beauty is not an end in itself, primary beauty certainly is. Beauty takes on a cer-

³⁵ For Hutcheson, in case it’s not entirely clear, beauty is primarily an agreement between parts. The better the agreement and the more various the parts, the greater the beauty. See *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty* (1973).

tain depth, a phenomenological purchase, it would not otherwise have. In redeeming beauty, Edwards makes it easier to redeem the other affections. And in redeeming the affections, Edwards embraces a chastened enthusiasm. His divine light weakens the link between scripture and its revelation, since now the word is only ceremonially the purveyor of divine knowledge. Scripture is not the exclusive vessel of revelation, but one path among many. Nature becomes an alternative route, and while Edwards stipulates that the book of nature must be deciphered using the Bible, the Bible enters a compromise in which nature partakes of its authority. The boundary between heaven and earth does not disappear, but it certainly relaxes. Edwards comes very close to authorizing visions from heaven, direct intercourse with God. The divine light may reveal no knowledge outside of scripture, but scripture on its own affords no immediate access to divine knowledge. Revelation comes from the holy spirit, from an influx of divine light. God imparts insight directly through a secret movement of the soul. Without heaven, earth is destitute. There is something excessive and heavy-handed about imposing a strict limit between the two just to guard against enthusiasm. For Edwards, the question is not whether religious experience respects the boundary between heaven and earth, but whether religious experience is truly the work of the holy spirit. A subtler apparatus will do, one that distinguishes between true and false revelation, primary and secondary beauty.

Edwards's system would have worked as a foundation for New England Calvinism, but not as a model of eighteenth-century secularity. The same standards that regulated enthusiasm also served as the common standard among competing confessions. Because he relaxes these standards, or trades them in for sharper and more technical ones,

Edwards provides no basis on which Calvinism can negotiate with other denominations. He makes Calvinism more coherent, but less cooperative. At a time of great religious friction and diversity, his unavailability to secular standards may have contributed to his downfall.³⁶

In the next chapter, the Transcendentalists pick up where Edwards left off. They too find the Lockean standard of religious tolerance stifling and counterproductive. They too work to restore affect to a central position in religious practice. But where Edwards carefully negotiates between dry rationalism on the one hand and enthusiasm on the other, the Transcendentalists embrace enthusiasm outright. Thus, where Edwards has to carefully limit the relation between natural and spiritual beauty to mere analogy, the Transcendentalists are free to grant natural beauty the power to stimulate religious experience directly.

³⁶ This, however, is just a hypothesis, one that would require further research to corroborate.

Interlude: "Sea-Surface Full of Clouds," by Wallace Stevens.

(*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, pp. 98-99).

I

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas. Paradisal green
Gave suavity to the perplexed machine

Of ocean, which like limpid water lay.
Who, then, in that ambrosial latitude
Out of the light evolved the morning blooms,

Who, then, evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds
Diffusing balm in that Pacific calm?
C'etait mon enfant, mon bijou, mon ame.

The sea-clouds whitened far below the calm
And moved, as blooms move, in the swimming green
And in its watery radiance, while the hue

Of heaven in an antique reflection rolled
Round those flotillas. And sometimes the sea
Poured brilliant iris on the glistening blue.

II

In that November off Tehuantepec
The slopping of the sea grew still one night.
At breakfast jelly yellow streaked the deck

And made one think of chop-house chocolate
And sham umbrellas. And a sham-like green
Capped summer-seeming on the tense machine

Of ocean, which in sinister flatness lay.
 Who, then, beheld the rising of the clouds
 That strode submerged in that malevolent sheen,

Who saw the mortal massives of the blooms
 Of water moving on the water-floor?
 C'etait mon frere du ciel, ma vie, mon or.

The gongs rang loudly as the windy booms
 Hoo-hooed it in the darkened ocean-blooms.
 The gongs grew still. And then blue heaven spread

Its crystalline pendentives on the sea
 And the macabre of the water-glooms
 In an enormous undulation fled.

III
 In that November off Tehuantepec,
 The slopping of the sea grew still one night
 And a pale silver patterned on the deck

And made one think of porcelain chocolate
 And pied umbrellas. An uncertain green,
 Piano-polished, held the tranced machine

Of ocean, as a prelude holds and holds,
 Who, seeing silver petals of white blooms
 Unfolding in the water, feeling sure

Of the milk within the saltiest spurge, heard, then,
 The sea unfolding in the sunken clouds?
 Oh! C'etait mon extase et mon amour.

So deeply sunken were they that the shrouds,
 The shrouding shadows, made the petals black

Until the rolling heaven made them blue,

A blue beyond the rainy hyacinth,
 And smiting the crevasses of the leaves
 Deluged the ocean with a sapphire blue.

IV

In that November off Tehuantepec
 The night-long slopping of the sea grew still.
 A mallow morning dozed upon the deck

And made one think of musky chocolate
 And frail umbrellas. A too-fluent green
 Suggested malice in the dry machine

Of ocean, pondering dank stratagem.
 Who then beheld the figures of the clouds
 Like blooms secluded in the thick marine?

Like blooms? Like damasks that were shaken off
 From the loosed girdles in the spangling must.
 C'etait ma foi, la nonchalance divine.

The nakedness would rise and suddenly turn
 Salt masks of beard and mouths of bellowing,
 Would- But more suddenly the heaven rolled

Its bluest sea-clouds in the thinking green,
 And the nakedness became the broadest blooms,
 Mile-mallows that a mallow sun cajoled.

V

In that November off Tehuantepec
 Night stilled the slopping of the sea.
 The day came, bowing and voluble, upon the deck,

Good clown... One thought of Chinese chocolate
And large umbrellas. And a motley green
Followed the drift of the obese machine

Of ocean, perfected in indolence.
What pistache one, ingenious and droll,
Beheld the sovereign clouds as jugglery

And the sea as turquoise-turbaned Sambo, neat
At tossing saucers, cloudy-conjuring sea?
C'etait mon esprit batard, l'ignominie.

The sovereign clouds came clustering. The conch
Of loyal conjuration trumped. The wind
Of green blooms turning crisped the motley hue

To clearing opalescence. Then the sea
And heaven rolled as one and from the two
90. Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.

Cruises strip the morning down to a few bare constants—sky, cloud, ocean, light—that, bare and constant as they are, afford profuse permutations, each precipitant of a distinctive atmosphere. “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” derives its structure from the 1923 cruise that occasioned it. A few bare constants—sky, cloud, ocean, light—combine and recombine in five distinctive atmospheres.

Atmosphere I.

No trees redden here, and the equatorial climate leaves the time of year ambiguous. Liberated from their characteristic emblems, seasons trade places in the natural order of time. Thus it is “summer,” not autumn, that “hue[s] the deck” this fine “November” morning (1-3). Perhaps Stevens simply means that the light is warm and has a summery tinge to it. Yet summer is more than warmth and brightness. It comes along with a certain mood, a sense of vitality and freedom, the relaxed, blissful, carefree disposition of a day at the beach. A subtle change in light brings about a change in atmosphere, and a subtle change in atmosphere radically changes the sense of time and place, as though we left one season and entered another. Alongside the deck’s wooden boards, “hued” puns on “hewed,” as if the summer dismantled and remade the entire setting with chromatic car-

penry. Atmosphere has a way of precipitating sudden revolutions in the presiding quality of a place and time. Our sense of where and when we are renovates beneath our feet.

Critics don't quite know what to do with the next two lines. Why, Joan Richardson asks, do the summer hues bring to mind "'chocolate' and umbrellas[?]" The juxtaposition of the two is jarring" (61). Phoebe Putnam calls this the poem's "most inexplicable moment... Why does the lyric digress so quickly into what appears to be merely eccentric association?" (48). I would say that this jarring quality, this abruptness, serves a very particular purpose: it draws attention to atmosphere. Stevens eliminates every possible strand of relation except associative overlap. Summery hues upon a deck, "rosy chocolate," "gilt umbrellas," all suggest the exotic, the decadent, the aimless sampling of tourists on "summer" vacation. The adjective "paradisaal" imbues the warm, relaxed vitality of the "suave" summer fling into the "perplexed machine."

"Machine" has rhymed with "green," the adjectives have found a noun to modify, and all the stanza's tensions have come to a close. We expect a break, a pause, a breather—but don't get one. The phrase staggers on into the next line. The "perplexed machine" is not the cruise ship at all, but a "perplexed machine / of *ocean*" (6-7, my emphasis) which is far more difficult to compute. A cruise ship is at least mechanical. The ocean, by contrast, is emblematic of the world's most natural, spontaneous rhythms. What's mechanical about that? Stevens could have softened the transition. He could have exchanged his "ocean" for a "sea," responding in soft assonance to "machine" and "green." But he prefers to roughen the jolt instead. This amplifies the metaphor's internal dissonance. Stevens overturns several of the ocean's most characteristic associations. Oceans are nat-

ural, cool, and soothing; machines are artificial, hot, and clanging. Stevens empties the ocean of life, nature, and tranquility, emphasizing instead the clockwork regularity of its waves, the metallic glint of its cold slate-greys. It is difficult to imagine a “machine of ocean” being “perplexed.” Machines command forceful, ruthless momentum. Insensitive to their surroundings and inhibitive of sensitivity, they suggest the sort of blind confidence that immunizes against perplexity. Oceans drive their waves with equivalent power and indifference. And yet, this machine, this ocean, is “perplexed.” Something light and fine has dumbfounded even the world’s most implacable forces as, in an earlier poem, three girls “check” a giant with “civilest odors,” “abash” him with “arching cloths,” and “undo” him with “heavenly labials” (“The Plot Against the Giant,” 4-18).

Atmosphere, the finest, lightest thing, recalibrates nature’s most stubborn engineering with the gentle interference of a mood. Under its influence, the ocean lies “like limpid water” (7). Is not an ocean water? Is not an ocean limpid? Stevens infringes upon one of the more obvious taboos of poetic composition: never compare something to itself. Where is the imagination in comparing an ocean to “limpid water”? Isn’t this a bit like comparing a dog to a brown furry creature that barks? Stevens clips all threads of dissimilarity except one: atmospheric mood. An “ocean” and “limpid water” *feel* different, effuse different generators from an identical substance. The “ocean” is sublime, dark, rough, vaguely threatening, symbolic of the precariousness of human life in nature’s volatile company. “Limpid water” is docile, bright, smooth, benign, suggestive of safe, soft streams and refreshing wells. Perplexity causes a self to go limpid—it pacifies and

makes vulnerable; a perplexed face is easy to read. Perplexed in the subtle intimations of atmosphere, the ocean goes “limpid”—passive, soft, transparent.

The clouds, like white “blooms,” are “evolved” from the light, radiating from the sun as petals radiate from a bud (9). “Sea-blooms,” the petal-like contours of the water, are “evolved” from the bloom-like clouds (10). Stevens draws an Emersonian chain of correspondences, a sequence of resemblances among natural forms that intimate a common spiritual origin. But where Emerson routes all correspondences back to the Over-soul, Stevens posits an altogether more mysterious origin: “C’etait mon enfant, mon bijou, mon ame” (12). This “enfant” descends from contested parentage. Does the speaker claim him as his own? Or does another voice intrude here? The child is, after all, a Romantic symbol of the poetic imagination, which has always been haunted by some strange alterity—an inspiring demon, a God confiding otherworldly realities. I cannot say to what precise extent Stevens may or may not have ascribed to Emerson’s vision of the poet-prophet, but enough of it persists to imbue atmosphere with some degree of spiritual significance. Some secret impetus, neither alien nor connate to the poet’s habitual self, weaves the light into the clouds into the ocean in a harmonious atmospheric texture.

The unusual verb form of “evolved” intimates some loosening of the boundaries between self and nature. “Evolve” is almost always intransitive. Internal laws generate gradual change. But here, some agency other than the clouds themselves determines how the clouds evolve. If Stevens had wanted the clouds to receive the poet’s imaginative transformations passively as clay, he could have used a different verb. “Unfolded” would have gone along nicely with “morning blooms,” and Stevens could have kept the metre

consistent by dropping that superfluous “the.” Why use “evolved,” then, when “unfolded” is both more idiomatic and economical? Is Stevens mangling English for a cheap surprise? “Evolved” as a transitive verb suggests a collaboration between the poet’s imagination and the secret nature of the blooms. Just as organisms evolve interactively with their environments, so the light, clouds, and ocean evolve interactively with the environment of the poet’s imagination. Things divulge the way they are, and yet the way they are is evolved upon the poet’s blue guitar.³⁷

The first two stanzas set the scene with distinct, concrete images: chocolate, umbrellas, the “machine / of ocean.” We have a clear sense of place and time: *that* specific November, *that* particular night. With the middle two stanzas, sky and sea begin to trespass beyond the bounds of the horizon. The imagery loses focus, but remains anchored in the relaxed forms of clouds and blooms. In the last two stanzas, form diffuses altogether in a blur of shades and radiances. It is difficult to say what is in the sky and what is in the sea, what is on the surface and what hangs in the depths. The “sea-clouds” could be the clouds in the sky above the sea, or their reflections on the surface of the water. They whiten “far below the calm,” but where is the “calm”? Is this the “calm” air between the sun and the clouds, or between the clouds and the sea, or the “calm” water between the ocean’s surface and its depths? If these “sea-clouds” are, in fact, reflections, then they should be floating on the waves. Why, then, do they move, not on but “in the swimming green”? All five sections follow this same pattern. All five sections progress from clear to

³⁷ “The Man with the Blue Guitar” takes this paradox as its theme: reality is most faithfully grasped in distortion.

vague, from concrete to diffuse, from distinct to shapeless. Stevens takes us from the discreteness of objects to the immersive formlessness of atmosphere.

Atmosphere II.

The same warm light returns to the same cruise-ship deck, eliciting the same associations with chocolate and umbrellas. Yet somehow the atmosphere is strikingly different this time around. Where the soft ambers of summer suggested blithe, relaxed meandering, “jelly yellow” is boisterous and up-beat. Among poetic synonyms for “colour,” hue ranks among the most tranquil. Wordsworth opens his pastoral sonnet about transcending “earthly care” in the beauty of nature with, “The fairest, brightest, *hues* of ether fade,” not “the fairest, brightest, *streaks* of ether fade” (1, my emphasis), and for good reason. “Streaked” sounds reckless and sudden. It connotes irregularity. Windows sloppily washed leave behind *streaks*, not *hues*, of Windex. “Streaked” suggests speed and abandon. Authors commonly describe race-cars and jet-planes and anything else that goes too fast to see as “streaks.” To go “streaking” means to run naked through a public place. And all this haste, all this recklessness, composes exactly the sort of atmosphere in which a jar of jelly is likely to get knocked to the ground and tracked across the floor.

Where “rosy” in the previous section deepens the “o” of “chocolate” into a long, soothing sonority, “chop-house” shortens the “o” and emphasizes the jagged *ch*-sound. Where “rosy” keeps the iambic intact, “chop-house chocolate” almost forces the reader to stress three syllables in a row with an overbearing, choppy rhythm. Where “rosy” suggested the blithe carefreeness of youth and romance, “chop-house” suggests the hasty

carelessness of a busy downtown diner. “Rosy chocolate” sounds exotic, expensive, deluxe. “Chop-house chocolate” sounds cheap, an association that carries over into the tawdriness of “sham umbrellas.” The preponderance of compounds—“chop-house,” “sham-like,” “summer-seeming”—grants the passage an upbeat, colloquial air. We have swerved from an atmosphere of aristocratic comforts to the blind haste of the working class where everything beautiful seems out of place. In a rich house, opulence is tasteful; in a poor house, gaudy. In the atmosphere of the previous section, the rich greenness of the sea seemed “Paradisal.” Against the gritty, blue-collar backdrop of the “chop-house,” the rich greenness of the sea seems all too extravagant. It must be a fake.

The previous section characterized the ocean as a ruthless, implacable giant conquered with the subtle instruments of beauty, a triumph on the side of fine, redolent things. The stillness of the water then was the stillness of astonishment: a wonder that seizes, stills, and pacifies. Here, the stillness bespeaks a more malevolent cause: a lurking threat, a shark or crocodile sheathed beneath the silver surfaces. Two antithetical moods shimmer from identical images. A subtle change in atmosphere, and threat stymied reverses into threat portended. “Mortal” commonly modifies “threat” and “danger,” while “massives” suggests the looming flanks of whales and sharks, an association answered in the broad blades of white, malignant flowers (28-29).

“Mon enfant, mon bijou, mon ame” suited the earlier atmosphere of blithe touristic meandering. Here, a more rough-and-tumble Whitmanian demon, “mon frere du ciel, ma vie, mon or,” voices the back-slapping fraternity of the chop-house. The cherishing of a “bijoux,” small and sparkling, corresponds to a father’s cherishing of his “enfant”;

bright radiant “or” corresponds to the buoyant amity between brothers. We tend to speak of the “ame,” the soul, as something vulnerable *within* the body—locked, secret, jealously guarded—as a jewel is locked and jealously guarded in a case. Conversely, we tend to speak of la “vie” as something that radiates openly outward, warm and vital, like sunlight or the sheen of gold. Person corresponds to place, soul to environment, mood to atmosphere, and it is unclear which precedes and which follows, which determines and which receives. In the previous section, it was the obscure impetus of “mon enfant, mon bijou, mon ame” that “evolved” the blooms, suggesting that the inspired poet projects his own private mental content upon the setting. But here, “mon frere du ciel” simply beholds, as if the poet receives his affects, his moods, his feelings, passively from his surroundings.

It’s possible that the “gongs” (31) trope the sound of the wind, but unlikely. Gongs and wind don’t sound anything alike, and Stevens could easily have selected an instrument from the woodwind family. Besides, “the gongs rang loudly *as* the windy booms / Hoo-hooed it” (31-32, my emphasis). The “as” implies distinction. No, these gongs are in the poet’s soul. They reverberate the “or,” the cherished gold of poetic inspiration, from the previous line. In their loud, shuddering music, the atmosphere resounds. Sharp, clangy, bright, golden, they play along to the reckless clamour of “chop-house chocolate” and “jelly yellow.” “Hoo-hooed it” sounds like the sort of outdated idiom a corny uncle might try to resurrect. It suggests the same racy colloquialism as “we footed it,” meaning “we hurried,” or “we hit it off,” meaning “we had a fun time together,” chiming in with the tacky, jovial chord that unifies the rest of the section.

And then, abruptly, the wind changes direction. “The gongs gr[o]w still” (33): the vitality settles, the buoyancy cools, the vast malignant bodies of the “water glooms” flee like monsters at the first rays of dawn, and a cooler atmosphere blows in off the next November night.

Atmosphere III.

The first few times I read this section, I mistook “patterned” for “pattered.” Even as I was preparing to write this essay, I realized that I could not help but picture the moonlight pattering across the deck like mice or rain. I dismissed my response as purely idiosyncratic. But now, with the sharpening of reception that comes with engaged critical attention, I’m no longer sure. Even slow readers like me take words in by chunks. And so before I’ve even processed the word “patterned,” I already know that “on” is the preposition. And “on” is an unusual preposition for a word like “patterned.” Usually, things pattern *through* or *across* or they drop the preposition altogether and simply *pattern*. “Patterned on” makes it sound as if patterning were a brief activity carried out on the deck, more like a dance than embroidery. There is, then, something about the preposition “on” that tricks me, and probably others too, into reading “patterned” as “pattered.” I picture the moon-rays pattering on the deck in a rain-like pattern, and I wouldn’t say my response is entirely anomalous. It is even, perhaps, richer for the mistake. A pattered patterning has a tactility that a pattern plain and simple lacks, a tactility that brings in the soothing sound of late-night rain.

The contrast between the “pale silver” of the moonlight and the dark-brown of the cruise-ship deck sets the colour scheme for the rest of the section. Chocolate is brown, while porcelain is white.³⁸ And just as moonlight smooths all roughnesses in a clear, cool surface, so “porcelain” emphasizes the cool smoothness of chocolate, bringing out clear, cool associations of refinement, sophistication, and restraint while downplaying associations of decadence and indulgence. This chocolate is a rich man’s food. “Pied” originally meant “black and white,” especially with reference to a friar’s habit (OED), a meaning that, though anachronistic, finds support in the pale silver on the dark wood boards, the pale porcelain in the dark chocolate, the piano’s ebony and ivory. “Tranced machine” reproduces the consonantal outline of the “tense machine” from the previous section, foregrounding the shift in mood: from malignant forces crouching in tense preparation, to tranquil pacifying wonder. Entranced, the subject takes on machine-like qualities: silent, passive, they await the hypnotist’s occult administrations. Yet “trance” also carries spiritual associations. To be entranced is to forget oneself, to be so taken up with something else that all trivial, selfish concerns fade away. “Machine” brings out the trance’s sense of self-effacement, and the trance de-emphasizes the machine’s dehumanizing associations. Together, “entranced machine” captures the divine automaticity of grace, a state of mind consonant with the generators that populate the opening two stanzas. The “pale silver” of the moonlight, the “porcelain chocolate” and “pied umbrellas,” the “piano-polished” sea, the colours black and white, web together associations with tranquility, quietness, soft-

³⁸ Of course, porcelain comes in all sorts of colours. What I mean is that porcelain is strongly associated with the colour white. For example, the phrase “porcelain skin” indicates an even, pale tone.

ness, and contemplation—an atmosphere antithetical to the rowdy bustle of the previous section.

The poet's imagination is invoked more cautiously, more thoughtfully this time, with the syntax of cautious thoughtfulness. Stevens delays the main verb across a series of gently unfolding clauses:

Who, seeing silver petals of white blooms
 Unfolding in the water, feeling sure
 Of the milk within the saltiest spurge, heard, then,
 The sea unfolding in the sunken clouds?" (44-46).

A sequence of participles—"seeing," "unfolding," "feeling"—holds the action in suspense for a three-line aside. When the main verb, "heard," finally arrives, it comes cloistered between two commas, next to an equally manacled "then." The assonance among "sure," "spurge," and "heard" forces the reading voice to slow down, to press upon each word, "spurge, heard, then," with a pensive, heavy touch. Stevens extends the blank verse to eleven syllables for the sake of a waste-word, "then," that doesn't do anything except slow us down further and set the "heard" off from what it hears. The subject is separated from the verb, the verb from the object. The result is a sense of detachment, the kind of depersonalization that haunts people who think too much and don't get enough done. The speaker sounds self-conscious and melancholy, as if expressing himself slowly and carefully, making sure he doesn't leave anything out. Yet this is not an anxious kind of inwardness. The cadence also has the *calmness* characteristic of thoughtful, melancholic people. The participial clauses lap upon one another with the rhythmic solemnity of

waves. This is not the kind of thoughtfulness that chews matters up into neurotic details, but the kind that grounds the self in unshakeable profundities, the kind that can sustain its solace through rough times, holding firm in the knowledge that there is “milk within the saltiest spurge.”

Atmosphere IV.

For the first time, “the slopping of the sea” does not “gr[o]w still one night.” Instead, “The night-long slopping of the sea grew still” (56)—a subtle change in syntax, a drastic change in mood. “The slopping of the sea grew still one night” attenuates across a long decrescendo. The stress falls strongest on “slop,” a little weaker on “sea,” and weaker still on “night.” The motions of the mouth contract and tighten, moving closer to the teeth as they slope gently to the end of the line. The phrase “one night” faintly suggests the intimacy and friendliness of an anecdote (it is common among friends to start off an anecdote with “this one night”). The effect is a light, quiet optimism. “The night-long slopping of the sea,” on the other hand, places the strongest stress, “slop,” right in the middle of the line and fortifies it with the assonance of “long.” “Night-long slopping” leadens the iambic foot, stressing “night” and “long” and “slop” with a drunken plodding that leans hard into the “slop.” The line divides right through the middle of “slop/ping.” The first half is heavy, slow, and loud, weighed down with full-mouthed vowels pronounced back towards the throat. The second half is light, soft, and quiet, a string of tight vowels pronounced up near the teeth. The result is a raucous turbulence. “The slopping of

the sea grew still one night” softens the transition from the loud, full “slop” to the soft and quiet “night.” “The night-long slopping of the sea grew still” roughens the transition into a terse and jerky contrast. “Night-long slopping” suggests drunken debauchery, an association that gets taken up again in the image of the morning “doz[ing]” deep into its shift “on the deck,” as if it were too drunk to get itself to bed last night.

“Musky” brings out chocolate’s associations with seduction and eroticism which, together with the “frail umbrellas,” suggest the moral dissipation of a brothel (59). The stanza flutters with a whore’s deceptive surfaces. The “too-fluent green” of the pimp or huckster anoints an otherwise “dry machine / Of ocean.” Why “dry?” What’s dry about an ocean? But then again, what’s dry about wine? Stevens never mentions alcohol. Yet he smuggles it in slyly, by association. It’s hard not to think of the only fluid commonly described as dry. “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” was first published in 1924, when prohibition was in full swing. Alcohol would have carried particularly strong associations with dark-alley handshakes and shady dealings. A “dry” machine is also a machine in need of oiling, suggesting deterioration beneath gaudy, “fluent” superficialities.

“Dank” usually describes wet inland sites, like wells and swamps and basements. We associate dankness with staleness and mildew and domestic neglect, the ocean with a freshness that can never expire. If the ocean is “pondering dank stratagem,” this suggests that the impossible has happened and it has somehow lost its freshness. A similar associative inversion occurs in the next stanza. “Damasks shaken off / From... loosed girdles,” an image of deflowering, breeds tawdriness into the “spangled must” (65). When I first read this line, I thought “must” had to be a typo. Someone probably hit the “u” key when

they were supposed to hit the adjacent “i.” After some cross-referencing, I confirmed that “must” is indeed intentional. And yet, I would not eliminate “mist” from the reading altogether. We are, after all, on the ocean, and nothing “spangle[s]” better than mist. This is just a mist that has gone musty, as the ocean has gone dank, thickening the presiding air of neglect and dissipation.

Atmosphere V.—alongside some closing observations.

The ringmaster day “bowing and voluble” (75), the “clown” (76), the “jugglery” of the clouds (81), the saucer-tossing “Sambo” (82-83), the “conjuring” sea (83), assemble the familiar iconography of a circus. This prompts us to go back over the poem and see whether the other sections correspond to any recognizable setting. They do, but not so overtly. Section I corresponds to the atmosphere of an upper-middle class vacation, section II to the atmosphere of a mess hall, section III to the atmosphere of an orchestra, section IV to the atmosphere of a brothel or an opium den—but roughly, loosely, indirectly. Stevens brings each place in not through its distinctive emblems, but through fine networks of associative overlap. For example, instead of staffing section III with, say, a conductor, a stage, and theatre binoculars, he pairs together images that share an orchestra’s associations with sophistication, refinement, tranquility, and rapture. Stevens elicits ghost-like ambiances severed of surroundings. His imagery effuses familiar yet unplaceable atmospheres as clouds effuse the vapours of far, exotic continents.

The closing stanzas of each section fade into a haze of indistinct but plangent verbal play. Section five fades most indistinctly and most plangently of them all, approaching, at times, the brink of euphonious nonsense:

The sovereign clouds came clustering. The conch
of loyal conjuration trumped. The wind
of green blooms turning crisped the motley hue

It is not at all clear what “the conch / of loyal conjuration trumped” could be, or what’s so “loyal” about this “conjuration,” what, exactly, it might “trump.” The next sentence, though anchored in a few discrete, familiar images, is somewhat difficult to visualize. We start off picturing the wind. No difficulty here. The ocean is a windy place. But then, in the very next line, we find out that this isn’t wind at all, but the wind “of green blooms turning,” soft and fluid like the wind, yet somehow hard and solid enough to have “crisped the motley hue.” The “motley hue” of what? Stevens does not specify. It’s almost as though a band of stray hues have detached from their objects and roam unruly, like a motley crew of pirates. And why not? The rest of the stanza has fallen into chaos. Sound has detached from sense, crispness has settled on uncrisp surfaces. Things swap qualities, shades evacuate shapes, meaning blurs into a verbal haze—but a distinctly *atmospheric* haze. The generators of the light, the clouds, the waves, and the sky unite in one harmonious atmosphere. It’s impossible to say where the light ends and the clouds begin, or where the clouds end and the sea begins. Atmosphere absorbs all apparent forms into an undifferentiated affective tone, a synthesis Stevens tropes in the colloquies of sky and sea. “The sea / And heaven [roll] as one,” their generators intermingle, and at-

mosphere transpires in “fresh transfigurations of freshest blue,” Stevens’ colour of the imagination.

The oceans folds its surfaces into its depths, its depths into its surfaces—starting with the title. A surface is flat. Fullness implies depth. How, then, can a surface be “full” of anything? The reflections of the clouds “whitened far below the calm,” but where is the calm? Is this the calm of the air, or the calm of the sea? If the calm of the sea, then how can reflections be submerged (13-14)? When Stevens describes the “blooms / of water moving on the water-floor,” does he mean the *ocean* floor, the ground beneath the water, or does he describe the surface of the sea as itself a floor? Either we picture the reflections crawling like sea-creatures across the rocky bottom, or we picture the ocean surface as a single depthless level. By the third section, the clouds have “sunken” (49) so deeply that they turn “black” with “the shrouding shadows” of the sea, as shipwrecks darken with rot and algae. Stevens tropes the deep superficialities, the shallow profundities, of the poem itself. He suggests that the poem displays its deepest meanings openly upon its surface, that poetic form, so often dismissed as superficial, divulges insights deeper than allegory knows to sound. He intimates that the meaning of the poem resides in its atmosphere, that the atmosphere floats upon the surface, and that any penetrative, point-mongering hermeneutic procedure misses the point. He also suggests that atmosphere is in itself deeply profound, that simply to experience the atmosphere of a poem is to obtain a form of insight as deep and moving as any philosophical inquiry or gnomic revelation.

Chapter 2. The Religious Sentiment and Transcendentalist Secularity.

In the previous chapter, I defined liberal secularity as a constellation of oppositions that develop to regulate the insurrectionary potential of enthusiasm. Liberal secularity draws a strict boundary between heaven and earth and denies the possibility of modern revelation. It holds religious legitimacy accountable to the twin standard of scripture and reason, and regards religious passions in general with suspicion. The Transcendentalists revive Jonathan Edwards's reaction to liberal secularity, this time under a more radical disposition. Scripture is neither univocal nor unambiguous, and human reason is inadequate to ground religious experience. They argue for the religious sentiment as an alternative standard of secularity. The religious sentiment is a universal faculty for receiving divine revelation. Revelation takes the form not of words or systematic thought, but of a state of mind. Egotism diminishes, cognition quickens and grasps profound spiritual laws in sharp imaginative clarity. Insofar as a religion stimulates the religious sentiment, it is legitimate. Insofar as a religion does *not* stimulate the religious sentiment, it commits an offence equivalent to heresy.

The religious sentiment is a central concept to the history of Transcendentalism. In 1840, when Transcendentalism was consolidating itself as a movement, Margaret Fuller expressed the aims of *The Dial* thus: "We do not wish to say pretty or curious things, or to reiterate a few propositions in varied forms, but, if we can, to give expression to that spirit which lifts men to a higher platform [and] restores to them the religious sentiment" (3). And yet, scholarship lacks a detailed historical account of the religious

sentiment. The definitive histories of Transcendentalism, Lawrence Buell's *Literary Transcendentalism*, Barbara Packer's *The Transcendentalists* (2007), and Philip Gura's *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007), give the religious sentiment only cursory attention. I hope to correct this deficit, with particular attention to revisions the religious sentiment necessitated among constitutive oppositions of liberal secularity. I will concentrate in particular on the opposition between religious and aesthetic experience and the concomitant opposition between literature and scripture.

The religious sentiment grants aesthetic form immediate religious value. Art relates to religion not just as a sign relates to its referent, but as a stimulus relates to an appetite. Nature and art stimulate spiritual experience as the sight of a beautiful human body stimulates erotic desire. And spiritual experience, like erotic desire, does not transpire in the absence of a stimulus. This means that aesthetic form is not just a shell to be cracked, a code to be deciphered, for a kernel of insight, but a necessary condition for spiritual experience to arise in the first place. The arts transcend their traditionally subordinate, supplementary role as embellishments of doctrine, and lay claim to an immediacy of religious experience equivalent to scripture.

Not *all* art, however—only that which is authentically inspired. The Transcendentalists did not collapse the boundary between art and scripture. They revised it. Some art is sacred, other art is profane. How, then, is it possible to tell the difference? What is it about some art that allows it to stimulate the religious sentiment, while other art does not? What, that is, are the specific formal characteristics that allow aesthetic forms to precipi-

tate religious states of mind? I conclude with these questions hanging in the air. The next chapter will consider how the Transcendentalists go about answering them.

Transcendentalism brings together a lot of different thinkers who think a lot of different things. And yet, they consciously organized their divergent viewpoints into a roughly coherent movement with consistent aims and tenets. Except where indicated, I have limited my analysis to a small canon of texts, all of which the inner circle of the Boston cohort recognized as representative of their movement. This canon includes (but is not limited to) Orestes Brownson's *New Views of Christianity, Society and the Church* (1836), George Ripley's *Philosophical Miscellanies* (1838), Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays and lectures, Theodore Parker's *A Discourse on Matters Pertaining to Religion* (1846), Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1843) and *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846), and various publications from *The Dial*.

The Transcendentalist critique of Liberal secularity.

In the previous chapter, I defined liberal secularity as a two-pronged standard that grew out of the seventeenth-century critique against enthusiasm. A religion must conform to scripture, and it must submit to the evaluation of reason. The Transcendentalists take issue with this standard.

