

Article

John Muir and the Botanical Oversoul

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Abstract: The relation of influence between Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir helps to illuminate Muir's characteristic brand of nature religion, namely his mysticism. This relation is especially clear, I argue, in both Emerson and Muir's writing on their mystical affinities for plant life. Applying Harold Bloom's renowned theory of literary influence, I draw lessons from Emerson and Muir's mystical writings to highlight the ways in which Muir acquired from Emerson the plant-related vocabularies and practices that came to mediate his nature-inspired mysticism and also how Muir can be said to have surpassed Emerson's own mystical example, thus opening new vistas of consciousness in human-plant relations in the nineteenth-century American religious experience.

Keywords: John Muir; Ralph Waldo Emerson; plants; mysticism; Harold Bloom; literary influence; nature writing

Human-plant relations have played a crucial role in the historical development of Americans' religious consciousness. I propose to examine this role for the light it sheds on an exemplar in this history, John Muir, and specifically for the ways in which Muir's innovative perspective on human-plant relations helped chart the course for a new evolution in American nature religion. Muir, I will argue, improved upon the mystical precedent first established in the mid-nineteenth century by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose *Nature* first illuminated the mystical potential inhering in humans' awareness of and connection to the plant world. However, whereas Emerson's mystical vision waned as he aged, Muir's only strengthened due to the unparalleled affinity he possessed for the plant kingdom. To read Muir's mystical writings on plants is thus to see Emerson both reflected and outpaced in Muir's sensate metaphysical insights into the thoroughgoing psychosomatic interconnectedness humans and plants all share.

Much scholarly attention has been given to John Muir's intellectual connection to Ralph Waldo Emerson. Most interpreters take two particular approaches to comparing their lives and work. On the one hand, scholars examine Muir and Emerson's connection within the frame of intellectual history, linking them as key figures in the development of Anglo-American environmental literature.¹ On the other, scholars elucidate Muir's merits apart from Emerson's influence.² The former interpretations are typically attempts at excavating the origins and historical permutations of the American nature writing canon. Emerson and Muir are exemplars in a lineage that runs roughly from Jonathan Edwards to Bill McKibben. The latter conversely seek to show how Muir came to stand upon his own two feet, casting off his debt to Emerson to devise his own *sui generis* intellectual contributions. Hence if Muir is not an

¹ A representative list of studies aligned with this first approach to the Muir-Emerson connection includes (Fleming 1972, pp. 7–91; Simonson 1978, pp. 227–41; Nash 1982; Albanese 1990; Callicott 1990, pp. 15–20; McKusick 2000; Gatta 2004; Eber 2005 and Purdy 2015).

² For studies aligned with this second approach, see, e.g., (Fox 1981; Devall 1982, pp. 63–86; Cohen 1984; Branch 1997, pp. 127–49; Holmes 1998, pp. 1–25 and Holmes 1999).

inheritor of Emersonian debts, he is a detractor. Rare are careful considerations of Emerson's specific influence upon Muir's thinking, so invested are interpreters in the aforementioned either-or biases.

Here, I argue we need not be forced to choose between these two options—which is to say, we need not follow Muir's past interpreters too closely in the concept of literary influence they employ. By treating the tension between artistic originality and an awareness of preceding traditions—a tension inherent to modern literature—as a zero-sum game, scholars inevitably limit their potential interpretive strategies. This will not do for interpreting Muir, and it especially will not do for interpreting Muir in light of what I take to be his robust Emersonianism. Even though Muir succeeded in distinguishing himself from Emerson, that distinction, in true Emersonian fashion, paradoxically serves to reflect Emerson's influence all the more.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Muir's overtly mystical writings, which are coincidentally the least understood parts of his literary corpus. Muir has long been hailed a spiritual luminary, a fact supported by his recent inclusion in the *Orbis Modern Spiritual Masters Series* (Muir 2013), which places him in the company of Simone Weil, Mahatma Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh, among many others. For all the acclaim Muir's mysticism has received, though, questions still abound regarding his characteristic brand of nature religion. Was Muir's mysticism a product of his influences (especially that of Emerson)? Or were his mystical experiences unique, completely lacking in spiritual antecedents? To these questions, no clear scholarly consensus has emerged. Scholars are divided, in fact, in their affirmation of one inquiry over the other. Catherine Albanese and Stephen Fox are prime examples of the split. Albanese, for her part, claims the religious continuities between Muir and Emerson are unmistakable. Emerson "provided a powerful language," she says, by which Muir articulated his own mystical experiences (Albanese 1990, p. 103). Fox strongly disagrees, arguing, "No written authority ever influenced [Muir] as much as his own private speculations in the wilderness." Muir was no mere disciple of Emersonian religious experience, Fox concludes: "Emerson . . . only corroborated ideas that Muir had already worked out independently" (Fox 1981, p. 82).

