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**Transatlantic Romanticism: The English  
Romantics and American Nineteenth-Century  
Poetic Tradition**

by  
Amal Ragaa Bassyouni Hussein

Thesis presented for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English Studies  
Durham University  
UK  
2011

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## Declaration

No part of this thesis has been submitted elsewhere for any other degree or qualification. The work is solely of my own, under the supervision of Professor Stephen Regan and Professor Michael O'Neill, unless referenced to the contrary in the text.

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*For my ancient yet newly-born country*

*Egypt*

## Acknowledgments

All praise is to Allah for his bounty, mercy and guidance. I am greatly indebted to my husband, my parents and all my family members, without their constant love and support I could have never done this work. Profound gratitude is due to Professor Stephen Regan for his invaluable help and support; for the knowledge he shared out and his unfailing encouragement, I am most grateful. I also owe thanks to Professor Michael O'Neill for his academic guidance and thoughtful comments.

## Abstract

This thesis explores the Romantic origins of nineteenth-century American poetic tradition; it looks at the relationship between the English Romantics and major nineteenth-century American poets. My research focuses on the Romantic lines of continuity within nineteenth-century American poetry, identifying them as central to the representation of American cultural and literary identities. American poets shaped their art and national identity out of a Romantic interest in their native nature. My study particularly explores the diverse ways in which major American poets, of this time, reacted to, adapted and reformulated Romantic ideals of nature, literary creation, the mission of the poet and the aesthetic category of the sublime. It traces connections and dialogues between American poets and their Romantic predecessors, including Blake, Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. This thesis is inspired by the strong and abiding academic interest in Romantic studies, and aims to advance new readings of nineteenth-century American poetry in a transatlantic literary and cultural context. It attempts to cover a wide range of nineteenth-century key poetic works in relation to Romantic visions, ideals and forms. Developing a chronological line of enquiry, my thesis highlights the paradox of writers seeking to establish an original, distinctive American literary canon while still heavily deriving ideas and techniques from other, non-American sources.

An introductory chapter outlines the historical and cultural framework of the Anglo-American literary relationship, focussing on its sensibilities, tensions and affinities. Chapter two considers how Bryant and Longfellow reformulated the Romantic pastoral tradition in their representations of American landscape, which helped toward shaping a peculiar national poetic canon. Through examining Emerson's poetic achievement in the light of the Romantic tradition, chapter three challenges Emersonian claims of originality and self-reliance. Chapter four addresses Whitman's Romantic preoccupations and interests alongside his groundbreaking innovations manifested in his attitudes towards nature, human body and urban landscape as well as his experiments with poetic language and form. Chapter five attempts to interpret the seeming idiosyncrasy of Dickinson's work in the light of the poet's dialogues with her Romantic precursors. Above all, this study examines how Romanticism worked upon the minds and art of nineteenth-century American poets, aiming to provide refreshing interpretations of nineteenth-century American poetry in the context of the broader transatlantic Romantic tradition.



## List of Abbreviations

- SE*      Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays. Ed. Larzer Ziff.  
New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1982.
- CW*      The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ed.  
Edward Waldo Emerson. Boston and New York:  
Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1904.
- PW*      The Poetical Works of Longfellow. London: Oxford  
University Press, 1957.
- CP*      Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems. Ed. Thomas  
H. Johnson. London: Faber and Faber, 1975.

## Preface

If “America” is a cluster of attitudes involving  
desire for a better future,  
nostalgia for a lost past,  
impatience with inherited forms,  
anxiety from relentless change,  
conflicted disdain for industrial (& virtual) society,  
sentimentality for nature and youth,  
and the domination of all by the individual  
—so is “Romanticism.” (White par.4)