First, scripture does not record the infallible word of God. The gospels predict things that never happen. Jesus, for example, did not return to Judea before the apostles died, as they expected Him to (Parker, *DMR*, 266). Also, "if the apostles were infallibly inspired," they could not have "disagree[d] on any point." But they disagree all the time

—on whether or not they should keep the circumcision ritual alive, for instance (265). Neither is scripture universally intelligible and unambiguous. It is actually “very elastic” (Parker, *DMR*, 265). It supports divergent interpretations, funds antithetical agendas. It lacks the rigidity necessary to regulate religious practice.³⁹

Second, religious experience transcends human reason. Holding religion accountable to logic and an empirical standard of truth is a bit like weighing a pot of milk in centimetres: the metrics are incommensurable. But the Unitarians tried to make it work anyway. In *The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels* (1837), Andrews Norton, the arch-antagonist of the Transcendental movement, takes the Bible as a compilation of first-hand testimonies of Christ’s life and works. We know (in his eyes) that Christ’s word is God’s because he performed miracles. And we know he performed miracles because people witnessed them and recorded their experiences. The Transcendentalists found these grounds somewhat shaky. First of all, heathen faiths too invoke the testimony of ancient patriarchs to legitimate their miracles. Second, even if we take the apostles blindly at their word, in what sense does a miracle prove the truth of their doctrine? If we define a miracle as that which goes against the laws of nature, then we would have to presume to know what all the laws of nature are in the first place (Brownson, “Evidences” 92). If historians found out that Kant had performed miracles, that wouldn’t make *The Critique of Judgment* any truer, the same way that if it turned out that Michelangelo had performed miracles it wouldn’t make the statue of David any more beautiful (Parker,

³⁹ The Transcendentalist critique of scripture as a standard of religious tolerance was heavily influenced by the German Higher Criticism, particularly the work of Johann Gottfried Herder. For more on the influence of the German Higher Criticism on the Transcendentalists, see Richard A. Grusin, *Transcendentalist Hermeneutics: Institutional Authority and the Higher Criticism of the Bible* (1991).

quoted in Miller, *Transcendentalists*, 226-227). And anyway, the gospels are very old, and men mistake the truth all the time, even with the best intentions (Brownson, “Evidences” 94). Matthew, Peter, Luke, and John are not in a court of law. Nobody swore them in. Their reputations aren’t on the line. No other historical documents back them up (95). Their testimonies are dubious at best.

So scripture and empirical reason supply unreliable grounds for religious tolerance. But the Transcendentalists go further: these grounds are *dangerous* as well. Liberal secularity impoverishes religious experience. In *Aids to Reflection* (1825), a particular favourite among the Transcendentalists, Coleridge quotes Robert Layton, Archbishop of Glasgow from 1661-74, with favour:

The boasted peaceableness about questions of faith too often proceeds from a superficial temper, and not seldom from a supercilious disdain of whatever has no marketable use or value, and from indifference to religion itself. Toleration is a herb of spontaneous growth in the soil of indifference; but the weed has none of the virtues of the medicinal plant, reared by humility in the garden of zeal... That were not a natural union produced by the active heat of the spirit, but a confusion rather, arising from the want of it; not a knitting together, but a freezing together, as cold congregates all bodies how heterogeneous soever, sticks, stones, and water; but heat makes first a separation of different things, and then unites those that are of the same nature. (74-75)

Yes, people have mostly stopped fighting over religion. But that’s not because they agree. It’s because they are indifferent. Religion has been purged of zeal. People don’t feel so

strongly about it any more. No wonder they get along. Coleridge calls for a more organic union, in which souls are “knit” rather than “frozen” together. Freezing attaches, fastens, but does not combine. A handful of grapes frozen in a clump are still separate grapes. True unity requires the “heat” of religious feeling, which boils souls down to a single uniform substance, the way diverse metal implements can be melted down and then hammered out into a single form. While freezing imposes an external structure (ice) that binds things unnaturally together, heat releases forms into their basic elements, so that they fuse in their affinities while all antagonistic substances filter away. Brownson echoes Layton directly: “No one dreams of moulding its dogmas to human nature, but every one would mould human nature to its dogmas... No sect ever looks to human nature as the measure of truth; but all look to what they are pleased to call the truth, as the measure of human nature” (*New Views* 68). When human nature conforms to dogma, people freeze together in strained, contrived equipoise. When dogma follows human nature, we have a harmonic rather than a sutured cooperation.

Your average nineteenth-century New England farmer has little training in logic and hermeneutics. How, then, is he supposed to exercise reason and scripture to evaluate religious practice? Liberal secularity deprives common folk of the power to make moral decisions for themselves. Everything sifts down to them from experts. This is J. A. Saxton’s point in “Prophecy–Transcendentalism–Progress” (1841): “the great mass of men, therefore, can have no warrant for their faith in Christianity, but the naked authority of the Learned” (102). In a regression to the feudal hierarchies of the Catholic church, Liberal secularity “necessarily disinherits the mass” (Brownson, quoted in Miller, *Transcenden-*

talists 208). By contrast, spiritual *feeling* penetrates the farmer deeply as the judge. That sacred enthusiasm which defies class boundaries and stirs the souls of carpenter and king alike, now as during the Great Awakening, is what should govern religious practice, not reason and scripture: “It is only on the reality of this inner light, and on the fact, that it is universal, in all men, and in every man, that you can found a democracy, which shall have a firm basis, and which shall be able to survive the storms of human passions” (Brownson, quoted in *Transcendentalists* 208). This is why the Transcendentalists turn to the religious sentiment.

The religious sentiment as an alternative standard of tolerance.

Unitarians commonly used “religious sentiments” in the plural for all the affections associated with religious experience, but *the* religious sentiment did not solidify as a formal term in English until Orestes Brownson’s 1834 review of Constant’s *De la Religion Considérée dans Sa Source, Ses Formes et Ses Développements* (1825). Brownson probably encountered Constant through his friend George Ripley, who later devoted a 126-page section of *Philosophical Miscellanies* (1838) to the French activist. The religious sentiment is a universal human faculty that receives divine revelation directly into the soul.⁴⁰ “There is a light,” George Ripley avers, “which enlightened every man that cometh into the world; there is a faculty in all—the most degraded, the most ignorant, the most obscure—to perceive spiritual truth when distinctly presented” (Ripley, quoted in Miller, *Transcendentalists* 255). This light comes from God. It imparts God’s truths,

⁴⁰ The Transcendentalists also use Coleridge’s term “Reason” to designate this faculty.

God's beauty, God's nature, unmediated to the human mind: "The end [that the religious sentiment] proposes is,—to reunite the man with God, till he thinks God's thought, which is Truth—feels God's feeling, which is Love—wills God's will... becoming one with him, and so partaking of the divine nature" (Parker, *DMR*, 109). It is "the strongest and deepest element in human nature" (29), as fundamental as the five senses or hunger or emotions or the sex drive. Man⁴¹ is "determined" to religion by "an interior sentiment, by a fundamental law of his being, a law invariable, eternal, indestructible" (Brownson, "Constant" 151). Humans need religion as badly as we need to eat. Religion compels as irresistibly as sexual impulse. It is a part of what we are. There is no escaping it.

The religious sentiment also designates the state of mind that revelation precipitates. The ego wanes: "All mean egotism vanishes" (Emerson, *CW* 1.10); "We forget ourselves, yielding passive to the tide of soul that flows into us. Then man's troubles are but a dew-drop on his sandals; his enmities or jealousies, his wealth or his poverty, his honors, disgraces, the sad mishaps of life are all lost to the view" (Parker, *DMR* 69). We care less about ourselves, more about others. A sense of calm tranquility descends: "light, comfort and peace dawn on him, like the day-spring from on high" (Parker, "Presence" 69). The attention turns to deep existential questions and hallowed objects of contemplation: "religion is the Conception, or Sentiment, of the Holy... which makes us linger around the Sacred and the Time-hallowed, the graves of heroes or of nations,—which leads us to launch away upon the boundless expanse, or plunge into the mysterious

⁴¹ I use "man" for "humanity" only when I'm ventriloquizing the Transcendentalists. This allows me to avoid a lot of awkward quotation editing.

depths of Being” (Brownson, *New Views* 2). The soul feels connected with God and nature. It experiences a sense of “universal harmony; the infinite within; sympathy with the Soul of All,” “the currents of the Universal Being circuit through me; I am part or parcel of God” (Emerson, *CW* 1.10). And it “makes our highest happiness” (Emerson, *CW* 1.124), a “bliss that words cannot portray” (Parker, *DMR* 115).

Like other peak experiences, the religious sentiment compels expression: “The religious sentiment seeks to express itself in forms” (Ripley, quoted in Miller *Transcendentalists* 291). And, like other peak experiences, it punishes us when expression is denied or thwarted: “it is the effect of conversation with the beauty of the soul, to beget a desire and need to impart to others the same knowledge and love. If utterance is denied, the thought lies like a burden on the man” (Emerson, *CW* 1.135). This expression can take the form of an institution: “We do not love to nourish an opinion which no one shares with us... Hence the necessity of religious institutions, the reason why the sentiment is always clothed in some form” (Brownson, “Constant” 151). But it can also take the form of art: “Poetry is the expression of abstract and spiritual truth by sensible objects, by the forms, colors, sounds, changes, combinations of external nature” (Peabody, “Scriptures” 175); “This religious sentiment is the strongest and deepest element in human nature... The greatest works of human art have risen only at Religion’s call” (Parker, *DMR* 29).

Unfortunately, the religious sentiment rarely strikes consummate fruition: “happy is he who can number one hundred such in the year, or even in a life” (Parker, *DMR* 172). It does not answer to the summons of the will, cannot be beckoned any better than sleep.

Yet we *need* its flourishing. And when we don't get it, we yearn for it. In addition to a faculty and a state of spiritual exaltation, the religious sentiment is also a *craving*, a desire, a want, as compulsive as hunger or the sex drive: "The sentiment results from that craving, which we have to place ourselves in communication with invisible powers" (Brownson, "Constant" 151); "The religious sentiment grows out of the want that man feels of communication with invisible powers" (Ripley, *PM* 280); "In a word, the religious sentiment is the response to that cry of the soul which nothing can silence, to that yearning after the infinite, which nothing can suppress." (277)

Hunger compels toward food. Eros compels toward other human bodies. The religious sentiment too has objects of compulsion: nature, virtuous personalities, and art. "There is certainly a religious sentiment, a restlessness, which craves more than the actual affords, an aspiration and yearning of the heart for communion, which cannot take place through words and thoughts, but only through some subtler medium, like music" (Dwight, "Concerts" 124). And those works of art that satisfy the religious sentiment are the most powerful: "The expressions of this sentiment affect us more than all other compositions" (Emerson, *CW* 1.126). In her capacity as editor, Fuller explicitly commits *The Dial* to the project of expressing and stimulating the religious sentiment through beautiful art and profound thought: "We do not wish to say pretty or curious things, or to reiterate a few propositions in varied forms, but, if we can, to give expression to that spirit which lifts men to a higher platform, restores to them the religious sentiment" ("Editor" 3).

Insofar as a religion satisfies the religious sentiment, it is legitimate, and has a right to tolerance and respect: “The test of the true faith, certainly, should be its power to charm and command the soul, as the laws of nature control the activity of the hands,—so commanding that we find pleasure and honor in obeying” (Emerson, *CW* 1.137-38). If the religious sentiment is a craving; and if certain practices and objects of attention can satisfy this craving; then we can “test” the truth of a religion by its capacity to satisfy the cravings of the religious sentiment. We don’t need miracles or scripture. Human nature supplies its own standard of toleration.

Liberal secularity trusts the senses to discern what is real and what is not. The senses are a human faculty. The religious sentiment is also a human faculty. Why, then, should we not trust it as we trust the senses? If the testimony of the senses suffices to establish external reality, then the testimony of the religious sentiment should suffice to establish spiritual realities: “We have direct access to [God], through... the religious Sentiment, just as we have direct access to nature, through the eye, the ear, or the hand” (Parker, *DMR* 160-61); “the truths of Christianity bear on their face a certain stamp of divinity, which the soul is capable of recognising; that ‘the inspiration of the Almighty, which giveth men understanding,’ enables us to see, and know, and be well assured of the great truths of the Gospel” (Brownson, “Evidences” 87). One knows God exists for the same reason one knows it is raining. The eyes send a percept to the brain, and this percept indicates the fact of water falling from the sky; one experiences spiritual movements, and

these movements imply the influence of God.⁴² Empirical reason and the religious sentiment are thus established on equivalent grounds. The only difference is that one is commensurate with spiritual experience and the other is not. Evaluating religion against the evidence of the senses is like judging how funny a joke is by the timbre of the speaker's voice: it takes an incidental for a constitutive condition. Timbre of voice *can* make a joke funnier: the senses *can* stimulate spiritual experience. But timbre of voice is not what ultimately determines whether a joke is funny or not: the senses cannot establish or demonstrate spiritual experience.

Liberal secularity extends tolerance only to Christian denominations. The religious sentiment demands a far more radical inclusivity. It manifests according to the needs of particular places at particular times: "The form in which religion is clothed is always proportioned to the social state of the nations or tribes by which it is professed" (Ripley, *PM* 304). "The religion must be made for man's religious nature, as much as the shoe must be made for the foot" (Parker, quoted in Miller, *Transcendentalists* 228), and religious natures differ from era to era, from culture to culture. No religion is right for all times and all places, and so no nation or race or tribe has the right to impose its religion on any other: "There is no monopoly of Religion by any nation or age" (Parker, *DMR* 82-83). The Transcendentalists find authentic expressions of the religious senti-

⁴² Also see J.D. Morrell in *Historical and Critical View of the Speculative Philosophy of Europe in the Nineteenth Century* (1841): "Just as sensation gives us immediate knowledge of the world, so there is an inward sense—a rational intuition—a spiritual faculty—by which we have a direct and immediate revelation of spiritual things" (601). Also see Ripley: "If it can be demonstrated that the sentiment of religion reposes on the eternal ideas of reason, its influence over our whole nature is sanctioned and confirmed; it is redeemed from the character of a temporary or enthusiastic feeling; it is removed from the sphere of the imagination to that of our severest convictions; and we yield our understandings and our hearts to its dominion with the same peaceful assurance, with which we act on the results of demonstrative science" (*PM* 290).

ment in traditionally heathen faiths, like Confucianism and Hinduism: “This sentiment... dwelled always deepest in the minds of men in the devout and contemplative East; not alone in Palestine, where it reached its purest expression, but in Egypt, in Persia, in India, in China” (Emerson, *CW* 1.126). Parker vouches for “Socrates, Confucius, Zoroaster... the saints and sages of every clime” as prophets of a common inspiration: “not similar inspiration alone, but the same inspiration, as all bodies fall by the same gravity and all violets blossom in the same sun” (Parker, “Presence” 63). Fuller even goes so far as to urge tolerance towards indigenous religious practices: “The Indian is steady to that simple creed, which forms the basis of all this mythology; that there is a God, and a life beyond this; a right and wrong which each man can see, betwixt each man should choose; that good brings with it its reward and vice its punishment” (*Summer* 208).

But how, then, does the religious sentiment avoid being *too* inclusive? How does it avoid tolerating everything and anything that declares itself a religion? A standard of tolerance is necessarily a standard of *intolerance* as well. Otherwise, it’s not much of a standard. To which religions and religious practices, then, did the Transcendentalists deny an authentic expression of the religious sentiment, and on what grounds?

The doctrine of dissipation.

One consistent theme among Transcendentalist writings is that the religious sentiment demands constant renewal of expression. Revelation stirs the prophet’s soul, she speaks, and for a brief but thrilling duration, material form and spiritual impetus beautifully coalesce. Works of art, personalities, institutions bind the demos together in live,

inspired affect. But the form quickly stales. The bond between sentiment and institution attenuates, the exultation of the masses settles down, the halo of inspiration diminishes. The religious sentiment sets new forms germinating in the minds of an enlightened few. And when they speak, their words ring truer and more purely than the words that came before. In his review of Benjamin Constant's *De la Religion*, Brownson attributes to the religious sentiment an "unceasing" labour "to purify the form with...which it is combined" (153). This requires constant tearing-down and building-up, disintegration and synthesis. If the religious sentiment exerted itself unimpeded, religion would sustain perpetual transition: "Left to the workings of this interior sentiment, man would march onward with an uninterrupted progress, and every day become able to conceive a nobler object of worship, and to embody more of excellence in his form of religion" (153). It is an agent of inexhaustible revolution.

Form (to paraphrase Ripley in *Philosophical Miscellanies*) observes the opposite law. It is an agent of stasis and stability: "Every positive form, however satisfactory it may be for the present, contains the germ of opposition to future progress. It acquires, by the very effect of its duration, a dogmatic and stationary character which refuses to follow intelligence in its discoveries" (280). Priests especially don't want religious institutions to change. They want to keep their power. And their power resides in a fixed set of laws and doctrines. Their interests necessarily exist in tension with the the religious sentiment: "In every age, the priesthood of all religions has anathematized the idea of change, the attempt at improvement and even the hope of it" (302). The religious sentiment evacuates the priesthood and its affectless dominion, retreating into dark, neglected corners of civi-

lization, where it foments fresh, insurrectionary forms of expression: “The religious sentiment then separates from this form, which has become, as it were, petrified; and demands another by which it shall not be wounded, and gives itself no rest until it has found it” (281). New prophets, new beliefs, new practices crop up, blazing with the sanction of the religious sentiment. The masses sense instinctively the conviction of divine impetus, and flock to the rebel truth. The priest class responds with an iron hand, anathematizing all rich prophetic feeling under a cold tyranny of facts: “persecution then increases. This occasions a sort of fanaticism for incredulity in the rebellious spirits, which seizes and maddens the enlightened classes of society, and soon attacks the religious sentiment itself” (282).

Ripley here alludes to the critique of enthusiasm. When he speaks of the persecution of the religious sentiment, he has in mind Cromwell’s posthumous execution, Edwards’s exile. The Transcendentalists take up Edwards’s agenda more daringly in more daring times. Where Edwards fought hard to distinguish the divine light from enthusiasm, the Transcendentalists embrace enthusiasm as essentially coterminous with the religious sentiment. Brownson uses the two terms interchangeably: “Men of virtuous lives, of ardent enthusiasm, of generous devotion to liberty, and to the welfare of their fellow beings, have, at times, opposed themselves to religion” (“Constant” 154). Good men, with all the substance of devotion but none of the punctilio, turn against religion. Why? Because “it no longer responds to the wants of their souls,” the secret yearnings of “the religious sentiment.” The same controls which restrain enthusiasm also inhibit the religious sentiment: rationalism, legalism, ritualism. A religion overly rational, overly dogmatic,

overly ritualistic, materialistic, and formulaic, stifles rather than expresses the religious sentiment. The Transcendentalists saw themselves as inflexible only towards inflexibility: “the only guest not tolerated” among them “was intolerance” (Fuller, quoted in Gura, 5). The early meetings at the Transcendental club had only one rule: “that no man should be admitted whose presence excluded any one topic” (Emerson, *JMN* 5.194).

The Transcendentalists hold up Christ’s direct, undistorted word as the purest expression of the religious sentiment the world has ever seen. In Fuller’s words, “Were there, indeed, a catholic church which should be based on a recognition of universal truths, simple as that proposed by Jesus, Love God with all thy soul and strength, thy neighbour as thyself; such a church would include all sincere motions of the spirit” (Fuller, *Papers* 2.161). Christ was, in their eyes, a flexible, inclusive, tolerant discourse. He boiled religion down to a few bare essentials: love your neighbour; divest yourself of wealth and pride; God speaks through each and every individual soul. But the priest class has strangled Christ’s voice in its formalistic apparatus: “The idioms of [Christ’s] language and the figures of his rhetoric have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. Christianity became a Mythus, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before.” (Emerson, *CW* 1.129). Now, in the nineteenth century, Christian institutions are, for the most part, corrupt: “The sentiment of the Holy has deserted [the church], and it is a by-word and a mockery... No institution, so long as it is in harmony with the progress of the understanding, can fail to command obedience or kindle enthusiasm. The Church now does neither” (Brownson, *New Views* 6). The “corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College” (Emerson, quoted in Miller, *Tran-*

scendentalists 8) generally bore the brunt of Transcendentalist ire. Its excessive rationalism, in their eyes, snuffed out the religious sentiment and its divine spark: “English and American Unitarianism, on the plan of Priestley and Belsham, avowedly material, and being, as it were, the jumping-off place from the Church to absolute infidelity, is evidently on the decline” (Brownson, *New Views* 53).

The religious sentiment, then, does not extend tolerance to all religious practices. It excludes those in which institutional mechanisms take priority over the impulse of expression, what the Transcendentalists call *formalism*. No-one can say whether or not a given religion satisfies the religious sentiment for anybody but oneself. But one *can* say whether or not a given religion is formalistic: it sticks too closely to the letter of its sacred texts, or measures piety according to the strict observance of rules and rituals, or submits religious experience to the testimony of the senses. Where Liberal secularity tolerates only those religions which conform to objective standards, the religious sentiment tolerates only those religions which *don't* conform to objective standards. The religious sentiment requires a fluid conduit. Rigidity alone errs against its radiant conviction.

Aesthetics and the religious sentiment.

Antebellum New England religious thinkers ceded to art a merely semantic reference to religion. Aesthetic forms related, for them, to spiritual truth as a sign relates to its referent. As we saw in the last chapter, Jonathan Edwards places secondary beauty (the beauty of nature and art) in a subordinate, analogous relation to primary beauty (the beauty of God and unmediated spiritual truth). Unitarian ministers regarded art as a supple-

ment to religion. Art could illustrate moral precepts with examples more compelling than real life could supply, it could dress dry doctrines with an imaginatively enticing surface, but there was nothing immediately religious about aesthetic form. As Buell puts it, “However much the Unitarian critics praised art—especially poetry—in the abstract, when it came to passing judgment they followed Orville Dewey’s stricture that ‘the moral character, or the effect upon the mind, must be the test’” (*Transcendentalism* 28): aesthetic form could only represent, refer to, allegorize spiritual truth. It derived religious value ultimately as an embellishment of moral content.

The religious sentiment makes it possible to bring art and religion into a more equitable relationship. The religious sentiment is a need, a desire, a craving. Just as hunger directs towards food, just as eros directs towards intercourse, so the religious sentiment directs toward aesthetic appreciation. A beautiful human body does not *refer to* or *represent* or *allegorize* erotic desire; aesthetic form does not *refer to* or *represent* or *allegorize* the religious sentiment. Beauty is, rather, a necessary condition for meaningful religious experience to transpire. Just as erotic desire diminishes in the absence of a stimulus (real or imaginary), so the religious sentiment starves in the absence of beauty: “As without the air, the body could not breathe; so without beauty, the heart and religious nature seem to want an element to live in” (Dwight, “Religion” 2). The relationship between art and religion fundamentally changes. Art does not merely illustrate or represent or allegorize religious truths. It directly stimulates and satisfies religious experience.

For Jonathan Edwards, as we saw in the previous chapter, secondary beauty is superfluous if one has access to the unmediated majesty of God; for the Unitarians, it is not

only possible to apprehend moral truth adequately without literary embellishment, but even in certain cases preferable.⁴³ By contrast, for a radical subset of the Transcendentalists (Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, Dwight, Parker, Jones Very, and Christopher Pearse Cranch), religious experience simply does not happen without the gentle solicitation of beautiful material forms.⁴⁴ It is in this context that Emerson declares, “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul” (*CW* 1.127). Revelation is an experience. And the beauties of art and nature have the potential to bring this experience about. Emerson recalls a Unitarian sermon he once attended. The formalist at the pulpit failed to awaken any religious feeling, and his failure was thrown into relief by contrast with the beauty of the snowstorm beyond the windows: “The snow-storm was real, the preacher merely spectral, and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him into the beautiful meteor of the snow” (*CW* 1.138). Religion resides in a kind of experience which the beauty of nature elicits with greater force than the most eloquent moralizing. I will consider a number of representative passages from the most radical of the Transcendentalists—Dwight, Emerson, and Fuller—that treat aesthetic experience as a stimulus to the religious sentiment. I will then carry out a quick thematic reading of Very’s sonnet “Beauty.”

Dwight.

⁴³ For a general overview of Unitarian aesthetics, see Lawrence Buell’s “Unitarian Aesthetics and Emerson’s Poet-Priest” (1968).

⁴⁴ According to Buell, “Frederic Henry Hedge, James Freeman Clarke, William Henry Channing, Parker, and Cyrus Bartol” all expressed a certain unease about imbuing art with immediate religious value (*Transcendentalism* 40-41).

Though somewhat of a fringe figure in the Transcendentalist movement, John Sullivan Dwight was a close friend of Theodore Parker and Christopher Pearse Cranch, and he published several pieces in *The Dial*. In 1849 he contributed to Peabody's *Aesthetic Papers* (1849) the essay "Music" which, as Perry Miller puts it, "perfectly expresses the Transcendental method of dealing with art in general" (*Transcendentalists* 411). Music reconciles spirit and matter: "This beauty, like all other, results from the marriage of a spiritual fact with a material form, from the rendering external, and an object of sense, what lives in essence only in the soul" (27). Spiritual experience finds adequate expression in melody, and melody stimulates spiritual experience: "the material part, which is measured sound, is the embodiment and sensible representative, as well as the re-acting cause, of that which we call impulse, sentiment, feeling, the spring of our action and expression" (27). When he speaks of "sentiment" here, Dwight has the *religious* sentiment in mind: "Music is religious and prophetic. She is the real Sibyl, chanting evermore of unity...Every genuine strain of music is a sincere prayer, or bold inspired demand, to be united with all, at the Heart of all things" (30). Dwight's earlier essay "The Religion of Beauty" (1840) puts the point more directly: "all this [beauty]... more than justif[ies] an attempt to show how the religious sentiments may be nourished by a cultivation of the sense of duty" (2). In describing the "practical effects" of beauty upon the mind, Dwight echoes Parker's description of the religious sentiment: "It disposes to order. It gives birth in the mind to an instinct of propriety. It suggests imperceptibly, it inclines gently, but irresistibly, to the fit action, to the word in season...The sense of beauty is attended with a certain reverence; we dare not mar what looks so perfect" (3). Beauty brings about a

certain state of mind. The religious sentiment brings about a certain state of mind. And these two states of mind share a striking number of symptoms: a sense of peace, a sense of tranquility, an orientation towards virtue, a sense of harmony with the outer world.

Emerson.

Emerson never houses beauty and the religious sentiment together in an essay of their own. Their relation emerges only over several scattered moments throughout his works. And yet, in the breadth of their scattering, such moments testify to a deep groove in Emerson's thought. From *Nature* (1836) to the revised edition of *The Conduct of Life* (1876) just six years before his death in 1882, Emerson remained committed to beauty as the primary stimulus of the religious sentiment. Nature "lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment. Prophet and priest, David, Isaiah, Jesus, have drawn deeply from this source. This ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature, as to seem the end for which it was made" (*CW* 1.41). Nature stimulates the religious sentiment: it puts prophets in touch with God. But nature also expresses the religious sentiment: it supplies the most suitable imagery for prophetic utterance. As he writes in an earlier section of *Nature*, "Wise men pierce" the "rotten diction" of abstract, arbitrary language and "fasten words again to visible things" (1.30). Poems, lectures, sermons, that draw upon natural imagery are not only more interesting, but also more spiritually edifying, than those that don't. "Pomp and riches" strikes a discordant note in such a thorough-

ly Protestant text as *Nature*.⁴⁵ Religion is not supposed to have anything to do with riches. This discordance draws a stark contrast between Transcendentalism and the formalistic Catholic church. What purpose serves all this pomp? How vain it looks against the riches of nature! The extravagances of popery, mired in avarice, stifle rather than express the religious sentiment. The true church will honour God only through the forms that bear directly His divine impress.

The theology of the religious sentiment takes core principles of Protestantism—anti-institutionalism and an introspective source of religiosity—to an extreme. In “Lecture on the Times” (1841), Emerson even goes so far as to blame the Protestants for not being radical enough. The reformers are fuelled with the “fire of moral sentiment,” but its influence is filtered through “personal and party heats, with measureless exaggerations, and the blindness that prefers some darling measure to justice and truth” (*CW* 1.277). Note that it is not any particular article of doctrine or religious practice, but sectarianism itself, that disqualifies the reformed churches in Emerson’s eyes. The religious sentiment tolerates everything except intolerance. As soon as one church grants itself some exclusive relation to truth, it subordinates inspiration to bureaucracy. Emerson impeaches the reformers using the rhetoric of literary criticism. They are guilty not of an infraction against a law but of “measureless exaggerations,” a blindness to rhythm and proportion. The problem is not that they are sinful or wrong-headed so much as that their forms of

⁴⁵ Harold Bloom characterizes Transcendentalism as Protestant without being Christian *The American Religion* (1985). So long as we grant him some allowance for rhetorical embellishment, I find this an apt description. The Transcendentalists did away with even those distinctions that set Christianity apart from other religions. Although many of them still saw Christianity as the purest expression of the religious sentiment the world had ever seen, others—such as Emerson—denied Christianity any secure privilege.

expression are ugly. They “present no more poetic image to the mind than the evil tradition which they reprobated” (1.277), and this is proof enough for Emerson that they have fallen out of touch with the religious sentiment. The beauty and the truth of a religious practice go hand-in-hand. If a religion is not beautiful, then it cannot be inspired with the divine impetus.

The Conduct of Life (originally published in 1860 and then revised by Emerson himself in 1876) ascends the metaphysical ladder from “Fate” (material laws of determinism) through “Power” and “Wealth” to “Worship.” Then, after some “Considerations By the Way,” Emerson proceeds to “Beauty,” implying that aesthetic experience comes closer to the essence of religion than the deepest sabbath genuflections. “All high beauty has a moral element in it,” because it stimulates the religious sentiment. A clarity of mind, a serenity of soul, descends, and for a while what must be done comes with the felicity of a noble urge (*CW* 6.306). Desire harmonizes with discipline. What we *should* do lines up neatly with what we *want* to do. Thus “the antique sculpture [is] ethical as Marcus Antoninus” (6.306): it edifies just as well to look upon a beautiful work of art as to read a philosophical treatise on ethics. Beauty may not tell us what to do. It may not set down a list of rules for right action. It orients us toward virtue through a subtler mechanism, precipitating that state of mind from which virtuous action proceeds out of impulse rather than compulsion. Such moments are all too brief. And yet while they last, we stand among the elect, and our exaltation is infectious. The religious sentiment pervades the human soul and divulges itself through subtle intimations of voice and gesture. The inspired soul obtains a certain magnetic influence over others: “an adorer of truth we cannot choose but

obey, and the woman who has shared with us the moral sentiment,—her locks must appear to us sublime.” (6.306). The erotic rarely intrudes upon Emerson’s abstract subject matter. But when it does, it carries the stamp of Plato’s *Phaedrus*: the erotic seduces unto beauty, and beauty seduces unto virtue.⁴⁶ Emerson draws attention to an analogy between the religious sentiment and erotic attraction: both are deep-seated urges stimulated in the presence of beautiful objects.

In the essay “Character” (not to be confused with the “Character” of the second series of Essays), printed in *The North American Review* in 1866, Emerson digresses from his topic for a moment to gauge the direction of religion in America. He observes, without any clear sign of approval or disapproval, a hasty abandonment of traditions and clear sectarian divisions: “Calvinism rushes to be Unitarianism, as Unitarianism rushes to be pure Theism” (*CW* 10.117). And yet, through all this change, one constant remains: “There will always be a class of imaginative youths, whom poetry, whom the love of beauty, lead to the adoration of the moral sentiment, and these will provide it with new historic forms and songs” (*CW* 10.117). Christianity morphs from form to form, yet the religious sentiment stays the same, and beauty remains forever its primary stimulus. Beauty is the kelson, the spine, the essence of religiosity. In the nation of a thousand Christian sects, during a time of drastic institutional upheaval, beauty and the moral in-

⁴⁶ Consider, by comparison, that moment from “Nominalist and Realist” in which “a fair girl, a piece of life, gay and happy, and making the commonest offices beautiful by the energy and heart with which she does them,” shames the philosopher of his “sarcasm at ignorance and the life of the senses” (*CW* 3.246). And in this resignation of his core principles, in this Socratic renunciation of the worldview in which an ego takes root, the speaker glimpses “universality,” a truth that resides beyond any philosophical system.

fluence of beauty constitute the one common denominator, the one consistent factor, that unifies religious experience.

Fuller.

The Transcendentalists' pre-eminent critic, Margaret Fuller takes the stimulation of the religious sentiment as a central governing principle of aesthetic merit. In her travelogue, *Summer on the Lakes* (1843), Fuller stages a dialogue in which the religious sentiment, personified as "Free Hope," briefly debates three other positions, each represented by its faculty of emphasis: "Good Sense," "Self-Poise," and the "Old Church." Free Hope declares the objects of her excitation: "the meaning of the flower uprooted in the ploughed field," the "field in its relations with the universe," the "aspect of death, the touch of love, the flood of music" (127-128). The beauties of art and nature, the peak experiences of death and love, cause a "break in habitual existence" in which one feels "the pressure of hidden causes, and the presence, sometimes the communion, of unseen powers" (128). We move insulated from the worlds of beauty and spirit in a membrane of moral and intellectual complacency. We perpetuate *doxa*, we circulate through mechanical ruts of habit and routine, we burrow into narrow, selfish concerns and remain stubbornly intransigent to the spiritual influences that abundantly surround us. Then we fall in love, or lose somebody close to us. The scales fall from our eyes. The membrane bursts. We shed our complacencies, our ossified habits of mind, and pursue a less frivolous mode of existence. Experience is richer, life fuller and more meaningful. But love and grief don't last forever, and their intrusions are neither frequent nor regular. Thankfully, aes-

thetic experience edifies as love and grief do, but without the caprices of love or the pain of grief. The beauties of art and nature are always there for us. We just have to attend to them: “we need only look on the miracle of every day, to sate ourselves with thought and admiration every day” (127). They are the chief stimulants to spiritual consciousness. “It needs not that I should ask the clairvoyant whether ‘a spiritual world projects into ours’” (128)—an army of witnesses to the divine occupies the world.