Scholars' outmoded ideas of literary influence are at least partly to blame for this impasse. The categories operative in their analyses—originality versus an outgrowth of tradition; uniqueness versus a reproduction, however novel, of pre-established forms, styles, and concepts—have long been antiquated. This side of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, few give credence to such categorical binaries.³ Bloom argues that all literary innovation emerges from the complex dynamics of psychological agon. To escape a precursor's shadow, talented writers carve out a space for their autonomous creativity by swerving from the precursor toward their own strength of originality. Yet all the while the writer simultaneously remains intimately acquainted with the precursor's genius—it is difficult to cut new paths, after all, without a careful knowledge of the paths one's precursors have already blazed. Thus literary innovation comes about as much from prevailing literary tradition as from the singular writer's very desire to *be* original, Bloom says. Emerson's efforts to dissuade writers from merely imitating their precursors to finally, as he puts it, "abide by [their own] spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility" (Bloom 1983, p. 259)—to realize their own literary genius, in other words—makes him an exemplar of the interpretive method Bloom commends.

My argument is that the closer we look at the relation of influence between Muir and Emerson, the sharper Muir's mysticism comes into focus. Muir can be shown to have taken up the aims and objectives of Emerson's mysticism put forth most clearly in Emerson's earliest publication, *Nature* (1836). Chief among those aims was the task of reconciling the gulf between material and spiritual reality. Interestingly, both Emerson and Muir examine this gulf (as well as the potential for its reconciliation) specifically in terms of humans' relationship to plant life. A better understanding of

³ While Bloom focuses his analysis upon modern poetry, especially the British Romantics and their American progeny, his approach is applicable to an analysis of modern prose writing, too. Emerson figures prominently in Bloom's other writings on modern literary influence, including *A Map of Misreading* (Bloom 1975) and *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (Bloom 1983), both of which expand upon the approach first developed in *The Anxiety of Influence*.

Muir's mystically-inflected concept of human-plant relations, then, not only helps define the nature of Emerson's influence on him, but also goes some distance in demonstrating how Muir can be said to have excelled Emerson's own mystical example.

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A close look at Emerson's *Nature* helps to delineate the concepts, vocabularies, and practices which eventually came to mediate Muir's mystical experience. At bottom, *Nature* is a full-throated response to the problem of skepticism, or the question of whether any "congruity" (Emerson 1983, p. 43), to use Emerson's word, subsists between mind and world. The skeptic claims that, try as we might, any mental contact we share with the external, physical world is bound to be incomplete. No thought can bridge the mind-world gap—unity will always evade us. With *Nature*, Emerson hazards a strategy for dealing with the skeptic's dilemma, effectively reimagining the terms of the debate.

The success of *Nature* hinges on the philosophical merits of esoteric vision, a theme Emerson foregrounds in the book's first chapter. There, he introduces a metaphor for perception as peculiar as it is profound:

Standing on the bare ground, —my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, —all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, —master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. (ibid., p. 10)

This reads more like a mystic's recounting than a philosophical treatise. What makes the "transparent eye-ball" passage so philosophically crucial is the way it signals Emerson's renunciation of the traditional quest for epistemic certainty that skepticism encourages. Instead, he calls his readers to a renewed awareness, one in which we are "sensible of a certain recognition and sympathy" we share with the world (ibid., p. 43).⁴ Vision is central to this enterprise; through it, nature is rendered into a universal whole. We no more need to mentally grasp than become, through our eyes, the world that eludes us. Doing this, Emerson says, "all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity"—we realize the wholeness inherent to our simple being in the world.

This all becomes clear in the attention Emerson gives to the affinity he attests to having felt for various flora during the mystical episode he catalogs in *Nature*. Emerson describes a robust sense of connectedness to plant life so as to express the strength of his experience of mind-world unity:

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to

⁴ When it comes to the role that observation-based intuitions played in Muir's thinking, a direct line of influence can be drawn back to Emerson and the Romantic tradition that first inspired him. Emerson distinguishes between direct, experiential knowledge and rational or speculative knowledge as the difference between intuition and tuition. Emerson did not deny that there was value in knowledge gained secondhand, but he believed a higher, more perfect knowledge was available to those who would seek it out for themselves. "[T]he doors of the temple," Emerson writes, "stand open, night and day, before every man" (Emerson 1983, p. 79). The distinction between intuition and tuition has its roots in the Romantic tradition, and specifically in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's misinterpretation of Kant. By "pure reason" (*Vernunft*), Kant meant one's a priori understanding of certain fundamental aspects of reality. Included in these are concepts like time, space, and causality. Our understanding (*Verstand*) of the world, which is gained through experience, is what we build on these a priori concepts; without them our comprehension of reality would simply not cohere. Coleridge's error was to translate "pure reason" into a synonym for intuition, by which Coleridge took Kant to mean a sense of cognitive immediacy which furnishes the knower with insights into things-in-themselves, or the very nature of ultimate reality. See, e.g., (Coleridge 1872, pp. 161–83 and Coleridge 1975, pp. 91–126). Emerson did little to camouflage his dependence on Romantic epistemology, especially early in his career. In places like *Nature*, he wrote, "The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds nutriment and room for its activity. . . . Meanwhile, Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marry Matter and Mind" (Emerson 1983, p. 26). Like both Coleridge and Wordsworth, who discerned in their intuitions a divine power which endows individuals with the means to, as Wordsworth put it, "converse with the spiritual world," Emerson identified in his own intuitive sense the ability to perceive God's very being in worldly phenomena.

me, and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right. (Emerson 1983, p. 11)

Beyond mere psycho-physiological correspondence, what Emerson indicates in *Nature* is that he and the plants that become the object of his gaze are of one accord. Emerson delights in his experience of oneness with the beings subsisting beyond the province of his own mind. Acknowledging plants' interests and agency, Emerson's sympathy for plant life is reciprocated in a mutual, rapturous exchange.

