

Cyclical Nature Images as Representations of Freedom and Fulfillment in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman

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Abstract—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman depict a removal of the boundary between man and nature. This imagined coalescence between humanity and the earth is portrayed through a unique fusion of form and content. Emerson's *Nature* (1836), Thoreau's "Walking" (1862), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) illuminate the vision of breaking down the boundary between man and nature through their combinations of sentiment and style. While many critics have focused on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman's explicit programmatic statements about connecting with nature, I will focus on the ways in which this message is conveyed by their use of metaphor, simile, and symbolic imagery. Through a comparative analysis of their uses of the cyclical nature images water and sun, I will attempt to elucidate the intricate differences and similarities between their conceptions of freedom and fulfillment. I will investigate how each author's treatment of these nature images provides a window of understanding their perspectives on the ways the spirit flows through the self – whether freedom is attained in complete isolation or in the company of others – and the place of divinity in nature.

Index Terms—Transcendentalism, nature imagery, freedom, fulfillment, cyclical images, water and sun.

I. INTRODUCTION

[Man] cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time- Ralph Waldo Emerson [1]

The literary scholar Francis Otto Matthiessen once wrote that the transcendental movement voices, "the fresh aspirations for the rise of the common man" [2]. These aspirations, which center around both democratic ideals and metaphysical desires, lie at the heart of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman's writing. Specifically, these fresh aspirations are at the core of these three author's depictions of removing the boundary between man and nature. This imagined coalescence between humanity and the earth is portrayed through a unique fusion of form and content. Emerson's *Nature* (1836), Thoreau's "Walking" (1862), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) illuminate the vision of breaking down the boundary between man and nature through their combinations of sentiment and style [1], [3]-[4]. While many critics have focused on Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman's explicit programmatic statements about connecting with nature, I will focus on the ways in which this message is conveyed by their use of metaphor, simile, and symbolic imagery.

Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman give us a revolutionary way of understanding the American spirit. This idealized

American spirit, stripped of any social conventions, is eloquently illustrated by their use of nature metaphors and similes. Through a comparative analysis of their uses of the cyclical nature images water and sun, I will attempt to elucidate the intricate differences and similarities between their conceptions of freedom and fulfillment. I will first look at how in their respective writings the symbol of the sun represents freedom. I will then evaluate how the symbol of water represents the idea of fulfillment. Finally, I will look at instances where the images of sun and water come together in each of their texts and show how these descriptions connect with the transcendentalists' emphasis on living in the present. Collectively, I will investigate how each author's treatment of these nature images provides a window of understanding on their perspectives on the ways the spirit flows through the self – whether freedom is attained in complete isolation or in the company of others – and the place of divinity in nature.

In addition to shedding light on the differences between their own *Weltanschauungen*, this comprehension of the different ways the images of water and sun are treated will provide insight into the desires and goals of these three authors. Whitman's sensuality infused writing illuminates his yearning for human connectedness, Thoreau's focus on sensory details draws our attention to his desire to really know the land he walks along, and Emerson's emphasis on transparency highlights his desire to get away from any mediating force between himself and the divine. Through an investigation of these cyclical images and the individual desires they shed light on, I seek to show how these three authors point us to eye-opening ways of understanding the individualized American spirit. By writing metaphorically about the free flowing and circular nature of the sun and water, these three authors express the qualities they believe man should display. In this respect, nature not only becomes something to merge into, but something that orients us.

II. THE SUN AS A REPRESENTATION OF FREEDOM

Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman's metaphorical treatments of the sun illustrate each of their desires to inspire their readers to break free from conventions and to connect with the earth. Emerson's desire to find the divine in nature himself is seen when he compares the sunset to god, "Nature [...] is loved as the city of god [...] the sunset is unlike anything that is underneath it" [1] (545). In equating the sunset and god Emerson is conveying the idea that nature is the place where god and spirituality are to be found and embraced and not in a demarcated spiritual space such as a church. This quote also connects with Emerson's central dogma on the nature of language, "Nature is the symbol of

the spirit” [1] (9). The comparison between god and sunset indeed exhibits this claim, as the sunset is depicted as a metaphorical symbol for a godly spirit. In other words, the sunset, a symbol of nature, is compared to god or “the spirit”.