Some membranes are so tough that art and nature need the supplement of criticism. The true task of criticism, as Fuller lays it out in *Papers on Literature and Art* (1846), is not to prune and police the reading lists of the nation, but to enhance the reader’s aesthetic experience and prime the mind for spiritual influx. Critics “must not tell [the reader] what books are not worth reading, or what must be thought of them when read” (5). They must not allow their reading experience to be circumscribed by “an object to carry or a cause to advocate” (6). That makes the “poor reader... too submissive” to experience the text in their own way, on their own terms. Criticism, that is, should not instruct, but provoke: “We do not want merely a polite response to what we thought before, but by the freshness of thought in other minds to have thought awakened in our own” (7). The aim is to broaden and relax, not stiffen and constrain, capacities of readerly reception. Only then will the mind be pliant enough to receive the religious sentiment’s eager stimulation. At the end of her essay, Fuller’s prose takes on a prophetic cadence:

He will be free and make free from the mechanical and distorting influences we hear complained of on every side. He will teach us to love wisely what we before loved well, for he knows the difference between censoriousness and

discernment, infatuation and reverence; and while delighting in the genial melodies of Pan, can perceive, should Apollo bring his lyre into audience, that there may be strains more divine than those of his native groves (8).

The anaphora (“he will,” “he will”), the *cursus*,⁴⁷ the diacope (“us to love wisely what we before loved well”) suggest a messianic rhetoric. Fuller prophesies the ideal critic as a kind of second coming. Uninhibited by “mechanical and distorting influences”—dogma, *doxa*, custom—the religious sentiment exerts itself freely through its enlightened representative, quickening his faculties and sharpening his perception, so that he may distinguish between the uninspired but formally polished melodies of Pan and the inspired art of Apollo. Fuller suggests that maybe this distinction is not always so easy to discern, that in fact most people miss it, their reception occluded by such prejudices and ideological commitments as “oblige them either to reject all writings which wear the distinctive traits of individual life, or to file away what does not suit them” (6). The religious sentiment perpetually hungers for new forms; inspired art is always distinctive, individual, original, and thus offends the pedantic tastes of the banal majority. It takes an authentically moved critic, animated with the divine impetus, to discern the divine impetus in art and bring the rest of us around to see it as well.

Fuller’s theory of criticism finds religious value in style as well as content. Her essay on “American Literature,” published in the second volume of *Papers*, begins with an invocation of the religious sentiment as the ultimate source of poetic inspiration:

⁴⁷ Consider the way the stresses weaken as the following two segments progress: “He will be free and make free from the mechanical and distorting influences we hear complained of on every side”; He will teach us to love wisely what we before loved well.”

“there is in every creature a fountain of life which, if not choked back by stones and other dead rubbish, will create a fresh atmosphere and bring to life fresh beauty” (2.125). “Stones” are pure matter without spirit. Cold, lifeless, inert, they stand for the formalisms that inhibit the religious sentiment. “The Sage of Concord” is one of those rare few in whom it freely flows. He is “a profound thinker,” but a more profound stylist: “His ideas are... embodied in a style whose melody and subtle fragrance enchant those who stand stupefied before the thoughts themselves, because their utmost depths do not allow them to sound his shallows” (128). Among American poets, “[William Cullen] Bryant stands alone” (131). His “range is not great, nor his genius fertile,” but he is, at least, in touch with his “inmost nature,” the same divine fountain from which all true force of poetry and personality springs. Fuller emphasizes less Bryant’s thought than the “lovely garb in which his thoughts are arranged.” It is, fundamentally, not in *what* his poems say but in *how* they say it that the religious value of his verse resides: “the atmosphere of his verse refreshes and composes the mind, like leaving the highway to enter some green, lovely, fragrant wood” (131). His poems bring about a state of mind analogous to the state of mind brought about by the beauty of nature—tranquil, composed, at ease. They stimulate the religious sentiment as mellifluously as nature itself.

Very, “Beauty.”

Jones Very, in many ways, embodied the Transcendentalist model of the inspired poet. He claimed to have received visions directly from the Holy Ghost, and he put even Emerson’s contempt for polish and convention to the test: Emerson once quipped, “Can-

not the spirit parse and spell?" (quoted in Miller *Transcendentalists* 341). Very stuck perhaps too closely to the letter as far as the condition of divine madness was concerned, circling the drain of insanity recklessly enough to earn himself a month-long stint in the McLean asylum near Boston in 1838 (*Salem is My Dwelling Place* 139). His sonnet "Beauty" (1838, see appendix) constitutes perhaps the most direct encapsulation of Transcendentalism's religious aesthetics in poetic form, and the most competent after Emerson's "The Rhodora." An encounter with beauty precipitates all of the defining symptoms of the religious sentiment. The ego dissolves in a pure, rapt state of attentiveness: "I was not, save it were a thought of thee" (5). A calm tranquility and clarity of mind descends: "every thought whose being was a strife / Each in its silent chamber sank to rest" (3-4). Material concerns vanish, and the mind turns to deeper, existential questions: "And still I gaze—but 'tis a holier thought / Than that in which my spirit lived before" (9-10). And a sense of deep spiritual connection webs the individual soul into the stars: "Each star a purer ray of love has caught, / Earth wears a lovelier robe than then it wore" (11-12).

The religious sentiment quickens to an almost erotic tempo, an analogy Very subtly cultivates at the level of association. By the end of the first line, "I gazed upon thy face,—and beating life," it sounds as though the "beating life" is the object of the speaker's gazing, and this suggests an erotic context: two lovers stare into one another's eyes and sense one another's beating hearts. Very draws freely and profusely upon the iconography of love sonnets. Each star catches a "ray of love" (11) and the earth changes into "a lovelier robe" (12). The "fire" of the closing line is the passion of "Divine" inspiration, but it also connotes more earthly passions, an association Very brings out with the

“lamps” that illuminate Beauty’s “shrine,” so suggestive of late night trysts between forbidden lovers. Religion is, like eros, an impulse, an urge, that beauty both stimulates and satisfies.

What does sacredness feel like?

It is not the moral or the message that makes a work of art religious, but the state of mind it brings about. And aesthetic form can bring about a religious state of mind just as effectively as profundity of thought: “An imaginative book renders us much more service at first, by stimulating us through its tropes, than afterward, when we arrive at the precise sense of the author” (Emerson, *CW* 3.32). For Lawrence Buell, “this drift toward subjectification threatened to deprive the would-be believer of any objective referent for the ‘religious sentiment’ and indeed of any secure criteria for determining whether a given utterance, scriptural or secular, was or was not inspired” (*Literary Culture* 168). What traces does the divine impetus impress into a work of art that the critic might point to as evidence of inspiration? Yes, the inspired work of art stimulates the religious sentiment. Yes, it brings about a tranquil state of mind that diminishes egotism and enhances our faculties of self-reflection. But why does *this* work of art stimulate the religious sentiment while *that* does not? How does the religious sentiment manifest at the level of form, and what specific formal characteristics elicit it?

The same characteristics that attend authentic expression of the religious sentiment in institutions also attend authentic expression of the religious sentiment in art. First, the religious sentiment is always moving on from old forms and inspiring new

ones: inspired literature is thus necessarily original. “No man,” Fuller affirms, “can be absolutely true” to the “fountain” of divine inspiration welling up from within, “eschewing cant, compromise, servile imitation, and complaisance, without becoming original” (*Papers* 2.125). The religious sentiment works against mechanical collectivity. All unthinking conformity, all formulae of personality, all uncritical habits of mind, everything that hardens the carapace of complacency and makes us automatons of social convention, falls away upon the touch of the religious sentiment. In this, we strike at what is perhaps the ultimate opposition of Transcendentalist secularity: the religious sentiment versus herd mentality. The world settles into established formulae, and the religious sentiment starts new, rebel forms germinating in inspired minds. Progress happens in an endless cycle of ossification and disruption. The Spirit manifests, form fossilizes, spirit manifests anew—and poetry accelerates the process: “Every thought,” Emerson admonishes, “is also a prison; every heaven is also a prison. Therefore we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode, or in an action, or in looks and behaviour, has yielded us a new thought” (*CW* 3.33). The inspired author expresses the religious sentiment and stimulates it from the reader, and the religious sentiment abolishes the rigid status quo. New thoughts break into circulation and set the world in an unexpected and refreshing light.

Second, the religious sentiment rejects formalism—dogma, ritual, rationalism: inspired art rejects rigid formal constraints. Emerson denounces “those esteemed umpires of taste” who “have lost the perception of the instant dependence of form upon soul” (*CW* 3.3). Form and spirit must harmonize. And this cannot happen when the form is exces-

sively polished or ornate. Fuller spurns “the judicious man of the world, calculating the effect to be produced by each of his smooth sentences” for “some earnest voice which is uttering thoughts, crude, rash, ill-arranged it may be, but true to one human breast, and uttered in full faith” (*Papers* 1.7). Parker identifies in Emerson’s verse “a ruggedness and want of finish which seems wilful in a man like him,” and yet “Mr. Emerson, on the whole speaks with a holy power which no other man possesses who now writes the English tongue” (quoted in Miller, *Transcendentalists* 419). Perhaps, Parker hints, Emerson speaks with “holy power” *because* of his “want of finish.” Perhaps to write smoother verse Emerson would have to wrest his concern away from the divine promptings of his soul to the stiff, cold symmetries of rhyme and metre: “The poet knows that he speaks adequately, then, only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or, ‘with the flower of the mind’; not with the intellect, used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service, and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life” (*CW*, 3.27). In a *Dial* review of Jones Very’s *Essays and Poems*, which Emerson helped publish in 1839, Margaret Fuller praises the young author for dispensing with the standards of literary merit out of fidelity to the sole standard of the “inward Spirit”: “There is no *composition*, no elaboration, no artifice in the structure of the rhyme, no variety in the imagery; in short, no pretension of literary merit, for this would be a departure from his singleness, and followed by departure of insight” (“Essays and Poems” 130). A certain ruggedness, wildness, frenzy, lack of polish, pays tribute to the priority spirit holds over matter. A punctilious adherence to the strictures of form inhibits the spiritual impulse.

But these are not really *criteria* of inspiration so much as its dubious effects. Inspired art is original, yes, and inspired art is not excessively polished. But not all original and unpolished art is inspired. The radical wing of the Transcendentalist movement needed to identify some kind of *formal* attribute that qualifies inspired art exclusively. This attribute would have to mediate between aesthetic form and divine impetus. It would have to straddle the distinction between matter and spirit, neither exclusively the domain of nature nor exclusively the domain of God, but their flickering intermediary. And it would have to be common to the beauties of nature and the beauties of art alike. How the Transcendentalists theorized this concept and how it allowed them to redefine the distinction between sacred and profane literature through aesthetic rather than historical criteria is the subject of the next chapter. I conclude, however, with an early effort: Christopher Pearse Cranch's poem "To the Aurora Borealis," published in *The Dial* in 1840, which the appendix includes in full.

The aurora is spiritual. It is the "flora" of the supernatural realm (22), a "fount of holiest light" (1), a staple Transcendentalist trope for divine inspiration.⁴⁸ The aurora is "posthumous," "unearthly" (10), the soul after it has left the body and ascended towards the heavens. It has been spread across the skies by angels, "heaven's watching vestals" (15) and simmers at earth's "glittering, polar source" (18), where the supernatural

⁴⁸ We have already seen Fuller describe the religious sentiment this way, but earlier precedents include Emerson's "Divinity School Address": "This sentiment is divine and deifying... It corrects the capital mistake of infant man... by showing the *fountain* of all good to be in himself" (126, my emphasis). The fountain-as-spirit trope also crops up in Cranch's own poetry: "Only when our souls are fed / By the Fount," the universal spirit, "which gave them birth" (quoted in Miller, *Transcendentalists* 386).

world opens into our own. It is the “dream of the deep-sunken sun” (11) which Cranch elsewhere interprets as the “type of the Godhead” (Miller, *Transcendentalists* 389).

Yet the aurora is also material. “Star-obscuring meteor-veil” (14) echoes the famous snowstorm, that “beautiful meteor,” from Emerson’s “Divinity School Address” (*CW* 1.126), so emblematic of the beauty of nature. Just as nature both reveals and obscures spirit, so the aurora both supports the stars with its “branchy lustre” (35) and obscures them with its veil. “Branchy” draws attention to the materiality of the aurora. Branches are hard, stiff, cold, and sinewy. Matter is hard, stiff, cold, and sinewy. “Branch” is a harsh, grating word, conspicuously at odds with the poem’s generally euphonic cadences, a dissonance that the rare adjectival form accentuates.

The aurora, then, stands for something spiritual, but not entirely spiritual; material, but not entirely material. It is the “type” for a certain aesthetic experience that transpires when the religious sentiment finds adequate expression. The “noiseless beck of night” summons out the “inner light” (59-60): the religious sentiment stirs upon contact with dark, un-illuminated matter, inducing a flood of spiritual-material feeling. Celestial detritus tumbles down to earth, and generates the ethereal, otherworldly northern lights, neither earthly native nor heavenly refugee. Thus spirit refracts through matter and generates a variety of aesthetic experience neither spiritual nor material, but somehow both at once. Whatever this phenomenon is, it transpires whenever spirit harmonizes with form. The beauties of nature elicit auroras from the soul. And the beauties of art can elicit auroras of their own, provided they, like nature, are inspired.

Interlude: "Kinderszenen," by Jan Zwicky
(*Forge*, pp. 16)

Snowcrust after freezing rain, the cool lost clarity
in the light. And the long field gathering shadows
the way the heart once gathered hope—
willow-tendrils and the massy tangle of the aspens,
the hay bales, even you—stretched,
blurred and luminous, across the unmarked snow.

Is it their weightlessness that makes them seem
like memory? The starched tablecloths,
the pinafores, someone laughing in the dim spruce-filtered light, air resinous
with love. Or do we call it memory
because we cannot bear to say
the longed-for that did not come to pass.
To find, this late, the distances inside oneself
uncrossable. The riddle
of forgiveness.

The red in the willows like forgotten laughter.
The weightless snow-blue of that glance.
How long the shadows are.
How long the heart is.

I include Canadian poet-philosopher Jan Zwicky here to extend the Transcendentalist legacy beyond the United States. Since her Ph.D. dissertation, *A Theory of Ineffability* (1981), Zwicky has remained deeply committed to the Emersonian project of justifying synthetic method to an analytic time, if never in these exact terms.⁴⁹ She continues to call “analysis” analysis, but “synthesis” evolves through a series of more rigorous terms: lyric thought, Freud’s “primary process” cognition, and gestalt perception. I will focus on gestalt perception, as Zwicky’s most recent articulation.⁵⁰ Analysis breaks things down, classifies, quantifies, to better manage and control; gestalt perception grasps integrated, harmonious wholes. Analysis proceeds through syllogisms—step-by-step, brick by logical brick; gestalt perception proceeds through flashes of sudden, intuitive insight.⁵¹ Analysis dominates the intellectual climate of our technocratic age. The “cult of rationality,” as Zwicky calls it, allies itself with “wealth, exploitation, and power. Calculation, analysis, mechanism, capital: these are the fundamental ideological commitments of technocracy” (*Meaning* 141). And, through technocracy, the cult of rationality is largely responsible for our ecological crisis: “the technocratic ideal—the vision of the good life as mechanized control of the natural world—has been not just an ecological disaster but

⁴⁹ Roughly, for Emerson analysis breaks things down, synthesis brings things together in grand, synoptic wholes. The sciences are analytic. They break things down to understand and control them. Religion and the arts are synthetic. They allow us to see how things fit together in vast assemblages that outstrip the probings of the senses. Zwicky uses “synthesis” to mean aggregation without coherence. A synthesis does not bring all its parts into an integral, resonant whole: that’s a miracle only lyric thought can perform.

⁵⁰ See *The Experience of Meaning* (2019).

⁵¹ The term gestalt first “came to prominence in German philosophy and psychology with the work of Christian von Ehrenfels in 1890” (4). Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka developed what is now called gestalt theory through the 1920s and -30s (4). It thrived briefly in North America. Then behaviourism rose into immense popularity, and gestalt theory was largely neglected. Recently, gestalt theory has begun to creep back into scholarly discussion through the work of Jonathan Schooler and, now, Jan Zwicky.

an epistemological mistake” (142). It is not just our values, not just the Western ethos of gleefully self-interested consumerism, that have brought us where we are today. Our habits of mind play a major role as well: “A culture that denies or derogates gestalt comprehension... won’t just scoff at the notion of causality that underlies the *I Ching*, or the possibility of navigating longlines; their susceptibility to the beauty of ecological wholes will be denigrated” (50). The cultivation of gestalt perception is a necessary step towards addressing the drastic imbalances—economic and ecological—of global capitalist technocracy.

Gestalt perception is the “kind of intelligence” that is active in “spiritual insight” (172). A gnomic aphorism, a scriptural parable, does not break down a thought or experience into its most basic possible units and arrange them in a linear progression, but condenses a very complex field of experience into a sharp flash of truth. It encompasses wholes too vast and nebulous for analytic procedures to grasp. Like the Transcendentalists, Zwicky sees literature, and lyric poetry especially, as an authentic source of spiritual insight. She even comes so close as to endorse a contemporary version of the religious sentiment: “I propose, in keeping with a version of Perennialism, that religions are the iconographic clothes in which a culture traditionally dresses spiritual insight. They are neither the body of such insight nor its ground” (172). The ground of spiritual insight, she avers, rests in a variety of experience—a heightened state of mind, the dissolution of the ego, a sense of ecstatic communion with the surrounding world—that gestalt perception has the power to stimulate (172-3).

Zwicky most clearly echoes Emerson and Whitman when she describes what a gestalt *feel like*. She briefly touches on Gerard Manley Hopkins' concept of the "inscape," the "shape a thing takes on because of... its vibrant, interior structure," its "sheer quiddity," something similar to what I have so far been calling a *signature*. The inscape is, fundamentally, an object of experience: "To perceive inscape is... to experience the resonance of being—all motions arising from its inner relations—in a particular thing" (168). It is the distinct impression or affective trace a thing leaves upon the mind. Sometimes, the inscape contains, in microcosm, a larger gestalt of which the object forms a part—what Zwicky calls a "*synoptic* gestalt": "the seeing of a particular for the unique gestalt that it is and, at the same time, sensing that it is an aspect of a much larger gestalt" (161). Not all gestalts are objects with definite boundaries that we can take in at a single glance. Places are gestalts. Bioregions are gestalts. Nations, epochs, even being itself, are gestalts. We can never perceive these gestalts all at once, not with the senses. What does a bioregion look like? How does an epoch smell? But it is possible to grasp them, implicitly, in the smaller gestalts that make them up, as we grasp the nation in the flag. Zwicky articulates something very similar to an experience of atmosphere. An environment forms a gestalt. We experience this gestalt in the form of a feeling. If we stop and reflect on this feeling for a while, we will notice that it is inflected by the signatures of every object present to the senses. We can never behold all the objects simultaneously. Instead, the senses roam about the scene, alighting on object after object. And each object presents the same atmosphere under a slightly different emphasis, as a prism refracts the same light

into a shifting series of shapes and colours. In Zwicky's terms, we might define an atmosphere as an assemblage of inscapes.

"Kinderszenen" comes from Zwicky's 2011 collection *Forge*. Music is a consistent theme throughout the volume. The opening poem, "Music and Silence: Seven Variations," dwells upon the capacity of music to provoke spiritual insight. Zwicky includes tributes to Schubert, Bach, and Schumann. "Kinderszenen" ("Children's Tales") is "written after" Schumann's opus 15 of the same name. The final movement, "Der Dichter Spricht" (The Poet Speaks), seems to invite Zwicky's verbal collaboration. The poem, like the melodies, casts the blitheness of childhood under the shadow of nostalgia. It achieves much of its atmospheric power from a rich blend of positive and negative, happy and sad, joyful and reflective, associations in a coherent affective hue.

"Snowcrust after freezing rain" and "the cool, lost clarity / in the light" (1-2) are superficially very different images. Snowcrust lies along the ground. It's hard and concrete. Winter light falls from above, soft and radiantly intangible. But this dissimilarity only enhances the harmony of their signatures. Freezing rain usually falls during that uncertain, transitional phase between winter and the coming warmth. It anticipates the Spring. A host of antithetical associations clang together. We associate Winter with coldness, death, dreariness, depression, old age; Spring with warmth, life, vividness, joy, and youth. The air is humid, but snow is on the ground. There is a sense of being neither here nor there, stuck between two contradictory times or places—a striking correlative to nostalgia. Nostalgia too involves a sense of being neither here nor there: a whiff of earlier times

softens the solidities of the present. Nostalgia too mingles together sadness and joy, youth and old age.

We associate light with warmth, life, vividness, joy, and inspiration. But in this light, some “cold, lost clarity” suspends. If Zwicky had written, “the cold, lost clarity *of* the light,” the effect would not not have been quite so strong. This cold, lost clarity is *in* the light—not a quality of the light, but a foreign body that inhabits it. “The cold, lost clarity *of* the light” would have me picturing cold, winter radiance with a slight blue tinge. But “the cold, lost clarity *in* the light” has me picturing a cross-hatching of cold and warm rays, an image neither cold nor warm, but both—warmth interpenetrating cold, cold interpenetrating warmth, just as Spring interpenetrates Winter, Winter Spring, in the previous image.

The opening sentence could easily continue on; the “and” is already there. The period could easily grow a tail and turn into a comma. Zwicky could have redeemed a sentence fragment. But grammar inflects the atmosphere as well as images. Fragments are drearier, more sympathetic with the mood of nostalgia, than completed forms. The opening line has no verbs, and its verblessness is more conspicuous this way, bringing the stillness of the scene into a more chilling emphasis. Besides, the full stop gives the long, diffuse sentence that follows something solid to push off. Here again we have a striking admixture of antithetical associations. A snowy field is compared to a heart, shadows to hope. A snowy field is dead, dreary, cold, inert; a heart is living, warm, and tirelessly beating. A snowy field is antithetical to hope. A field, a horizon, is a place where things happen, a common trope for a future and its prospects, as in the phrase, “a field of possibilities.” A

snowy field suggests a future, a set of prospects, blank and desolate. And “shadows” are a ubiquitous trope for doom, as in the hackneyed phrase, “shadow of impending doom.” Narratives only foreshadow bad events, never good.

Even so, all hopes have something shadow-like about them. To gather means to take away—from a field, for example—and put somewhere to last a while. But shadows do not detach from the bodies that project them, and hopes do not detach from contingency. Yet, we speak of *having* hopes, as if these hopes were ours, as if we gathered them and they are here to stay. Hopes define who and what we are. They sustain us, like a harvest gathered. But their sustenance is illusory. The sad truth is they can’t be gathered, they can’t be harvested from their fields of possibility, any more than shadows. To hope is to take a risk—to invest the ego in an uncertain future. To hope honestly, in tireless vigilance of risk, is intolerable. And so we “gather” our hopes together—we isolate them from contingency in a dubious dream-state. We do not fully recognize the precarity of our hopes. And yet, Zwicky suggests, the daring promise of youth, of a future ushered forth by a broad and welcoming horizon, illusory though it may have been, makes up so much of what we miss, so much of what we reflect on, in our nostalgic moments. The youthful gather hopes; the old gather shadows of hopes.

What is it, exactly, that lies “stretched / ...across the unmarked snow” (4-6)? Probably the “shadows.” That is the most straightforward reading. And yet, it could also be the hope, or even the “willow-tendrils,” “aspens,” and “hay bales” themselves. The withered natural forms of winter cast their signatures, their inscapes, alongside their shadows, and their signatures intermingle with lingering, discarded hopes. The willows, the aspens, the

hay bales, all contain the diminished greenness of summery life. “Even you,” even the addressee, stretches into the landscape before her, implying a diminishment of her own. Place and person, things and memories, trees and moods, blend into a single, presiding atmosphere. Nostalgia is not quite now, not quite then, and the verb “stretched” reflects this ambiguity. Zwicky could have written “stretch” without much trouble. “Stretch” would even have eliminated the passive voice. But “stretched,” the main verb of the poem’s first complete sentence, beautifully captures the temporal dividedness of nostalgia. It can mean that, in the present, the trees and the hay bales *are* stretched across the snow. But it can also be read in the past tense: the trees and hay bales stretched across the snow before as they do now.

Atmosphere makes memory present to us.⁵² The atmospheres of earlier periods of life erupt and colour the atmosphere we currently inhabit. It is when Zwicky blurs the boundaries between remembered and immediate experience that the atmosphere of the poem becomes most salient. “Is it their weightlessness that makes them seem like memory?” the speaker asks (7-8), without much indication of what exactly *they* are: the “snowcrust” and the “willow-tendrils” that came before, or the “tablecloths” and “pinafores” that come after? All these things are “like” memory: light, frail, diaphanous. “The starched tablecloths, / the pinafores, someone laughing in the dim spruce-filtered light”—it is unclear whether these images set the present scene, or if they arrive, fragmentary, from the settings of the past. What is clear is that they all carry complementary atmospheric reso-

⁵² For an essay on atmosphere and memory, see Steffen Kluck, “Atmospheres and Memory: a Phenomenological Approach,” in *Atmosphere and Aesthetics: A Plural Perspective* (2020), edited by Tonino Griffèro and Marco Tedeschini.

nances. The “starched tablecloths” and the “pinafores” both suggest the customs and fashions of older times. Nobody starches their tablecloths anymore. And pinafores are traditionally a child’s garment that, all through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, doubled as a symbol of prosperity. Together, these two images betoken an ethos of domestic care that modernity has resigned. A sense of anachronism, of desuetude, casts a shadow over images that otherwise carry a strong positive charge. Housewives starched tablecloths in preparation for company, suggesting promise, intimacy, friendship. Young girls wore pinafores when they went out to play or when company was coming to visit, suggesting joy, spontaneity, bliss, the enchantment of a child with her new clothes.

“The starched tablecloths” and “the pinafores” are both short, clipped clauses. “Someone laughing in the dim spruce-filtered light” (9) is quite long. This emphasizes other dissimilarities. Tablecloths and pinafores are domestic things, the frills of life at home; “spruce-filtered light” is a natural, outdoor image. I’m probably not the only reader who picture the tablecloths and the pinafores as white. Starch is white; the kind of domestic fastidiousness that starches tablecloths aspires to immaculateness, and white is the emblematic colour of the immaculate. White is also the colour of the classic pinafore. “Dim spruce-filtered light,” however, is full of blacks and yellows. If the light is dim, that means it is close to evening. And if the light “filters through” the trees, that means it is coming from *behind* them, that the light hits the trees before it hits the speaker’s eye. The reader is prompted to imagine tall, dark silhouettes, and the silhouettes of spruces are especially tall, especially dark. They suggest a sense of surrounding, almost malignant otherness. Together with the evening light, they convey a sad tranquility out of which

“laughter” flashes with sharp, arresting contrast. The joy and vitality of laughter arrives muffled against such a stark and haunting background, just as the joy and promise of the tablecloths and pinafores arrive muffled in the sad cast of obsolescence. Sonically, “The starched tablecloths, / the pinafores” and “someone laughing in the dim spruce-filtered light” both progress from wide, open-mouthed, throaty sounds to narrow-mouthed sounds pronounced near the teeth in a verbal decrescendo suggestive of diminishment. The sequence fades into an “air resinous with love.” It closes, that is, with an overt reference to its own atmosphere. The air which surrounds, invisible and permeant, is charged with feeling. Love is a happy feeling, or at least generally associated with happiness. But the word “resinous” echoes the amber-coloured light filtered through the dark spruce trees from before, suggesting the sadness of love remembered. Just as resin suspends in a surrounding, preservative form, so this atmosphere of love, bubbling up from memory, suspends the ego in defunct attachments.

The next six lines are best left to speak for themselves. Their purpose is to anchor the otherwise diffuse imagery in a common hub of psychological content. Zwicky touches on the theme, but lightly, briefly—just long enough to brace the atmosphere with a bit of human mood. Any longer, and the atmosphere would have been dispelled. Any shorter, and the Zwicky would have weakened the correspondence between imagery and subjective feeling necessary for atmosphere to arise. It brings out the atmosphere to dwell a while on nostalgia and regret, sharpens the poem’s general associative cohesiveness. Nostalgia throws the interplay of joy and sadness, hope and doom, warmth and coldness, light and shadow, into clear relief. Zwicky presents a diffuse atmosphere in a set of dis-

connected images. Then she reveals that this is a nostalgia poem, and suddenly the atmosphere subtly alters, as the atmosphere of the same landscape changes between afternoon and evening: a new gestalt fumes from the same configuration of parts. We realize that the atmosphere of the willows and the aspens, the tablecloths and pinafores, the laughter and the spruce-filtered light, corresponds to the atmosphere of nostalgia.

“The red in the willows like forgotten laughter” (16) draws a simile between two utterly dissimilar things. Red willow leaves are tangible, laughter intangible. But this dissimilarity of substance foregrounds a resemblance among signatures. Red willow leaves *feel* like forgotten laughter. That is, red willow leaves and forgotten laughter both bring about similar moods. Laughter shares with the colour red associations with life, vitality, warmth, and positivity. But the red in the willows is a sign of the approaching autumn, the laughter is forgotten, and we associate autumn and the forgotten with decline, loss, diminishing force. Two dead and dying images glow with residual warmth. Then, in the very next line, a living hint of passion arrives overcast with chilling pallor: “the weightless snow-blue of that glance” (17). In the context of “air resinous with love,” this glance suggests erotic desire dampened across the distances of memory, another kind of decline, another kind of diminished force.

The closing couplet returns to the opening trope. The field gathers shadows as the heart once gathered hope, and now the heart itself is cast, “long,” like a shadow. The image of a “long heart” suggests the colloquialism of a “long face.” It also resuscitates a poetic sense from the word “longing.” To “long” for something means to pine for or sadly desire—both of which make hearts and faces long. In the evening, shadows lengthen; in

the evening of a life, the heart casts longer shadows—more hopeless griefs, more numerous regrets. Just as the shadow that a body casts mingles with the shadows of the trees in one long unbroken shade, so nostalgia mingles with the atmosphere in one continuous mood. Except in these last two lines, the ambivalence Zwicky has sustained so carefully thus far resolves into sadness, plain and simple. No happy associations intervene to lighten the mood. Zwicky intimates the sense of emptiness that prevails when nostalgia comes to a close and one returns to responsibilities of daily life.

Chapter 3. The Concept of Atmosphere in Emerson.

The previous chapter left the r Transcendentalists in a predicament.⁵³ They needed to theorize a link between the religious sentiment and aesthetic form. Otherwise, they could not explain how the religious sentiment manifests in art, or how art stimulates the religious sentiment. This link had to fulfill two conditions. First, it had to bridge the distinction between spirit and matter. Second, it had to arise from art and nature alike.

The present chapter investigates how the Transcendentalists went about resolving this predicament. They developed a new concept, similar to what today we call *atmosphere*: the aesthetic impression of an environment as a whole.⁵⁴ But for the Transcendentalists, the term *atmosphere* carries additional, theological significances. Atmosphere transpires upon the refraction of spirit through form. Just as the shapes and colours a prism casts upon a wall are neither wholly prism nor wholly light, so atmosphere is neither spirit nor form, but the spontaneous effect of their harmonious proportion. God moulds our earthly terrain, and the result is nature; nature, then, has atmosphere. Divine revelation expresses itself through the poet-prophet's soul, and the result is art; art, then, has atmosphere as well. When the religious sentiment finds adequate expression, atmosphere transpires, the divine stamp and seal of inspiration. And a clear, distinct, com-

⁵³ From here to the end of the dissertation, when I speak of "the Transcendentalists," I mean the radical Transcendentalists (Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller, Dwight, Parker, Very, Cranch).

⁵⁴ I use "environment" loosely to mean a surrounding fabric of objects, conditions and relationships. Not only places but social contexts and works of art are environments.

elling atmosphere constitutes the aesthetic stimulus of the religious sentiment *par excellence*.

I begin by touching briefly on two historical sources that oversaw the germination of atmosphere as a concept: the “animal magnetism” of Franz Anton Mesmer and Jacob Böhme’s “signature.” I then track the concept of atmosphere through Emerson’s essays, lectures, and poetry. I conclude by situating atmosphere in the larger context of Transcendentalist criticism. Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau both conceive of atmosphere as the preeminent stimulus of religious experience in art.

Animal magnetism as a precursor to atmosphere.

Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) and his followers posited an imperceptible fluid called *animal magnetism* that permeated all things. The will could wield its influence without touch or voice or gesture to make invalids well and stately businessmen dance like chickens.⁵⁵ With its help, a few uniquely receptive individuals could predict the future and read thoughts (Schmit, 411-4). Under the mesmerist’s trance, subjects attested to “heightened spiritual sensibilities” (“Ecstatica” 302). Mesmerism made its first appearance to a New England audience in a series of lectures the Parisian Charles Poyen delivered in Boston in January, 1836 (Schmit, 403). It caught on quickly: “According to one

⁵⁵ Mesmerist John King includes the following list of afflictions treatable by mesmerism: “Asthma, chronic affections of the Lungs, Liver, Kidneys, Convulsions, Cramps, Deafness, Diseased Eyes, Dropsy, Epilepsy, Fever and Ague, Female complaints, Headaches, Hypochondria, Jaundice, Palsy, Palpitation of the Heart, Rheumatism, St. Vitus’ Dance, and all other chronic diseases, accompanied with a nervous disability” (quoted in Schmit, 412-413).

estimate, by 1843 more than 200 'magnetic healers' were selling their services in the city of Boston alone" (Fuller R., 33).

Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clarke, both members of the most intimate Transcendentalist circles, were early and avid proponents of mesmerism.⁵⁶ Clarke hosted a small club of Boston elites interested in mesmerism, and even cultivated mesmeric capabilities of his own ("Promise of Mesmerism" 252-7). Fuller found relief in mesmerism from her numerous ailments ("Ecstatica" 307). On one occasion, she invited Emerson to an evening of "*Mesmeric experiments*" at Clarke's house. He declined, pleading domestic obligations, but his journals and essays display a consistent skepticism.

Emerson found that animal magnetism and its theoretical texts left him cold. They did not awaken spiritual exhilaration or orient him towards virtue: "Animal magnetism, omens, Sacred lots... certainly these facts are interesting," he admits, but "Read a page of Cudworth and Bacon & we are exhilarated and armed to manly duties. Read Demonology and Colquhoun's report, & you are only bewildered & perhaps a bit besmirched" (*JMN* 5.44-45). Here, Emerson tests animal magnetism against the religious sentiment and finds it wanting. His verdict hardens over the next four years: "Mesmerism is... a low curiosity or lust of structure, and is separated by celestial diameters from the love of spiritual truths. It is wholly a false view to couple these things in any manner with the religious nature and sentiment" (*CW* 10.25-26). "Lust of structure" strikes a note of particular damnation. In Emerson's eyes, mesmerism commits a sin equivalent to the formalism of

⁵⁶ Clarke was one of the original members of the Transcendental club and edited *The Western Messenger* from 1836-9, the Transcendentalists' "principle implement" in their debate against the Unitarians (Miller, 1950, 43).

the Catholics or the rationalism of the Unitarians. It pretends to domesticate religious experience under systematic method, reversing Emerson's metaphysical hierarchy: "In the divine order, intellect," by which Emerson means the will of God, "is primary; nature, secondary" (*CW* 1.198). Spirit precedes and determines matter. When matter turns around and arrests spirit, spirit evacuates, leaving matter cold and inert. The religious sentiment will not respond to a medium so rigid as medical practice. Emerson sensed a certain theoretical friction between mesmerism and Transcendentalism where Fuller and Clarke saw mostly affinities.

Animal magnetism is spiritual, but not only spiritual. It is material, but not only material. It mediates between matter and spirit, nature and the supernatural. French mesmerist J. F. P. Deleuze writes, "Man is composed of a body and a soul; and the influence he exerts participates the properties of both. It follows that there are three actions in Magnetism: first, physical; second, spiritual; third, mixed action" (30). Clarke and Fuller were well acquainted with Deleuze's *Practical Instruction in Animal Magnetism* (1834). Fuller spoke of animal magnetism as a means for the body to act as "pliant vestment and organ to the spirit" (quoted in "Ecstatica" 302). Clarke drew upon mesmerism to revise the matter-spirit dualism. He added a third term, the soul: "the soul is the individual personal being, our *I*—it is our essential nature. We are souls—we are not *spirit*, though we are united with spirit—we are not body, although we are united with body—but we *are* souls" (quoted in "Promise of Mesmerism" 254). Just as flour and heat are necessary to make bread, but neither constitutes the essence of bread as such, so spirit and body are both necessary ingredients for the self to arise, but do not constitute the essence of the

self as such. Just as flour and heat act upon one another to make bread, so spirit and matter act upon one another to make a soul. And just as bread is not reducible to flour and heat, so the soul is not reducible to spirit and body. Clarke finds his chief source of evidence for the soul-spirit distinction in the work of “the magnetic somnambulists of Germany,” chiefly “Kerner’s *Prophetess of Prevorst* and Wemer’s book on guardian spirits” (quoted in “*Promise of Mesmerism*” 254). Animal magnetism, for Clarke, traverses the entire metaphysical ladder. It infuses all matter and all spirit, and passes between the two realms via the channel of the soul. It is primarily in this capacity that animal magnetism prefigures atmosphere.

Mesmeric terms commonly circulated as tropes for the power a strong personality exerts over an audience. A charismatic speaker exudes an ineffable force of presence that saturates the entire room in a pervasive, trans-subjective sway. What is the source of this power? Not words: the same speech rehearsed from another organ will fall flat. Not gestures: the same gestures reproduced from a flimsier personality will seem contrived or meretricious. A mysterious, ineffable something holds the audience captive, almost as if a supersensory fluid permeated all matter and all spirit and responded to the human will. Thus, in the words of Allen Ackerman, the “melding of presence and language, the aura that surrounds both the speaker and the audience and that defies the reifying tendency of

the written word, was referred to... most commonly as 'electricity' or 'influence'" (*The Portable Theatre*, 51), both official entries in the mesmerist vocabulary.⁵⁷

Despite his reservations about mesmerism as a theory, Emerson had no qualms about adapting its terms into tropes. In his essay "Character," he speaks of "a reserved force, which acts directly by presence and without means," bringing about remarkable influences not by "talent" or "eloquence," but "by some magnetism," invisible, ineffable, yet irresistible (*CW* 2.90-1). For him, however, this "force," which Emerson calls "character," draws from spiritual wells. It "teaches over our head[s]," imparting itself through mysterious, indemonstrable means: "If he have found his centre, the Deity will shine through him" (*CW* 2.287). In order to cultivate character, the individual must practice rigorous self-reliance, shunning arbitrary custom and the frivolous temptations of society. If Archimedes and Newton "had been good fellows, fond of dancing, port and clubs, we should have had no Theory of the Sphere and no Principia. They had that necessity of isolation which genius feels. Each must stand on his glass tripod if he would keep his electricity" (*CW* 7.7). Character commands through an invisible force, neither entirely physical nor entirely spiritual, analogous to the ether or animal magnetism: "Everything in nature is bipolar, or has a positive and a negative pole... Spirit is the positive, the event is the negative. Will is the north, action the south pole. Character may be ranked as having its natural place in the north. It shares the magnetic currents of the system" (*CW* 2.98).

⁵⁷ See Blumenthal (2015): "An ever-present magnetic energy that could heal when harnessed seemed a natural extension of electricity. Subsequently, electricity became fodder for the mesmerists' speculations about the healing power of their treatments" (570). John Dods, one of mesmerism's more reputable popularizers in Boston, uses electricity as a term interchangeable with animal magnetism: "the active mind of the Mesmerizer is exerted... through the agency of the nervo-vital fluid or invisible electricity" (quoted in Blumenthal, 571).

Just as the compass points always towards the north, so the moral compass always points toward the universal spirit, the fountainhead of character. And character orients other minds towards it under the influence of a medium just as subtle and omnipresent and inevitable as the earth's gravitational field.

Emerson invests inspiration consistently with an experiential element throughout his essays. The audience can feel the divine impetus radiating from the inspired prophet's soul like heat from a rock. But poets as well as prophets are inspired. An ineffable halo of inspiration radiates from poetry as well. And Emerson uses mesmeric tropes to describe it:

Thought may be ejaculated as Logos, or Word. Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say 'It is in me, and shall out.' ... a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity... Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible... This is like the stock of air for our respiration or for the combustion of our fireplace; not a measure of gallons, but the entire atmosphere if wanted." (*CW* 3.41)

The poet conducts the divine impetus as a filament conducts electricity. Spirit enters the poem and charges it with a mystical energy. And from the poem spirit radiates into the physical world. At this point, Emerson switches tropes, from electricity to "atmosphere." The atmosphere surrounds and permeates everything; spirit surrounds and permeates everything. The atmosphere is invisible; spirit is invisible. We need to breathe air to survive, and the quality of air affects quality of health; we need spirit to survive, and poetry refreshes the spiritual atmosphere in which our lives revolve.

Just as the air is fresher in some places than in others, so certain places carry an especially strong spiritual charge. Boston's Faneuil Hall, for instance: "the *genius loci* is more commanding at Faneuil Hall than at any other spot in America. The air is electric. Every man thinks he can speak whilst he hears, — lifted off his feet oftentimes, — the multitude swaying alternately this side & that" (*JMN* 5.429). "*Genius loci*" is the Latin term for the spirit of a place—its social milieu, the moods and states of mind it brings about, its distinctive aesthetic *feel* or ambience. A wave of common feeling transfuses the place, blurring the boundaries between self and other: people hear, and resonate so deeply with the sound that they feel as if they spoke the words themselves. Whatever this feeling, whatever this *genius loci* is, it cannot be purely physical or purely spiritual. It must straddle the boundary between spirit and matter. And again, Emerson describes this phenomenon in mesmeric terms: "The air is electric." Some invisible energy or power or force which moves between bodies and objects is active here and holds entire crowds under its sway.

Emerson does not appropriate mesmerist terminology to describe atmosphere without a certain degree of distortion: Mesmer does not include the arts among the media available for conducting animal magnetism. Animal magnetism could not, on its own, supply the link between art and the religious sentiment that the Transcendentalists needed. It was, however, a precedent Emerson and certain of his fellow Transcendentalists, like Clarke and Fuller, drew upon to theorize an intermediary between spirit and matter. Inspiration, in poetry as in personality, is felt, and not only by the conduit. When the religious sentiment finds expression in material form, a subtle experiential quality transpires,

as steam transpires when cold water hits hot rock. And just as steam is neither water nor heat, but the product of their chemical reaction, so this experiential quality is neither spirit nor matter, but the product of their harmonious proportion. Among the tropes Emerson uses to describe it, magnetism and electricity figure prominently forth. So does atmosphere. Sometimes, as in the quotation from “The Poet” analyzed above (*CW* 3.41), magnetism and atmosphere even work together, on a single page, in a single paragraph.

Jakob Böhme’s theory of signatures as a precursor to atmosphere.

Jakob Böhme was a seventeenth-century German mystic. Emerson would have been familiar with the four-volume “Law edition” of Böhme’s works that George Ward and Thomas Langcake published between 1764 and 1781 (Hurth, 150). His close friend, Bronson Alcott, was “one of the most active adapters and readers of Böhme in New England” (153). His aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, “was well-read in Böhme and has been called an ‘American Jakob Böhme’ herself” (154). Emerson’s earliest mention of Böhme comes in a journal entry dated January 7, 1835, a year before the publication of “Nature”: “How precisely parallel are the biographies of religious enthusiasts. Swedenborg, Guyon, Fox, Luther, & perhaps Bohmen. Each owes all to the discovery that God must be sought within, not without” (*JMN* 5.6). Emerson draws on Böhme consistently until his final publication, the posthumous *A Natural History of the Intellect* (1882). Böhme gravitated steadily towards the centre of Emerson’s pantheon of respected influences, eventually displacing Swedenborg as Emerson’s mystic of choice: “Behmen is healthily and beautifully wise, notwithstanding the mystical narrowness and incommunicableness. Sweden-

borg is disagreeably wise, and with all his accumulated gifts, paralyzes and repels” (*CW* 4.143-4).

Emerson would have been familiar with *De Signatura Rerum* or *The Signature of All Things*. First published in 1621, *De Signatura Rerum* anticipates Emerson’s conception of the spirit-matter dualism. Spirit and matter are neither separate nor identical. They come together, they interact, and through their interaction a mysterious impression arises:

as a Lute that lies still, and is indeed a dumb Thing that is neither heard or understood, but if it be played upon, then its Form is understood, in what Form and Tune it stands, and according to what Note it is set. Thus likewise the Signature of Nature in its Form is a dumb Essence; it is as a prepared Instrument of Music, upon which the Will's Spirit plays; what Strings he touches, they sound according to their Property (I§4).

A physical form is like a musical instrument: a lump of matter, containing certain properties, dimensions, attributes. When a musician picks up a lute and plucks its strings, all of its properties—depth, size, shape, the grain of its wood, the fineness of its strings—divulge themselves in a single, unified sound. This sound is not reducible to the lute’s properties. It’s impossible to say, for instance, that the sound is half wood, a third depth, and a quarter size. And yet if the quality of wood were exchanged for another, if the depth were expanded or contracted, or if the size were enlarged or shrunken, the sound would change correspondingly. Neither the musician nor the lute has the power to bring about this sound on their own, but only in their harmonious interplay. In the same way, when spirit shines into a material form, all of its properties divulge themselves in a single, uni-

fied impression, just as the varying notes and instruments of a melody come together in a single, unified feeling or mood. This impression is not reducible to the form's properties. And yet, if the properties were to change, so would the impression. Neither matter nor spirit brings out this impression on its own. It arises only in their harmonious interaction.

Böhme calls this impression the "signature" of a thing. A written signature is taken to be representative of a particular human identity. No two signatures are exactly alike. And a signature *authenticates*. It demonstrates that so-and-so approves of or agrees to what she has signed. It is the authoritative symbol of a unique, individual identity. Things, animals, people, have *affective* signatures as well: all characteristics coalesce in a distinctive impression. No two signatures are exactly alike: no two objects elicit a precisely identical impression. And thus the signature says something about the particular character of a thing. In the signature, we apprehend the most intimate knowledge an object can divulge about itself: "the greatest Understanding lies in the Signature... for by the external Form of all Creatures, by their Instigation, Inclination and Desire, also by their Sound, Voice and Speech which they utter, the hidden Spirit is known" (I§14). A scientist may study a frog, dissect a frog, analyze a frog to bits, and tally up its causes, its inclinations and desires, the sounds it makes, the way it looks. But only in the signature can she apprehend all this information in a unified gestalt.

In "The Poet," Emerson transcribes Böhme's theory of the signature into his Transcendentalist paradigms:

As, in the sun, objects paint their images on the retina of the eye, so they, sharing the aspiration of the whole universe, tend to paint a far more delicate

copy of their essence in his mind. Like the metamorphosis of things into higher organic forms is their change into melodies. Over everything stands its dæmon or soul, and, as the form of the thing is reflected by the eye, so the soul of the thing is reflected by a melody (*CW* 3.26).

Just as the sun shines down from the sky and illuminates everything visible to the eye, so the universal spirit shines down from heaven and illuminates everything apprehensible to the soul. Just as every object impresses its image on the retina, so every object impresses its essence on the soul, in the form of a *feeling*. Emerson, like Böhme, describes this feeling in musical terms. The various notes and sounds of a melody collect into a unified mood, so that even through all its key changes and accelerations and decelerations it seems just to describe Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" as a *sad* song. In the same way, all of an object's various properties come together in a unified impression. And, for Emerson as for Böhme, this impression captures the *essence* of a thing. Just as no two melodies elicit precisely the same mood, so no two objects project precisely the same impression into the soul. Thus, in its musical dæmon the human mind apprehends the distinctive character of a thing, the *gestalt* of its properties.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Gernot Böhme cites the earlier Böhme's theory of signatures as an early precursor to his own concept of atmosphere: "In [Jakob Böhme's] terms, the body is something like the sounding board of a musical instrument, while its outward properties, which Böhme calls 'signatures,' are moods which articulate its expressive forms. And, finally, what is characteristic of things is their tone, their 'odor' or emanation – that is to say, the way in which they express their essence. Tone and emanation – in my terminology, *ekstases* – determine the atmosphere radiated by things. They are therefore the way in which things are felt present in space. This gives us a further definition of atmosphere: it is the felt presence of something or someone in space" (*Atmospheres* 32). When we apprehend an object, we experience its affective signature. When multiple objects occupy a single space, their signatures intermingle. Just as the odour of a spice cupboard is not quite reducible to the odours of cumin, oregano, and basil, so the atmosphere of a place is not quite reducible to the signatures of the objects that occupy it. (Gernot) Böhme and Emerson draw their theories of atmosphere from a single source. I point this out merely to stress a line of continuity that stretches from Jakob Böhme through the Romantics to present-day investigations into atmosphere.

Atmosphere in Emerson's essays and lectures.

Emerson does not develop the concept of atmosphere systematically. Indeed, he avoids system as far as he possibly can. Julie Ellison (*Style* 87) and Branka Arsić (*On Leaving* 327) both see a rejection of linear, systematic argumentation as a defining characteristic of Emerson's style after *Nature*. For Arsić, this reflects Emerson's commitment to a "Socratic or feminine-like reason" that explores each issue from divergent perspectives instead of developing one perspective to the exclusion of all others (327). I agree—I would only contextualize this "Socratic" reason within the theology of the religious sentiment. As soon as an institution, a philosophy, a worldview, settles in a fixed form, the religious sentiment deserts it. Thus Emerson turns to the essays of Montaigne as a model for thought that never settles, that always resists the stability of a paradigm. He keeps his terminology loose and flexible. Impersonal divinity changes names at every mention, jumping from "Over-soul" (*Works* 2.268) to the "Universal Spirit" (*Works* 1.44) to the "universal mind" (*Works* 2.3) to "Jove" (*Works* 2.278). Atmosphere achieves equivalent indeterminacy. Emerson never pins it down under the solidity of a fixed term. Instead, atmosphere cycles through a proliferating series of tropes. In what follows, I carry out close readings of several passages in which the concept of atmosphere emerges. I will begin with Emerson's prose works and then move on to his poetry. One of these tropes, "mist, clouds, fog," has already received some attention in Branka Arsić's "Brain Walks" (71) and Kate Stanley's *The Practice of Surprise* (120-21), and so while I will touch on vapour here and there, I will mainly focus on other tropes: stars, property, air,

spice, warmth, illumination, dance, melody, aura, and architecture. My aim is, first, to show that atmosphere is an important though neglected concept in Emerson's oeuvre and, second, to establish that, for Emerson, atmosphere is neither spiritual nor material, but an intermediate term between spirit and matter.

Emerson speaks of atmosphere as early as the opening section of *Nature*: "If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will separate between him and what he touches" (*CW* 1.8). These stars have something spiritual about them. They are "heavenly." They shine down from the sky just as spiritual light shines down from God. But they also have a certain amount of matter weighing them down. "Though always present," the stars "are inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression." Like any other natural object, the stars are available to the senses. But, like spirit, the senses can't quite reach them. Their light allows the senses to perceive things. But it also "separates" the self from what it perceives. Emerson invites his readers to imagine the starlight to be tangible, a veil or curtain draped across all forms. In revealing, the stars conceal. In granting knowledge, they alert to mystery. Grasping a natural object through the senses, we become aware of something that the senses cannot grasp. The more clearly we see, the more closely we hold, the more keenly aware we are of something that cannot be seen or held.

What is this something? What do the senses imply that they themselves cannot grasp? I would say that here Emerson gestures to the elusiveness of the signature, the musical dæmon, the essence of a thing—the impression through which an isolated form tinctures the atmosphere. The signature arises when we perceive, but evades perception. It is

not something that we see or hear or touch or smell or taste, but something that we *feel*, like a “better emotion” (*CW* 1.12) coming over us from a higher mind. This feeling defies articulation and analysis. Thus, while each object is present to the senses, its signature, its essence, is inaccessible to our more grasping faculties. The figure of the star, present in the sky to all places and all ages yet divided across incomprehensible distances, captures this same quality of immediacy and remoteness.

“When we speak of nature in this manner,” Emerson continues, “we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects” (*CW* 1.9). Trees, rocks, grass, sunlight, the quality of air, all come together in a single, unified feeling. Each tree, each rock, each blade of grass, tinctures the environment with its signature, and these signatures combine into an integrated impression: “There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet” (9). This property is atmosphere. Just as the horizon is always around us, so atmosphere is omnipresent. Pursue the horizon, and it retreats; describe an atmosphere in plain, systematic language, and it slips away.

“Property” has two meanings: characteristic and territory. Things have properties: elements, characteristics, attributes. And property is a set of things a person has: money, furniture, land—but especially land. Emerson brings both meanings into play at once. On the one hand, the horizon is a feature of the terrain, which suggests “property” in the sense of land to be owned. On the other hand, this property is *in* the horizon, one of the horizon’s defining attributes. Atmosphere integrates the properties *within* things into the collective property of the landscape. Signatures, the most essential property of a natural

object, tincture the atmosphere of the place as a whole. The word “property” suggests ownership. But this property exists in the horizon. How, then, can it be owned? Emerson suggests that each and every one of us is entitled to this migrating realm, but only insofar as we are heirs to God, this divine spark within. As soon as one portions off a segment of the earth with a picket fence and calls it her own, she abdicates her spiritual patrimony.

As “most men do,” Emerson laments: most of us “creep into a corner, and abdicate,” though “we are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate.” (*CW* 1.21). Here is that word “property” again. And again, property can mean both attribute and territory: the universe is a property that *belongs to* every individual, and the universe is a property that *constitutes* every individual. It’s easy to understand how the universe might be conceived as territory. But how can the universe be conceived as an attribute? God is the universe. The universe is God. Insofar as God shines through the individual soul, the universe defines her inmost nature, and she stakes a claim upon the universe. Again, atmosphere is the conduit between the property within (the spirit welling up) and the property without (the natural beauty of the material landscape): “Ever does natural beauty steal in like air, and envelope great actions... An act of truth or heroism seems at once to draw to itself the sky as its temple, the sun as its candle” (17). We tend to speak of beauty as an attribute that resides *in* things. But here, beauty “steals in like air,” as if this beauty blew in from somewhere else, as if beauty were detachable from objects. And isn’t atmosphere just that—detachable beauty? Beauty moored to no one object, but free-floating, a quality of the environment as a whole, like smoke from an unseen source? The

religious sentiment inspires the hero to do good. Spirit refracts through his personality like light through a prism. His own essence, his own signature, permeates the place. His presence predominates in the atmosphere of his surroundings. It is through atmosphere, then, that he claims the universe as his property. And it is his inmost property, his signature, that lays claim upon the universe.

Atmosphere constitutes an essential ingredient of religious experience—though, as Emerson suggests in “The Divinity School Address,” one that is sadly absent from dominant New England dispensations. The “religious sentiment” constitutes “our highest happiness. Wonderful is its power to charm and to command. It is a mountain air. It is the embalmer of the world. It is myrrh and storax, and chlorine and rosemary. It makes the sky and the hills sublime, and the silent song of the stars is in it” (126). We have already seen that both “song” and “stars” are tropes that Emerson uses for the signature of a thing. Here, stars and song blend together with a series of effervescent, half-intangible, pervasive qualities. Myrrh, storax, chlorine, rosemary—these are aromatic substances. And aroma is analogous to atmosphere. Just as aromas scent the air, so signatures radiate into the environment. Just as aromas tell us something about the nature from which they issue, so signatures tell us something about the essence from which they exude. Just as many different aromas blend into a single aroma, indivisible into parts or quantities, so signatures blend into a single indivisible atmosphere. And just as aromas are subtle, intangible, invisible, and pervasive, so atmosphere subtly, intangibly, invisibly pervades.

“Embalmer” carries some dreary connotations that stand at odds with the light airiness of the quotation. But “to embalm” also has a poetic sense, “to endue with balmy

fragrance” (OED). Perhaps it is in this sense that Emerson speaks of the religious sentiment as the “embalmer of the world.” Spirit refracts through matter and scents the universe with atmospheric impressions latent in nature. Yet I would not eliminate the mortician’s lab as a relevant context.⁵⁹ Emerson is critiquing the Unitarian Church here, and the Unitarian Church is “corpse-cold” (quoted in Miller, *Transcendentalists* 8), after all. A religion that follows hard and fast procedures over the religious sentiment dooms itself to *decay*, a word which occurs three times in the “Address.” Emerson deplores the “universal decay and now almost death of faith in society” (136) and the “decaying church and...wasting unbelief” (144), which entails the “decay” of “all things” (144). Just as spice preserves the corpse, so atmosphere is the spice that, in manifesting and stimulating the religious sentiment, can preserve religion. Religion must be “one with the blowing clover and the falling rain” (130): the religious sentiment must express itself in the beauties of nature and poetry. Spirit must enter into congress with matter. And when they do, atmosphere emits, their spontaneous product.

The body-as-corpse metaphor returns in Emerson’s “Literary Ethics,” and here again atmosphere supplies the preservative element:

when I see the day break...I feel perhaps the pain of an alien world; a world not yet subdued by the thought; or I am cheered by the moist, warm, glittering, budding, melodious hour, that takes down the narrow walls of my soul, and extends its life and pulsation to the very horizon. *That* is morning, to

⁵⁹ During Emerson’s time, chemical embalming would still have been relatively new. Formaldehyde was discovered by A. Butlerow in 1859. See “Ueber Einige Derivate de Jodmethylens” [“On some derivatives of methylene iodide”]. *Annalen der Chemie und Pharmacie*. vol. 111, 1859, pp. 242–252.

cease for a bright hour to be a prisoner of this sickly body, and to become as large as nature. (*CW* 1.168)

The religious sentiment is not always alert; spirit does not shine through the individual soul at all times. Dull, uninspired moments inevitably haunt us. The world seems “alien,” the soul a “prisoner” of a “sickly body.” Damnation, for Emerson, takes the form of estrangement—from spiritual influx and from the surrounding physical world. As Emerson writes in a later lecture, “A link was wanting between two craving parts of nature, and [the human] was hurled into being as the bridge over that yawning need, the mediator betwixt two else unmarriageable facts” (1.208). Spirit and matter crave one another. Only in a certain illuminated state of mind do they consummate their union. But when they do, the hour is “moist, warm, glittering, budding, melodious.” We have already seen Emerson use melody and fragrance as tropes for atmosphere. Here he adds three more: moisture, warmth, and illumination—all, like atmosphere, half-tangible and efflorescent and, like atmosphere, pervasive throughout an environment. They blur the line between tangible and intangible, substantial and insubstantial, just as atmosphere blurs the line between the spiritual and the material. They all extend properties of objects into the surrounding environment—water moisture, fire warmth, light illumination—just as signatures extend the essence of a thing into the surrounding atmosphere. Self, spirit, and nature intermingle in a single harmonious feeling. The alienness of the external world softens its edge. Atmosphere binds the self to its inanimate others in a dense web of intimacies.

The “divine pilgrim,” any mind under the excitation of the religious sentiment, “inhales the year as a vapor: its fragrant midsummer breath, its sparkling January heaven”

(*CW* 1.159). Emerson compares a “year” to “vapor,” a rather difficult metaphor to compute. A “year” is a unit of time, a sequence of hours, days, weeks, months organized into a chronological block. But there is nothing sequential or chronological about vapour. Vapour diffuses homologously through space. It cannot be segmented into chunks or arranged in sequential order. The extreme cognitive dissonance isolates atmosphere as the one element common to tenor and vehicle. A day, a month, a year, an era, a century, conveys a certain atmospheric character. Böhme speaks of the “atmosphere of the 1920s” (25); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht argues that Shakespeare’s sonnets have “concentrated” and “absorbed” the “loud, dirty, tender, dangerous” atmosphere of “Shakespeare’s London around 1600” (39). Both indicate a pervasive atmospheric quality which organizes a given time period into a unified, distinctive impression. An atmosphere floats through a certain time, subtle, invisible, and permeant as vapour. Chronological boundaries blur together in a collective mood. A single atmosphere unifies the “breath” of summer and the “sparkling” sky of winter. Under the influence of the religious sentiment, the mind becomes more sensitively attuned to atmosphere. Emerson suggests that this alters its experience of time. Time passes not in a sharp dripping of seconds, but in one vast, revolving moment.

Spirit comes from the “eternal spring” of God and refracts through “fair objects” (*CW* 1.201). “Like an odor of incense, like a strain of music, like a sleep,” atmosphere transpires, “inexact and boundless.” And atmosphere alters our experience of time: “How silent, how spacious, what room for all, yet without place to insert an atom; —in graceful succession, in equal fulness, in balanced beauty, the dance of the hours goes

forward still” (201). The reader does not know, at the beginning of the sentence, what Emerson is describing, what exactly is so “spacious,” full of “room for all.” With the word “dance,” Emerson prompts the image of a spacious ballroom. Only then does the reader learn that Emerson is describing time, that this is the “dance of the hours.” How can time be spacious? How can time be roomy? Here again, the metaphor is difficult to compute. In Euro-American cultures, we are trained to think of time in linear sequence. Calendars, charts, history textbooks represent time as a steady march forward. But ball-room dancing does not move in a straight line from one point to another. In pairs, the dancers circulate chaotically through the room, like molecules of vapour through the air. This image is spacial as well as temporal. The dance evolves, but within a bounded form, as a cloud shapes and reshapes within its foggy contours. A time has atmosphere. Place has atmosphere. These atmospheres combine and harmonize, so that it’s impossible to say where the atmosphere of a time ends and the atmosphere of the place begins.

This same interplay between time and space, motion and stasis drives one of Emerson’s defining tropes for atmosphere: architecture. Germaine de Stael once described architecture as “frozen music,” and her metaphor seems to have made an impression on Emerson. He copied it into his journal on August 19 1832 (*JMN* 4.41) and again in his quotation book, the *Encyclopedia* (*JMN* 6.227). He cites it in “Nature” (*CW* 1.44) and again in “Quotation and Originality” (*CW* 8.186). Its power resides in a paradox. Movement is essential to music. “Frozen,” music would cease to be. Architecture is still and musical at the same time. Though it does not move, though it does not change, architecture is replete with atmosphere, the music of a place. And atmosphere gives architec-

ture a sense of movement, like music. As the body roams through the rooms, as the eyes roam across the walls, the atmosphere unfolds. The building itself remains solid and impassive, but its atmospheric character evolves like a strain of melody.

Frozen music is everywhere, for Emerson. The “spirit of” every “plant” and “animal has an architecture of its own” (*CW* 3.11). Architecture is solid, heavy, complex—a series of interlocking parts. Spirit is intangible, weightless, simple—a unified, homogeneous force. How can a spirit, then, have architecture? What likeness can reside between such dissimilar things? Light refracts through a prism and scatters an architecture of shapes and colours on the wall. Spirit refracts through a plant or animal and casts its signature, its frozen music, into the soul. We apprehend the creature’s architecture—its various parts, how they web and interlock and freeze—in a single unified impression.

Poetry brings out the signature, the architecture, of natural objects: “We do not enclose watches in wooden, but in crystal cases, and rhyme is the transparent frame that allows almost the pure architecture of thought to become visible to the mental eye” (*CW* 8.52). Philosophers defend their straightforward, literal, unembellished prose because it ostensibly translates thought with greater transparency. Emerson disagrees. Poetry is *more* transparent than cold didactic prose, because it makes the architecture and not just the ἀρχή (arche)⁶⁰ of thought visible. A watch in a crystal case multiplies into many watches—some clear, others blurry; some magnified, others contracted—each crystal facet emphasizing a different aspect of the watch arranged in an architecture of contrasts and symmetries. An idea in a poem multiplies into many ideas—some clear, others blur-

⁶⁰ The ancient Greek ἀρχή has various meanings, including “beginning, origin, source, from the beginning, principle, power, sovereignty, empire” (Liddell, Scott).

ry; some magnified, others contracted—each trope, conceit, analogy, correspondence, shedding an unexpected slant upon its content, alerting us to the multiplicity and arbitrariness of perspective. We witness, in a poem, a single object revolve through a panoply of emphases. We behold it from many different angles, under many different slants of light. We realize that each emphasis, each angle, each slant of light constitutes only one part of a larger whole than we can perceive in a single glance. To experience, say, a tree from a single standpoint is like experiencing a large building from within a single one of its rooms. Gradually, as we move from room to room, we approach a complete grasp of the building's comprehensive design. Gradually, as we diversify our standpoints, we approach a complete grasp of the tree's comprehensive architecture. And poetry helps us do that. It enriches the signatures of things.

Emerson conceives of poetry as the recording and production of atmosphere: "The condition of true naming, on the poet's part, is his resigning himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms, and accompanying that" (*CW* 3.27). The aura, the atmosphere that radiates upon the refraction of spirit through matter, constitutes the poet's highest subject and effect. An analysis of atmosphere in Emerson's oeuvre would, then, not be complete without some readings of his poetry. I would say that Emerson falls short of his ideal. The following poems all take atmosphere as their subject matter, but they are not especially atmospheric. Emerson never developed any new literary devices for writing atmospherically. That would not come until later, with Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

*“The Sphinx”*⁶¹

Emerson’s contemporaries could not vindicate his esteem for “The Sphinx.” One reviewer complained that it “may be read backwards quite as intelligibly as forwards, and no mortal can trace the slightest connection between the verses” (quoted in Storm, 44). Emerson’s son Edward opened the Centenary edition of *Poems* (1903) with the more accessible “Good-Bye,” worried “The Sphinx” would snuff out the casual reader’s initial spark of curiosity (Morris, 550). Even Thoreau conceded bafflement: “You may find this as enigmatical as the Sphinx’s riddle. Indeed, I doubt if she could solve it herself” (JHDT, pp. 237).⁶²

Traditionally, the Sphinx represents the threshold between the known and the unknown, our habitual frameworks and the unrendered reality beyond them. People try to make sense of life. Life resists our sense-making. The Sphinx arbitrates the negotiation. The Sphinx typically figures as a mystery that teases resolution. In this poem, however, it’s the Sphinx who wants to make sense of herself, with the help of the poet:

The Sphinx is drowsy,
 Her wings are furled;
 Her ear is heavy,
 She broods on the world.
 “Who’ll tell me my secret,

⁶¹ All three of the poems I read here, “The Sphinx,” “Forerunners,” and “The Snow-Storm,” are included in the appendix.

⁶² C.E. Pulos investigates the influence of “The Sphinx” on Thoreau’s *Walden* in “*Walden* and Emerson’s ‘The Sphinx’” (1969)

The ages of have kept?—

I awaited the seer,

While they slumbered and slept;— (1-8).