If Emerson's goal in the first chapter of *Nature* is to give insight into his personal vision, his goal for the remainder of the book is to impart a semblance of that vision to his readers. The intellect may regularly "put an interval between subject and object" (Emerson 1969, p. 466), but the aim of every individual should be to overcome the myriad cognitive obstacles to mind-world unity. We do so not just by learning to see nature, but by reading it. The world is "emblematic," says Emerson, comprised of manifold signs and symbols (Emerson 1983, p. 24).⁵ The deeper we begin to see and read nature, including each of its constituent parts, the closer we come to accessing its truths. The logical structure of Emerson's argument follows a similar pattern as this, beginning with an examination of the physical world's common uses before moving on to explore its more explicitly philosophical potential. Initial chapters like "Commodity," wherein Emerson considers the uses of nature as raw material, give way to chapters focusing upon "Beauty," "Idealism," and finally, "Spirit."

As we learn to see as Emerson would have us, a symmetry between mind and world emerges. No longer a collection of objects, the world, to mind's all-seeing eye, becomes a communion of subjects, entwined together in the same patterns of life and subsistence.⁶ This accounts for the reciprocity entailed in Emerson's mystic interactions with local botanical life in *Nature*—a sense of fellow feeling develops from the recognition of one's interconnectedness with other beings. Herein lies "the most basic theme of *Nature* as a whole," writes Lawrence Buell: "physical nature's potential to energize the powers of the human mind once we awaken fully to their inherent interdependence" (Buell 2003, p. 112). When we wake to mind's intrinsic intimacy with world, the charms of an "occult relation" between human and non-human, "man and the vegetable," become clear and tangible. It follows from this that, the more we learn to really *see* nature, the less alien it becomes. We begin to see our own selves reflected in the object of our gaze: "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature" (Emerson 1983, p. 10). This is not philosophical narcissism, wherein human being is mirrored back in all the forms of life it beholds, but rather a philosophy of reciprocal reflection. Humans, in a sense, *are* their vegetable neighbors by virtue of the interdependent relationality all being shares.

Isolated from their philosophical context, many of the ideas contained in *Nature* might seem nonsensical, even fatuous. Numerous critics have reasonably conceived of a lunatic Emerson traipsing through a Massachusetts common imagining himself a life-sized eyeball, nodding inanely at moss and dirt.⁷ The substance of *Nature*'s admittedly peculiar images, however, are the very basis of its philosophical aims. Moments of visionary transformation establish the connection between outward phenomena and the inner, mental realm of self-consciousness. As such, they seek to resolve the intractable dualism bequeathed upon Western philosophy by Descartes and carried through in Kantian idealism. No longer discrete and unrelated domains, mind and world are married in Emerson's

⁵ Emerson draws upon the tradition of theological typology all throughout *Nature*, going so far as to say, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind" (Emerson 1983, p. 20). For an in-depth study of Emerson's use of typology in *Nature*, see (Labriola 2002, pp. 124–33).

⁶ The language of moving from a "collection of objects" toward a "communion of subjects" is Thomas Berry's. See (Berry 2006, pp. 17–18).

⁷ This was the basis of much of the critique leveled at Emerson in the years immediately after *Nature*'s publication, during which the now-famous cartoon drawn by Christopher Cranch of Emerson as a spindly eyeball ambling across the New England countryside was published.

totalizing vision. *Nature* not only sacralizes the physical, vegetable world, but also insists upon a philosophically substantial concept of the cosmos and humans' relationship with it, an idea later supported by the rise of modern evolutionary biology.

Still, Emerson ultimately saw *Nature* as a failure—not necessarily on its philosophical merits, but because, much to Emerson's chagrin, he himself could not maintain the very vision he endorsed. This is evident from Emerson's journal, where he logged his frustrations mere weeks after *Nature's* publication. In ways that recall the "transparent eye-ball" passage, Emerson attests there to the clarity of his connection to the physical world, especially the plant world. But Emerson's journal also reveals a level of uncertainty that is lacking in *Nature's* pages:

I behold with awe & delight many illustrations of the One Universal Mind. I see my being imbedded in it. As a plant in the earth so I grow in God. I am only a form of him. He is the soul of Me. I can even with a mountainous aspiring say, *I am God*, by transferring my *Me* out of the flimsy & unclean precincts of my body, my fortunes, my private will, & meekly retiring upon the holy austerities of the Just & the Loving—upon the secret fountains of Nature. That thin & difficult ether, I also can breathe. . . . Yet why not always so? How came the Individual thus armed & impassioned to parricide, thus murderously inclined ever to traverse & kill the divine life? Ah wicked Manichee! Into that dim problem I cannot enter. A believer in Unity, a seer of Unity, I yet behold two. (Emerson 1965, pp. 336–37)

In July of 1836, weeks before *Nature* went to print, Emerson wrote to his brother William with a similar complaint: "the book of *Nature* still lies on the table," he says, "there is, as always, one crack in it, not easy to be soldered or welded" (Emerson 1939, p. 32). In spite of his flights of perceptual fancy, mind and world remained unreconciled to Emerson's eye. No conventional belief, idea, or vision could sustain for him what he knew to be true during moments of mystical ecstasy (cf. Harvey 2013, Chp. 7). The crack between self and world, mind and matter, did more than convince Emerson of *Nature's* ontological shortcomings. It rendered him distinct from the landscape, alienated from materiality and thus from the reality of his own physical existence. "I cannot tell why I should feel myself such a stranger in nature" (Emerson 1965, p. 74), Emerson confessed in his journal in 1838, more grieving the impermanence of his bond with the world than acknowledging a state of confusion.