When discussing the sun as being a metaphorical representation of god, Emerson asserts a caveat: few people can fully take in the rays of its light. “Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he [...] who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood” [1] (3). Emerson explains that when people reach adulthood, their originality is often lost. This passage is emblematic of Emerson’s belief that only those who let go of the ‘superficial’ ‘mundane’ way of being in the world, that generally accompanies adulthood, are capable of taking in the light of the sun which, as we previously discussed, can be seen as the light of god. Additionally important in this quote is Emerson’s emphasis on the child’s ability to feel the sun as opposed to the man’s ability to see the sun. The child, unlike most men, is not tainted by society, he is pure and therefore the light of the sun is accessible to him in the fullest sense. The fullest sense being that he experiences it as a fully awakening or vitalizing force. Childhood innocence and curiosity are the things that allow the pure light to ‘shine’ through them, rather than merely appearing to the eyes of most men.¹

This light from the sun that “shines into [...] the child” is, for Emerson, a light not only of god’s presence but also the presence of knowledge. He claims, “light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance” [1] (9), meaning that light is a metaphorical representation of intellect and darkness is of a lack of understanding. Light, being something only few people are capable of truly seeing and being represented as a symbol of pure knowledge, relates back to Plato’s “Allegory of The Cave” [5]. The aforementioned quote from Emerson’s *Nature* can be seen as an allusion to Plato’s allegory. Specifically, the prisoners in the allegory may be seen as the men who only see the sun superficially, or those who are literally and figuratively stuck in society. Just as the prisoners see the shadow from the fire and the puppeteers but they do not actually see anything ‘real’, the people absorbed in society only see its stolid features rather than the ‘beautiful’ and ‘alive’ aspects of nature.² While the sun indisputably shines in cities and institutions that society is comprised of, it is as if the people ‘seeing’ the sun in these spheres of life are like the prisoners only seeing shadows and illusions rather than real sunlit

² This perspective on the beauty and bliss of childhood innocence relates back to the English Romantic movement. Philosopher David Archard explains the core of this idea, “The work of the Romantics, especially Blake and Wordsworth [...] chiefly celebrates the original innocence of childhood. The child’s state is seen as one of spontaneous wonderment and joy before nature [...] Wordsworth sought a form of growth whereby the qualities of childhood might be integrated and preserved within the nature of the mature individual” [6] (51). Archard’s discussion shows how Wordsworth’s works centered on showing the Child’s encounter with nature as richer and more pure than that of most men. From Archard’s comments we can see how Emerson draws from the Romantics in that he too encouraged the spontaneous ‘qualities of childhood’ to be preserved in the ‘mature individual’.

truths.

The power of rising beyond these places and escaping from the prisoners’ figurative shackles, and for Emerson unbinding ourselves from the ties that hold us to society, is seen in Plato when a prisoner ascends from the cave and moves towards the light of the sun. Emerson can be seen as making the same claim. It is only when we “cast off years” in the woods and become like children towards the sun that we rise beyond the limitations of society. Just as the metaphysical encounter with the object of nature allows the prisoners in Plato’s allegory to transcend the confines of the cave, for Emerson it allows us to move beyond societal conventions, being freed by the guiding force of the sun.

Simply ascending from the cave does not, however, mean that the prisoners instantly or effortlessly understand true intellect. Similarly, we as human beings in nature do not immediately and easily connect with the divine.³ That is why some men are ‘illuminated by the sun’ yet it only ‘shines through the heart of the child’. The philosopher for Plato, and the self-reliant, childlike man for Emerson have the ability to transcend beyond the mimetic or material mundane world and see the luminescent truths that are visible through nature only when we are in the place to soak them in.⁴ The child, unspoiled by society, or the man who rids himself of his hold on conventional societal reality can be transformed and freed through the sun’s pure light. It is a type of freedom because, in Emerson and Plato’s eyes, it is a letting go of the ties that prevent our ability to gain true intellect and ultimately a metaphysical transformation.

Literary critics Nina Baym and Joseph Moldenhauer supply useful means for understanding Emerson’s metaphysical desire as rooted in Greek thought. Though neither directly connect Emerson’s writing to Plato’s allegory, they explain how Emerson’s wish to transcend beyond conventional society, and all the limitations to the spirit inherent in society, finds its roots in platonic conceptions of metaphysics. Baym explains, “Emerson’s writings lie back in the Greek thought which so deeply permeated his world view, a union of pre-Socratic and Neo-Platonist thought” [7] (230). Indeed, we can see how Plato’s allegory permeates through Emerson’s writing. Baym later remarks that when Emerson thought of “the spirit of Idea, he used the metaphor of light” [7] (233).⁵ This is seen in the above quote by Emerson and its origin can again be traced back to Plato, as the light is a symbol for knowledge that ideas represent.