With these words Professor Craig White introduced the course on American Romanticism he instructed in 2008 at the University of Houston-Clear Lake; Professor White expressly highlights the idea that “America” ideologically rests upon ideas borrowed from theories of “Romanticism.” David Morse earlier asserts this claim in the preface to his substantial study, American Romanticism (1987), as he argues that “of all societies, the United States is the one that has been most deeply marked by the impact of Romanticism” (1: ix). In spite of Emerson’s denial of influence and his assertion of a self-reliant, national literary canon, American Romanticism has been seen to show lines of continuity with its precedent European movement, particularly in terms of the Romantic primary concerns with self and nature. The Romantic influence on American literature was not merely intellectual;

it rather extended to the aesthetic aspects concerned with formal and verbal expression. In the following pages I discuss the Romantic elements in nineteenth-century American poetic tradition within the broader transatlantic context of the literary and cultural dialogues between Britain and the United States. My aim is to extend the grounds on which we view the Romantic legacy, transcending national barriers and geographical boundaries for a broader transatlantic vision of the culture of Romanticism. After gaining political independence from Britain in 1783, American intellectuals and men of letters sought a parallel cultural independence; the growing American nation felt the need to assert itself intellectually in the same way it proved its economic power. Stephen Spender calls the American state of culture after independence “the American dilemma: the combination of political independence and cultural colonization” (8). The nineteenth century was the time of the sudden rise of the United States as a literary force; the publishing of American literary masterpieces marked the emergence of a distinctive national canon. American literature succeeded in claiming a substantial degree of international recognition, and it demonstrated a unique national stamp through tackling domestic themes in a distinctively American language.

Despite such nationalistic claims of authenticity and originality, there are still traceable lines of continuity with the mother literary

tradition. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in studying this relationship between English literature and American studies, particularly, in examining both literary traditions in a broader transatlantic dimension. Cultural exchanges and ideological parallels across the Atlantic have been investigated, documented and found to be profound and complex. Paul Giles, in his recent study, Transatlantic Insurrections: British Culture and the Formation of American Literature, 1730–1860 (2001), emphasizes the aspect of mutuality in Anglo-American literary relations. Giles argues not only that American literary tradition has been influenced by British culture, but also that British authors have been equally responsive to their American counterparts. Within a broad historical framework, Transatlantic Insurrections attempts to explore the complex web of reciprocal influences between Britain and the United States. The purpose of this study, however, is not to consider the interactive nature of Anglo-American Romantic dialogues; rather it focuses on the way in which English Romantic writers acted on the minds and works of their American counterparts during the nineteenth century—the time when major American canonical literary works were produced.

Stephen Spender, in his groundbreaking book, Love-Hate Relations: A Study of Anglo-American Sensibilities (1974),

emphasizes the cultural authority of British literature by arguing that responding to the image of England and Europe was an integral part of the American sense of identity. American writers formulated the significance of their homeland through comparing its grandeur, vastness and untouched beauty to the ruins of the old world, seeing aging Europe as the past and the United States as the present and future of civilization. Their self-image as American nationals, as well as their perceived or even imagined image of America itself, were essentially influenced by their self-involvement with European civilization, since they employed Europe, particularly Britain, as a standard for comparison in terms of culture. Considering the various ways in which the American authors responded to Britain, Spender describes Anglo-American sensitive literary relations as “love-hate”:

American literary relations with England consisted, then, until recently, largely of Americans—Emerson, Hawthorne, James, Eliot and many others—comparing their country with an England which was predominantly of the dead, and of their experiencing various degrees of disillusionment (recorded mostly in their correspondence) when they came to this country and were confronted by the living and their works... the American writers’ concept of ‘patria’ [true nation] was partly the result of comparing their idea of European civilization with their own country’s force and vitality. They either reacted against Europe or they gravitated

towards it, but the shadow image of England and Europe qualified their attitudes to their own country and state of culture. (xvi– xvii)

Remarkably, Spender asserts that the American writers' tendency to associate their identity with Europe and England during the age of Emerson was inevitable, as implied by his expression "the shadow image." The Old World resembles the past that you can never escape; it is the shadow that follows you wherever you go. Hence, the American, though politically independent, continued to be haunted by the shadows of the past.