Emerson's later writing on plant life proclaims his sense of alienation from the world. In "Nature," published in *Essays: Second Series* (1844), Emerson betrays a sense of his estranged relations with the nonhuman biome that was noticeably absent in 1837's *Nature*. "Plants are the young of the world, vessels of health and vigor," Emerson writes, "but they grope ever upward towards consciousness; the trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted in the ground" (Emerson 1983, p. 547). In "Nature," gone is the seamless correspondence between mind and world that Emerson posited earlier in his career. No longer do the grass and trees bow to Emerson, nor he to them. In place of an "occult relation" abiding between Emerson and the plant world, Emerson rather acknowledges a hierarchy—humans reign supreme while plants "grobe ever upward," conceding both their diminutive status on the register of value as well as humanity's planetary ascendance.

Despite all this, Emerson's career-long engagement with the question of humanity's relationship to nature was enormously influential. No American before him had taken up this question with such philosophical intensity, the effect of which was to authorize and energize the natural world as a live topic in nineteenth-century American literature and beyond. Emerson inspired his readers to see nature anew. One such reader was John Muir.

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It is difficult to say precisely when Muir came under Emerson's influence. During his days as a student at the fledgling University of Wisconsin, Muir was surrounded by such New Englanders as James Davie Butler and Ezra Carr, two of his professors, as well as the latter's wife, Jeanne. All were Emerson devotees. Judging from this, Linnie Marsh Wolfe asserts Muir "was led" to read Emerson's

essays as early as 1862 (Wolfe 1945, pp. 79–80). Yet there is no way to tell exactly what of Emerson’s Muir encountered at Madison, no less how much. As Stephen Holmes writes, “Although it is often presumed that Butler and the Carrs introduced Muir to the writings of Emerson, there is no evidence that they did so, and in fact he seems not to have read [Emerson] until the early 1870s” (Holmes 1998, p. 7).

It was April of 1871, when Emerson mailed Muir two leather-bound volumes of his essays, that Muir began to read Emerson in earnest. We know this from the heavy pencil markings and indexing both volumes received.⁸ So, too, does evidence from Muir’s journal bear this out, where his writing from around the same time is clearly reliant upon patented Emersonian ideas. In September of 1871, for instance, Muir wrote,

The life of a mountaineer seems to be particularly favorable to the development of soul-life, as well as limb-life, each receiving abundance of exercise and abundance of food. . . . My legs sometimes transport me to camp, in the darkness, over cliffs and through bogs and forests that seem inaccessible to civilized legs in the daylight. In like manner the soul sets forth at times upon rambles of its own. Our bodies, though meanwhile out of sight and forgotten, blend into the rest of nature, blind to the boundaries of individuals. (Muir 1979, p. 78)

The blending Muir describes here mirrors the sensate metaphysics Emerson styled in such places as *Nature*. Just as “all mean egotism” vanished for Emerson as he crossed a bare New England common, Muir likewise becomes “blind to the boundaries of individuals,” losing all particularity in his own moment of mystic kenosis. “In *Nature*,” John Gatta writes, “[Emerson] discovers the world’s transparency as well as his own, and thereby dissolves the cognitive distance between personal subjectivity and material objectivity” (Gatta 2004, p. 89). For Muir the result was the same.

Muir’s mystic episodes bear marks of his inclination to seek communion with the world’s cosmic life force, or what Emerson called the “Over-soul,” that which “every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other” (Emerson 1983, p. 386). Muir’s addition to this feature of Transcendentalist philosophy was to explicate its distinctive ecological proportions while describing the American West. Writing about an experience hiking through Yellowstone, for instance, Muir remarks on the ecology of the place, how the rhythms pulsing through the mountains and geysers, springs and tree groves dissolve the seeming chaos of difference into a grand and symphonic harmony. This, Muir says, is the “ordinary work of the world” (Muir 1997, p. 749), the oversoul writ large. Muir’s idea that all beings play constitutive roles in the various ecosystems in which they participate is also demonstrated by the “people” language he used to describe various flora and fauna. It was not unusual for Muir to refer to flowers as “plant people” (see, e.g., Muir 1997, p. 231; Muir 1979, p. 354) so as to indicate the basic integrity of even those life forms too many contemporary observers might be tempted to consider nonessential to the biome.

Despite the similarities in Muir and Emerson’s writings on mystical experience and plants’ role in impelling it, Muir also could be said to have disputed Emerson as much as he drew water from his well. More often than not, Muir’s scribbles in his personal copies of Emerson’s works register a spirit of dissent. Consider a sample of his marginalia, some of which deal directly with passages that evince Emerson’s later estrangement from the plant world, as follows:

Emerson: Not in nature but in man is all the beauty and worth he sees. The world is very empty, and is indebted to this gilding, exalting soul for all its pride. . . . There are as good earth and water in a thousand places, yet how unaffecting!