³ This point is further illuminated through Socrates statement, “The world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; and when seen, is also inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right”. Plato is explaining that a person must consciously seek to understand knowledge and the form of goodness, and when he does he will experience the brightest light of beauty and morality. Moreover, Plato suggests that being brought out of the cave was a necessary step for the prisoner to move toward truth, but not until the prisoner makes an effort to attain intellect and truth will he do so.

⁴ Emerson’s “Self Reliant” man is he who “insists” on himself, and he who “never imitates” [8].

⁵ Baym additionally remarks, “Eventually the universe brightens so that forms disappear and man perceives only the clear white light of pure spirit” [7] (237). This quote, in collaboration with her previous ones, signifies the possible echo’s of Plato’s thought in Emerson’s imagery as the forms or shadows in the cave disappear, so do the superficial sights Emerson describes disappear when man maintains his child-like state of being in the world.

In a similar manner, Moldenhauer writes that there was an, “aesthetic dependence of Emerson [...] upon Platonic Idealism” [9] (246). If, as I previously suggested, we take Emerson’s *Nature* to be at least in part an allusion to Plato’s allegory, then the choice to use the image of the sun shows this dependence, because Emerson’s aesthetics draw from Plato’s use of the sun and light as symbols of intellect. This connection to Platonic Idealism is important for our discussion in that it highlights how stylistically, it is only through a language that draws on nature metaphors that represent spiritual forces, that Emerson draws from Plato’s original depiction of the symbol and is then able to convey ideas of transcendence. Again, we can see how it is only at the moment when man can become, “the follower of the sun” that he is freed. In this respect, for Emerson, the sun becomes a symbol of not only freedom but of a guiding force towards a true connection with nature and god. Thus, the sun is for Emerson, as it was for Plato, a representation of intellect, freedom and guidance.

The echoes of Plato’s cave allegory are not limited to Emerson’s *Nature*. These ideas can also be found in Thoreau’s treatment of the image of the sun and symbol of light. Thoreau states, “genius is a light [...] the light of common day” [3] (31). Thoreau’s use of metaphor, wherein he directly compares genius and light signifies the direct connection he is claiming exists between the two. Moldenhauer explains that in Thoreau’s writing, “sun [is a] major symbol within an elevated scheme between mundane and spiritual phenomena. In Greek religion and philosophy these symbols and the idealistic equation are again of great moment” [9] (247). Notably, while Moldenhauer never directly discusses the relation between Plato’s cave allegory and Thoreau and Emerson’s treatment of this image, the same ideal is present in all three. For Plato, Emerson, and Thoreau alike the sun represents a penetrating light that has the ability to guide us to a place of freedom from convention, from blindness to the beauty of the natural world, and toward being in a place where we can manifest our true selves. However, it is not just through following the sun, rather, it is through actively altering our consciousness that these latter phenomena can occur.

We can directly locate Thoreau’s perspective on how the sun acts as a guide bringing us to a higher or more pure way of being in the world through his use of metaphor. Thoreau writes, “[the sunset] is the great western pioneer whom the nations follow” [3] (5). Like Emerson, Thoreau uses metaphor not simile to describe the weight of this part of nature and by doing so he is putting greater emphasis on the sun as such. Paul Ricoeur’s perspective on the capabilities of this literary device is visible in both Emerson and Thoreau. Specifically, we can see through both author’s treatment of this image how from the metaphor of the sun, “a new semantic pertinence out of the ruins of literal meaning [...] sustains a new referential design” [10] (272). For Ricoeur metaphors are powerful because they are built on the reformation of a deep history of meaning. The “ruins” are the remaining pieces of meaning that are then recast in a way that refers back to the origin and simultaneously points beyond itself to the new referential idea. In the case of Emerson and Thoreau, these designs are the new understandings they

promote of the sun as a symbol of god and a pioneer respectively, metaphorically signifying freedom.

While both Emerson and Thoreau illustrate the sun as a guiding force leading us to freedom, in Thoreau, unlike in Emerson, the sun is anthropomorphized. Instead of being a ‘god’ the sun is a ‘western pioneer’. This distinction calls our attention to the fact for both authors the sun represents a guiding force in the natural world. For Emerson, however, this force is imbued with religious meaning, while for Thoreau this force is seemingly secular.

Another seminal comparative point between Thoreau and Emerson’s treatment of this image is visible in their emphasis on the power of light. Thoreau expresses, “It is the lightning up of the mist by the sun. Man cannot know in any higher sense than this, any more than he can look serenely and with impunity in the face of the sun” [3] (12). Similar to Emerson, light is the highest form of intelligence. However, what is different between the two rests in the fact that for Thoreau this is a deeply physical encounter distinguished by ‘mist’ hitting our skin, whereas for Emerson the encounter with the sun dwells in the realm of sight and feeling with the eye and the heart. This distinction further demonstrates how for Emerson the sun as a guiding force is spiritual and metaphysical while for Thoreau it is physical.