Robert Weisbuch, in his illuminating study, Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson (1986), argues that the rise of nationalism in American literature came as a conscious rejection of British influence on the part of American writers. The argument is posed through case studies of pairs of American and British writers, examining American literary works in a transatlantic perspective. According to Weisbuch's portrayal of the transatlantic situation during the age of Emerson, the American writers, starting from a "defensive position" against the authority of British culture, felt the need for distinctive literary qualities distinguishing their works from British models. The attempts to establish a national canon were challenged by the British side, on the grounds of the American lack of history, which entails the absence

of a national identity, national manners and representative social classes. Fully aware of their dilemma, the American writers turned these disadvantages into merits, by rethinking the meanings of history and society and redefining their relation to literary creation. The British derogations of America served as a catalyst to the growing American sense of nationalism; resistance to a British cultural hegemony provided the “goad” for the shaping of American literature.

Leon Chai, in his insightful study, The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance (1987), traces the transformation of the European Romantic legacy (1780–1830) by the American Renaissance authors during the mid-nineteenth century. Chai focuses on the development of certain key Romantic concepts through this transformation from their original European context to the growing American canon. In this way, Chai allows for the coexistence of American and British literatures in a synthesis reflecting the development of Romantic thought, rather than emphasizing a simple anxious American rejection of British influence and the corresponding desire for cultural independence.

Richard Gravil’s major study, Romantic Dialogues: Anglo-American Continuities, 1776–1862 (2000), is a signpost in the field of transatlantic Romanticism. Gravil challenges the “Emersonian myth”

of American cultural and literary independence through his thoughtful examination of the tangled Anglo-American relations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within this cultural context of transatlantic interactive intellectual parallelisms, Grivil reads American “canonical” Romantic works comparatively with the English Romantic works of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Reading such major American Romantic works against their British counterparts brings to light the extensively intricate intertextual connection between the two literary traditions.

These previous studies significantly demonstrate and document transatlantic Romanticism; however, the field still needs more exploration, as Grivil himself admits the need to investigate further such “a lost continent of literary exchange that our artificially divided academic community has yet to recognize and explore” (xix). This study, therefore, aims to develop a further exploration of transatlantic Romantic culture. What this study aims to provide is an exploration of how American writers transformed Romantic ideologies and aesthetics through original close comparative readings of British and American Romantic texts. This leads to innovative evaluations of the subtle dialogues that took place with British Romantic precursors that shaped the works of those founding figures in the American poetic tradition. The first chapter sets the context of the study with its



exploration of Anglo-American cultural tensions and affinities during the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century. The study dwells on a close reading of both British and American Romantic works, aiming to bring to our understanding the way in which Romanticism acted as an international culture. The second chapter demonstrates the early American attempts of Bryant and Longfellow to assert Americanism in literature. It shows that tackling new subjects— including the American landscape— does not in itself constitute the production of a new literature. The Romantic echoes in Bryant and Longfellow’s works are clear and traceable. The third chapter considers Emerson’s Transcendental philosophy and its roots in British Romanticism, and it further examines Emerson’s poetry from a transatlantic Romantic perspective. The fourth chapter discusses how Whitman, while being a quintessentially American poet, can be seen as representative of Romantic culture. It demonstrates how Whitman’s originality is challenged when his work is examined within a transatlantic Romantic context, while equally acknowledging his innovations as a Romantic. The last chapter attempts to interpret Dickinson’s idiosyncrasy in the light of the poet’s dialogues with English Romantic writers. The enigma of her eccentric way of writing can be better understood and appreciated, given a knowledge of the literary sources from which Dickinson derives many of her key ideas.

The thesis is presented chronologically, but it also aims to establish thematic links throughout, and it gives particular attention to Romantic ideals of nature, literary creation, the mission of the poet and the aesthetic category of the sublime.