Muir: They are not unaffecting

⁸ Muir’s personal copy of *The Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1 (1870) is housed at Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. I consulted this volume at the Beinecke Library on April 18, 2016.

Emerson: But the soul that ascends to worship the great God is plain and true; has no rose-color, no fine friends, no chivalry, no adventures; does not want admiration; dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience of the common day . . .

Muir: Why not? God's sky has rose color and so has his flower

Emerson: Flowers so strictly belong to youth, that we adult men soon come to feel, that their beautiful generations concern not us . . .

Muir: No!

Emerson: There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape.

Muir: No—always we find more than we expect

As noted above, scholars typically count Muir as either a dyed-in-the-wool Emersonian or otherwise an original to the core—a “belated Transcendentalist,” as James McKusick calls him (McKusick 2000, p. 173), or a fiercely independent thinker who believed Emerson's philosophy to be, in Bill Devall's words, a “dead end street” (Devall 1982, p. 68). Neither of these sides is correct in its assessments, but neither are they entirely wrong. This is the assumption of Harold Bloom, whose concept of literary influence lights a way past the scholarly standstill in Muir scholarship.

Bloom's focus is Western poetry since Milton, though Emerson, known more for his prose, plays a prominent role in Bloom's analysis all the same. The substance of Bloom's argument is that all great poetry (and by extension, literature) emerges from the struggle between writers and their precursors. Precursors, Bloom says, are an obstacle to their inheritors' own creative expression. Having legislated the world as they have, precursor poets effectively clap their successors into a prison of self-consciousness, forcing those who inherit their work to forever wonder, Are my thoughts and voice my own? Does the fruit of my labor grow from another's tree? This, Bloom says, is the anxiety of influence, a “mode of melancholy” every poet necessarily feels (Bloom 1997, p. 25).

Literary influence concerns literary freedom. Enslaved by the impulse toward constant comparison, the belated poet feels his autonomy compromised. The precursor threatens to drown his voice and vision. And while “every good reader *desires* to drown” in the strength of visionary literature, Bloom says, “if the poet drowns, he will become *only a reader*” (ibid., p. 57; original emphasis). Thus rather than imitate the precursor and remain enslaved, poets of renown—“strong” poets, Bloom calls them—instead “swerve” toward their own strength of originality (ibid., p. 14), opting for freedom by achieving an expression of their unique will to power.⁹ Put differently, poets do not *read* their influences, but *misread* them. They open creative spaces for the revision of, and differentiation from, poetic precursors; so much so, in fact, that “the true history of modern poetry would be the accurate recording of . . . revisionary swerves,” according to Bloom. This misreading is the most basic indication of agon between writers. “Without Tennyson's reading of Keats,” Bloom's logic goes, “we would have almost no Tennyson” (ibid., p. 44). A similar dynamic can be interpreted of Emerson and Muir.

I am far from the first to note the apparent agonism in Muir and Emerson's relationship. Most point it up not in Muir's writing but in the actual friendship the two men shared. Emerson's choice to decline Muir's invitation to camp outdoors during the elder's sole trip to Yosemite dimmed Muir's thoughts of him considerably, or so some have argued. According to Michael Branch, Muir's disappointment at Emerson's decision to sleep indoors and not under Yosemite's sequoias may have spurred Muir to “protect his own developing identity as a wilderness philosopher by maintaining and perhaps exaggerating a distinction between himself and the man who, by the 1870s, had become

⁹ Bloom takes the word for “swerve,” or *clinamen*, from Lucretius, who used it in reference to changes that occur on a molecular level, specifically atoms that move and swerve to make change possible in the universe. “A poet swerves away from his precursor,” Bloom writes, “by so reading his precursor's poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it” (ibid.; original emphasis).

American culture's literary voice of nature" (Branch 1997, pp. 132–33). Michael Cohen goes further than Branch, claiming that, after their fateful Yosemite meeting, Muir realized he needed a clean break altogether from Emerson's influence. So while Emerson could be said to have "provided a ladder" to Muir's mature voice, after Emerson's trip out West Muir essentially "kicked the ladder away" (Cohen 1984, p. 52).

There is something of Bloom's thinking in accounts like these. If we are to believe that every literary talent unfolds through rivalry and creative rebellion, as Bloom argues, then Branch and Cohen ostensibly demonstrate the integrity of Muir's thought. But Branch and Cohen err in claiming Muir casted off Emerson's influence once and for all. For one, these accounts make the mistake of assuming literary influence is a skin to be shed. While belated writers may swerve from their precursors, it does not follow that, in so doing, the belated does not remain proximal to the original source of his inspiration. It is in this way that neither of the two opposing factions of Muir scholars can be said to be entirely right or wrong in their judgment of Emerson's influence. Muir no more dispensed with Emerson than any other writer dispenses with their influential predecessors. And yet, like all talented writers, Muir swerved.