Thoreau’s treatment of the image of the sun is further elucidated through a consideration of how his written descriptions parallel the physical nature of the natural phenomena he discusses. Thoreau’s descriptions literally imitate the physical movement of the sun, whereas Emerson’s imagery is depicted more idealistically. This draws our attention to the fact that Thoreau desired to accurately depict the earth he inhabited, perhaps feeling that he could best inspire us as his readers by giving life-like depictions. It is only through this flexible language, wherein we as readers can almost feel the mist Thoreau describes, that he is able to have such a powerful effect on us. His style implants us in the scene he is describing, letting us almost feel the sunshine and mist ourselves.

The idea that Thoreau’s descriptions of images parallel their natural movement can be further illuminated through linguist Charles Kraitsir’s philosophy of language. Kraitsir explains how the act of articulation is born from organic earth. Kraitsir writes that the word “articulate may go together with organic” [11] (69).⁶ Meaning that, language and the act of expressing ideas and feelings is connected with the natural world. Thoreau’s writing can be seen as embodying this idea as it is precisely through his utilization of an ‘organic’ language that relies heavily on nature metaphors and similes that his style parallels both the picture he is illustrating and the sentiment behind the scene he is relaying to his readers. This is seen in his description of the rising sun as something ‘lightening up’. The verbs and adjectives he uses demands us to notice the image and pause at his word choices of ‘lightening up’ and ‘mist’ as these are real ‘organic’ phenomena that occur when the sun shines. Thoreau’s writing is simultaneously immediately accessible, since we

⁶ For a more in-depth discussion of Kraitsir’s explanation of how the act of articulating is connected with the natural world see chapters “Sounds and Letters” and “Language”.

can directly relate to the image, and makes us see a familiar scene afresh in an inspiring way. It is through his language, which describes the movement of the sun as lighting up, that we can see what happens to us as humans as we are illuminated with knowledge. The parallel between the description and the natural phenomena Thoreau explains, positions us to recognize the freeing and guiding aspects of the sun.

Kraitsir's belief that language and nature are intertwined also ties in with Whitman's treatment of the image of the sun. Specifically, Kraitsir's comment that "freedom [...] and nature are intimately entwined in language" [11] (67) is applicable to both Whitman's view that in nature we are free and his practice as a poet of using metaphorical language to describe how the sun is representative of this freedom. Also interesting to note is the fact that unlike his predecessors, Whitman uses simile not metaphor to describe the sun. Whitman states in "Song of Myself", "we ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun" [4] (91). The word 'as' is key here, since it connotes to us that man, in nature, rises like the enormity and beauty of the glistening sun. Of particular interest in this quote is the word 'ascend' because it connects to the idea of freedom, which again ties in with Kraitsir's philosophy of language and demonstrates how the sun is a symbol of liberation. As sociologist Robert Bellah remarks, "freedom to Whitman was above all the freedom to express oneself, against all constraints and conventions" [12] (34). In this respect, if we are like the sun, then we are without influence or the restrictions of societal conventions.

Despite the fact that Kraitsir's philosophy of language connects to all three authors' illustrations of the image of the sun, when we look at the literary device Whitman uses and the messages he conveys through this we can see how his treatment of the sun differs from that of Thoreau and Emerson in terms of what it represents symbolically. This shift is elucidated when Whitman writes in his poem "As I Sail Alone By Blue Ontario's Shore" that, "[the poet] judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling round a helpless thing" [4] (30). The poet is meant to illuminate and lift us up as the sun brightens nature. In this respect, Whitman's treatment differs from Thoreau and Emerson's because he personally equates the sun and the poet himself as opposed to the sun and god or the sun and another person as Emerson and Thoreau do, respectively. This quote is also representative of Whitman's belief that the poet's *telos* is to bring warmth and light to people inhabiting America. Friedrich Schiller, whose thought revolved much around conceptualizing the connection between nature and man, lucidly explains this sensation. "Before truth causes her triumphant light to penetrate into the depth of the heart, poetry intercepts her rays, and the summits of humanity shine in a bright light" [13]. Indeed, Whitman is attempting and arguably exemplifying just this phenomenon. It is through his poetry that he wants to illuminate his fellow Americans.