The Sphinx *wants* to have her secret interpreted. She shares the “aspiration of the whole universe” to “paint a... delicate copy” of her “essence” upon the human mind. But not without ambivalence. In the same moment that she rises up and declares the poet “master” (132), she also bites her “thick lip” and derides the poet for presuming to name her (109-110). Nature resists the analytic methods of word and reason. Just as the Sphinx conceals her secret knowledge of the beyond, so nature conceals secret knowledge about spirit in the mystical correspondences of nature: “Erect as a sunbeam, / Upspringeth the palm” (17-18). Emerson draws a correspondence between the spiritual sunlight beaming down from the sky and the material palm rising from the ground. This image is somewhat difficult to visualize. I find that my brain *wants* to picture the sunbeam slanted, but it has to resist this impulse, placing the sun directly *above* the palm tree, pointing downwards. This is a spiritual light, the light of God, and in European visual arts the light of God is almost always represented as descending from directly overhead.⁶³ Spirit, light, is soft, intangible. And from this intangible softness, the palm tree sprouts. Could Emerson have chosen a heavier, thicker, rougher plant to contrast with his mild, reified sunlight? A palm

⁶³ See, for example, Jan van Eyck’s *The Ghent Altarpiece* (1432), Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *The Baptism of Christ* (1427), Stefan Lochner’s *The Virgin in the rosebower*, (1440), Hugo van der Goes’ *The Death of the Virgin* (1480), Hieronymus Bosch’s *Paradise and Hell* (1510), Grünewald’s *The Resurrection* (1515), Correggio’s *The Assumption of the Virgin* (1530), Tintoretto’s *St. George and the Dragon* (1555-8), Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *The ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1645-52), and Giovanni Battista Gaulli’s *The worship of the Holy Name of Jesus* (1670-83). When God’s light is represented as slanting, it’s usually because the painting represents an interior, as in Gherardo di Giovanni’s *The Annunciation and scenes from Dante’s Divine Comedy*. All of these paintings can be found in E. H. Gombrich’s *The Story of Art* (1950).

is utter mass. Prickly, hard, coarse, spiky, how could a palm grow from such a smooth, uniform substance as light? Emerson throws the spirit-matter dualism into stark relief. The palm's grey, wrinkly trunk anticipates the greyer, wrinklier trunk of the "elephant brows[ing]" through the next line—a subtler correspondence, but no more accidental. "Undaunted and calm," the elephant is only a slightly more animated palm. The resemblance intimates a common origin. Some intangible force flows through all things and animates them under a common will.

This universal, electric force is perceptible in the form of atmosphere: a "thrush... sings" the "silence" of "his covert." (23-24). We should recognize this silent song. We have heard it before, in the "silent song of the stars" and in the silent song of the "musical dæmon" from "The Poet," which hovers, thrush-like, "over" each object, animal, plant, and person. The thrush captures the atmosphere of its environment in its melody. It is the musical dæmon of its grove, but also of the poem itself:

By one music enchanted,
 One deity stirred,—
 Each the other adorning,
 Accompany still;
 Night veileth the morning,
 The vapor the hill.

The night adorns the morning, the vapour adorns the hill, by veiling it. First of all, it's somewhat difficult to imagine night *veiling* morning. It would be much easier to imagine the night *ousting* or *usurping* the morning. Morning is a specific time of day. It is night

insofar as it is not morning, morning insofar as it is not night. But Emerson speaks as if morning were perpetually present behind the backdrop of night, barely concealed. Just as the Over-soul is always with us, only shaded, concealed, in matter, so the morning is always happening somewhere, shaded in the dark of night. Emerson suggests that this shading, this concealment, enhances the beauty of God. Daylight is unified and tyrannical. The lights of night are softer and multifarious. Pure spirit is one, absolute, and stable. Spirit concealed in matter is fluctuant and variegated. As stars are smaller but more populous suns, all souls are smaller but more populous Over-souls. Just as the stars emit and intermingle their lights, so the atmospheres of things extend into the world around them and intermingle. Vapour veils a hill, and suddenly the green ridges lose their definition and blur into the sky and the surrounding hills. Vapour is light and diffuse, like atmosphere. Just as vapour shades the hill's topsoil into its surroundings, so atmosphere shades the object into the atmosphere of the other objects and of the place in general.

Nature and the sphinx both intimate spiritual wisdom, but this wisdom defies expression and calculation. The point is not to extract spiritual knowledge from nature like a nut from its shell. Rather, nature enhances spiritual knowledge, refracts it into harmonic multiplicity. Just as the Sphinx "devoured those unable to explain her enigmas," so we "are devoured by doubt and struggle towards the light, as if to be assured of our lives" (*Writings*, 7.229). The wisdom of the poet resides not in that he knows the answer to the Sphinx's question, but that he knows better than to answer it: "Man's spirit must dive; / To the aye-rolling orbit / No goal will arrive" (82-84). "Aye-rolling" puns on "eye-rolling," suggesting both the disorientation and the self-satisfied skepticism of the ratio-

nalist, with his single-minded quest for the *archē*. “Pride ruined the angels, / Their shame them restores” (89-90), and the poet repents from instrumental reason. Instead of dominating nature, he submits to it, and this, paradoxically, is what grants him mastery. The Sphinx endorses the Poet’s negative capability: “Couldst see they proper eye, / Alway it asketh, asketh; / And each answer is a lie” (114-116).

Oedipus answered the Sphinx’s riddle, and she consumed herself. Emerson’s poet denies the imperative to answer, and the Sphinx diffuses into a higher form. The mystery of Oedipus’s Sphinx succumbs to reason. The mystery of Emerson’s only shrouds itself in a murkier haze:

Uprose the merry Sphinx,
 And crouched no more in stone;
 She melted into purple cloud,
 She silvered in the moon;
 She spired into a yellow flame;
 She flowered in blossoms red;
 She flowed into a foaming wave;
 She stood Monadnoc’s head.

The poet never actually solves the mysteries of nature, but respectfully attends to their aesthetic effluence. The Sphinx, nature, fumes into atmosphere, shedding her hefty material husk for cloud, flame, wave—fine, fluid forms, hovering as if on the border where matter shades into spirit. The cloud, so often associated with silver and linings and the sky, transitions smoothly to the moon which, with its shining and brightness, transitions

smoothly to the yellow flame which, with its tongues budding from a stem of wick, resembles a red blossom. The wave with its white crest glides effortlessly into the mountain with its head white either with snow or clouds. I personally recover the “purple cloud” from before and picture another hill veiled in vapour, this time purpled with Monadnoc’s stone. Emerson speaks the language of correspondences, of resemblances woven through nature that demonstrate a common spiritual origin to all things.

Sandra Morris classifies “The Sphinx” as a “threshold poem.” A common feature of nineteenth-century poetry collections, threshold poems “function as overtures to the material that follows,” and “ask for distinctive and heightened attention by virtue of their liminal position” (457). Threshold poems conventionally reflect on the writing process itself, the challenge of saying the unsayable. If, as Waggoner suggests, “The Sphinx” offers a “clue to both intention and method” (120), then perhaps we should approach each poem with the caution and respect a sphinx deserves. And perhaps we can only hope to master the poem when, like the poet, we renounce mastery, when we decline to crack the poem like a code and instead present ourselves, susceptible and receptive, to the mercy of its provocations. Then, hopefully, the poem’s meaning will resolve, not a methodically exportable message, but a diffuse and subtle atmosphere, more inscrutable than the sphinx.

“Forerunners.”

Atmosphere is elusive. Like the stars, it is always present, yet always beyond our grasp. This paradox, of distant nearness, near distance, is a pervasive theme in Emerson's essays:

There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction....The present object shall give you this sense of stillness that follows a pageant which has just gone by. What splendid distance, what recesses of ineffable pomp and loveliness in the sunset!... Is it, that beauty can never be grasped? in persons and in landscape is equally inaccessible? (*CW* 3.193).

A pageant comes, passes by, and disappears, leaving behind only an ambient resonance. Everything looks the same, but the mood, the feeling of the place, is different. A pageant comes from *out there*, interrupts every-day life with extravagant, otherworldly spectacle, and leaves the setting charged with an air of latent revelry. So the religious sentiment makes contact with something *out there*, interrupting the complacent drone of every-day life with otherworldly exaltation, and leaves the setting charged with atmosphere. A pageant draws a strict boundary between the quotidian and the realm of spectacle. If the audience, if daily life, were to interfere, it would cease to function as a pageant. So the eruption of spirit cannot be rerouted through the bureaucracy of our mundane habits and enterprises, or conscripted into any system, without ceasing to be spirit.

The forerunners are pageant-like in their just-expired spectacle. The speaker catches only the "scent" of the flowers they cast (11), hears only a "trace" of their "silver instrument[s]" (12-13). He invests them with the blithe nomadism of circus performers,

calling them “revellers” (19) and a “jubilant troop” (29). They are meant to capture the fleeting wonder of those spiritual flashes that begin to evacuate a new form, idea, institution, immediately upon incarnation. Just as atmosphere crests on the convergence of spirit and matter, so the forerunners leave behind signs neither identical to themselves nor the natural forms they imbue. The “tone of silver instrument / leaves on the wind melodious trace” (12-13), and “their smokes” are “mixed with mist from distant lochs” (15-16). It’s hard to say where the natural sound of the wind and the “mist from distant lochs” end, or where the “tone of silver instrument” and the “smokes” begin, an enhancement so subtle as to be almost undetectable. Emerson’s imagery fuses opposites. Smoke issues from fire, hot symbol of spirit, and blends with mist, cold and insufficient to move itself as matter. Just as smoke and mist are neither fire nor water, so atmosphere is neither spirit nor matter, but the chemical effect of their commingling: “Their near camp my spirit knows / By signs gracious as rainbows” (33-34). The rainbow, Jehovah’s covenant with the sons of Abraham, becomes in Emerson a symbol of atmosphere—if not a covenant, at least a sign, an emblem, of the universal soul’s convergence with human consciousness. A rainbow patterns the entire colour spectrum: atmosphere organizes thoughts, feelings, correspondences, into an aesthetic whole. A rainbow is identical with neither vapour particles nor the colourless light that refracts through them, but hovers an intangible intermediary: an atmosphere is not identical with its object nor with the spirit that refracts through it, but hovers somewhat ghostlike—not quite material, not quite immaterial. It’s impossible to grasp a rainbow with the hands: it’s impossible to capture atmosphere directly in language.

3.4 “*The Snow-Storm.*”

Perhaps Emerson’s most sophisticated meditation on atmosphere in poetry, “The Snow-Storm” enacts upon the landscape a process analogous to the excitation of the religious sentiment. The north wind issues from an “unseen quarry” (11) and animates the air, just as the universal spirit issues from occult origins and animates cold matter. The storm moves through the landscape and then abides; a spiritual surge moves through the soul and then restores it to its habitual frame of reference—but not without a change. The storm leaves the landscape cool, calm, and glittering with a uniform whiteness; the transcendental experience leaves the mind at peace, and confides the unity of all things. The storm quarantines each house in a cell of “tumultuous privacy,” a striking oxymoron. “Turbulent” would have been more precise and metrically consistent than “tumultuous,” which spills over the edge of Emerson’s blank verse into an awkward eleventh syllable. But “tumult” is directly associated with the mob, the crowd, the clamour and chaos of social life: the Transcendental experience brings about a state of detachment in which the outside world passes by indifferently as a winter storm from the safety of a warm house. There is something calming about a cold night storm, something that enhances the cosiness and comfort of hearth and home. The more furious the storm, the deeper the serenity: the more clamorous the multitude, the more ensconced the flaneurship. A fierce storm demonstrates the safety of the dwelling: the city streets and wild natural environment prove the unassailability of the soul. The night darkens, the fireplace brightens. “Radiant” seems an odd descriptor for a fireplace. Lexically, “radiant” does make sense. But we as-

sociate radiance with awe, power, majesty, exultation—all of which clash with the fireplace’s humble, domestic lambency. This associative dissonance draws attention the effect a snowstorm has on a fireplace. When a snow-storm insulates the windows against the night’s residual luminescence, the fire goes slightly feral. It casts longer, darker shadows, and the entire room flickers with a wild texture. It no longer seems so humble or domestic. It merits the emphasis of radiance with all its spiritual connotations. So a Transcendental experience rouses the divine spark into a revelatory blaze.

As the north wind blows the snow into the world, so spirit blows atmosphere into being. Snow is formless and erratic until it elaborates upon more solid shapes: spirit is formless until it collides with matter and enweathes it. Snow “white[s]” the air. It gives the air volume and visuality. We can see where the air goes and what shapes it takes only because the snow fills it and reveals its movements. So spirit acquires in atmosphere a perceptual dimension. As snow blurs distinct shapes into one another and softens their edges, so atmosphere alleviates the resolute determinacy of things.

“A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn” (19): snow fills a thorn bush, soft and feathery, like a swan. And yet the word “invests” suggests something more than that. We invest things like wealth, energy, attention, time—transferable properties. And for the transfer to work, the subject must have it and the object must be capable of receiving it. If a stock broker invests wealth in a business, it means that she and the business both have money and some of it goes from her into the business. If a scholar invests time in the completion of a degree, it suggests that time is a transferable property between the scholar and the degree. A thorn-bush does not have swan. A swan cannot become a part of

thorn. The *signature* of a swan, however, *is* transferable. It radiates into the atmosphere and mingles with the signatures of other things. Here, the signature of the swan and the signature of the thorns blend into the common atmosphere of the place, as represented by the snow.

The storm's work is "fanciful" and "savage," yet the final product upstages human art (16). Emerson's work in "The Snow-Storm" too is somewhat fanciful and savage. Systematic structure cannot express atmosphere. Atmosphere is too subtle and variegated for strict metrical discipline. It requires a rhythm supple enough to follow its alternations, subtle enough to grasp its nuances. Emerson disrupts the (up till now relatively consistent) iambic for reckless metrical irregularity, restoring it in the next line "for number or proportion," though "Mockingly" (17). Emerson dispenses with his habitual rhyming couplets for sporadic slant rhymes ("heaven-end" (4-5), "feet-sit" (6-7), "he-Mockingly-wreaths" (16-18), "work-world" (22-23) and allows himself greater metrical variety than usual—except, as R.A. Yoder observes, in the "last graceful line, a perfect iambic pentameter," which "resolves the poem and gently sets us down from a momentary Uriel-like vision" (85).

Atmosphere as a criterion of aesthetic merit.

At this point, it should be amply clear that atmosphere mediates between spirit and matter. Atmosphere, then, allows Emerson to explain how the religious sentiment can manifest in aesthetic form, and how aesthetic form can stimulate the religious sentiment. I will now show that, for two of Emerson's closest peers, Margaret Fuller and Henry

David Thoreau, atmosphere demonstrates inspiration and constitutes the aesthetic stimulus of the religious sentiment *par excellence*.

In the early 1840s, Fuller conceived of atmosphere in mesmeric terms. She speaks of Goethe, “The great poet of [his] nation,” as a “magnet strong enough to draw out the virtues” of his countrymen, generating the definitive “atmosphere” of his time (“Bretano” 314). Goethe suffuses his poetry with inspired force of personality, and his poetry suffused eighteenth-century Germany with its atmosphere. Fuller yearned for something of the same for her own age and nation. She eagerly anticipated “that riper time” when the “national ideas” of a mature America would “take birth... clothed in a thousand original forms” (*Papers* 2.124). American literature so far, she laments, expresses an “English character, a reminiscence of walls and ceilings” (123), too cooped up in the aristocratic interiors of Austen and Richardson. An authentically American poetry needs an authentically American atmosphere. And an authentically American atmosphere requires a soul great enough to shed tired European conventions and conduct the universal spirit through a fresher and more dazzling prism of personality:

No man can be absolutely true to himself, eschewing cant, compromise, servile imitation, and complaisance, without becoming original, for there is in every creature a fountain of life which, if not choked back by stones and other dead rubbish, will create a fresh atmosphere, and bring to life fresh beauty (*Papers* 2.125).

“Stones,” “dead rubbish,” detritus of exhausted European traditions, clog the spiritual springs of the American soul. But if there came a man or woman strong enough, individ-

ual enough, to roll the rocks away, then the stream would run clear again. Such a poet could not fail to conduct spirit through the fresh forms of the new world, generating a potent, unprecedented atmosphere for the young empire.

“The Sage of Concord” has precisely this “dignity of purpose” and “purity of spirit.” And it does not fail to manifest in an atmosphere distinctly his own, “a style whose melody and subtle fragrance enchant those who stand stupefied before the thoughts themselves, because their utmost depths do not enable them to sound his shallows” (*Papers* 2.128). Even those readers who can’t understand Emerson’s difficult prose can still grasp his atmosphere, and it is in the atmosphere that the true value resides. “Their” could refer to the reader, in which case the “utmost depths” of the human soul cannot encompass the “shallows,” the atmosphere, of Emerson’s style. Though Emerson’s thoughts could, theoretically, be broken down and interpreted and finally understood, his atmosphere defies analysis and puts the reader in touch with deeper truths than language can express. “Their” could also refer to Emerson’s thoughts. The “utmost depths” of Emerson’s content hold no key to the mysteries of his atmosphere. Fuller plays upon a common hermeneutic metaphor. Content—meaning, message, insights—is deep, form shallow. To get at the depths of content, the reader first must wade through the shallows of form. This metaphor deploys value claims: depth is associated with profundity, truth, reality; shallowness is associated with superficiality, vanity, superfluity. But Emerson’s shallows are deeper than his depths. The atmosphere of his prose and poetry is no merely cosmetic surface to be penetrated or peeled away. Atmosphere puts us in touch with deeper metaphysical insights than cold, analytic thought ever could.

Atmosphere has this power (for Fuller) because it stimulates the religious sentiment. Philosophical content imparts profound ideas. But atmosphere engenders a profound *state of mind*. To return to Emerson's famous maxim, "it is not instruction but provocation that I can receive from another soul." Content instructs in religious truth. But atmosphere provokes religious experience. Fuller places William Cullen Bryant at the "head" of all American poets because "the atmosphere of his verse refreshes and composes the mind, like leaving the highway to enter some green, lovely, fragrant wood" (*Papers* 2.131). Atmosphere "refreshes": it purges stale *doxa* and custom. And atmosphere "composes": it calms, it settles, and it brings the mind to order. Refreshment and composure are hallmark symptoms of the religious sentiment. Spirit shines into the soul, and disencumbers it of prejudice and dogma, shedding the light of a fresh perspective. The mind is clear and serene. It reflects more bravely upon itself. Temptations are easier to resist, virtuous action comes naturally. All the disparate parts of the self coordinate in a whole. Speaking of a Washington Allston exhibit, "A certain bland delicacy enfolds all these creations as an atmosphere... While looking at them would be always coming up in my mind the line, 'The genius loci, feminine and fair.' Grace, grace always" (*Papers* 2.115-6). Fuller invokes the *genius loci* here as a classical precedent for atmosphere. I cannot find any source for this line that Allston's paintings conjure from Fuller's memory. It might not come from her memory at all. Maybe she invented it. But why, then, did she not simply write, "Allston's paintings represent feminine and fair genius loci"? Why put her own sentiment in the form of an unsourced quotation? Perhaps Fuller better captures the quality of religious excitement this way. Allston's beautifully at-

mospheric landscapes stimulate Fuller's religious sentiment. The imagination stirs receptive to the spirit's inner promptings. And some voice from beyond the self speaks into her soul. She obtains a state of "grace," and atmosphere promises her "grace always."

Thoreau seconds Fuller's yearning for an authentic American literature, and for him too it would dispense with tired European conventions so that the universal spirit could refract through the individual personality and inflect the spirit of the times in a pervasive atmosphere:

A true poem is distinguished, not so much by a felicitous expression, or any thought it suggests, as by the atmosphere which surrounds it. Most have beauty of outline merely, and are striking as the form and bearing of a stranger, but true verses come toward us indistinctly, as the very kernel of all friendliness, and envelope us in their spirit and fragrance. Much of our poetry has the very best manners, but no character. It is only an unusual precision and elasticity of speech, as if its author had taken, not an intoxicating draught, but an electuary. It has the distinct outline of sculpture, and chronicles an early hour. Under the influence of passion all men speak thus distinctly, but wrath is not always divine ("Homer-Ossian-Chaucer," 304).

Thoreau distinguishes between the passion of "wrath," the selfish narrow passions of the materialistic soul, and the "divine" passion that animates the inspired poet. It is possible to tell when a poem is authentically inspired. Inspiration radiates, not through compositional virtuosity or profundity of thought, but through "the atmosphere" that a poem exudes into an environment. Atmosphere is indistinct, and so inspired poems "come toward us indistinctly." Their thoughts may not be clear, their execution may not be polished,

they may not constitute bounded wholes. And yet, their ambiguity, their rawness, their spontaneity, allows them to conduct the religious sentiment as a more rigid vessel could not. Spirit refracts through their hazy contours in a diffuse “envelop[ing]” atmosphere. “Much of our poetry,” Thoreau laments, so far flows mechanically. It lacks the divine impetus, and as such can only hope to imitate stale European formulas.

In a journal entry dated August 22, 1851, Thoreau compels himself toward an atmospheric style of writing: “Sentences which suggest far more than they say, which have an atmosphere about them, which do not merely report an old, but make a new, impression; sentences which suggest as many things and are as durable as a Roman aqueduct; to frame these, that is the *art* of writing” (*A Year* 174). Just as a sentence stretches across the page, so a Roman aqueduct stretches across the landscape. Just as a sentence forms a complex architectural whole, so an aqueduct forms a complex architectural whole, each part integrated with and supporting every other part. The aqueduct also activates what should be by now familiar tropes of spirit as a fluid conveyed. Just as the aqueduct conducts water from place to place, so the atmospheric sentence conveys spirit from place to place. The aqueduct, an architectural relic representative of Roman culture, writhes with frozen music. Though the Grecian and Roman empires have fallen, their monuments remain, imbuing the Mediterranean landscape with their atmospheres: “Two thousand summers have imparted to the monuments of Grecian literature, as to her marbles, only a maturer golden and autumnal tint, for they have carried their own serene and celestial atmosphere into all lands to protect them against the corrosion of time” (*Writings*, 2.114). So Thoreau aspires to construct sentences that, like a Roman aqueduct or a Grecian mar-

ble, survive his time to imbue the American landscape of later generations with the atmosphere of his personality.

That is the true value of historical documents: not to record details of how life used to pass, but to project the atmospheres of earlier times into our own:

We should read history as little critically as we consider the landscape, and be more interested by the atmospheric tints, and various lights and shades which the intervening spaces create than by its groundwork and composition. It is the morning now turned evening and seen in the west—the same sun, but a new light and atmosphere. Its beauty is like the sunset; not a fresco painting on a wall, flat and bounded, but atmospheric and roving or free (*Writings*, 1.161).

Just as the sun passes over the landscape, so the religious sentiment passes through history. And just as the position of the sun in the sky determines the atmosphere of the land below, so the position of the religious sentiment in relation to art and institutions determines the atmosphere of an epoch. The sun does not change, it is always the same sun as spirit is always the same spirit. The landscape does not change, it is always the same landscape just as human life is always essentially the same human life. The sun beams down upon the land, and generates the atmosphere of a place; the universal spirit shines through human life and generates the atmosphere of an epoch. The “highest of arts” is that which “affects the quality of day” (*Writings*, 2.100). The artist is like the sun, beaming the universal spirit into human life: “It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glo-

rious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look." Beauty is not entirely beyond the uninspired artist. But it is a staid sort of beauty. It does not stir religious passion. Only under the welcome duress of divine impulse can the artist renovate the atmosphere in which we behold. It is through the atmosphere of a work, for Thoreau as for Fuller as for Emerson, that inspiration radiates. And atmosphere satisfies the religious sentiment like nothing else.

Interlude: "End," by Jorie Graham.

(*From the New World: Poems 1976-2014*, pp. 315-317).

End of autumn. Deep fog. There are chains in it, and sounds of
 hinges. No that was
 birds. A bird and a
 gate. There are
 swingings of the gate that sound like stringed
 instruments from
 some other
 culture. Also a
 hammering which is held
 in the fog
 and held. Or it is continuing to
 hammer. I hear the blows.
 Each is distant so it seems it should not repeat. It repeats. What is it being hammered
 in. Fog all over the
 field. The sounds of
 boots
 on soil in groups those
 thuds but then it is
 cattle I
 think. The sound of the hinge the swinging chain it
 won't
 go away. But it is just the farmer at work. he must be putting out
 feed. Fog. Play at
 freedom now it
 says, look, all is
 blank. Come to the
 front, it is
 your stage it
 says, the sound of the clinking of links of
 chain, I think it is someone making the chain—*that* is the hammering—the thuds—mak-
 ing
 their own chain. But no, it is the gate and the herd is let in again, then

out. I can hear
 the mouths eating, dozens maybe hundreds, and the breathing in and out as they
 chew. And the
 chain. For now I am alive I think into the hammer-
 ing
 thudding clinking swinging of metal hinge—of hind—and also think maybe this is
 winter now—first day of. Fog and a not knowing of. Of what. What is inner
 experience I think being
 shut out. I look. A gate swings again and a rustling
 nearby. All is
 nearby and invisible. The clinking of a chinking of someone making nails. The sounds of
 a crowd
 meaning to be silent, all their breathing. Have been told not to move and to be
 silent. Then having been told to
 move and be
 silent. The crowd is in there. All the breaths they are
 trying
 to hold in, make
 inaudible. And scraping as of metal on metal, and dragging as of a heavy thing. But it is a
 field
 out there. My neighbour has his herd on it. When I walk away from the
 window it's a violin I
 hear over the
 chewing out of tune torn string but once it made
 music it might still make
 music if I become a new way of
 listening, in which
 above all,
 nothing, I know nothing, now there are moans
 out there such as a man accused and tossed away by his fellow beings, an aloneness, and
 listen, it is blank but in it is an
 appeal, a ruined one, reduced, listen: in
 there this
 animal
 dying slowly
 in eternity its

trap.

Fog condenses the atmosphere we breathe. In this poem, fog also condenses the atmosphere we feel. Fog blurs the edges of things into a common hue: atmosphere blurs the distinctions between things into a common mood. In fog, it's easy to mistake one form for another: atmosphere liberates forms into the dense vapour of free association. The speaker mistakes birds for hinges, cattle for boots. That's why she apprehends the atmosphere so deftly. A slight loosening of conceptual bonds, and the forms may leak into a dense associative fabric.

Graham catalogues a series of items that are "in" the fog. The chains, the hinge, the birds, all obscured in dreary depths. Yet these things are also "in" the fog another way. When you take them together, they *feel* like a foggy autumn day. Autumn sutures together contradictory associations. The vestige hues of summer brighten at winter's earliest intimations. Warm colours signal the coming cold. The ripeness and softness of fruit signals the approaching decay. The imagery and cadence likewise suture together contradictory associations. Chains suggest bondage, coldness, dullness, death. Birds suggest freedom, warmth, vividness, and vitality.

The hinge pivots in between. A hinge is more like chains than birds. It is cold, dull, mechanical. Also, this hinge squeaks. It hasn't been oiled in a while and has proba-

bly rusted, echoing the rusty colour of autumn leaves. But then again, a creaky hinge sounds like birdsong, doesn't it? The effect of the comparison is similar to, say, a child's toy faded on a lawn of just-melted snow, or a playground at night: positive and negative associations blend together in a sense of decline or corruption. Graham's cadence is both childlike and mechanical. She writes, "No that was / birds" where she should write "No, those were birds." Children often speak in short clauses with monosyllabic words. Conjugations elude their vocabulary. At the same time, a series of subtle verbal cues ("no" is not set apart by any punctuation, the line ends after "was," "was" and "birds" both end in a z-sound) make it difficult to read the line out loud without stressing every single syllable in mechanical monotony. Graham emphasizes an unlikely affinity between the cadences of children and the cadences of machines. Already, no more than four lines in, Graham has established an integrated atmosphere.

A heavy, haunting "hammering" sound "is held / in the fog / and held" (9-11). Except, of course, the sound of a hammer cannot be held. This suggests that it is not to the ear that the note is held, but some mental or spiritual faculty. No matter how sharp, how percussive, the note *holds* through the atmosphere. The signature of hammering inflects the atmosphere undiminished over the silences between impacts. "What is it being hammered in," she wonders. "Fog," perhaps, "all over the / field" (13-15). Whatever the hammer strikes, it's the atmosphere that it fixes into place, the cold, leaden impacts enhancing the cold, leaden mood that fog imbues into a setting.

But maybe it is not a hammering at all. Maybe she hears "the sounds of / boots / on soil in groups those / thuds." She has made a similar mistake before. What is it about

the end of autumn, deep fog that turns living, breathing beings into machines? This atmosphere brings out the cold, unfeeling character of things. Graham invokes the trudging dehumanization of T.S. Eliot's crowds, the "sawdust-trampled street / with all its muddy feet that press / to early coffee stands" (Preludes, 16-18). "But then," another mistake, "it is / cattle I / think," *the* canonical symbol of the unthinking masses. Fog belongs with trudging, unthinking crowds. Fog and capitalism both homogenize the landscape. Fog and capitalism both alienate people from one another. Fog and capitalism pent souls up in shuttered interiority: "What is inner / experience I think being / shut out" (36-38). The secret world of the soul is not, as Protestants would have it, a liberation from the confines of the flesh, but an imprisonment.

Graham finds salvation not in transcendence, but in charged exchanges between bodies in the real world: "For now I am alive I think into the hammering / thudding clinking swinging of metal hinge—of hinge—" (34-35). The first line admits of two readings, depending on where we put the implied comma. One of these readings is redemptive. "For now" means "finally," as in, "Finally, I am alive, I think into the hammering." The speaker lives and thinks into the "hammering / thudding clinking swinging" of raw physical being. It is right of her to speak of living and thinking *into* being as one would speak of vaulting *into* water: not representation, but immersion. The mind does not think *of*, but simply thinks. Mind and matter *can* enter into sharp, immediate congress. It has happened to her before, and it might happen again if she is lucky.

The other reading is a little more doubtful. "For now" means "for the time being," as in, "For the time being, I am alive, I think, into the hammering." This time, "I think"

means “I suspect,” “I hope,” “I would like for this to be true.” Maybe she only *thinks* she lives so vividly. She comes back, again and again, to the “hinge” and its weary question: what is it that swings between the mind and the world, subject and object, and on what mechanism does it pivot? Whatever it is, hers is rusty. Something bars her from reality, replete with promise. Like “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” she is “too dumbly in [her] being pent” (Stevens, 4). “Maybe this is winter now—first day of. Fog and a not knowing of. Of what.” Of all prepositions, “of” is the flimsiest to end a sentence, never mind two in a row. “Of” is purely transitive. It brings no images to mind, refers to nothing in the world, exhausts its meaning in utility, the humble hinge of language. Like a pair of hinges on which nothing turns, these “ofs” lead nowhere, supply no function. Consciousness teeters upon a steep brink of pure transition. “Play at / freedom now” (22-23) the fog taunts, “look, all is / blank” (24-25). Freedom requires blankness, yes, or it has nowhere to write. But too much blankness, too much possibility, and freedom has no materials to be free upon. Nature, the world of flesh, contingency, confines. But liberated from these things, a life confines itself, “making / [its] own chain” (28-30). “There are chains in it,” the fog, remember. How can something so heavy and hard exist in such a fine and airy substance? Infinite possibility is even finer and airier than fog, yet holds heavier restraints.

“There are / swingings of the gate that sound like stringed / instruments from / some other/ culture” (5-8). There have been moments when the harsh screeches of the gate, suggestive of the quotidian, the familiar, the domestic, the hum-drum, have been sublimated into an orchestral resonance, exciting, fresh, and strange. Atmosphere can re-

fresh perspective, salvage residues of the exotic from sterile familiarity. But this is not one of those moments. The speaker is not entirely cut off from the world, but the intervening boundary creaks and grates with friction. She wants, she lacks, a felicitous alliance between thought and place. “Shut out” of the confidence of outer things, shut in to private experience, “All is / nearby and invisible” (39-40), as in a fog. The “crowd” that populates the surrounding obscurity suggests the legion meanings that teem behind the surfaces of things. But today the crowds have been compelled to silence: “All the breaths they are trying / to hold in, make / inaudible” (44-46). A silence over which the creaking of the hinge returns, “metal on metal” (46), this time in an explicitly carceral capacity. A gate can let out or pen in. Form can divulge the secret nature, the signature, of a thing. It can effuse an atmospheric character that makes the place feel a certain way. But form can also imprison. It sets *this* apart from *that*, objects apart from objects, objects apart from subjects, subjects apart from subjects. At this particular moment, the gate is closed. Things are stashed inside their properties, captive from the flow of experience. And in between, the heavy fog, which is supposed to bring subject and object together, suspends each quiet body in murky separation.

“But it is,” she remembers, “a field out there,” after all. Her “neighbor has his herd on it.” This is the first moment we receive explicit confirmation that the speaker is, in fact, standing on a farm, and that she knows the person to whom the farm belongs. The setting, it seems, is not entirely intractable to intimacy. And with this knowledge comes potential for salvation:

When I walk away from the

window it's a violin I
 hear over the
 chewing out of tune torn string but once it made
 music it might still make
 music if I become a new way of
 listening, in which
 above all,
 nothing, I know nothing (47-55).