# **Chapter One**

## Anglo-American Cultural Tensions and Affinities

This opening chapter attempts to define the ground for the thesis as a whole. As the study is concerned with the acknowledgement and appraisal of the Romantic elements in nineteenth-century American poetic tradition within a transatlantic context, a discussion of Anglo-American cultural relationships is essential. The former colony and the colonial power developed a very “special relationship” that has survived until today. In cultural terms, the relationship between the two nations has been characterized by rivalry and friendship, antagonism and amity, and shared concerns and interests. American literature started as a colonial branch of the well-established broader English literary tradition. However, it soon developed its own peculiar characteristics, becoming a distinctive national art. The nineteenth century was the time of the rise of America as a literary force and the establishment of a canon that could be characterised as distinctively national rather than a colonial branch of English literature. The emerging of nationalist America as a literary power, a phenomenon that reached its peak with the flourishing of the American renaissance during the second half of the nineteenth century, triggered various responses on the other side of the Atlantic. The American assertion of a nationalistic view of literature is challenged by interactive cross-cultural influences within the

developing multicultural American society. America attracted a wide spectrum of European immigrants, who came to the New World carrying their own diverse cultural heritages, in addition to Native Americans, and Africans who were brought as slaves. In this context, there can never be claims of an integrated, pure culture, since the shadows and reflections of other cultural traditions are always there. In such a dynamic transatlantic world, to what extent nineteenth-century American poetry succeeds in achieving authenticity and originality, and to what extent it comes to show intellectual and artistic borrowings from English literary sources, are crucial questions. The aim of this thesis, then, is to examine American nineteenth-century major poetic works within the broader context of English Romanticism, so as to attempt to evaluate the ideological and aesthetic interplay between American and British works of literature.

America was colonized by both the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Scotland as early as 1607, and after the union of the two kingdoms as the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707, it continued to be a part of the British Empire. It was not until 1783 that America declared its political independence from the home nation and formed the United States of America. During this long period, the British influence on America was not confined only to political authority, it rather extended to all aspects of life within the developing American

society. Among the many waves of early European immigrants to the New World were the English settlers who established colonies on the strip of land along the eastern seacoast. New England colonies were the centre of educational, cultural and intellectual movements as well as the Industrial Revolution; hence, they were the first colonies to rebel against the British sovereignty. With the growing American desire to break from the British Empire, came a strong nationalistic emphasis on the formation of a unique cultural identity. After the American Declaration of Independence in 1783, American men of letters called for an intellectual independence parallel to the political one. Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of America's most famous thinkers, called for such intellectual independence in his oration, "The American Scholar," delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1837:

Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star for a thousand years? (*SE* 83–4)

However, if it was relatively easy for the Americans to achieve such a political separation, intellectually this was not the case as the cultural

and literary ties between the two Atlantic nations were complex and deep. Recent research in transatlantic studies has shown how the British and American cultures were intertwined, and that the shaping of literary tradition in each nation has been, to a great extent, influenced by continuous transatlantic cultural dialogues.

The Anglo-American literary relationship has always been considered both problematic and complex. According to Benjamin Lease, “the Paper War” between British and American men of letters continued for more than one hundred years. Some British could not see in the American materialistic culture anything but dishonest trickery. The expression of such a hostile attitude triggered off a similar antagonistic reaction on the American side. The climax came with Sydney Smith’s famous attack on American writers in the Edinburgh Review (January 1820) with his insulting question: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American Book?”— a crucial encounter in Anglo-American literary relations (3–4).

In the context of anti-Americanism in nineteenth-century British literature, Diana C. Archibald argues that the concept of anti-Americanism, in theory, depends on national boundaries, but in practice, it is less distinctive in real communications and literary texts. Archibald argues further that the phenomenon can be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century when America was viewed