Thoreau uses metaphor to describe the sun as a guiding force, while Whitman draws on simile, describing the sun as a guiding influence just as the poet is for readers. This fits well with Whitman's emphasis on self-proclamation. If he is a poet, then his proclaimed words can brighten up the future of America. This comparison reveals that for both Thoreau

and Whitman man can and should be like the sun, and in this respect man can be an illuminating force. However, for Thoreau the exemplar is a woodsman, whereas for Whitman he is a poet. This again ties into Whitman's sense of being himself, someone who can bring and inspire tremendous change.

The combination of the sentiment of freedom being elucidated stylistically by the literary device of simile is further seen in Whitman's conscious choice to write both "As I Sail Alone By Blue Ontario's Shore" and "Song of myself" as free verse poems. The free verse poetic style, with its lack of meter and rhyme scheme, and in their place an incorporation of long lines and free flowing elements, parallels the liberating sentiment he is manifesting. Whitman's form and content fuse together to paint a picture of the idealized way of being in America and professing what the poet can bring out in the citizens of its nation. Drawing strength to be free like the sun, and be unrestricted by the traditional British rhyme scheme conventions of poetry, parallels his belief that America should be free from European influence. It is in the act of writing free verse, about something as free and inspiringly pure as the sun, that Whitman manifests his ideals of the place of man in nature and the guiding place of nature to man.

It is not only the breaking away as an independent nation, but also the free flowing form that represents Whitman's profound desire for America to be the place where people, like the poet who 'judged as the sun' are inspired by nature to create themselves, be themselves, and truly celebrate individuality. The revolutionary break away from meter and conventional poetic form parallels the breakaway from conventional society that Whitman so strongly desires. On another level, it is also possible to see this as representing his desire to fight for democracy and gender and racial equality in the United States. Historically, at the time Whitman was writing, slavery was still part of United States and women were treated as inferior to men. Whitman's egalitarian stance, much like his poetics, seeks to defy these societal conventions of his day, and more than just go against them, inspire others to be democratic.

Despite his free verse style paralleling his desire for freedom and self-expression, Harold Bloom points out, "His artistry reflects conscious study of his precursors in the language, despite his American nationalist ambivalence toward British tradition" [14] (2). Thus, while he broke away from certain conventions, he knew them well. "His art is nuance, delicacy, inventiveness, intricate matching of sound to sense" [14] (2)⁷. In this vein we can see how Whitman is responding to something, and is trying to make a radical claim about American selfhood, in that while it perhaps found its roots in Europe, it needed to be replanted in American soil in order to be free to ascend towards the light of the sun.

Despite the differences in the way these three authors describe the sun, they all represent it as a compass. Whether

⁷ Bloom expands on this phenomenon and explains how, "The more deeply you read him, the more you encounter his suppressed allusiveness, his gathering self-awareness of the complexities of poetic tradition, which he urges himself to usurp. In his battle for self-reliance, he remains Shakespearean and High Romantic" (2).

that compass is anthropomorphized or pantheistic, it is inspirational and associated with circularity, ascendance, and freedom. Another similarity among all three authors is seen in their use of language. It is only through a language dependent on nature metaphors, which can express man and god as being grounded in natural elements such as the light of the sun, that these authors can convey what would otherwise be nearly ineffable ideas. It is only in a language born from nature, from the things we aspire to be like, that we can describe how to attain freedom. Furthermore, this combination of sentiment and style, centered around language grounded in the earth conveying radical ideals, is the only way they can convey such grand desires in inspiring ways. Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman are urging us to see that a possible route to attain freedom is to be guided by the light of the sun and consciously choose to let it illuminate us.

III. WATER AS A REPRESENTATION OF FULFILMENT

The idea of the circularity of our being, and the desire for a removal of the boundary between man and nature, is illuminated in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman's treatment of the image of water. Having discussed how the sun illustrates each of the author's desire to inspire freedom in their readers and a breaking free from conventions, we will now focus our attention on their use of the image of water to see how once 'freed' by the sun these authors show how us to be 'fulfilled' like flowing water. While each author treats the idea of water differently, they do have a shared emphasis on circularity and their incorporation of water images elucidates their views on the cyclical nature of life. It is through embracing this cycle of life, whether alone or with others in the purity of nature, that each of the authors finds the ability to describe the almost indescribable transcendental encounter with the world.