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Additional evidence of Muir's swerving is strewn throughout other of his writings. In a July 1890 journal entry, Muir wrote,

It has been said that trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment rooted in the ground. But they never seem so to me. I never saw a discontented tree. They grip the ground as though they liked it, and though fast rooted they travel about as far as we do. (Muir 1979, p. 313)

This passage is not so different from others in Muir's journal. He was inclined toward rhapsodizing about nature, especially trees, and did so often. What makes this passage noteworthy is its tacit reference to Emerson's "Nature," the above-mentioned piece from *Essays: Second Series*. Recall Emerson's original remarks from that essay: "the trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted in the ground" (Emerson 1983, p. 547).¹⁰ Citing Emerson some twenty years after he first read "Nature," Muir clearly took umbrage at his precursor's claim. Most noteworthy about the above passage, however, is the way swerves like this and others in Muir's writing confirm his participation in the larger Emersonian literary tradition. It was indeed Emerson's intention not for others to duplicate his individual efforts. Rather, he hoped his voice would inspire his readers to find their own. So while Muir's swerve away from Emerson distinguished Muir from his greatest influence, it nevertheless also corroborated what I take to be the substance of his Emersonianism.

Provocation and awakening are crucial themes for what I am calling Emersonianism. Emerson sought to provoke with his essays and lectures the desire to think one's own thoughts, to believe one's convictions to be true. Some of Emerson's most memorable lines concern the task to throw off one's conformist slumber to become whomever one truly is, a task he saw as being akin to waking up to greet the day. In his address to Harvard Divinity School's 1838 graduating class, for example, Emerson famously admonished his listeners, saying, "The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity . . . he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's" (Emerson 1983, p. 89). Less than two years before, in *Nature*, Emerson reproached his age for being too "retrospective," beholding the world through the eyes of "foregoing generations" (ibid., p. 7). And in "Self-Reliance," Emerson's most famous essay, he asserts, "Imitation is suicide . . . Trust thyself" (ibid., pp. 259–60). Such proclamations are warnings against intellectual idleness, a dormancy of the mind. We are too often given to depending upon others' thinking than we are inclined to trust in our own. Emerson included himself in this,

¹⁰ Muir scrawled "No!" in the margin adjacent to this line in his personal copy of Emerson's book.

too. His readers, he thought, should no more ground their thoughts in his ideas than anyone else's. Hence one becomes Emersonian by virtue of abandoning Emerson—no longer relying upon he who first made you aware of your many reliances. It was for this reason that Walt Whitman judged the chief value of Emerson's intellectual contributions to be the desire he instilled to distinguish oneself from one's precursors, not merely to imitate them.¹¹ The same judgment compelled Bloom to consider Emerson a model of modern literature (Bloom 1997, p. 50).

The tradition of striving to improve upon inherited forms, so linked with Emerson in modern American literature—a tradition in which Muir participated, as I am claiming—goes further back than Emerson in historical precedent, further than even Milton (as Bloom asserts). The fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dutch Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam distinguished between following a literary exemplar, imitating it, and emulating it.¹² Emerson, in his own writing on literary influence, has something similar to Erasmus's thinking in mind. According to Erasmus, we should strive to emulate rather than follow, to "desire more truly to rival than to be alike" (Erasmus of Rotterdam 1908, p. 87). Erasmus makes these claims in a work on rhetoric, *Ciceronianus*, which focuses on the rhetorical excellence of Cicero. Orators should imitate Cicero, Erasmus argues, for there is no better rhetorical example. Yet none should imitate Cicero indifferently, he says. Doing so, one runs the risk of mindlessly repeating Cicero's own vices. It is instead better to emulate Cicero, by which Erasmus means not merely copying, but excelling Cicero's example. Emerson strikes the same tone in his calls for individual exemplarity in works like "Self-Reliance." Imitation, he contends, is a kind of double bind: it considers conformity to one's models a virtue (and, as Erasmus adds, affirms the model's vices) while also silencing the unique thought and voice the model's work originally roused. This is why both Whitman and Bloom believe the most Emersonian individuals are in fact the least like Emerson; or as Erasmus says, "he is most a Ciceronian who is most unlike Cicero" (*ibid.*, p. 78). Slavish imitation "scatters your force," says Emerson. "Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world" (Emerson 1983, pp. 261, 263).

If I am right that Muir inherited and assumed the rhetorical tradition in which Emerson and Erasmus were exemplars, then we need not locate the specific points where Muir may have swerved from Emerson to determine the quality of Muir's own voice. We rather need examine more closely Muir's particular emulations of Emerson so to apprehend the ways Muir sought to improve upon and exceed the very forms he originally found in his most crucial precursor. As Erasmus says, "If you put before you Cicero, entire and alone, with the view not only of copying him but of excelling him, you must not merely overtake him but you must outstrip him" (Erasmus of Rotterdam 1908, p. 58). How might Muir, in his emulation, have overtaken and outstripped Emerson?

Time and again Muir hems close to Emerson in his accounts of mystical experience. Of an adventure climbing an ice crevasse in the Alaskan wilderness during a thunderstorm, Muir writes,

the most trying part of the adventure, after working my way across inch by inch and chipping another small platform, was to rise from the safe position astride and cut a step-ladder in the nearly vertical face of the wall, —chipping, climbing, holding on with feet and fingers in mere notches. At such times, *one's whole body is eye*, and common skill and fortitude are replaced by power beyond our call or knowledge. (Muir 1997, p. 566)

Not all of Muir's mystical accounts are so dramatic. Other moments of mystic oneness are wrought by experiences of nature's lavishness, like an occasion Muir relaxed in the glacier meadows of Tuolumne Soda Springs:

¹¹ Whitman writes, "The best part of Emersonianism is, it breeds the giant that destroys itself. Who wants to be any man's mere follower? lurks behind every page. No teacher ever taught, that has so provided for his pupil's setting up independently—no truer evolutionist" (Whitman 1964, pp. 517–18).