as a wild unknown land, out of the territory of the more sophisticated and civilized European world. Anti-American views were highly shaped and influenced by this early image of America, and the hostility unsurprisingly was institutionalized with the revolt of the American colonies against the Mother Country. The formation of an American republican political system, based on democratic ideals of freedom and equality, could be seen as a threat to its well-established British counterpart. The industrialization of America took the concept further; the emergence of America as a strong, successful economic power provoked typical images of materialism and even greed. Some writers attributed the failure of the American moral model to the stereotyped image of America as a land far away from civilization. The American Revolution presented America as a military rival and threatening economic force; the potential superiority and prosperity of America announced a shift in power. The image of America as a land of opportunities, ruled by the democratic values of liberty and equality, triggered off massive waves of emigration from the Old to the New World. The American world-domination invoked more anti-American sentiments, as the former colonial power struggled to come to terms with its “subordinate position.” At this stage, Britain viewed America as a “nation [that] grew in might but lacked cultural maturity” (131). Archibald further points out that, in ideological terms, the democratic



ideals of equality and freedom, upon which the United States was established, threatened the social structure of European nations, where the aristocratic elite still dominated the middle and working classes (130–4).

Following the declaration of political independence in 1783, the United States struggled to break free from the British cultural dominance; hence, the nineteenth century was a crucial period in the history of Anglo-American transatlantic dialogues. Yearning for cultural independence and a distinctive American literary voice, a patriotic campaign swept over the United States calling for the production of native authentic literature of a distinctive nature. The nineteenth century was a time of philosophical attempts to explore an American intellectual and literary identity distinguished from that of the British forebears. In their quest for such a national identity, the American writers could not simply break away from their British ancestors. England remained a major force controlling the rise of an American literature through the American writers' engagement with their British counterparts. Such an involvement significantly influenced the shaping of the intellectual and imaginative worlds of the American writers in the nineteenth century. In his historical review of this transatlantic relationship, Leon Chai records the transformation of the cultural legacy of European Romanticism, from roughly 1780 to

1830, by a group of great American writers during the middle of the nineteenth century. In tracing these lines of continuity, Chai focuses on the development of some governing Romantic concepts through the process of their later appropriation by American authors. While Chai emphasizes that the rise of American literature during the mid-nineteenth century finds its origins in the Romantic legacy, he also recognizes the development of Romantic thought by the American authors during that period. On the other hand, the way in which the British perceived America before and after the Declaration of Independence is highly important for the evaluation of such transatlantic encounters.

A further examination of the affinities between American literature and the Romantic tradition needs to be grounded on a clear definition of the concept of Romanticism. Since the flowering of the English Romantic literary movement at the end of the eighteenth century, critics have embarked on many attempts to define the characteristic nature of Romanticism. Among the various approaches to the term was Morse Peckham's historical interpretation for the sake of literary study. According to Peckham, Romanticism is the shift from the classical view of the world as a static mechanism, like a clock, to one that regards the world as a dynamic organism, like a growing tree. This shift in world view is accompanied by another shift

in values and ideals. The classical values of reason, logic and permanence are replaced with intuition, freedom and change. The Romantics reject static rules, absolute values and formal classifications, and call for novelty, originality and freedom. The main interest is no longer in the distinctions between phenomena, but rather in the organic relationships unifying them all, particularly, the relationship between man and nature. According to the Romantic perspective, the whole world is seen in terms of an intricate live network with many direct and indirect relationships among its own components. The role of the Romantic artist is not to imitate old forms but rather to invent new ones more suitable for the expression of his own thoughts and feelings. In such a creative act, he depends on imagination rather than on reason, on the unconscious rather than on the conscious, and on symbolism rather than on allegory. Peckham emphasizes this philosophical position of the Romantic artist who, through his own creations, has managed to renew the whole organic universe (Adams, "Romanticism" 419–20). Adopting Peckham's theory of Romanticism, R. P. Adams argues that the American literary tradition underwent the same shift in attitude from the rational to the more sentimental. Strict religious practices of Puritanism brought the American society into a static state. Adams further argues that Emerson's innovations are nothing but a revolt against static reason in

favour of a more dynamic spiritual system. Adams regards Emerson's visit to Europe and his contact with English Romantic poets as the spur for establishing American Romanticism. Particularly, Emerson's publication of Carlyle's Sartor Resartus and his own "Nature" in 1836 marks the beginning of the Romantic Movement in the United States ("Romanticism" 420–1). However, it is worthy of note that the American Revolution itself has previously worked as a catalyst urging this shift in European thought from rationalism to sentimentality.