Whitman depicts water as filling our spirits with a sense of strength and serenity. In "As I Sat Alone By Blue Ontario's Shore" Whitman writes, "By the blue Ontario shore, while the winds fann'd me, and the waves came trapping toward me, I sang with the power's pulsations [...] till the tissues that held me parted their ties upon me" [4] (66-68). It is by the sea, where the waves come towards the speaker, that he is empowered by the water and expresses it verbally through song. This highlights Whitman's emphasis on self-expression, since the waves coming towards him are what inspire him to unrestrictedly express himself. This quote also shows how the water of the nation gives the speaker of the poem the power to express himself and to explore his identity through the act of singing.

Whitman utilizes alliteration, alongside tactile, visual, and auditory imagery in "As I Sat Alone By Blue Ontario's Shore" to call on all of our senses. He invites us to partake in the speakers' journey by singing along and feeling the empowering possibilities that water presents. The alliteration of "power's pulsations" and "till the tissues that" demands us as readers to stop and notice the omnipotence he is ascribing to the sea. The waves coming towards the speaker evoke a feeling of movement, as though we are being lifted from the page and moved to a sea of our own. The blue allows us to visualize this scene and the wind that 'fann'd' calls us to hear

his experience. Collectively, Whitman's use of these devices places us in a position to not only hear, but also to experience what the speaker is conveying. By doing so, he is giving us a sense of the fulfillment that comes from being at sea.

For Whitman, the very nature of the sea parallels the nature of our identity. It is free flowing and changing yet it is also constant. These tenets are particularly prominent in Whitman's, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd" as the speaker states "I glorify thee all above [...] the ocean shore and the husky whispering wave, whose voice I know" [4] (154-155). From his use of the word 'glorify' we can see how the shoreline is simultaneously 'sacred' and familiar to him. This quote illustrates both Whitman's use of alliteration as well as how he anthropomorphizes the sea, since waves of course cannot actually whisper. The auditory effect of the alliterative phrase 'whispering waves whose' is to give us pause as readers as we hear the whispers themselves lingering on the page. This pause combined with the anthropomorphizing of the waves, further pushes us to consider whose whispers have influenced our own lives.⁸

Similar to Whitman, water as a symbol of vitality and sacredness is also evident in Thoreau's work. He writes, "There seemed to come up from its waters and its vine — clad hills and valleys a hushed music as of crusaders departing for the Holy Land. I floated along under the spell of enchantment, as if I had been transported to a heroic age, and breathed an atmosphere of chivalry" [3] (16). Like Whitman, Thoreau illustrates how water has the capacity to transform us, however, whereas the transformative moment in Whitman is one that embraces sound and activity, the water in Thoreau is representative of serenity and silenced music. This is made clear through Thoreau's use of the words 'hushed music'. Additionally, the verbs he uses depict a type of serene water rather than one which wakes us up, since 'breathing' and 'floating' are associated with reflection and quiet rather than actively singing and expressing oneself as Whitman does. Water is fulfilling for Thoreau, like for Whitman, but this fulfillment is met with silence and a space of effortless movement while for Whitman it is loud and expressive.

The phenomenon of Thoreau describing and showing water as a symbol of fulfillment is prevalent throughout his writing. Thoreau states, "a single gentle rain makes the grass many shades greener. So our prospects brighten on the influx of better thoughts. We should be blessed if we lived in the present always, and took advantage of every accident that befell us, like the grass which confesses the influences of the slightest dew that falls on it" [16] (415). Thoreau is calling our attention to the fact that the rain not only has an effect on nature as such, but it can serve as an inspiration for how its nourishment can, and should inspire us to notice the world we live in, and be attentive and grateful to beauty of the land. In the latter part of the quote he is also emphasizing that we should be present with nature and ourselves. Just as the rain is

⁸ Literary critic Roland Hagenbuehle remarks on Whitman's use of literary devices adds nuance to my comparative discussion. Hagenbuehle states, "Metaphor is made little use of by Whitman, with the important exception of anthropomorphisms" [14] (428). Indeed, Whitman's use of anthropomorphisms is significant as it makes the readers associate with the speaker more so than they would if the waves were not metaphorically brought to life.

an accident of the clouds which brightens the grass, so too should the unknown be embraced because it is that which is unfamiliar and or unexpected that brings us to meaningful encounters with the world. In being present with these literal and metaphorical drops of rain, we can begin to, as Thoreau notably suggests, “suck the marrow out of life” [16] (118).