Not quite “exotic instruments from another culture,” but close, a more modest sublimation. The string is torn, the tune “chewing out” with only marginally more tact than the “chew[ing]” of the herd from before, but there is potential here, at least, a common ground between the soul and its environment. The hinges swing, not sweetly, but with potential sweetness. Though less dignified ambassadors than Emerson’s musical dæmon, they are at least cautiously welcoming. Perhaps some day they too will divulge “precantations, which sail like odors in the air,” and maybe she will record them, if she can “become a new way of / listening.” *Become*, not *obtain* or *devise*: she, her self as a whole, would have to come together in a single way, a concerted method, of attention. It is odd to conceive of the self as a method. Usually we speak of methods as bringing about what selves want. Usually we think of the self and its flourishing as the ultimate end of all method. Graham reverses the usual priorities. Being is the method, the vehicle, the intermediary, the hinge. It pivots between matters larger than itself. It is self that makes the gate rust and screech between the land and that *something else* Graham does not name.

The hinges pivot smoothly, atmosphere transpires clear and mellifluous, when and only when the self dissolves. She must “know nothing.” She must make herself an empty space where higher powers may meet. Then reality may speak to her clearly and without reserve.

The speaker abandons her optimism abruptly:

nothing, I know nothing, now there are moans
out there such as a man accused and tossed away by his fellow beings, an aloneness,
and

listen, it is blank but in it is an
appeal, a ruined one, reduced, listen: in

there this

animal

dying slowly

in eternity its

trap (55-63).

The “animal” could be none other than the speaker. She is not empty yet. She knows too many things. She is trapped inside her self. That’s why she speaks of it as if it were another person, “a man accused and tossed away.” Cut off from the world, the self regards itself as a stranger. The animal could also embody the “nothing,” the oblivion in which the self is reduced to an exalted function of attention. Or the animal could be the musical dæmon of the place, the atmosphere of late autumn and deep fog condensed into a single lonely, abject condition. Or perhaps all three possibilities have some truth to them. Per-

haps Graham alerts us to a paradox of the subject-object relationship: if the self were ever cut off completely from the world, it would then be empty. Self and world could finally merge. Perhaps this is the “trap” of eternity.

Or perhaps Graham gestures toward the spectre of mass extinction and the climate crisis. That would be fitting for a poem called “END,” confronting as it does the eroded bonds between people and places.

Chapter 4. Walt Whitman's Poetics of Atmosphere.

The concept of atmosphere emerges through Emerson's essays to serve a specific function: it mediates between the religious sentiment and aesthetic form. Whitman is the first to put this function directly into use. Emerson writes about atmosphere; Whitman writes atmospherically. Emerson treats atmosphere as a subject, a topic; Whitman devises new formal strategies of writing atmospherically. I begin by establishing the centrality of atmosphere to Whitman's poetics. I then carry out close readings of a series of particularly atmospheric passages from the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1881). My aim here is to figure out what it is that makes these passages so atmospheric. Whitman assembles words, images, cadences, rhythms, tones that suggest a similar affective tenor, elicit a similar bouquet of signatures. And these signatures intermingle to generate a cohesive and compelling atmosphere. Atmosphere, then, supplies the primary principle of cohesion in many of Whitman's poems. And Whitman weakens or eliminates competing principles of cohesion (theme, narrative, chronology, etc.) to bring atmosphere into arresting saliency.

Atmosphere as a central concept of Whitman's poetics.

As early as the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman speaks of poetry as a deeply religious vocation. The soul has cravings that poetry can fulfill: "Whatever satisfies the soul is truth. The prudence of the greatest poet answers at last the craving and glut of the soul" (*CPP* 23). To the secrecy of his notebooks Whitman con-

fided his ambition to compose a “New Bible.”⁶⁴ In *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman calls for a new prophetic literature that will some day establish “a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual bases of these States” (CPP 932). This literature would usurp the social function of the priest-class with a more flexible apparatus: “the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature. The priest departs, the divine literatus comes” (CPP 932). Whitman envisions something more radical than plangent doctrinalism, more immediately provocative than dogma that happens to rhyme: “In the prophetic literature of these States... Nature, true Nature, and the true idea of Nature, long absent, must, above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems” (CPP 984). The new prophetic literature must, first and foremost, be atmospheric. And, what’s more, it must derive its atmosphere from the American landscape.⁶⁵ Whitman deepens a radical Transcendentalist vein. Literature stimulates religious

⁶⁴ Critics have dismissed Whitman’s ambition to write a “New Bible” as a passing fancy, citing the absence of sacramental insight from the 1860 edition on. David Reynolds paints a portrait of a Whitman “floundering” in pursuit of just “the right metaphor for the sort of work he was up to” (368). Michael Moon writes, “the scriptural ambitions [Whitman] had first articulated for his project in 1857 account for some of the most significant differences between the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* and its two predecessor-editions” (124). W.C. Harris disagrees: “if we weigh the force with which Whitman speaks of a New Bible as “the principal object-the main life work,” and if we consider the fact that the mid-nineteenth century was to-date the most active period of sectarian splintering and Bible translation in American history, it seems that an important argument has been left unmade about the way in which the 1860 *Leaves* responds to demands that nineteenth-century Americans were making on the Bible, the work that sacred writing, in its received and newly invented forms, was being called to do” (172). I stand with Harris. I see little evidence that Whitman’s religiosity declines with age.

⁶⁵ I don’t have space for a more in-depth overview of Whitman’s religious agenda, which is already amply documented. For a recent review of scholarship dealing with Whitman in his capacity as a prophet, see Murray, “Tedious Walt: A New Whitman for Religious Studies” (2019). For in-depth monographs on religion in Whitman in general, see George B. Hutchinson’s *The Ecstatic Whitman* (1986) and David Kuebrich’s *Minor Prophecy* (1989). In *Whitman in the Light of Vedantic Mysticism* (1964), V. K. Chari investigates links between Whitman’s religiosity and East Indian religions. In *Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples* (2008), Michael Robertson documents Whitman’s reception as a modern-day prophet among a small body of disciples in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Also see Mullins (2016).

experience—not through profound thoughts, not through embellished scriptural morality, but through the ineffable aura of divine inspiration:

The spirit and the form are one... Subtly interwoven with the materiality and personality of a land, a race... there is always something—I can hardly tell what it is—history but describes the result of it—it is the same as the untellable look of some human faces. Nature, too, in her stolid forms, is full of it—but to most it is there a secret... To absorb and again effuse it... is the work, or a main part of the work, of any country's true author, poet, historian, lecturer, and perhaps even priest and philosopher. (*CPP* 979).

This unidentified “something” can only be atmosphere. It transpires upon the conjunction of spirit and form; it captures something vague yet distinctive about the land; it fuses the land and its inhabitants in a single affective hue; it is ineffable, invisible, elusive, yet permeant, interpenetrating, ubiquitous. Whitman likens it to the magnetic aura of a personality. Certain human faces divulge an “untellable look,” a sense of electric tension that fills the air with an ineffable, prickling excitation. And whatever this “something” is, nature has it, and poetry has it as well.

To be “really valuable and permanent,” to accede to the pre-eminence of religious poetry, an authentically American literature must take as its “foundation,” as its central governing principle, the atmosphere of the national landscape. Thus the “spirit” of America's great prophet-poet

responds to his country's spirit.... he incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri

and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him” (7).

Whether he knew it or not, Whitman comes very close here to Böhme’s theory of the signature. Material forms are like musical instruments. A dormant assemblage of properties awaits the animation of a higher power. A flute is metallic, long, and cold. The musician’s breath moves through it, and all its properties come together in a unified sound. Spirit plays all forms like instruments: their properties come together in a concert of signatures, and this concert is atmosphere. Inspired, the poet fashions an instrument, a form, of his own and plays harmoniously along.

Like Emerson and Fuller, Whitman draws upon mesmeric tropes in describing atmosphere. Except in Whitman’s case, they might not *just* be tropes. In an 1842 article he published for the New York Sunday Times, Whitman declares himself no longer ‘a devout disbeliever in the science of animal magnetism... it reveals at once the existence of a whole new world of truth, grand, fearful, profound, relating to that great mystery, in the shadow of which we move and have our being’ (quoted in Reynolds, 260).⁶⁶ When speaking of the charismatic force of presence, Whitman uses “magnetism” and “atmosphere” interchangeably: a “noble personality, as exhibited in presence, face, voice, dress, manner, and what may be call’d his atmosphere and magnetism” to Thomas Paine (*CPP* 799). He ascribes “a fund within or atmosphere without, deeper than art, deeper

⁶⁶ For more on the link between Whitman and animal magnetism, see Edmund Reiss, “Whitman’s Debt to Animal Magnetism” (1963) and Catherine Waitinas, “‘Animal Magnetism’: The ‘Cotemporary’ Roots of Whitman’s ‘Is Mesmerism True?’” (2016).

even than proof” to the Quaker preacher Elias Hicks (*CPP* 1238). Something ineffable about a charismatic personality radiates into the environment and imbues it with a trans-subjective charge of feeling. Whitman ascribes a similar potency to poetry. An “impalpable diffuseness and atmosphere or invisible magnetism, dissolving and embracing all” constitutes “the final proof of song,” not “any special achievement of passion, pride, metrical form, epigram, plot, thought, or what is call’d beauty” (*CPP* 1253). Just as the mesmerist commands an invisible, intangible fluid that permeates all things, so the poem commands an invisible, intangible atmosphere that permeates the room, the city, the nation.

It is this atmosphere, this ineffable quasi-spiritual force, that proves the ultimate value of a poetic composition. Metre, plot, philosophy, are all important. But they in no way demonstrate the inspired origins of the work of art. “It is not when matched with other verse and tested by the ordinary intellectual or esthetic lineaments” that the poems in *Leaves of Grass* “compare favourably with that verse,” but by the “impalpable atmosphere which every page of *Leaves of Grass* has sprung from, and which it exhales forever” (*NUP*, 1541). Whitman judges himself by distinctly Transcendentalist criteria of merit. The highest literature is prophetic. Prophetic literature expresses and stimulates religious experience. And religious experience admonishes constraints. Rigid metrical patterns, regular rhyme schemes, obsessive and exacting deliberation over formal details, strangles spiritual impetus. The author must let religious passion take the helm and manifest spontaneously through his pen. The end result will be somewhat rough, somewhat rugged, but it will radiate inspiration and inspire others as a more ornate composition

could not. Other poetry may have more profound ideas. It may be more formally polished. It may sound prettier or have cleverer metaphors. But profundity, polish, and prettiness are worthless if the composition is not also inspired. And it is possible to discern inspiration, to feel it radiating from the page into the air. The inspired work has atmosphere, the uninspired work does not. And it is atmosphere that ultimately sets Whitman's verse apart.

The word.

Whitman aspired to augment the poet's obligatory reverence for language with some amateur philosophizing, though it never progressed far beyond notes and clippings too fragmentary to either deserve or escape the condescension of posterity.⁶⁷ One particularly notorious passage, "A perfect user of words uses things... they exude... lilies, clouds, sunshine, woman, poured consciously—things, whirled like chain-shot" (*Day-books* 42), has generally been taken as a naïve affirmation of word magic.⁶⁸ A more modest claim seems likelier to me: words are irreducible to acts of reference. They are gestalts. They exceed the sums of their parts. And, like other gestalts, words have at-

⁶⁷ Whitman's language philosophy is contained in the notebooks *Words* and *The Primer of Words* (published posthumously by Horace Traubel as *An American Primer*), the essay "Slang in America," and two chapters he may have ghostwritten for his acquaintance William Swinton in *Rambles Among Words*. Its prevailing scholarly reception, however, has remained largely unrevised since the late eighties and early nineties. The authoritative study remains Joseph Penn Warren's *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment* (1990), which enlists Whitman in the nineteenth-century project to recover an Adamic state of language in which word and referent unite in a single act of meaning. This thesis has the endorsement of two other well-cited studies from about the same time: Mark Bauerlein's *Walt Whitman and the American Idiom* (1991) and Tenney Nathanson's *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in Leaves of Grass* (1992).

⁶⁸ Warren reads this to assert that "thing and word are one" (32), that words have some motivated connection to things. Nathanson arrives at a similar conclusion: "Whitman aspires to the word magic of the shaman: the sense of words the early poems seek to convey has... the archaic belief in the magical power of naming" (pp. 6);

mosphere. A word evokes an aesthetic feeling peculiar to that word alone. “Lilies” exude fragrance, “clouds” pour rain, “sunshine” radiates heat: words exude, pour, radiate atmosphere. A word, then, is like a thing in that it has a kind of significance that is not strictly referential.

What, then, determines how a given word *feels*? What shapes a word’s special atmospheric character, its signature? The signatures of its referents. For instance, the word “cool” means “cold to the touch.” “Cold to the touch” has a signature. And this is what we feel when we hear the word “cool.” But “cool” *also* means “dispassionate,” “calm,” “composed,” “easy-going,” “faint,” “fashionable,” a general term of approval, “sleek,” and in-the-know (OED), among others. All these meanings have signatures too.⁶⁹ And all these signatures blend together in the superordinate signature of “cool.”

Now, usually no more than one referent obtains in any particular use of a given word. It is rare for “cool” to mean *both* “fashionable” *and* “cold to the touch.” If so, does the atmosphere of the word “cool” derive from the signatures of *all* its referents, or only the one that happens to obtain in a given case? Take the phrase, “a glass of cool water.” “Cool” clearly means “cold to the touch.” Is its signature then reducible to the sensation “cold to the touch,” or is it inflected by *all* its referents?

Studies have suggested that when we encounter a word, all possible meanings flash into mind at once. Then we narrow them down on the basis of context. All this hap-

⁶⁹ That is, when one grasps the concept of “calm,” one experiences an aesthetic impression that only the concept “calm” elicits. This impression is not identical to the actual experience of calmness. One can experience the signature of calmness without actually feeling calm, the same way that one can fully experience angry-sounding music without feeling angry, or fully experience a sad film without actually feeling sad. The same principle applies to the concepts of “dispassion” and “composure.” It also applies to the concept of “sleek,” even though “sleek” is not a state of mind or an emotion. I cannot grasp the concept “sleek” without experiencing an aesthetic impression specific to and characteristic of sleekness.

pens so quickly that we don't even notice it. When we read the phrase, "a cool glass of water," we select "cold to the touch" and eliminate "dispassionate," "calm," "fashionable," etc. without conscious effort.⁷⁰ I call this process *semantic pruning*.

The atmosphere of a word, then, likely alters over two stages. The first stage comes before semantic pruning has begun. All possible referents flash into mind, and all possible referents inflect the atmosphere of the word. I would hypothesize that each individual referent does not move through the mind in isolated succession, but that they all coalesce in a unified atmosphere specific to the word. When we encounter the word "cool," we don't experience first the signature of "cold to the touch," then the signature of dispassion, then calmness, then composure, and so on. Instead, we experience a single gestalt that combines the signatures of coldness, dispassion, calmness, and composure into a unified atmosphere. But again, we experience this atmosphere only in a flash so transient it escapes introspection.

The second stage comes after semantic pruning has concluded. We experience the signature only of the one referent to which the word refers. In "a cool glass of water," semantic pruning eliminates all possible referents except "cold to touch," which then dominates the signature of the word "cool."

In addition to referents, words carry associations. We associate "cool" with the colour blue, with sleekness, with goatees and piercings and leather jackets, with tattoos and smoking, with certain genres of music (hip-hop, rap, pop), with a certain disaffected chic of academic style, with certain attitudes and affects—irreverence, sleekness, disaf-

⁷⁰ See Glucksberg et al. (1986); Onifer and Swinney (1981); Simpson (1981); Swinney (1979); Seidenberg et al. (1982); Tabossi (1988); Tabossi et al. (1987); Tanenhaus et al. (1979).

fectedness. All of these associations have signatures of their own, and all of them inflect the atmosphere of the word “cool.” It seems likely that associations follow the same laws of semantic pruning as referents: the word initially strikes consciousness with the combined force of all the signatures of all available associations, all organized in a unified feeling.⁷¹ Then, after semantic pruning has concluded, only those associations that attach to the referent inflect the atmosphere.

The full atmosphere a single word elicits, then, is remarkably complex. All signatures of all possible referents, plus the signatures of all possible associations, plus the way the word sounds in the air and looks on the page including font and timbre, all come together in a whole irreducible to the sum of its parts.

What this means is that a word *can* be a thing, but it usually isn't. A word *can* convey an atmosphere irreducible to individual referents, but only *before* semantic pruning has done its work. By the time semantic pruning has narrowed meaning down, the word has lost its thingliness: we experience only the signature of a single referent. To use words as things, then, Whitman's consummate poet must arrest them in that brief interval before semantic pruning has concluded.

Whitman's style delays or halts semantic pruning. He places certain words strategically so that it is difficult to determine which content, lexical and associative, is relevant and which is not. We don't know which meanings to eliminate and which to retain. And this allows each word the unfold its integral atmosphere before readerly attention.

⁷¹ Especially if we associate content not with words directly, but indirectly, through referents. It is unclear, for instance, whether we associate goatees and piercings and leather jackets with the word “cool” directly, or with one of its referents.

Writing off convention.

Convention aids semantic pruning. The more conventionally a word is used, the easier it is to narrow meaning down. Pretend that you have recently taken up English as a second language, and you have just learned “around.” It’s rather vague. You have trouble grasping it. So you look it up in the Oxford English Dictionary and find yourself even more perplexed than you were before. “Around” means all sorts of things: “In every direction from a central point; on every side, all about”; “In circumference; in distance along the outside or edge”; “In the immediate vicinity; in a place or various places nearby; at hand”; “In the world at large; out and about”; “Along the circuit or surface”; “In a circular or orbital course; so as to make a complete circuit”; “With a rotating or revolving motion”; “So as to face a different or opposite way; so as to change or reverse direction”; “In turn or succession among a group of people”; and to indicate location or movement “In an idle, casual, or frivolous manner,” among others. In certain cases, it is relatively clear which meanings apply and which do not. In “tie the string around your finger,” it’s clear that “around” means “in circumference, in distance along the outside or edge,” and not “in the immediate vicinity.” In other cases, it’s somewhat ambiguous. In, “I’m just going around town,” it’s not entirely clear whether the speaker is going methodically around the circumference of the town, or just perusing the general vicinity. We rely on convention to clear things up. A native English speaker, who has mastered not only what words mean but also the conventions of their usage, discerns without conscious effort that “around” means “wandering through with a loose sense of aim or purpose.” Unfortunate-

ly, until you have mastered the conventions of the English language, you have to carefully consider each meaning of the word “around” one by one and decide which is likeliest.

Now let’s pretend an ESL learner picks up “Song of Myself” and reads the following lines: “I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no, / And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away” (“Song of Myself,” 7.16-17). For once in her life, the ESL learner interprets “around” at no disadvantage to the native speaker. Convention is no help here. Whitman brazenly disregards it. Prepositions usually perform a purely transitive function, ushering briskly from one node of content to another. Rarely do they declare *themselves* direct objects of attention. But this “around” is stubbornly intransitive. The speaker omits what exactly he is “around.” It’s common to say, “I’m around,” as in, “I’m around, hit me up whenever”—a light, breezy attitude of casual intimacy. But the tone here is anything but breezily intimate. “I am... tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away” suggests intense, possessive, obsessive passion.

With no less deliberate, conscious effort than any ESL learner, the native speaker has to carefully weigh each individual meaning of the word “around”—not that it helps much. So many of them apply. We can imagine the speaker wrapped, coiled, constricted “around,” like a snake or rope. We can imagine him embracing. We can imagine him permeating the air like smoke or choking gas, omnipresent as a God. A dense tangle of lexical ambiguity frustrates semantic pruning. And consider how much more crowded the picture gets when we include associations. In some cases, “around” carries associations with intimacy: a couple puts their arms *around* each other, a mother wraps a blanket

around her sleeping child. In other cases, “around” carries associations with aggression: the snake coils *around* its prey, the army assembles *around* its enemy. And these two associations contradict one another. Intimacy and aggression are antithetical attitudes. Usually, on the basis of context, we would omit one and keep the other. But Whitman is careful to retain both. “I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no” too suggests a mixture of intimacy and aggression. The long-winded sequence of descriptors—“and am... tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away”—suggests the aggressive intimacy of a jealous and persistent suitor.

“Around,” so often overlooked, delivers an intricate assemblage of lexical and associative content that is very difficult to narrow down. When I read “Song of Myself” for the first time, this little word struck me with a force I could not account for. I was surprised and disarmed to find such an innocuous preposition snagging so violently at my attention. I did not analyze the effect at the time. I did not consciously sift through its various significances. All I experienced was a vague but striking *feeling* all the more striking in that I had never before responded so strongly to such a benign and familiar stimulus. “Around” had never eluded my semantic pruning apparatus so deftly. I had never fully experienced its gestalt. I had never apprehended its signature before.

Whitman’s poetry is replete with words that snag. At least twice in his oeuvre, Whitman uses “huge” where “vast” would have been more appropriate: “I wonder where [animals] get those tokens [of myself], / Did I pass that way *huge* times ago and negligently drop them?” (“Song of Myself,” 32. 11-12, my emphasis); “the *huge* and thoughtful night” (“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” 14.47, my emphasis). “Huge”

and “vast” both mean large. But “huge” usually designates largeness of bodies, “vast” largeness of area or quantity. “Hugeness” implies clear, three-dimensional boundaries, “vastness” does not. Lions and tigers and bears are huge. Mountains and oceans and eternity are vast. “Time” and “night” contain us. They go on forever—time unto eternity, night into the darkness of space. So “huge” cinches awkwardly around their sublime proportions. This frustrates semantic pruning. “Huge” only has one lexical meaning: “Very great, large, or big” (OED). But it has many associations. We associate “hugeness” with power, strength, and the attitudes that wield power and strength: violence, savagery, aggression. Imbued as the English language is with the ideologies of colonialism, *violence* and *aggression* suggest the primitive and the animal. In the western tradition, huge characters are often (if not usually) stupid, slow, and clumsy. And so “huge” breeds associative dissonance in relation to the “thoughtful night” it modifies. “Thoughtful”: intellectual, introspective, sensitive, discerning; “night”: calm, cool, tranquil. “Vast” would have been the more conventional word choice, suggestive as it is of the calm, sedate wisdom of the sage.

This is precisely why Whitman uses “huge” instead—he *wants* the clash. He wants to drive two words together so hard that they vibrate throughout their entire associative structures. Consider what happens when the word “huge” modifies, say, a tiger. Some associations overlap—power, strength, violence, savagery, aggression—but not others—the crude, the clumsy, the stupid. We keep those that fit with what we know about tigers and discard the rest. As a result, the reader passes over the signature of “huge” for the more concrete image of the tiger. When “huge” modifies a “thoughtful

night,” however, associations clash. And every association that clashes juts into saliency. We don’t really know which associations to keep and which to shear away, and so we experience them all. Words, like herbs, release their aromas most pungently when crushed.

Compound adjectives.

Semantic pruning usually eliminates meanings that are not consistent between adjectives and nouns. For instance, “awesome” can mean “inspiring awe,” or it can function colloquially as a general expression of intense satisfaction. If someone says, “the arts and crafts party was awesome,” we reject the possibility that the arts and crafts party inspired sombre, reverent awe, and we don’t even have to think about it. Whitman uses compound adjectives to complicate this process. Semantic pruning can’t retain only those referents that apply to the noun and discard the others. It also has to retain any referents that the hyphenated adjectives share in common. So if someone were to say, “the arts and crafts party was awesome-stupefying,” semantic pruning would have to retain the possibility that the crafts party did, in fact, inspire some sort of awe. I would hypothesize that the same principle applies in the case of associations. Semantic pruning retains all associations that the hyphenated adjectives hold in common—even if they do not apply to the noun.

“With Husky-Haughty Lips, O Sea!” would have been a very different poem if the title (which is also the first line) had been, “with husky, haughty lips, O sea!” Semantic pruning would retain only those meanings that apply to the noun (the uttering “lips”). “Husky” means “dry in the throat, so that the timbre of the voice is lost, and its sound ap-

proaches more or less a hoarse whisper” (OED). We associate huskiness of voice with the seductiveness of the femme-fatale (perhaps because the human voice gets husky with arousal) and the mystery of the oracle or prophet (perhaps because it sounds like a whisper, a confiding of secrets). All these meanings would find a home in the sea’s feminine, erotic, oracular intimations. But “husky” also means “tough and strong,” and we associate it with a kind of upper-class dignity, an air of respectability, sophistication, and authority, perhaps because the huskiest voices belong to old men, with all their power and privilege. Semantic pruning would probably eliminate these other meanings. There is nothing tough or strong or authoritative about “lips.” But “husky-haughty” requires semantic pruning to retain any meanings that “husky” and “haughty” hold in common. “Haughty” means “high in one’s own estimation; lofty and disdainful in demeanour; proud, arrogant, supercilious,” and “of exalted character, style, or rank; elevated, lofty, eminent” (OED), all of which overlap quite neatly with “tough and strong,” dignified, sophisticated, authoritative. As a result, semantic pruning has to juggle more meanings than it would if Whitman had simply replaced the hyphen with a comma. A richer set of referents and associations inflects the aesthetic effect of “husky.”

Compare the following two lines: (1) “O little shells, so curious and convolute, so limpid, cold, and voiceless”; (2) “O little shells, so curious-convolute, so limpid-cold and voiceless.” Number (2) is the original. It comes from the opening poem of “Autumn Rivulets,” “As Consequent, Etc.” (24). (1) is the same line with the compounds removed. I place them side-by-side so that the difference in effect may be more striking. (2) is aesthetically more successful. Partly because it strikes a more rhythmic balance, yes, but also

because the compounds frustrate semantic pruning. In (1), semantic pruning eliminates all meanings that “curious” and “convolute” do not hold in common with “little shells.” “Curious” means “deserving or exciting attention on account of its novelty or peculiarity” (OED), which is exactly what little shells are: mildly interesting as oddities. In (2), semantic pruning retains all meanings that “curious” and “convolute” hold in common. “Curious” also means “desirous of seeing or knowing; eager to learn; inquisitive;” “minute in inquiry or discrimination, subtle;” “made with care or art; skillfully, elaborately or beautifully wrought;” “characterized by special care, careful, accurate, minute” (OED), all of which overlap with “convolute.” A convolute is intricate, detailed, complex; it inspires wonder, awe, perplexity—a deeper attention than mere trifling interest. The spiral also happens to be a clever analogy for curiosity. Curiosity stimulates understanding. Thought proceeds from the surface to the depths, from the apparent to the secret and implicit. A spiral starts from the wide, open edge, and proceeds to a deep, narrow core. Curiosity absconds with consciousness. We lose ourselves in the object’s maze-like intricacy. A far richer wealth of referents and associations tinge the signature of “curious” in (2) than in (1), and I would say that this directly contributes to its more striking aesthetic effect.⁷²

⁷² Some examples I would like to have analyzed include: “By my **life-lumps!** becoming already a creator” (“Song of Myself, 41.32); “Always California’s golden hills and hollows, and the silver mountains of New Mexico—always **soft-breath’d** Cuba” (“Our Old Feuillage,” 3); “Ringing, ringing, to warn the ship from its **wreck-place**” (“Aboard at a Ship’s Helm,” 6); “And one the Atlantic’s wind caressing, fierce or gentle—mighty hulls **dark-gliding** in the distance” (“Paumanok,” 3); “Haply, aloft, (who knows?) from distant **sky-clouds’** blended shapes” (“Red Jacket,” 4); “Fitful as **motley-tongues** of flame, inseparably twined and merged in one—combining all” (“On, On the Same, Ye Jocund Twain!” 3); “Me, old, alone, sick, **weak-down, melted-worn** with sweat” (“To the Sun-set Breeze,” 4).

Subject-predicate inversion.

Poets usually declare what they will describe *before* they begin describing it. In Whitman's poetry, the opposite is more common: he describes, describes at exorbitant length, and only at the very end does he reveal what he's been describing. This affects cognitive processing. Semantic pruning lags. And, in my experience, it lags just long enough for the richest possible signature to resolve from each word:

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entreated, braced in the beams,

Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,

I and this mystery here we stand" ("Song of Myself," 3.12-14).

A breathless train of modifying clauses precede the subject they all modify. We don't know what, exactly, is "sure as the most certain sure" or "braced in the beams" or "stout as a horse," for an extended delay. If the delay were shorter ("plumb in the uprights, / I and this mystery here we stand"), semantic pruning would occur quite efficiently. We would know, almost immediately, to picture a person, a human body, "plumb in the uprights." But it takes two full lines before the object materializes. As a result, we don't know which meanings, which associations, to edit out of the picture.

"Plumb" in particular vexes semantic pruning. It has several meanings: "vertically, perpendicularly," "exactly in a particular direction, position, or alignment," "completely, absolutely, quite," "downright, absolute; thorough; utter" (OED). "In the uprights" accommodates them all. "Upright" means both "vertical" and "adhering to or following correct moral principles," suggesting absolute, unwavering integrity. These uprights

could be verticals, perpendiculars, something “exactly in a particular direction,” something “complete, absolute,” something “downright; thorough; utter.” Now, “upright” does not commonly appear as a noun, never mind a plural noun. We face the additional challenge of having to picture what these “uprights” might look like. I have always pictured a tree, and I don’t think this is an entirely idiosyncratic response. Multiple “uprights” stick out straight, *up* above my head—the phrase lends itself naturally to the image of branches.

We so far have no clue as to how we should narrow down the meaning of “plumb,” and we find none in the next clause either (“well-entreated”). What about the clause after that? “Braced in the beams” parallels the syntactic structure of “plumb in the uprights” and reinforces all its meanings and associations with surgical precision. “Braced” means “To clasp, to fasten up tightly,” “To fix, render firm” (OED), reinforcing the strong, fast, exact, absolute, utter straightness of “plumb.” “In the beams” suggests the beams of a house or barn, reinforcing the sense of straight juttings above the head from “in the uprights.” We have now arrived at the end of the line. Whitman has deftly avoided any hints as to which meanings we might eliminate. Instead, he has taken the webs of meaning that cluster around the word “plumb,” around “uprights,” around “braced,” around “beams,” and woven them all together. The result is a fabric of meaning too dense for semantic pruning to shear. Whitman sacrifices clarity for richness of meaning. He leaves us with no sturdy image, no certain insight. The only take-away we have for sure is a mood, a *feel*, an atmosphere.

The twentieth section of “Song of Myself” opens in a state of disorientation: “Who goes there?” (1). The speaker does not know who or what he beholds, and we don’t know either. Then comes a string of haunting, delicately-weighed adjectives: “hankering, gross, mystical, nude.” In the deathbed version, the line ends with a semicolon, and the next proceeds, “How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?” Perhaps the “I” is the strange figure “who goes there.” But then how could he have surprised himself? Without any further context, the adjectives modify an ambiguous object. The 1855 version grudges us even this dubious hint: “Who goes there! hankering, gross, mystical, nude? / How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?” We do not know what, exactly, is so “hankering,” so “gross,” so “mystical” and “nude.” Critics are avid to resolve the enigma. Daniel Hoffman suggests “the mystery of individual existence” (1994, pp. 3), Karl Keller a “macho pose” (1993, pp. 119), Mark Bäuerlein a “distancing perspective” Whitman assumes in relation to himself (1987, pp. 130), Katherine Kinney the poet’s introduction of himself to the reader in “radical... departure from socially prescribed conventions” (1989, pp. 11). I do not disagree. I consider all these interpretations perfectly plausible. At the same time, a poem is not a puzzle. The ambiguity is not there for the pleasure of decoding, but to elicit an immediate, visceral effect, an effect which criticism deadens rather than enhances when it disenchants the poet’s cryptic arrangements. Whitman confuses us for a reason: someone “goes there” who both is and is not himself. He wants the subject to remain indefinite. That way, his adjectives resist semantic pruning, and the full signature of each word tolls like a bell through all its meanings and associations.

“Hankering” usually takes the form of a noun, meaning a craving, a desire. The verb form, however, has two meanings: “to have a longing or craving,” and “to ‘hang about,’ to linger or loiter *about* with longing or expectation” (OED). “Gross” means all sorts of things: “thick, stout, massive, big”; “Corpulent, burly”; “Of conspicuous magnitude; palpable, striking; plain, evident, obvious”; “glaring, flagrant, monstrous”; “Lacking in delicacy of perception”; “Rude, uninstructed, ignorant”; “extremely unpleasant, disgusting, repulsive, obnoxious” (OED). “Mystical” suggests “a spiritual character or significance by virtue of a connection or union with God which transcends human understanding” and “mysterious, enigmatic, obscure, esoteric; of hidden meaning or nature; having an unknown or mysterious origin or influence.” “Nude” is the only relatively unambiguous adjective, “naked, bare” (OED).

There is little lexical overlap here, but the associative texture is inexhaustible. The line divides into two segments, each consisting of two words, the first a dactyl, the second monosyllabic. Something about the first segment sounds dark and masculine. The consonants and vowels are all pronounced near the back of the mouth, giving it a deep throatiness. The lips never come together, and even the teeth remain apart until the very last sound ([s]). “Hankering” suggests the kind of feverish, lustful, insatiable desire permissible among men but taboo among women. We often encounter the phrase, “I have a hankering for a...,” which suggests a masculine flaunting of sensual nature. We associate all the meanings of “gross” (corpulence, flagrancy, rudeness, roughness) with masculinity. Together, “hankering” and “gross” suggest late-night revelries, whoring, gambling, brawling—the libertine’s licentious life of sin.

Something about the second segment sounds light and feminine. The vowels are all pronounced near the front of the mouth, and the consonants (except for the [c]) all require some contact among teeth, lips, and tongue (the alveolar [t], [d], and [s], the nasal [m] and [n], the liquid [l]), so that it sounds free and tripping. The mystical tradition has always had a certain affinity with female seers and prophets, suggesting as it does a deeply subjective, private, personal religiosity susceptible to enthusiastic outbursts.⁷³ And nudes in painting are so resolutely female that when we speak of *male* nudes we feel the need to specify the sex, as with “*male* strippers” or “*male* models.”⁷⁴ (If Whitman were, as Keller insists, really so committed to his macho persona, he could have written “naked” instead. “Naked” is far more masculine than “nude.”) Together, “mystical” and “nude” suggest the sacred groves, the white temples, of Botticelli and Titian, the virgin oracle’s life of grace and purity.