¹² I am grateful to Jeffrey Stout for pointing out the example of Erasmus to me, including Erasmus's considerations of the dynamics of rhetorical imitation.

With inexpressible delight you wade out into the grassy sun-lake, feeling yourself contained in one of Nature's most sacred chambers, withdrawn from the sterner influences of the mountains, secure from all intrusion, secure from yourself, free in the universal beauty. And notwithstanding the scene is so impressively spiritual, and you seem dissolved in it, yet everything about you is beating with warm, terrestrial, human love and life delightfully substantial and familiar. [. . .] You are all eye, sifted through and through with light and beauty. (ibid., p. 395; my emphasis)

These depictions are expressly Emersonian—ecstasy is realized through ocular absorption; vision is the avenue to discerning spiritual union. Like Emerson, Muir also witnesses to a special kind of worldly intimacy. “The whole landscape glows like a human face in a glory of enthusiasm” (ibid., p. 224), he writes, echoing Emerson's claim that nature “is so pervaded with human life, that there is something of humanity in all” (Emerson 1983, p. 41).

Also like Emerson, Muir depicts the fellow feeling he has for nature—wrought, as we have seen, by his mystical experience—through his writing on plants. Indeed, a place like Yosemite's “plant-wealth” could easily send Muir into the heights of ecstatic rapture, so evident in his descriptions of the “flowery plains,” “loose dipping willows,” and “broad green oaks” of the Merced meadows (Muir 1997, p. 587). The Sierra's many forests were the places Muir especially felt at one with the ecological oversoul. Drawing on the Romantic trope of the Aeolian harp, Muir gloried in nature's symphonic harmony.¹³ Of an experience seeing the Sierra's trees made to dance by an afternoon storm, Muir wrote, “A few minutes ago every tree was excited, bowing to the roaring storm, waving, swirling, tossing their branches in glorious enthusiasm like worship” (Muir 1997, p. 237). To the uninitiated, such trees are inanimate and inert—“imperfect men” in Emerson's post-*Nature* words. Yet to ears able to hear their rhapsodic tune, “Every hidden cell is throbbing with music and life,” Muir writes, “every fibre [*sic*] trilling like harp strings.” “No wonder,” then, Muir reasons, “the hills and groves were God's first temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmer seems the Lord himself” (ibid.). Much more than in the built environment, God, through the lives of plants and their many relations, is revealed. All it takes is our possessing what Emerson, in “The Over-Soul,” calls “the power to see” (Emerson 1983, p. 392).

Muir did not stop with the ocular, however, the power to see. His principal innovation of Emerson's mystical method was to convey his own mystical experience through a much wider sensory range.¹⁴ For Emerson, the eye was all. “[N]othing can befall me in life, —no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair” (ibid., p. 10). Muir, we have seen, appreciated the importance of sight for mystic euphoria (this appreciation was especially urgent due to an experience Muir had of nearly losing his sight after being injured while working in a carriage parts manufacturing shop in 1867), but his mysticism also went beyond an exclusive focus on his eyes. In what have become his most famous pieces of nature writing, Muir gives more attention to sound, scent, and bodily touch than he does his vision. He also attends to the emotional resonance emanating from his experience of plant life, namely trees. Recounting a time he spent being tossed by a windstorm in the boughs of a 100-foot-tall Douglas Spruce, he describes “taking the wind into [his] pulses” (Muir 1997, p. 470), as if he and the tree delighted as one organism enjoying a windswept dance. Exaltation, fear, pleasure—all this was mediated through the multidimensionality of Muir's senses. He was keen on the interconnectedness all being shares: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe,” Muir wrote in *My First Summer in the Sierra* (ibid., p. 245). Something similar could be said of Muir's mysticism, for when he tried to locate the source of his tree-induced ecstasy, he found each of his senses hitched to all the rest, no one more productive of the bliss he felt in nature than the others.

¹³ On the Aeolian harp's place and significance in romantic literature, see (McKusick 2000), Chps. 5 and 7.

¹⁴ I am thankful to the guest editors for their encouragement to further highlight this dimension of Muir's mysticism.

It is not an overstatement to say Muir fawned over Emerson at their brief 1871 meeting. Muir himself attests to being “excited as [he] had never been excited before” in the moments leading up to when he finally made Emerson’s acquaintance—“my heart throbbed as if an angel direct from heaven had alighted on the Sierran rocks,” he gushes (Muir 1996, p. 132). Yet Emerson, over his five-day Yosemite jaunt, became just as taken with Muir. A year after returning to Concord, he wrote Muir, saying, “I have everywhere testified to my friends who should also be yours, my happiness in finding you.” Emerson also made plain his hopes that Muir would soon come east to Massachusetts: “you must find your way to this village, and my house” (Muir 1986, 2:675).¹⁵ Muir never did make it to Concord while Emerson was still alive, but that did not stop Emerson from counting Muir among his “men,” a list of twenty favored epochal figures from Emerson’s life, noted in the final volume of his personal journal (Devall 1982, p. 188). By the time of Muir’s addition, the list already included the likes of Thomas Carlyle, Henry David Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott.