The previous image of water and rain illustrates Thoreau’s desire to paint a picture of the powerful effect that is possible when man and nature merge together. On a figurative level, Thoreau is conveying the credo that it is when we become like the grass and embrace the falling rain that we too can become “brighter”. As F. O Matthiessen writes, “the quality of Thoreau’s landscape depends on his belief that man identifies himself with earth” [2] (289). It is through the rain coming down to the grass that man has “an influx of better thoughts”. In this way, man is not only influenced by water but also nourished by the cycles of rain. From both Thoreau’s writing and Matthiessen’s commentary we can see how the *telos* of Thoreau’s text is to inspire readers to coalesce with nature.⁹

The transformative capabilities of nature are illuminated most notably when Thoreau states, “When I would recreate myself [...] I enter a swamp as a sacred place – a *sanctum sanctorum*” [3] (46). This image is arguably the most seminal illustration of how the element of water is vital to self-transformation. It is upon entering this dark wet space that he is able to find the serenity to recreate himself. Furthermore, this picture provides a way of seeing water as imbued with religious meaning. It is in this natural element, and not for example a church, that Thoreau claims we can ‘recreate’ ourselves. Nature is a place where we can be renewed and where we can be fulfilled. His life and time by Walden Pond is, of course, exemplary of these very thoughts in a fully realized way.

Along with Whitman and Thoreau, Emerson’s water imagery can be viewed as a symbolic representation of fulfillment and meaning. Emerson states, “Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature” [1] (1). This “flood” is empowering and inspirational, it “supplies” us with the motivation to be like it, to produce meaning in a world where society is stolid, nature is neglected, and difference is distrusted. This quote provides insight into Emerson’s desire to show us that there is a new way of being in America, one in which the element of water can inspire a way of encountering life apart from the decaying aspects of society. The flood of water after an everyday storm becomes imbued with sacred meaning and goes so far as being another manifestation of the divine, filled with religious and spiritual significance.

Water as a symbol of fulfillment is seen in Emerson’s discussion of morals grounded in the earth’s elements. Emerson explains how at its very core nature is ethical, and

so when man and nature coalesce these ethics pass from the latter to the former. This belief is seen in Emerson’s claim that, “the ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature [...] this moral sentiment which thus scants the air, grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul” [1] (14). Following Emerson’s thought, if water is impregnated with ethics, when man goes into the water and drinks it, he himself would also be impregnated with ethics. The water is pure and so too can man be if he is penetrated by these ‘waters of the world’.

When we interpret the abovementioned quote from Emerson, we can see that he is claiming that ethics are a part of the grain, air, and sea; they are a part of the living earth that surround us as humans who inhabit it. It is in nature that ethics arise and it is in nature that we can describe these ethics using a language grounded in the earth. Buell poignantly comments that physical nature has a “potential to energize the powers of the human mind once we awaken fully to their inherent independence” [18] (112). Buell’s remark sheds light on the power Emerson is attempting to address that is inherent in nature and that can be transmitted to man when he is in the uncultivated wild earth.

This conception of man being transformed through the ‘energizing’ powers of water is brought to light most fully with Emerson’s comment, “I look out into the silent sea. I seem to partake in its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate” [1] (6). The word “dilate” is significant since it makes us think of eyes, which again highlights Emerson’s emphasis on sight and ideals depicted through vision. Furthermore, since the sea makes him feel dilated, it makes him feel alive and grand, reflecting the water itself.

All three writers discussions of water, whether in the form of rain, swamp, flood, or the sea represent an element that is capable of empowering us. These authors take the water that is vital to our physical health and depict it as being vital to our spiritual health. Like we saw with the imagery of the sun, the idealization of possible ways for being in the world come to light through water, something that nourishes the American soil which in turn nourishes the soul. Whitman, Thoreau, and Emerson, show how water is not only inspirational and vitalizing but is literally transformative. They describe water as being the element that provides what man needs to transcend beyond this world in any conventional sense, for him to become one with nature, and at peace and comfortable with his true self. This phenomenon is representative of how it is only through a language rooted in earthly metaphors and images that they are capable of describing such transformative, radical, and possibly unrealizable ends.

IV. THREE DIFFERENT MODES OF TRANSCENDENCE

The radical possibilities of transcendence described when a fusion between humanity and nature occurs is fully illuminated when the images of sun and water come together in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman’s writings. The unrestricted and orienting aspects of the nature of the sun and the sea connect with the transcendentalists’ emphasis on living in the present, and their cycles inspire the drive to move beyond the mundane.

⁹ Beyond identifying with the earth, Thoreau’s prose are arguably alive like nature, and it is this ‘living aspect’ of his writing that allows him to relay such grand claims. Larwrence Buell points out, “Thoreau is like Whitman: sometimes insisting that his text is alive” [17] (379). In this respect, the act of transposing his experience to us as readers, is in Thoreau’s eyes, bringing to light the possibility of transformation through a type of identification and coalescence with nature.