At the same time, “nudity” pairs with the rough sexuality of the first segment, while the deep, private, enthusiastic upwelling of “mystical” pairs with the deep, private, gnawing lusts of “hankering.” A hankering suggests a desire, the “mystical” a divine inspiration, so strong it separates the subject from other people. Whitman has meticulously engineered a rich reconciliation of opposites, a dense weave of contrast and complementarity. Each adjective resonates throughout a robust body of interlocking meanings, and prompts the meanings of every other adjective into abrupt, compelling saliency. Whitman would have weakened the texture somewhat if the subject were explicit (“I am hankering,

⁷³ Mack, Phyllis. *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (1992).

⁷⁴ Type “Renaissance nudes” into google images, and all of them are female, aside from a few feminized St. Sebastians.

gross, mystical, nude”). We would begin with a vague picture in mind, likely inspired by Whitman’s persona: a bearded man, somewhat rough around the edges, reckless, enigmatic, in touch with nature. We would then match each adjective to the picture, and this would require us to suppress certain meanings and associations. And we would lose something in tailoring such a paradoxical, ambivalent, monstrous presence to concrete human dimensions. The signature of each word would no longer be foregrounded. Neither would they knit together in such an intricate, enticing atmosphere.

Line & couplet.

Atmosphere is the dominant principle of cohesion in *Leaves of Grass*. Diverse textual elements all evoke the same atmosphere from the reader, and this is what holds the composition together.⁷⁵ As I put forward in the introduction, the only way to determine whether or not two or more signatures harmonize is to identify overlapping associations. Each association does not pass through mind one-by-one. Instead, they gather together in a unified aesthetic impression. If so, then a shared body of associations ought to indicate complementarity among a set of signatures.

Another way Whitman writes atmospherically is by eliminating or de-emphasizing competing principles of cohesion. Whitman usually dispenses altogether with narrative, chronology, and rhyme scheme. Some thematic or philosophical reference is often

⁷⁵ How is a theme different from an atmosphere? Does not a poem express an atmosphere like any other feeling? Whitman answers this question for us. Themes and thoughts are “display[ed]” to the reader. The author represents, expresses, articulates. But atmosphere resists representation, expression, articulation. It must instead be evoked *from* the reader. The author arranges “the conditions in which the atmosphere appears,” (*Atmospheres* 31) and that’s the most that can be done. Whitman’s principle of cohesion, then, resides not in reference but in effect. It is not an experience the poem refers back to continuously, but an experience the poem continuously precipitates in the reader.

present, but vaguely, loosely, inconsistently. It is typical for theme in lyric to take the form of an emotion expressed or a thought considered or an insight intimated. Whitman expresses emotions. He considers thoughts and intimates insights. But he often jumps from emotion to emotion, thought to thought, insight to insight, without any clear, consistent order. Sometimes, it seems as though the theme is there only so that Whitman can depart from it. In other cases, Whitman promises an insight he never divulges. I argue that these are ways for him to alert us to atmosphere as the one principle of cohesion the poem *does* consistently observe.

When I read “Song of Myself” for the first time and a line stuck out for me, I could usually explain why: this line is profound, this line has an apt analogy, this a striking turn of phrase. But one line in particular elicited an effect that I could not account for: “Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine” (2.9). I was arrested. I stopped and lingered a long while, I turned it over in my head. And for years afterward this line would arise unprompted from memory. My critical vocabulary at the time could not account for its power. It consists of a bare list of images. No metaphors, no analogies, no profound thoughts. And the images in isolation are not especially striking or unexpected. How, then, does this line provoke such a powerful effect? I assumed that my response must be anomalous, a purely subjective, accidental reaction indicative of no particular merit or compositional achievement. And then I found that atmosphere holds the key. The images refer collectively to no unitary thought or emotion or message, further no narrative or line of action. A loose erotic theme binds them together, but Whitman departs from it at whim. There is nothing erotic about “echoes” and “ripples,” while

“buzz’d whispers” and “silk-thread” are only implicitly erotic. Whitman has selected *these* words and arranged them in *this* order to engineer an evocative complementarity among signatures. We can substantiate this complementarity by tracing out networks of associative overlap.

First, we have two short chains of somatic similitudes, three terms each. The first chain suggests diminishing over distance: “echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers.” Just as echoes repeat the voice in diminishing waves, so ripples reproduce the force of an initial drop in diminishing waves. “Buzz’d whispers” suggests voices diminished to an incomprehensible lull. The second chain joins together images of long, fine extension. The love-root is long and fine, like silk threads; silk-threads are long and fine, like vines.

But this is only the most superficial layer of associative texturing. We also have to consider how cultural associations come into play as well. “Buzz’d whispers” suggests the private intimacies of lovers. Sure, these could be the whispers of gossiping school-boys or anyone whispering about anything, except that the word “buzz’d” suggests lazy, idyllic summer days, the birds and the bees, the “buzzing in the ears” so suggestive of the sensation of falling in love. It’s impossible to read “buzz’d whispers” without some hint of romance, and this hint finds confirmation in “love-root,” which suggests the trope, common enough in English poetry, of love taking root in the heart with ecstatic parasitism. Even if the reader is ignorant, as I was at first, that “love-root” is *Ligusticum Porteri*, they are likely to sense that “love-root” refers to a particular kind of plant.

The reader is less likely to identify what kind of plant a “silk-thread” is, because it’s not actually a plant. But Whitman does not discourage the mistake. After all, he did

put “silk-thread” between two plants, and the hyphenation suggests a colloquial name for some gossamer species of vegetation. Maybe Whitman sets the trap for us deliberately. But why, though? Why would Whitman *want* us to imagine “silk-thread” as a plant? Maybe this enhances the harmonies, de-emphasizes the dissonances, between the silk-thread and the flanking vegetation. “Silk-thread” both harmonizes and clashes with the “love-root” on one side and the crotch-vine on the other. It suggests the effete, the over-fine, the exotic, wealth, aristocratic delicacy preserved in sacred isolation. Nothing could be less raw, less rugged and unrefined. But “silk-thread” also suggests sensuality and luxuriance, which in turn connote the erotic.

I have so far shown how each term works in relation to adjacent terms. But the line would not hold together very well if certain associations did not weave throughout the whole. The light subtle finenesses of the “love-root,” the “silk-thread,” and the “vine” reinforce the light subtle finenesses of “echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers,” softening the eros in a haze of healthy, joyful innocence. At the same time, “echoes,” “ripples,” and “buzz’d whispers” connote a sense of mystery. People usually hear echoes in dark, deep, cavernous regions. Fiction often uses echoes to suggest isolation and a sense of having gone astray. Ripples veil depths in murky ruffling. “Buzz’d whispers” exclude the reader from a private conference. “Love-root” suggests the mysteries of love and of the deep dark soil, “silk-thread” shrouds and veils, “crotch” the most private and secret parts of the body. So we have fineness, lightness, and subtlety on the one hand, deep dark mystery on the other. As a whole, the line resolves into an oracular atmosphere, at once ecstatic and tranquil, soothing and suggestive.

The next passage comes from “Spontaneous Me,” which consists of almost a single long catalogue. I have numbered the lines for convenience of reference:

- (1a) The body of my love, the body of the woman I love, the body of the man, the
body of the earth,
- (1b) Soft forenoon airs that blow from the south-west,
- (2a) The hairy wild-bee that murmurs and hankers up and down, that gripes the
full-grown lady-flower, curves upon her with amorous firm legs, takes his will of
her, and holds himself tremulous and tight till he is satisfied;
- (2b) The wet of the woods through the early hours,
- (3a) Two sleepers at night lying close together as they sleep, one with an arm slant-
ing down across and below the waist of the other,
- (3b) The smell of apples, aromas from crush’d sage-plant, mint, birch-bark,
- (4a) The boy’s longings, the glow and pressure as he confides to me what he was
dreaming,
- (4b) The dead leaf whirling its spiral whirl and falling still and content to the
ground (“Spontaneous Me,” 15-26).

An overt erotic theme knits throughout the passage. But there is only a subordinate principle of cohesion. Whitman undercuts it at every turn. Each erotic line is paired with a line of nature imagery that has little to do with eros. The theme, then, functions as a kind of springboard: Whitman leaps away from it again and again, abruptly and conspicuously, and this draws attention to atmosphere as the only principle of cohesion that brings *all* the parts together. The pairings bear no allegorical or logical or analogical relation to one an-

other. They come together only at the level of association. By this, I do not mean that we associate, say, “two sleepers lying at night” with “the smell of apples,” but that “two sleepers lying at night” carries one set of associations, “the smell of apples” another, and these two sets harmonize and contrast. I will analyze the associative texture of each pairing one by one.

Pairing (1). (1a) is a sequence of bodies arranged from least to most firm, from most to least alive. Whitman could mean by “my love” a particular romantic interest with a concrete, living body. He could also mean the *feeling* of his love, in which case the “body” would indicate the wholeness, the “main, central, or principal part” (OED). He could also mean the “collective mass” (OED) of everything he loves. In any case, “the body of my love” remains vague, indeterminate. I find myself picturing something red and squishy, like a heart. The female body is associated with softness and mutability, the male body with hardness and consistency. “The earth” is emblematic of the firm and the stable in the Western tradition, unchanging and impassive. Love is associated with the heart, which pumps blood through the veins. It is also that experience in which we feel the most alive, the most active and stimulated. The first two soft clauses (“the body of my love” and “the body of the woman I love”) end with “love,” a verb, an action. But the last two clauses terminate in nouns, emphasizing their solidity. The earth is cold and inert, the resting place of the dead. Reading the line out loud, it is hard to resist the temptation to lower the voice in volume and pitch as the line hardens and cools.

Between (1a) and (1b) we have a series of contrasts: a long line vs. a short line, human vs. natural imagery, firm bodies vs. soft wind. Whitman brings out the contrast by

cutting abruptly from the hard, stable earth to the quick and shifting wind. Yet (1b) also weaves subtle complementarities through the associative fabric of (1a). These are not “soft, forenoon *winds*,” but “soft, forenoon *airs*.” Wind is steady, strong, seething. Airs are delicate, flickering. They come from the south, which we associate with warmth, and are thus suggestive of lovers’ pantings—but not insistently so. Whitman could easily have written “soft forenoon *pantings*,” but that would have been too on-the-nose. Whitman would prefer the association to remain half-conscious, a hint, a light inflection. Otherwise, he would run the risk of eclipsing other associations.

It is hard not to picture the forenoon airs blowing from behind the speaker. There are two reasons for this. First, the airs blow *from*, and it is idiomatic to speak of things coming *from* behind, but sounds odd to say *from* in front. Second, the airs blow from the *South-west*, which we associate with the below, the beneath, the under-side. To have the wind at one’s back suggests a favourable adjustment in relation to prevailing conditions, a forward momentum. Forenoon “airs” suggests the faint beginnings of some momentous experience, like falling in love. At the same time, (1b) suggests a faint sense of foreboding. Part of the foreboding results from the contrast between warm, vital, human eros and a cool, natural breeze. We go from firm, live, sexualized bodies to a weak leak of breeze, and there is something melancholy about the shift. The “southwest” direction suggests the bright red warmth of the sinking sun. And the preponderance of o’s (“soft,” “forenoon,” “blow,” “from” “south-west”—seven out of the line’s fourteen vowels), a

decidedly sad sound,⁷⁶ brings out the melancholy of the wind's soft mowing. (1b), then, complements both the erotic mood and the downward, deathward progression of (1a).

Pairing (2). The contrasts here are particularly salient. (2a) happens to be the longest line of the entire passage, (2b) the shortest. Bright colours (the bee, the flower) contrast with drab (the bark, the earth, darkened with the damp). The hottest part of day (when the bees are most active) contrasts with the coolest. (2a) is packed with verbs, (2b) conspicuously verbless. (2a) concludes with a tight cluster of short clipped dentals and i-sounds, “tremulous and **t**ight **t**ill he **i**s **s**atisfied,” suggesting active, aggressive, forward motion. (2b) has a grand total of two plosives, and both come at the ends of words. The line generally favours fricatives and approximants, “the **w**et of **t**he **w**oods **t**hrough **t**he **e**arly hours.” It sounds dark and haunting.

Again, the lines sustain no logical or analogical relation. They come together only at the level of association. Something about “the wet of the woods through the early morning” suggests the post-coital emptiness that follows the fever of seduction, the guilt of a regretful adolescent at the first signs of dawn. A forest accumulates dew throughout the night, and the dew persists at the encroachment of the day. Sex accumulates dampnesses of its own that, if ever they cool and linger into the next morning, sharpen the detachment and estrangement with which a calm and cool mind regards an earlier frenzy. The night's moisture seems out of place in the light and warmth of morning; the post-coital mood grates against the blithe hustle of the daily grind.

⁷⁶ See Reuven Tsur's *Toward a Theory of Cognitive Poetics*.

Pairing (3) has perhaps the lightest contrasts and complementarities. There is nothing overtly sexual about (3a) at first. Whitman builds up over no fewer than three prepositions, “down across and below,” to the genital-fondling, which intrudes into the air of benign, complacent affection with a slight jolt of surprise. The speaker’s tone in no way reflects the scandal of his own explicitness. His tone holds unruffled and serene. The three sequential prepositions dilute the intensity, cushion the impact. This is a routine, bucolic union, the kind characteristic of long-term relationships between people who know each other well. The fever of the wild-bee has receded into a hum-drum domesticity. The romantic spark has cooled to a slower but also more sustainable ember.

(3b) likewise suggests domesticity, this time of the kitchen counter and the dining-table, the agrarian life of simple wants and complacent attachments. We in no way associate apples directly with a steady romantic flame, but the two images share a rich and striking associative constellation. The apple is ripe. We know because unripe apples do not smell. Like relationships, apples mellow as they ripen. The texture softens, the flavour dulls its edge of sharp acidic intensity, but rounds out into a richer sweetness. So the spark softens, dulls, but obtains, in return, a gentler disposition. Whitman contrasts the wild-bee’s brief coital intensity to the slow erotic burn of the two sleeping lovers, the intense odour of the flower to the subtle smell of apples. Flowers suggest the wild, the flashy, the extravagant, the exotic; no fruit is more ordinary than the apple. Sage and mint, two common household spices, release their flavours best when dried and “crush’d.” Sage especially is never eaten raw, another image of rich, subtle pleasures released only in the wake of dwindled freshness and intensity. I cannot help but picture the

sage, mint, and birch-bark in a deep, surrounding darkness—of the cellars where the sage hangs up to dry, of the forest where the birch bark peels, like the darkness that surrounds the sleepers. We associate darkness with secrecy, secrets with intimacy, intimacy with prolonged, meaningful acquaintance.⁷⁷

Pairing (4). A boy confides sexual fantasies, probably to an older man. The “glow” refers to the flush of arousal, but also to the eager radiance of youth. The “pressure” is more indeterminate. We associate pressure with sex and sexual arousal generally, but the boy and his confidant do not appear to come into contact. The meaning of pressure, then, is vague but rich. It brings to mind the pressure of imagined bodies, the accelerated blood pressure, the coercive pressure of the urge, the pressure of a future masturbation session. Whitman leaves it ambiguous to whom the glow and the pressure belong, the boy or the man. On the one hand, this could suggest a shared or vicarious arousal. On the other hand, the rhythm is soft, lilting, serious, suggesting detachment. It is likely, then, that the speaker is both engaged *and* detached—the good-humoured indulgence of an adult who remembers and sympathizes but cannot reciprocate the enthusiasm of youth.

The autumnal colours of the leaf reflect the erotic glow from an image of death and decay. Perhaps the man, in the presence of the boy, senses how far he has receded from his prime. Perhaps he can feel himself falling, like the leaf, “still and content to the ground.” A warm colour tinges a surface that is cool to the touch: so the man regards the boy’s arousal with nostalgic, cool-headed humouring, a mood for which the dead leaf supplies a striking objective correlative. The leaf also reflects something of the boy’s per-

⁷⁷ Have I not just shown how (3b) is analogous to (3a)? I have not. I have only shown how their *associations* are analogous.

spective. The combination of the “glow,” “pressure,” adolescence, and frustrated sexual urges are all suggestive of masturbation. Ejaculate tears from the body, the sperm cells quickly dying, the mind satisfied, “still and content.” Again we encounter the sad, detached mood that follows sexual release, the “wet of the woods” that follows the “wild-bee” and its possessive frenzy. The atmosphere of autumn beautifully augments the melancholy of extinguished passion. The heat of the summer, the heat of the moment, has quelled, but scraps of warmth remain, in reddening foliage and ripening fruit, in bleak coital detritus.

Catching Whitman's drift: the stanza.

It is common for Western poetry of the early nineteenth century and before to follow a teleological structure. The poem has an *end*. This end can be an ultimate moral insight or a resolution of a problem. In narrative poems like *Beowulf* or *Paradise Lost*, it might be a climax, a culmination of the plot. In journey poems like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* or Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline*, it may be a destination or objective. The poem is structured in a progression towards this end. Teleological structure, then, functions as a principle of cohesion. It marshals all compositional parts toward a common point, granting the poem a sense of focused direction and accelerating momentum. Whitman's poems often assemble the scaffolding of a loose teleological structure and then violently tear it down. They promise an end they then brazenly withhold. No insight manifests. No resolution proceeds. No destination looms into sight. As a result, they lack a sense of focused direction. They meander slowly,

whimsically, and celebrate their slowness and whimsy. I call this “drift,” a term I borrow from one of Whitman’s reproofs against nineteenth-century point-mongering: “The words of my book [are] nothing, the drift of it every thing” (*CPP* 175).⁷⁸ Do not ask *what is the point* or *moral* or *purpose* of a Whitman poem. The point, moral, purpose is to simply drift and enjoy the movement for its own sake. *Leaves of Grass* does not drive consistently forward. It drifts, rabid for minor provocations and distractions. In drawing attention to the elision of a terminus, the disavowal of a teleological structure, Whitman establishes atmosphere as the presiding principle of cohesion.

The seventeen long lines of “Not Heaving from my Ribb’d Breast Only” defer some ultimate significance to a denouement that neither consummates nor closes, except to dispel the suspense so elaborately accumulated:

Not heaving from my ribb’d breast only,
 Not in sighs at night in rage dissatisfied with myself,
 Not in those long-drawn, ill-supprest sighs,
 Not in many an oath and promise broken,
 Not in my wilful and savage soul’s volition,
 Not in the subtle nourishment of the air,
 Not in this beating and pounding at my temples and wrists,
 Not in the curious systole and diastole within which will one day cease,
 Not in many a hungry wish told to the skies only,

⁷⁸ For more on Whitman’s drift, see Srikanth Reddy’s “Digression Personified: Whitman, the New York School, and the Drift of Poetry.” Reddy sees drift as Whitman’s alternative to the imperialistic teleology and the focused, rational Enlightenment self bound up in the American mythos of progress (3-4).

Not in cries, laughter, defiances, thrown from me when alone far in the wilds,
 Not in husky pantings through clinch'd teeth,
 Not in sounded and resounded words, chattering words, echoes, dead words,
 Not in the murmurs of my dreams while I sleep,
 Nor the other murmurs of these incredible dreams of every day,
 Nor in the limbs and senses of my body that take you and dismiss you contin-
 ually—
 not there,
 Not in any or all of them O adhesiveness! O pulse of my life!
 Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in these songs (*CPP*
 273-74).

A single sentence sprawls across seventeen long lines, the first sixteen of which start with a “not” or “nor.” Usually, when the word “not” precedes the subject, it implies a positive rejoinder, as in the formula “not x, but y”: “it’s not coffee that I want, but tea.” The negative clauses function to emphasize the positive clause. The more negative clauses, the more pronounced the emphasis. For example, in the sentence, “It’s not coffee, not milk, not juice, not water, not beer, but tea that I want,” tea receives the emphasis not of one, but of four negative clauses, and sounds considerably more testy as a result. When a positive clause does not arrive at the end, the sentence sounds incomplete. “It’s not coffee, not milk, not juice, not water, not beer that I want” leaves the question itching in the air: well then, what *do* you want? These sixteen lines, these sixteen negative clauses, lead the reader to expect that a positive clause will come at the end of the poem. We have the

promise of a teleological structure. The full meaning of each line is deferred to a final consummation, a final insight, that will resolve the mounting tension and receive the emphasis. But no positive clause ever arrives. Instead, we get a final negative clause: “Not in any or all of them O adhesiveness! O pulse of my life! / Need I that you exist and show yourself any more than in these songs.”

These two lines are complex and enigmatic enough to require close, careful parsing. They follow a common formula in the English language: “*x* is not necessary *here* any more than it is *there*.” Usually, this formula implies that *there x* is obviously unnecessary, and so it follows that it is unnecessary *here* as well, as in “you don’t need a dog-sled to get around Canada any more than Alabama.” If we apply the formula blind to context, then we can paraphrase Whitman thus: “adhesiveness need not divulge itself through these poems, and therefore need not divulge itself through the above bodily expressions.” The problem with this paraphrase is that adhesiveness *does* divulge itself through Whitman’s other poems. The likeliest paraphrase, then, becomes, “adhesiveness does not divulge itself in my other poems except to a certain degree and in certain ways. It ought not to divulge itself in the above bodily expressions except to an equivalent degree and in equivalent ways.” How, then, does adhesiveness divulge itself through Whitman’s other poems? Or perhaps the more relevant question might be, how does Whitman *think* adhesiveness divulges itself through his other poems? In “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” Whitman “sets out with the intention” of indicating

some point-characteristics which I since see... were bases and object-urgings
toward those ‘Leaves’ from the first... The word I myself put primarily for

the description of them as they stand at last, is the word Suggestiveness... I seek less to state or display any theme or thought, and more to bring you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or thought—there to pursue your own flight. Another impetus-word is Comradeship as for all lands. Other word-signs would be Good Cheer, Content, and Hope. (*CPP* 666-667)

Whitman uses “comradeship” as a synonym for “adhesiveness,” and groups it with “Good Cheer, Content, and Hope” as the central “themes or thoughts” in *Leaves of Grass*. He has not “displayed” these themes—he has not exposed them to the harsh light of direct representation. He has, rather, elevated the reader into the “atmosphere” of Comradeship, Good Cheer, Content, and Hope. The concluding lines of “Not Heaving From My Ribb’d Breast Only,” then, likely mean, “adhesiveness need not divulge itself through the past fifteen lines with their litany of sighs except indirectly, insofar as they tincture the atmosphere.” The atmosphere of what? Probably the atmosphere of the poem. They do, after all, comprise its content. If so, then at the very moment that we expect to find a hub of insight that ties together the previous fifteen lines in a tidy consummation, we are referred back to the particulars, to the details, as consummately meaningful in and of themselves. The effect is similar to those stories in which the hero, after an arduous journey, finally arrives at the destination, only to find that it was an empty pretence for the journey, which was the real destination all along. Whitman implies a primary principle of cohesion, teleological structure, which he then disavows, drawing attention to atmosphere as the primary principle of cohesion.

It is not only common but even typical for Whitman's poems to conclude so inconclusively. "Spontaneous Me" closes with a "bunch pluck'd at random from" and "toss[ed]... carelessly to fall where it may" (*CPP* pp. 262). Section thirty-three of "Song of Myself," the longest catalogue in a particularly catalogue-heavy poem, traverses the American landscape via a breathless lexicon of prepositions and participles—"By," "Along," "Over," "Under," "Upon," "At," "Through"; "Weeding," "Prospecting," "Scaling," "Walking," "Approaching," "Looking," "Wandering," "Coming," "Voyaging," "Hurrying," "Speeding," "Carrying," "Storming"—beckoning us toward a destination that turns out to be no destination at all, but more traveling: "I tread day and night such roads" (*CPP* pp. 221-223). "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" opens in a prepositional tension that Whitman holds for twenty-two long lines. Something, which we do not learn until line eighteen is "A man," proceeds *out* of a cradle, through fifteen prepositions ("out," "out," "over," "down," "up," "out," "from," "from," "from," "from," "from," "from," "from," "from," "as"), through a chain of participles ("twittering," "rising," "passing," "throwing," "confronting," "taking," "leaping"),⁷⁹ to the somewhat flat "a reminiscence sing" (22). We already know that Whitman is singing, and we already know that what he sings is a reminiscence. Why, then, such an extended prepositional suspense? "Out from Behind This Mask" similarly starts off by indicating that *something* is coming "out" from behind a "bending, rough-cut mask," "out" from behind "the convolutions of this glob," but we don't learn what until, fifteen lines later, we find that it's "a look," and nothing but a look (15). The first catalogue Whitman's audience would have

⁷⁹ Ezra Greenspan has carefully analyzed Whitman's addiction to participles in "Some Remarks on the Poetics of 'Participle-Loving Whitman'" (2006).

encountered in the 1855 edition drifts slowly through a list of disconnected urban trivia, concluding in, “I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart” (*CPP* 195). Perhaps Whitman here teaches us the secret of navigating his catalogues. Perhaps we should mind the “show” or the “resonance” of each item and then depart on to the next one. Perhaps we should attend to each surface and the thoughts, feelings, associations it brings to mind, without any irritable reaching after something else or something (as critics like to say) *more*. That would certainly be the surest way to appreciate atmosphere.

No passage drifts quite so languidly as the eighth section of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Whitman builds a gentle momentum detached from any sense of progress. He implies a destination that never arrives, an insight that never crystallizes:

O western orb sailing the heaven,

Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I walk’d,

As I walk’d in silence the transparent shadowy night,

As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night after night,

As you droop’d from the sky low down as if to my side, (while the other stars all
look’d on,)

As we wandered together the solemn night, (for something I know not what kept
me from sleep,)

As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how full you were of woe,

As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool transparent night,

As I watch’d where you pass’d and was lost in the nether ward black of the night,

As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
 Concluded, drop't in the night, and was gone.

For an entire month the speaker has wondered what the star confided to him, and now he understands. But before he can take us in on the secret, he has to proceed through an extended procession of adverbial clauses. He does not tell us where he goes, only that he is *going*: “a month since I walk'd,” “As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,” “As we wandered together the solemn night.” All three adverbial clauses say more or less the same thing. You would think that after so much walking there would be some progress. Instead, Whitman is fastidious to emphasize the *absence* of progress. The night is “transparent,” the speaker informs us. How can night, how can darkness, be transparent if the eyes cannot see through it? Whitman could just as easily have written “opaque,” but he insists on transparency. Opacity suggests the night closing in around like walls—one kind of blindness. Transparency suggests vast and open distance—another kind. Opacity limits vision through obstruction. Transparency liberates the eye so that it can see everything, but there is nothing to see. Progress can only be nominal across such homogenous terrain.

The passage moves from night, through night, to night. The word “night” tolls monotonous at every line, every step. The verbs of motion, “walk'd,” “wandered,” arrive unaccompanied by the customary prepositions. The speaker does not walk *through* the night, he simply walks it. He and the star do not wander *across* the night, they simply wander it. Prepositions imply progress. “As I walk'd in silence through the transparent shadowy night” would have implied a trajectory, from one end of the night to the other.

The absence of any *through* or *across* evokes a sense of aimlessness, of walking, of wandering, for the sake of walking and wandering.

At the seventh line, the motion transfers from the speaker to the night. Now it's the "night" that "advance[s]," the "ground" that "rise[s]." There is in aimless wandering, as in drifting, a reciprocity of direction between subject and environment. In the absence of any fixed destination, the path continuously negotiates between the subject's dispositions and the gestures of the terrain. The speaker compromises with the night and ground in deciding where to go. He moves as he is moved, drifting beyond our ken as silent as the star, promising a revelation it does not divulge. He and the star he follows begin to blur into one another. He addresses it in the second person, but two very important verbs remain stubbornly in the first person. He says, "I watch'd where you pass'd and *was* lost in the nether ward black of the night" (my emphasis) where he should say, "where you pass'd and *were* lost"; he says "you sad orb, / Concluded, drop't in the night, and *was* gone" where he should say "and *were* gone." The speaker himself has "droop'd," like the star, "from the sky low down" as if to *our* side, *we* have "wandered together" with him from a place no less shadowy than the night to an even murkier conclusion. We have not gone anywhere, we have not learned anything, but perhaps, like the speaker, in a month or so, the revelation will crystallize for us, not in the form of any expressive content, but as a feeling, a peculiar movement, a drift, an atmosphere, too subtle to appreciate in the moment, but persistent and even arresting, provided it has the care and charity required to mature.

Conclusion: "Rain," by John Ashbery.

(*John Ashbery: Collected Poems 1956-1987*, pp. 59-63).

I.

The spoon of your head
crossed by livid stems

The chestnuts' large clovers wiped

You see only the white page its faint frame of red
You hear the viola's death sound
A woman sits in black and white tile

Why, you are pale

Light sucks up what I did
in the room two months ago
Spray of darkness across the back,
Tree flowers...

Taxis took us far apart
And will...

over the shuddering page of a sea
The sofa

Hay
blown in the window
The boards dark as night sea
Pot of flowers fixed in the wind

Last year... the gray snow falling
The building... pictures
His eye into the forest

And people alright
Those stiff lead rods

Silver in the afternoon light
 Near where it stops
 Where they drink tea from a glass smaller than a thimble
 Head of shade

And many stiff little weeds that grew
 beside the kidney-shaped lake
 A wooden cage painted green
 sand

And the green streets though parallel run
 far from each other

Cupped under the small lead surface of that cloud you see you are
 going to die
 Burnt by the powder of that view

The day of the week will not save you

Mixture of air and wind
 Sand then mud
 A flower, lost in someone's back yard

II.

The first coffee of the morning.
 Soon the stars.

and broken feldspar black
 squares against the light
 message—a handwriting
 Dip pen in solution

They would be playing now
 The sky
 Flowers sucked in—stone rhinunculus
 amaryllis—red
 Freesia and existence

The letter arrives—seeing the stamp

The van
New York under the umbrella

A photograph of what

Fumes
Features in the lake
The light
The shadow of a hand
soft on the lock
staring wax
scraped with a pin, reflection of the face

The time
principal thing

Train
Hand holding watch
silver vase
against the plaid

Comfort me

The hedge coming up to meet me that way in
the dried red sun

The meadows down I mean

At night

Curious—I'd seen this tall girl

I urge the deep prune of the mirror

That stick she carries

The book—a trap

The facts have hinged on my reply

calm

Hat against the sky

Eyes of forest

memory of cars
 You buried in the hot avenue: and to all of them, you cannot
 be and are, naming me.

III.

The missing letter—the crumb of confidence
 His love boiling up to me
 Forever will I be the only
 In sofa I know
 The darkness on his back
 Fleeing to darkness of my side

It is the time
 We do not live in but on
 And this young man
 like a soldier
 Into the dust
 Words drip from the wound
 Spring mounts in me
 of dandelion—lots of it
 And the little one
 the hooded lost one
 near the pillow

A fine young man

IV.

The storm coming—
 Not to have ever been exactly on this
 street with cats
 Because the houses were vanishing behind a cloud
 The plants on the rugs look nice
 Yet I have never been here before

Glass

regime

Which is in the tepee of the great city
I build to you every moment
Ice lily of the sewers
In a thousand thoughts
Mindful in a thousand dresser drawers you pull out
Mufti of the gray crocus silent on the wood diamond floor
Or if I asked you for a game with rods and balls
You stood up with me to play

But fatal laxity undoes
The stiff, dark and busy streets
Through which any help must roll.
The third of runners who are upon are past you
The opal snows the moppet
You behind me in the van
The flat sea rushing away

I said earlier that everything has atmosphere in some way—places, buildings, works of art, situations, historical epochs. But to what extent is it right to speak of the atmosphere of capitalism? A Target parking lot, an overpass, a warehouse, a grain silo—these places have atmosphere too, but there’s something empty or negative about it. Homogenization, industrialization, quantification have a way of depleting places of what is characteristic about them, and the atmosphere fades along—or, rather, the atmosphere remains, but eerily, as if it has been hollowed out. Capitalism, then, has atmosphere, but it is a somewhat rotten atmosphere. Emerson says it is by atmosphere that “the universe [is] made safe and habitable, not by science and power” (*CW* 1.126): atmosphere engenders a sense of intimacy between people and places. The atmosphere of capitalism has the opposite effect. There is something irreducibly alien about a warehouse that no quantity of welcome mats or coffee mugs can redress.

Capitalism erodes the presiding sense of place. Ashbery knew this all too well. He even denied the status of *place* to one of capitalism’s most emblematic urban environments:

If you live in New York... you are probably not doing so because you like it or you feel it expresses you, but because it’s the most convenient place: there are people, jobs, concerts and so on, but it doesn’t add up to a place: one has no feeling of living *somewhere*... New York is really an anti-place, an abstract climate (*Selected Prose* 114).