Emerson was preternaturally drawn to individuals whose mysticism knew fewer limits than his own. This helps explain his fondness for Muir. It certainly explains Emerson’s fondness for figures like Jones Very, who, from the young age of twenty-five, proclaimed himself the “newborn bard of the Holy Ghost” that Emerson had called for in his graduation address to the Harvard Divinity School (Emerson 1983, p. 89). While others questioned Very’s wits, Emerson considered him both “profoundly sane” and a “treasure of a companion” (Emerson 1939, p. 173). Very’s charisma was unflagging—he was known for publicly baptizing unwitting participants with the Holy Spirit. Instead of being unnerved by this behavior, Emerson was profoundly moved by the force of Very’s presence and drawn to his genius. There was none of the mystic ephemerality or alienation in Very that Emerson had so struggled with himself.

Muir’s strength of connection to nature rivaled Very’s spiritualist ardor. Emerson’s desire to learn more of that connection was the prime reason he wished for Muir to join him on the “Atlantic Coast,” where Emerson hoped Muir would “bring his ripe fruits so rare and precious into waiting society” (Muir 1986, 2:675). Emerson, as we have seen, was frustrated by the fleeting nature of his mysticism. Despite his best efforts, a thoroughgoing crack persisted in his mystic alliance with the world. In Muir, though, Emerson found unbroken mystical absorption; someone whose being was disposed toward experiencing in mind and body the essential unity constitutive of all the world’s relations. The irony, of course, is that it was Emerson who furnished Muir with the language and metaphors for articulating the details of the most remarkable of his experiences. So while Emerson, by his own account, had the weaker mystical genius between them, Muir, who availed himself throughout his writing life of ocular metaphors, was nevertheless deeply indebted to the language Emerson used to relay his mystical experience.

From 1836 onward (i.e., after *Nature*), the failure to achieve an enduring ocular union with the world became a guiding theme in Emerson’s work. In essays like “The Poet” (1844), Emerson calls upon individuals of genius who can achieve intellectual feats not unlike that which he endeavored to maintain in his mystic experiences: to marry the sensual with the ethereal, the material with the spiritual. He who can solder the crack between nature and mind, Emerson believes, is worthy of highest repute; worthy, that is, of being called a “poet,” Emerson’s name for great seers of cosmic unity. “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe,” he writes (Emerson 1983, p. 465), no doubt including himself in the assessment. Shakespeare is an example of a figure that does not fit the bill. Despite Shakespeare’s excellence, Emerson thinks his writing is far too imbued with material worldliness. As Robert Falk says, “Emerson is never wholly convinced that Shakespeare, with all his poetic beauty, overcomes the natural taint of the playhouse” (Falk 1941, p. 540). Yet figures of apparent spiritual genius Emerson also found wanting. Emmanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic,

¹⁵ I cite here the John Muir Papers, a 51-reel, 53-fiche microfilm edition containing all the collected papers of John Muir, housed at the library of University of the Pacific. I refer to this collection by making reference to reel and frame number (e.g., “2:675” refers to reel 2, frame 675).

employed a faulty concept of nature in his correspondential mysticism, so never truly reconciled materiality with spiritual truth.

The degree to which Muir's mysticism realizes Emerson's call for poetic genius, articulated in places like "The Poet," is striking. Emerson's clearest description of the poet's vocation could well suffice as an account of Muir's mysticism:

[T]he great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they have had with nature. There is no man who does not anticipate a supersensual unity in the sun, and stars, earth, and water. These stand and wait to render him a peculiar service. But there is some obstruction, or some excess of phlegm in our constitution, which does not suffer them to yield the due effect. Too feeble fall the impressions of nature on us to make us artists. Every touch should thrill. Every man should be so much an artist, that he could report in conversation what had befallen him . . . The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance. (Emerson 1983, p. 448)

Muir's awareness of nature's "supersensual unity" was absolute; he had no "obstruction" or "phlegm" to speak of. World and self, matter and spirit, real and ideal were, for Muir, integrated in a stable, uninterrupted whole. Every touch he had of nature thrilled. As a result of this, he could not help but report what mystic reveries had befallen him in the woods. He wanted all the world not just to hear, but to come, to see, to experience untainted nature for themselves. Muir, by this account, was the artist of Emerson's reckoning, the poet personified.

Despite Muir's mysticism being a semblance of Emerson's, Muir can be said to have realized Emerson's original mystical vision in a way that exceeded his precursor. He added elements of depth and consistency Emerson himself could not attain, an idea made especially clear by both Emerson and Muir's writing on their mystical connection to plants. Muir's mysticism was not the result of his somehow stepping out from under Emerson's influence (as if this were even possible, as Bloom demonstrates), but the result of his *response* to Emerson's influence. Emerson, issuing a call for self-reliant individuals, hoped more individuals would stand at the enigmatic junction of self and world, mind and nature, to report upon their experience of ecstatic unity not as their models might, but as only they themselves could. Such was the basis of Emerson's provocation, his summons for mystical awakening. Muir's response to that provocation can thus be said to be the product of his Emersonianism, or the way in which his being influenced by Emerson was not reducible to imitation. "Be not content to follow," Erasmus writes, but "improve upon others . . . in such a way as to surpass if possible" (Erasmus of Rotterdam 1908, p. 79). So it is how Muir, by emulating his precursor, came to surpass him.

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