Emerson's discussion of the transcendental experience comprised of both sun and sea imagery brings to light his emphasis on the importance of solitude and embracing nature. "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chambers as from society [...] the sun evaporates the sea [...] and the endless circulation of the divine charity nourishes man" [1] (3). From this quote we can see how for Emerson, the transcendental experience requires consciousness, solitude, acceptance of the circularity of time, and an active embrace of nature.¹⁰ Moreover, this quote highlights how for Emerson it is nature in itself, and as a symbol of the divine, that "nourishes man". It is the unity of the sea and the sun and their circular movements that inspires and allows for a transformation of the self.

The merger of man and nature also comes full circle in Thoreau's writing when these two cyclical nature images are described in the same passage and directly depict to us as readers the transcendental experience. Thoreau writes, "The sun sets on some retired meadow, [...] we walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright — I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it" [3] (25). The collapse of the boundary between nature and man in this quote is threefold: man, sun, and water become one. This is evident in his words "I had never bathed in such a golden flood". While he is referring to the reverberations of the sun's rays, the word flood unquestionably makes us think of water, with the 'I' signifying his part in this transformative experience. Here the cyclical nature elements are a compass. Thoreau purposefully leaves it vague whether he is alone or with someone. Perhaps the 'we' is he and animals or maybe it is he and another person. By leaving the 'we' vague he may be suggesting to his readers that nature provides the conditions for transcendence as long as we are mentally, spiritually, and physically in a place for it.

In Whitman, this transcendental experience, depicted with both water and sun imagery, is eternal, endless, and sensual. In "Song of Myself" Whitman writes, "I do not talk of a beginning or an end [...] never be any more perfection than there is now [...] Earth of departed sunset — earth of the mountains misty-topt! [...] Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!" [4] (40-44). The mottling and mist draw our attention to the unique physical nature of the present, and thus Whitman can be seen as desiring to depict reality in a perfect, individual light. This is, as Tibbie Lynch and Larry Reynolds remark, a moment of transcendence wherein Whitman "bridges the gap between the material and the ideal, the concrete and the ideal" [19] (150). The material is the physical mist of the mountain and the ideal being the notion of life without a definitive beginning or end. Beyond the elusive eternal aspect Whitman is addressing, this quote also highlights how for him, the sun and water will always be in a cyclical relationship with the earth, so when we embrace this way of being, illuminated and vitalized, we can transcend beyond conventions and have the richest encounter with life in the present moment. Furthermore, the enjambment present

in this poem exemplifies how Whitman's "style and Weltanschauung [are] inseparably linked up" [15] (428). The lines flowing off the page without restriction, depicting an image of circularity and perpetual renewal through the water and sun, parallel his sentiment to be perpetually alive and free of all constraints of conventional reality.

It is through drawing on the cyclical nature images of water and sun, that Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman address their desires most clearly: to transcend time and space and, in a sense, conventional reality. They provide us with a formula for a new way of being in the world, one in which as Emerson suggests we become, "above time" and "in nature." Despite this shared desire, their quotes that incorporate both water and sun imagery most directly illustrate the contrasts that lie in each of their respective transcendental encounters. For Whitman we are called to feel this, for Emerson we are called to envision and spiritually experience this, and for Thoreau we are called to embrace this experience full heartedly both physically and spiritually. Unlike Whitman who implies the desire to be with others and unlike Emerson who stresses the need for solitude, for Thoreau fulfillment and transformation can occur whether we are alone or with others.

V. CONCLUSION

Despite Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman's similar idealizations of nature as a transcendental space, my analysis has shed light on the vast differences that actually occur on the level of transformation. For Emerson, nature is idealized as a place to merge into, but his emphasis on sight and knowledge signal to us that perhaps for him these cyclical images of sun and water are more compasses of imagined transcendence that actually occurs on the level of thought. In Thoreau's writing, we can see that these cyclical nature images illustrate a kind of transcendence that moves in and through an embodied encounter with nature. For Whitman, these images can be seen as ways of expressing a yearning to transcend all social conventions and personal limitations.

When Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman describe the sun and water, and encourage man to be like them, or at the least guided by them, they express a deep, even if perhaps not fully realizable, desire for a different way of being in and with America. It is this radical way of being that is only expressible through a language that draws on nature metaphors and similes and challenges us to see beyond our everyday encounter with the world. The sun and water as cyclical elements are significant not simply because they express the possibility for perpetual renewal and oneness with the earth, but because their movements have the ability to inspire it.

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