New York’s “climate,” its atmosphere, is “abstract.” What could Ashbery mean by this? That New York has no character, no charm, certainly. But what do we mean when we say

that a place has no character? Perhaps something similar to what we mean when we say, cruelly, that a person has no character: they have character, just a boring one. There is nothing distinctive about them. They are too much like too many other people we know. In the same way, a place without character has character, just a boring one. There is nothing distinctive about it. It is too much like too many other places we know. The atmosphere of suburban Chicago is only marginally different from the atmosphere of suburban Los Angeles is only marginally different from the atmosphere of Toronto. Capitalism homogenizes atmosphere and thus deadens it. But even this does not get at the crux of the matter. It's not just that urban atmospheres are too much the same these days. Otherwise, Ashbery would just be polishing up a cliché. Atmosphere has become *abstract*. Abstractions take us away from the world. They make things easier to measure, quantify, and regulate, but they also stand between us and experience. An "abstract climate," then, is an atmosphere that does not bring us into commerce with the world, but estranges us from it. "Atmosphere," Böhme tells us, "is what relates object features and constellations of the environment with my bodily feeling in that environment" (1). It brings the hard, aloof world outside into communication with what resides most deeply inside. Place inflects mood and mood inflects place. We achieve a wordless intimacy with our inert surroundings. But urban capitalist environments remain implacably aloof. The atmosphere inflects the mood, yes, but it only makes one feel a stranger and alone. Capitalism alienates from lands as well as labour.

For Ashbery, writing as he does in a tradition that stretches back through Stevens to Whitman to Emerson, alienation equates with damnation. As I claimed in chapter two,

the Transcendentalists revise the Christian agon between spirit and the flesh into a rapprochement. Salvation rests not with the liberation of the soul from its mortal coil, but from their harmonious integration. To be cut off from nature is to be cut off from God, a theme Stevens elaborates within a disenchanted frame: under “the malady of the quotidian” (9), “The Man Whose Pharynx was Bad” is “too dumbly in [his] being pent” (4), too circumscribed within the limits of his ego, to take up the world in ecstatic dilation. Ashbery suffers the same malady with a wryer, more resigned cadence: “Like a rainstorm, he said, the braided colors / Wash over me and are no help... This severed hand / Stands for life, and wander as it will, East or West, North or South, it is ever / A stranger who walks beside me” (“Worsening situation,” 1-7). We are not too far here from the darkest passages of Emerson’s “Experience”: “souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with” (*CW*, 3.49). A certain experiential nullity divorcing self from other occupies the nadir of each life’s lonely arc. For Ashbery, the abstraction of climate, the negation of atmosphere, represents a torment far more crippling than a deficiency in urban charm.

The interludes cultivate atmosphere as a stimulus to deeply meaningful experiences. I conclude with Ashbery because he discloses the dreariness of a life denied atmosphere’s intermittent illuminations. Harold Bloom sees *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962) as taking “too massive a swerve away from the ruminative continuities of Stevens and Whitman” (104). I argue that nowhere else is Ashbery more Whitmanian, because nowhere else does atmosphere supply his primary principle of cohesion, and nowhere else does he eliminate competing principles of cohesion so ruthlessly. Ashbery composes

the atmosphere of capitalism, or capitalism's deadening of atmosphere. I consider "Rain" his most successful attempt.

Rain is atmospheric in a meteorological sense: it falls from clouds which collect in the atmosphere. Rain is also atmospheric in a phenomenological sense: it's always raining in sad and scary movies, and every white noise machine has a "rain" option. Just as rain condenses the atmosphere into heavy drops, so rain condenses the *atmosphere* into a pervasive affective hue. Rain is tranquil and meditative. It belongs in the tranquil meditations of Du Fu and Wang Wei. But rain is also dreary and depressing. It belongs in a poem about the effect capitalism has on the presiding sense of place. Capitalism homogenizes culture: rain douses everything in a homogenous sheen. Rain turns everything grey. So does capitalism: skyscrapers, asphalt, cubicle partitions—grey is the emblematic shade of technocracy.

Congruous signatures unify otherwise dissimilar images. The greater the dissimilarity, the more salient the atmosphere. We have four images altogether, two per line: spoon-head, lividness-stems. To understand how each image inflects the atmosphere of the poem, it is first necessary to consider how the two pairs work within themselves.

Spoons and heads look similar. Both are round. Heads perch on top of necks, spoons on top of handles. But spoons are cold, and we associate coldness with sadness and death; heads are warm, and we associate warmth with joy and life. Spoons are smooth, passionless, and artificial; heads crackle with natural thought and emotion. Spoons suggest the hum-drum, the mundane, the routine, the quotidian. In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," it is by the unit of "coffee spoons" that dreary, mechanical

modern life “measure[s]” itself out (50). Heads are the seat of human thought and emotion, where wonder and imagination happen. A set of mostly negative, depressing associations cluster around the spoon, while mostly positive, affirmative associations cluster around the head. How do these associations interact? The head is the tenor. It takes on the qualities of the spoon, and to do this it has to give up some of its own qualities. Human warmth and passion cools off; human expression is polished smooth; human imagination suffocates in the hum-drum, the routine. Usually this sort of metaphor tells us something about the person—their attitudes, their feelings, their relation to the speaker. When Mary Oliver describes a sick woman walking as though she were “balancing a sword in her body” (“August”), or when Jeramy Dodds describes the “mammogram hands” of an overbearing party guest (“Heimlich” 2), an intricate profusion of mental content gathers in a single, crisp image. “The spoon of your head” has the opposite effect. It tells us nothing about the “you” it modifies. It emphasizes only a quality every body has alike: otherness, alterity, the distance that intervenes between separate minds.

“Livid stems” resolves neatly into “stems that are bluish or purplish-grey.” However, “livid” more commonly applies in its figurative sense, “furiously angry” (OED), so angry that the skin darkens straight through the spectrum of reds and into purple extremes. These stems, blowing in the wind, are *like* intense rage. How so? First, it is uncommon to speak of “stems” without any connection to the plants they support. Usually, we specify the stems *of* flowers, or the stems *of* cilantro. When we speak of stems, just stems, it suggests that the rest of the plant has rotted or been cut away. “Lividness” signifies an ill-intent that purples, that damages the body. So the stems and lividness overlap in a sense of

corruption—a corruption that *concentrates*. The stem sheds its petals, its leaves, honing itself down to a sharp and narrow shaft; lividness hones the self to a sharp and narrow purpose.

Superficially, spoons and stems could not be more different. Spoons are round, stems are straight and slender; spoons are metallic and artificial, stems are natural. But just as the human head is polished into a smooth, unthinking spoon, so the stems acuminate to the steely resolve of lividness. The couplet weaves together across a field of shared associations: de-animation, reduction, emptying-out, paring-down, deprivation, corruption. A certain sense of violated domesticity is also present here. A spoon suggests morning joe and wholesome soup, a grandmother's collection of novelty utensils. But when Ashbery reverses the idiomatic expression "the head of a spoon" into "the spoon of your head," all comforting domesticity sours in an uncanny, dehumanizing metaphor. A pot of flowers on a dining room table, a carefully-tended flower garden in the front yard, are emblematic declarations of domestic triumph. But a vase, a garden, shrill with "livid stems," declares the victory of more despotic forces.

Flowers are everywhere in "Rain," and everywhere they effuse this same atmosphere of violated domesticity. In any other poem, "a pot of flowers fixed in the wind" (19) would suggest carefree domestic bliss. But in "Rain," these associations contrast eerily with the presiding gloom:

Hay

blown in the window

The boards dark as night sea

Pot of flowers fixed in the wind (16-19).

Hay, metonymic of the farmer's masculine, outdoor labour and its utilitarian orientation towards the land, intrudes into the nurturing femininity of domestic space. The atmosphere of home, of intimacy, of cosiness and containment, ruptures further from within. The floorboards are "dark as night sea." Wood, Böhme tells us, suggests "easiness and warmth... and solidity" (2017, 144). Domestic space is easy: a place where people mingle who know each other well. It is warm: the hearth occupies the centre of the home. It is solid: a bulwark of stability in an unstable wilderness. The sea is ruthless, cold, and fluid, a canonical symbol of the indifference and flux of the external world. A vaster flux and mute indifference erodes the modern home, assimilating the intimate interiors of family life to the ebbs and flows of the market. Against such a background, this "Pot of flowers fixed in the wind" is devastating. The felicitous arrangement of nature in nature, flowers in the spontaneous promptings of the wind, turns sour. This wind blows off the "night sea" from the previous line, casting all warmth and intimacy under a cold, indifferent pallor.

The motif returns in "A flower, lost in someone's back yard," an image of faded joy, and then again, under an even starker emphasis:

They would be playing now

The sky

Flowers sucked in—stone rhinunculus

amaryllis—red

Freesia and existence (51-55).

The tone suggests the sober nostalgia of a parent dwelling upon children lost to death or distance, for which the abrupt cut to “The sky” supplies a chilling objective correlative. The “Flowers” have been “sucked in” like a sharp breath, suggesting an apprehensiveness that holds natural spontaneity in reserve. I find myself picturing the almost cartoonish image of the earth inhaling flowers beneath a bare and dismal surface. The flowers could be the spontaneous charms of a personality held captive in Prufrock-like neurosis. Or they could gesture towards the spectral children implicit in the first line, retrieved from their play like flowers back into the grave. The short catalogue of flowers, “rhinunculus,” “amaryllis,” “Freesia,” sounds almost Whitmanian in its gleeful profusion of bare natural details, except that Whitman’s characteristic ebullience rings hollow here. Some impasse intervenes between the American empire Whitman prophesied and the American empire that has come to fruition. Ashbery gives no clue as to what this impasse might be. Perhaps the democratic multitude has found all too apt a consummation in the coercive monad of the market. Whatever the reason, Whitman’s voice echoes briefly, faltering and uncanny. Ashbery ends the stanza with the addition of “existence” to his bouquet. Existence is like a flower. It buds, it opens, it is beautiful and ordered, an integrated harmonious whole. And existence too has been “sucked in,” sequestered in the dark terrain of modernity.

Whitman’s is not the only voice that echoes here. One hears the fretful cadence of an old woman in “Why, you are pale” (7) and “a fine young man” (106). The colloquialism of “I’d seen this tall girl” jars with the speaker’s generally sombre cadence, suggesting the interruption of another voice. If restored to context, these disjointed phrases would

likely recover a warm, chatty quality—an aging mother’s playfully brusque cajoling about her daughter’s appearance; an utterly benign, indulgent flirtation between an old woman and a young man; blue-collar men talking about women together. Decontextualized, they ring tinny and mechanical, like scraps of conversation overheard through an air vent.

As a balloon only saddens a rainy day, so bright, happy images enhance the poem’s dreary atmosphere. “The first coffee of the morning” (45) suggests the optimism of fresh starts and new beginnings. “Stars” (46) are symbolic of hopes and dreams. Together, you would think they would combine into an energizing affirmation of the American dream: you get up, make your coffee, and pursue your ambitious without stopping to care about what other people think. The word “soon” subtly erodes this fantasy. The middle-class American dream remains, at the end of the day, far too dreamlike, obscured in the sleepy haze of routine: the day passes in a blur of mechanical labour, and before you know it, the stars are coming out.

Ashbery gives us nature, but withholds its tranquilities. On its own, “the chestnuts’ large clovers” (3) would intimate the soothing sway of leaves in the breeze, the meditative calm of forests, the blissfulness of city parks. But these leaves have been “wiped”—a chilling associative dissonance. We wipe things down to clean and sterilize. Wiping removes things of any properties that might interfere between the object and some procedure. It eliminates the distinguishing stuff of nature—dirt, odours, bacteria—and prepares the object for instrumentalizing attention. The kitchen staff wipes down the counter before they start cooking, the surgeon wipes down the patch of skin that will receive the in-

cision, the scientist wipes down the lab equipment. Wiping connotes impassive effacement of a thing's peculiar nature. When we want to indicate that something was eradicated maliciously, we say it was *decimated*, *ravaged*, *destroyed*. When we want to indicate an impassive, passionless eradication that leaves behind no residue, we say it was *wiped out*, or *wiped off the face of the earth*. The word "wiped" here thus functions to sterilize the chestnut leaves of nature's charm and magic. We see a similar device at work in the image of the "kidney-shaped lake" (31). On its own, a lake suggests calm, relaxation, peace. A kidney puts one in mind of the abjection and disgust that arise when what is supposed to be inside the body comes out into the open air. There is nothing calming, relaxing, peaceful, about the image of a giant kidney, wet and glistening, in a forest or a city park. On its own, "shade" (29) suggests the blitheness of a short rest, a zone of respite carved out from a muggy, crowded street. But "head of shade" suggests the anxiousness of living in another's shadow, of suffering another's scrutiny.

Nature has lost something of its edifying power, something of its capacity to humble and inspire. So, perhaps, has "Nature," Emerson's spiritual manifesto. The "transparent eyeball," Emerson's most famous and emblematic image, is somewhat odd, dissonant, even grotesque. But Emerson's characteristic grandiosity makes it work. In "Rain," the transparent eyeball contracts to more modest dimensions. It no longer fits the sublimity of the Transcendentalist ethos, and so there is nothing to offset its oddness, its dissonance:

Last year... the gray snow falling

The building... pictures

His eye into the forest

And people alright

Those stiff lead rods

Silver in the afternoon light

Near where it stops

Snow suggests calm, purity, and beauty, the delicate architecture of the snowflake. The colour “gray” modifies these associations. *Gray* snow is not pure. *Gray* snow suggests some fundamental corruption in the order of things. Snow falls straight from the clouds; nature proceeds straight from the source. If the snow is gray, the wellspring of nature itself must be polluted. Ashbery does not specify what kind of “building” this is. In English it is unusual to call a house or a bookstore or a church a “building,” except when talking about buildings in general. We usually reserve “building” for the squarest, greyest offices, too squat to merit the awe of a skyscraper. “Pictures” could be paintings or it could be photographs. Why would Ashbery pair these two images, the building and the pictures, together? And why is this pairing so haunting? Perhaps it has something to do with the implicit likeness between the black, square, uniform windows of an office building and paintings arranged along a wall, or photographs along a table. Perhaps the pairing prompts us to imagine a row of paintings or a row of photographs, black and glassy, uniform, effaced of artistic content. Against such a dismal background, “His eye into the forest” resounds, eerie and uncanny. Ashbery subtly directs the reader to imagine the eye dislodged from its socket. He does this in two ways. First, the eye is singular. Ashbery does not write, “His *eyes* into the forest.” This is *one* eye, which implies that it comes

separately from the other eye and so the rest of the body as well. Second, no verb specifies what the eye *does* into the forest. It could be entering, it could be simply looking. But if Ashbery had written, “His eye *goes* into the forest” or “His eye *looks* into the forest,” he would prompt the readerly imagination to assemble a human body, a human agent, to do the going and the looking. The absence of a verb suggests mechanical, intentionless movement, as if the eye operated independent of the “He.” Emerson’s eyeball was disembodied. Ashbery’s is disembodied too, but in a more gruesome sort of way that brings out something inescapably gruesome from Emerson’s original image. Where Emerson describes an ecstatic dilation into the orbic wholeness of a single, giant eyeball, Ashbery describes a rupture in the flimsy whole a self comprises.

Emerson celebrates a dissolution of the ego in which “the name of the nearest friend sounds... foreign and accidental” (11). Throbbing with the “currents of the Universal Being” (11), the mind strikes through to the great, existential questions, in light of which one’s personal attachments and material interests seem trivial. Ashbery’s eye engenders a more troubling form of detachment. Consider the effect of the word “alright” in “And people alright.” It could mean that the “people” are just fine, that things are going well for them. But in the company of “Those stiff lead rods,” other significances rise into chilling saliency. Alrightness is not the most ambitious state of affairs a person can aspire to. It suggests the deadening complacency of the nine-to-five suburban lifestyle—a mechanical comfort untroubled with passion or imagination. “Alright,” especially when it arrives at the end of a phrase, can also indicate grudging acceptance, as if the speaker

were conceding that yes, perhaps in a certain sense of the word, these “stiff lead rods” are, in fact, people.

Later, Ashbery re-orders “his eye into the forest” into “Eyes of forest” (85). There is something intrinsically uncanny about imputing to unconscious objects the faculty of sight. One needs no more information than the title to know that *The Hills have Eyes* (1977) is a horror film. A large, dark, enveloping otherness surveils us beyond our knowing. Emerson’s “occult relation between man and vegetable” (11) returns here with implicit malignancy. And here too the eyes are surrounded in dehumanizing imagery: “memory of cars / You buried in the hot avenue” (86-87). I take Ashbery to be describing a traffic jam here. Could anyone have chosen a more apt correlative for the alienation of the modern subject under capitalism? We are never more cruel to one another than when we’re driving. It’s hard for care and charity to intervene between such dark, anonymous shuttles: “To all of them,” to all the other drivers, “you cannot / be,” your existence as a person is rather difficult to recognize (87-88). Driving has a way of making people quick to judge and eager to hate. Traffic jams exacerbate these tendencies. Never are we more desperate to blame, and never is culpability so diffuse—it’s never unambiguously so-and-so’s fault, it’s always a jam in a system beyond anyone’s control. Usually, a common source of suffering brings people together. Traffic jams are different. We all have a common interest, we’re all under the duress of the same situation—and we hate each other for it.

And yet, even in a system engineered to keep us all apart, to occlude our shared humanity; even in a crowd of unseen others to whom “you cannot / be”; nevertheless, “you

are, naming me” (88). A few rare, meaningful attachments survive, constitutive of who and what we are. The “you” and the “I,” taken “far apart” in “taxis” (12), separated by “the shuddering page of a sea,” correspond, and the poem follows one of their letters from composition (4) to arrival (56) to misplacement (89). We have the rudiments of narrative, but not much more. The trajectory is all too easy to miss, attenuated as it is across so many lines, diluted with so many extraneous details, hinted only through a few light, inconspicuous touches—“You see only the white page its faint frame of red” (4); “Dip pen in solution” (50); “The letter arrives—seeing the stamp” (56); “The missing letter—the crumb of confidence” (89). In many ways, the narrative seems to be there only for the sake of fragmentation. Atmosphere supplies the dominant principle of cohesion. The nostalgia and regret of two old flames goes along quite well with the atmosphere of capitalism. An intimacy cools, the domestic promise of a life together is renounced. Capitalism institutes a “Glass // Regime” (113-114): alienation thickens the distances between people and things, people and other people, and glass is a kind of thickened distance. A truncated romance institutes a kind of glass regime of its own. An invisible yet impenetrable partition intervenes between the self and the world.

Something about Transcendentalism comes to an end in “Rain.” Ashbery defiles Transcendentalist tropes. Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” becomes an image of the poet’s Oedipal self-blinding: the world is a far darker place than *Nature* imagines. Whitman’s lilacs wilt into “livid stems,” his all-embracing “I” beholds its mirror image in capitalist homogenization. With atmosphere we have lost a source of rich and meaningful experi-

ence, perhaps the most important source, such that the kind of utopian optimism we find in Whitman and in certain moods of Emerson rings somewhat hollow.

But this is only one of Ashbery's many perspectives. There are other poems, like "The One Thing that Can Save America," in which Ashbery strikes the same note of hopeful resignation as Emerson's "Experience"—resignation as a trial for hope, renunciation as a preparation for grace, which comes only by accident and when nobody's looking. If we set out in search of the deepest, the most meaningful, the most intense experiences, Emerson avers, they will elude us. We cannot will them into being any better than we can will ourselves to laugh or sleep:

All our days are so unprofitable while they pass, that 't is wonderful where or when we ever got anything of this which we call wisdom, poetry, virtue. We never got it on any dated calendar day. Some heavenly days must have been intercalated somewhere, like those that Hermes won with dice of the Moon, that Osiris might be born. (*CW* 3.46)

The richest moments, Emerson suggests, arrive unannounced, and seem mundane enough under the frail light of the present. It is only later upon reflection that we realize their significance. If we pursue them, they will disperse. They come on their own or not at all. They sneak up on us while we are distracted. There is, then, no method to living meaningfully except the resignation of method. We have to stop striving and let something beyond ourselves act upon us. Ashbery recommends a method of waiting—analogue, perhaps, to the Quaker practice of silencing the "I" until grace grants irresistible conviction:

All the rest is waiting

For a letter that never arrives,
 Day after day, the exasperation
 Until finally you have ripped it open not knowing what it is,
 The two envelope halves lying on a plate.
 The message was wise, and seemingly
 Dictated a long time ago.
 Its truth is timeless, but its time has still
 Not arrived, telling of danger, and the mostly limited
 Steps that can be taken against danger
 Now and in the future, in cool yards,
 In quiet small houses in the country,
 Our country, in fenced areas, in cool shady streets. (37-49)

Yes, the atmosphere of the American landscape has begun to erode. Yes, places blur into a
 “rush at eye level / Beating themselves into eyes which have had enough / Thank you, no
 more thank you” (6-7). Yes, we are ushered from one end of life to the other too quickly
 to appreciate or fully take in what we see. But even so, there are certain places, “cool
 yards,” “quiet small houses in the country,” “cool shady streets,” where atmosphere sur-
 vives, and it is there that experience obtains meaning; it is there that the promise of the
 “letter” comes a little closer to fulfillment.

We cannot take the title, “The One Thing That Can Save America,” seriously.
 That would be too ham-fisted for Ashbery. But an ironic or satirical reading would be a
 little ham-fisted, too. Some claims cannot be stated precisely, and so we can either be

silent or state them with self-reflexive imprecision. Ashbery brings us into the neighbourhood of a hypothetical idea that the poem casts in a favourable light. Atmosphere may not save America, but something about atmosphere might orient towards salvation. Ashbery's poems recognize in atmosphere something more than personal enjoyment. Ashbery never gets very explicit about what this "something more" might be, but it stands beyond material human flourishing. It puts us in touch with that "place (activity or condition)," as Charles Taylor describes it, where "life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be" (*A Secular Age* 5). A certain religious value continues to imbue atmosphere, in our time as in Emerson's.

So far, I have done my best to avoid evaluation. But I would not call my analysis entirely descriptive either. A certain class of objects and experiences, to be described well, demand at least the spirit of affirmation: I must renounce critical distance and speak with faith and charity. Literature and the kind of religion the Transcendentalists espoused, it seems to me, both fall into this class. What they are for us depends on what we think of them: description necessitates an evaluative element.

At this threshold, where the dissertation enacts its own process of ending and disciplinary standards relax somewhat, I thought I would wade a little deeper towards the evaluative end of the process and take stock of some larger guiding parameters. This dissertation pursues ends far beyond its scope. The driving agenda behind most of my intellectual inquiry since the second year of my undergrad in 2008 has been to justify formalism to an intellectual climate that is largely suspicious of it. I am not competent to tackle this project head-on, but I have chipped away at it steadily from one small corner for the

past three years or so, and I thought I would conclude by gesturing after the larger aims I have in view. It will be a rather broad, sweeping gesture. I won't be able to thoroughly substantiate all my claims. I will have to sacrifice detail and rigour for breadth. My aim is to be suggestive and speculative rather than conclusive. These are somewhat fragmentary notes that I cannot bring into a complete picture. I lay them out here only to give a sense of the horizon that I've been working within.

I do not believe in God or the Over-soul or any sort of universal consciousness, and so I cannot believe in the religious sentiment. But I have found that literature (and the arts in general) can bring about a very similar state of mind (which for the sake of clarity and convenience I will call the "epiphanic mood"). In addition to the symptoms that the Transcendentalists explicitly identify with the religious sentiment (a weakening of the ego, a clear-headed tranquility, attention to profound rather than trivial concerns), I find that during an epiphanic mood what I want to do lines up neatly with what I should do, I better tolerate the knowledge that terrible things can happen at any time, and I find it easier to admit when I am wrong. This epiphanic mood supplies the only reliable relief from anxiety that I have so far encountered. And, what is most important to me, as long as it lasts I find it possible to be somehow self-conscious and spontaneous at the same time.

While I would not go so far as to claim that atmosphere is the stimulus to epiphanic moods *par excellence*, I would say that it is an uncommonly successful one. There is, unfortunately, no way to establish this claim conclusively. Atmosphere and epiphanic moods are both at least partly subjective. All we can do is amass personal testimony. This is, in fact, one of the more important objectives I have assigned myself in

this dissertation. Literature supplies perhaps the most articulate form of personal testimony that we have, and the American literary tradition testifies profusely to atmosphere as a stimulus to virtuous states of mind. I would append a testimony of my own: the most intense epiphanic moods, in my experience, have come from intensely atmospheric works. And, in my experience, criticism has been able to enhance their elicitation.

Philosopher Sophie Grace Chappell has argued that we should consider virtue ethics not as an exclusive moral theory that competes with other moral theories (deontology and consequentialism being the major players), but as an essential component of any complete moral theory (185). In deciding what is ethical, it is not sufficient to consider *only* the consequences of a line of action or *only* to what degree a certain line of action accords with a moral principle. We also have to consider what virtues, what character attributes, what habits of mind, a line of action cultivates.

If atmosphere precipitates epiphanic moods, and if epiphanic moods are conducive to virtue and ethical action, then careful formalist attention to atmospheric works of literature carries powerful political significance in and of itself. Criticism derives political significance not only from deciphering the text into a normative statement or exposing historical tensions the text suppresses (in both of which I recognize a certain kind of value), but also from engendering virtuous states of mind and predisposing us to virtuous action. This is a kind of political value for which aesthetic form, so overwhelmingly marginalized since the rise of cultural studies in the 1970s, is essential. The activist potential of an aesthetic education is not fully developed without it.

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Appendix

“Beauty,” by Jones Very.

I gazed upon thy face,—and beating life (1)
Once stilled its sleepless pulses in my breast,
And every thought whose being was a strife
Each in its silent chamber sank to rest;
I was not, save it were a thought of thee,
The world was but a spot where thou hadst trod,
From every star thy glance seemed fix on me,
Almost I loved thee better than my God.
And still I gaze—but 'tis a holier thought
Than that in which my spirit lived before, (10)
Each star a purer ray of love has caught,
Earth wears a lovelier robe than then it wore,
And every lamp that burns around thy shrine
I fed with fire whose fountain is Divine.

“Aurora Borealis,” by Christopher Pearse Cranch.

Arctic fount of holiest light (1)
 Springing through the winter night,
 Spreading far beyond yon hill
 When the earth is dark and still,
 Rippling o’er the stars, as streams
 Ripple o’er their pebble-gleams—
 Oh, for names, thou vision fair,
 To express thy splendors rare!

Blush upon the cheek of night,
 Posthumous, unearthly light, (10)
 Dream of the deep-sunken sun,
 Beautiful, sleep-walking one,
 Sister of the moonlight pale,
 Star-obscuring, meteor-veil,
 Spread by heaven’s watching vestals,
 Sender of the gleamy crystals,
 Darting on their arrowy course
 From their glittering, polar source,
 Upward where the air doth freeze,
 Round the sister Pleiades— (20)
 Beautiful and rare Aurora,
 In the heavens thou art their Flora,
 Night-blowing Cereus of the sky,
 Rose of amaranthine dye,
 Hyacinth of purple light,
 Or their Lily clad in white!

Who can name thy wondrous essence,
 Thou electric Phosphorescence?
 Lonely apparition fire!
 Seeker of the starry quire! (30)
 Who hath won thy mystery?
 Mortal science hath not ran

With thee through the Empyrean,
 Where the constellations cluster
 Flower-like on thy branchy lustre!

After all the glare and toil,
 And the daylight’s fretful coil,
 Thou dost come so mild and still,
 Hearts with love and peace to fill;
 As when after revelry (40)
 With a talking company,
 Where the blaze of many lights
 Fell on fools and parasites,
 one by one the guests have gone,
 And we find ourselves alone,
 Only one sweet maiden near,
 With a sweet voice low and clear
 Murmuring music in our ear—
 So thou tallest to the earth,
 After daylight’s weary mirth. (50)

Is not human fantasy,
 Wild Aurora, likest thee,
 Blossoming in nightly dreams
 Like thy shifting meteor-gleams?

But a better type thou art
 Of the strivings of the heart,
 Reaching upwards from the earth
 To the *Soul* that gave it birth.
 When the noiseless beck of night
 Summons out the *inner* light, (60)
 That hath hid its purer ray
 Through the lapses of the day—
 Then like thee, thou northern Morn,

Instincts which we deemed unborn,
Gushing from their hidden source,
Mount upon their heavenward course,
And the spirit seeks to be
Filled with God's Eternity.

“The Sphinx,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Sphinx is drowsy, (1)
 The wings are furled;
 Her ear is heavy,
 She broods on the world.
 “Who’ll tell me me my secret,
 The ages have kept?—
 I awaited the seer,
 While they slumbered and slept;—

“The fate of the man-child;
 The meaning of man; (10)
 Known fruit of the unknown;
 Daedalian plan;
 Out of sleeping a waking,
 Out of waking a sleep;
 Life death overtaking;
 Deep underneath deep?

“Erect as a sunbeam,
 Upspringeth the palm;
 The elephant browses,
 Undaunted and calm; (20)
 In beautiful motion
 The thrush plies his wings;
 Kind leaves of his covert,
 Your silence he sings.

“The waves, unashamed,
 In difference sweet,
 Play glad with the breezes,
 Old playfellows meet;
 The journeying atoms,
 Primordial wholes, (30)
 Firmly draw, firmly drive,
 By their animate poles.

“Sea, earth, air, sound, silence,
 Plant, quadruped, bird,

By one music enchanted,
 One deity stirred,—
 Each the other adorning,
 Accompany still;
 Night veileth the morning,
 The vapor the hill. (40)

“The babe by its mother
 Lies bathed in joy;
 Glide its hours uncounted,—
 The sun is its toy;
 Shines the peace of all being,
 Without cloud, in its eyes;
 And the sum of the world
 In soft miniature lies.

“But man crouches and blushes,
 Absconds and conceals; (50)
 He creepeth and peepeth,
 He palters and steals;
 Infirm, melancholy,
 Jealous glancing around,
 An oaf, an accomplice,
 He poisons the ground.

“Outspoke the great mother,
 Beholding his fear;—
 At the sound of her accents
 Cold shuddered the sphere:— (60)
 ‘Who has drugged my boy’s cup?
 Who has mixed my boy’s bread?
 Who, with sadness and madness,
 Has turned the man-child’s head?’”

I heard a poet answer,
 Aloud and cheerfully,
 “Say on, sweet Sphinx! thy dirges
 Are pleasant songs to me.
 Deep love lieth under

These pictures of time; (70)
They fad in the light of
Their meaning sublime.

"The fiend that man harries
Is love of the Best;
Yawns the pit of the Dragon,
Lit by rays from the Blest.
The Lethe of nature
Can't trace him again,
Whose soul sees the perfect,
Which his eyes seek in vain. (80)

"Profounder, profounder,
Man's spirit must dive;
To his aye-rolling orbit
No goal will arrive;
The heavens that now draw him
With sweetness untold,
Once found,--for new heavens
He spurneth the old.

"Pride ruined the angels,
Their shame them restores; (90)
And the joy that is sweetest
Lurks in stings of remorse.
Have I a lover
Who is noble and free?--
I would he were nobler
Than to love me.

"Eterne alternation
Now follows, now fled;
And under pain, pleasure,—
Under pleasure, pain lies. (100)
Love works at the centre,
Heart-heaving alway;
Forth speed the strong pulses
To the borders of day.

"Dull Sphinx, Jove keep thy five wits!
Thy sight is growing blear;
Rue, myrrh, and cummin for the Sphinx—

Her muddy eyes to clear!"—
The old Sphinx bit her thick lip,—
Said, "Who taught thee me to name?
I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow, (111)
Of thine eye I am eyebeam.

"Thou art the unanswered question;
Couldst see they proper eye,
Alway it asketh, asketh;
And each answer is a lie.
So take thy quest through nature,
It through thousand natures ply;
Ask on, thou clothed eternity;
Time is the false reply." (120)

Uprose the merry Sphinx,
And crouched no more in stone;
She melted into purple cloud,
She silvered in the moon;
She spired into a yellow flame;
She flowered in blossoms red;
She flowed into a foaming wave;
She stood Monadnoc's head.

Through a thousand voices
Spoke the universal dame: (130)
"Who telleth one of my meanings,
Is master of all I am."

“The Forerunners,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Long I followed happy guides,— (1)
 I could never reach their sides.
 Their step is forth, and, ere the day,
 Breaks up their leaguer, and away.
 Keen my sense, my heart was young,
 Right goodwill my sinews strung,
 But no speed of mine avails
 To hunt upon their shining trails.
 On and away, their hasting feet
 Make the morning proud and sweet. (10)
 Flowers they strew, I catch the scent,
 Or tone of silver instrument
 Leaves on the wind melodious trace,
 Yet I could never see their face.
 On eastern hills I see their smokes
 Mixed with mist by distant lochs.
 I meet many travellers
 Who the road had surely kept,—
 They saw not my fine revellers,—
 These had crossed them while they slept. (20)
 Some had heard their fair report
 In the country or the court.
 Fleetest couriers alive
 Never yet could once arrive,
 As they went or they returned,
 At the house where these sojourned.
 Sometimes their strong speed they slacken,
 Though they are not overtaken:
 In sleep, their jubilant troop is near,
 I tuneful voices overhear, (30)
 It may be in wood or waste,—
 At unawares 'tis come and passed.
 Their near camp my spirit knows
 By signs gracious as rainbows.
 I thenceforward and long after
 Listen for their harplike laughter,
 And carry in my heart for days
 Peace that hallows rudest ways.—

“The Snow-Storm,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky, (1)
 Arrives the snow, and, driving o'er the fields,
 Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
 Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
 And veils the farm-house at the garden's end.
 The sled and traveller stopped, the courier's feet
 Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
 Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
 In a tumultuous privacy of storm.

Come see the north wind's masonry. (10)
 Out of an unseen quarry evermore
 Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
 Curves his white bastions with projected roof
 Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.
 Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
 So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he
 For number or proportion. Mockingly,
 On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
 A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
 Fills up the farmer's lane from wall to wall, (20)
 Maugre the farmer's sighs; and, at the gate,
 A tapering turret overtops the work.
 And when his hours are numbered, and the world
 Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
 Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
 To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
 Built in an age, the mad wind's night-work,
 The frolic architecture of the snow.