The last half of the eighteenth century was a period of radical, social and political upheaval in Europe; the spirit of rebellion, which swept over the continent, was intensely provoked by both the French Revolution (1789–1799) and the American Revolution (1774–1783). For the British monarchy, so closely associated with both revolts, these events signified a real threat. Discussing the British anxieties in this period, Mark Philip explains that British reformers, yearning for domestic political and social changes, regarded such illuminating events in America and France as the dawn of a new era; while, on the other hand, other British observers were more conservative in their response. In his famous critique of the French Revolution, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), Edmund Burke, though a supporter of the American Revolution, attacks the French revolutionary excesses and predicts the destruction of the civilized

French state, the rise of military dictatorship and the outbreak of war in Europe. The debate within British society escalated into a battle of political rhetoric, and the British government, sensing such dangerous political controversy, issued in 1792 a Royal Proclamation against seditious writing. Most famous among such seditious writing is Tom Paine's Rights of Man (1791), whose author was persecuted by the British government, but managed to flee to France.

Under these circumstances of fear of radical and republican thought, William Blake wrote his interpretation of the American Revolution, America, a Prophecy (1793). In order to disguise his theme, Blake elaborated his personal, invented, complex mythology to dramatize the political struggle between Britain and America, and to glorify the spirit of freedom inspiring the American revolt. America is symbolized by Orc, the mythic positive figure of creative passion, rebellion, fire and energy. Orc and the Thirteen Angels, representing the thirteen rebelling colonies, are to fight against the Angel of Albion, standing for the British tyranny. Remarkably, the names of the founding fathers— George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine— are included in the struggle against the oppression of the Angel of Albion. Orc, a symbol of America, advocates the freedom, dignity and even holiness of the individual: “For every thing that lives is Holy” (Erdman 45). Blake's prophetic

book, despite its obscure and mystical language, proposes a Romantic image of the American Revolution; the Romantics apparently find in America the embodiment of the freedom they seek.

Early in 1794, America was idealized by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Robert Southey in their utopian scheme to establish an egalitarian society on the banks of the Susquehanna River in northeastern America. Away from the tyranny of corrupted society, political institutions and the indulgence of personal possession, wild, unspoiled America resembled a fresh start for a culture of equality and benevolence. Inspired by Plato's ideal commonwealth, the two young English poets devised their utopian community on two principles: Pantisocracy and Aspheterism. According to the first ideal a utopian state should be governed by all; people should have equal control over the matters that affect their interests, and no one should be given more power than others. Moreover, the second principle entails that people should give up their personal properties, and that they should rather share a public property and work together for the common good. Radical plans of Pantisocracy, envisioned by Coleridge and Southey, were also influenced by Romantic disillusionment with the French Revolution, as well as travel accounts of the wild New World. Out of their resentment towards the political situation in Britain, the two Pantisocrats planned to emigrate to America to set up a democratic

community, based on equality and liberty, and reposefully live in peace and harmony. However, while such positive reports of America were very inviting, others described life in America as difficult and exhausting. By 1795, Coleridge and Southey came to realize that the dream of Pantisocracy had practically failed because of a lack of funds for emigration and establishing such a Pantisocratic state; in addition, the young poets did not have sufficient experience with farming, carpentry and general labour. Southey suggested establishing the hoped-for utopian state in Wales, which sounded to him less remote and perhaps more manageable than the wild American unknown. Coleridge totally refused the idea, and the two poets separated, contemplating the reasons for their failure. From a broader transatlantic perspective, Tim Fulford argues that despite the failure of Pantisocracy, the image of such an American Eden, as envisioned by Pantisocrats, helped, to a great extent, in the rise and modeling of British Romanticism:

In fact, Pantisocracy and its fall-out helped shape the radical writing for which they [Coleridge and Southey] were first famous. The themes of that writing —opposition to British imperialism, enthusiasm for American liberty, idealization of rural life— have their origin, in part, in the hopes and fears of the Pantisocrats. So does a theme that has been less noticed but is bound up with the others— uneasy fascination with Native Americans. It is this theme that I shall investigate here, showing, in

particular, that not only was Pantisocracy modelled, to a greater extent than has been realized, on a representation of Native American society, but that it was by further exploring this representation that, in part, Coleridge and Southey developed the discourse we have come to call Romantic.

(121)

Although the idealized Pantisocratic community was never realized, the vision of an American Arcadia, where primitive native Indians live in harmony with nature, continued to capture the thoughts of the two young poets. Southey expresses this fascination with American Indians in his epic Madoc (1805); the poem is based on the legend of Madoc, the Welsh prince, who flees his homeland, sails to the west and discovers a new land. According to Welsh folklore, after the death of Madoc's father, the king of North Wales in the late twelfth century, his sons fought violently over the throne; Madoc escaped from bloody fighting and set a sea voyage to the west. The epic hero, just as in the Pantisocrats' plan, emigrates from his own "barbarous country" searching for peace and repose. Remarkably, Southey's last plan to establish a Pantisocratic state in Wales probably had its origin in the mythical connection between Wales and America. As the epic unfolds, Madoc lands in America where he is welcomed by its native "friendly hosts":

What men were they? Of dark-brown colour, tinged  
With sunny redness; wild of eye; their brows



So smooth, as never yet anxiety,  
Nor busy thought had made a furrow there;  
Beardless, and each to each of lineaments  
So like, they seemed but one great family. (Southey V: 45)

As represented by Southey, American Indians are primitive, wild men whose similar faces are free of wrinkles as if they have never known care or worry. Fulford claims that Coleridge and Southey's conception of Indian life can be tied to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas of uncorrupted natural life (120). Rousseau believes that man is innately good, and that it is civilization, particularly traditional education, that corrupts his good virtues. The literary tradition of glorifying primitive cultures can be traced back to Greek and Roman writers. However, it was John Dryden who first used the expression "the noble savage" in his play The Conquest of Granada (1672):

I am as free as Nature first made Man,  
E're the base Laws of Servitude began,  
When wild in Woods the noble Savage ran. (Dryden 6)

The image of the American Indian as a primitive who lives in harmony with nature is itself a Romantic image since it emphasizes the Romantic belief in the natural goodness of man. The figure of the "Noble Savage" reflects a trace of the Romantic conception that it is civilization, with its social constraints, that hinders man's innate

goodness, while living in contact with nature nourishes human soul and potentialities.

Astrid Wind argues that since the “interest in the land” is the major factor shaping the European conception of American Indians, the Anglo-American political conflict during the eighteenth century has greatly influenced the Romantic image of “the noble savage.” The Indian’s participation in the American war for independence reflects them as violent, merciless warriors and hunters. Such conceptions have displaced their idealized image of innocence and simplicity. With the growing interest in the land at the turn of the eighteenth century, both American and British writers, despite their political differences, agreed that Indians, with such potential savagery, should be excluded from the scene of an American Utopia. Representing an obstacle to the fullest achievements of free immigrants on fresh, virgin soil, Native Indians were portrayed as a race that was doomed to vanish so as to give way to a new and brighter beginning. Perceiving Native Indians in this light entailed more serious challenges to the developing American civilization. Applying the “environmental theory” to the American landscape, the French naturalist, George Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, in his massive work Histoire Naturelle (1749–1789), concluded that it was the American natural environment that allowed Native Indians to degenerate to such a

primitive stage of human existence, and that it was very likely that it would have the same effect on European emigrants. Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence and the third President of the United States (1801–1809), attempts in his own Notes on the State of Virginia (1787), to refute Buffon's claims against American nature through his emphasis on the potential of Indians. Focusing on the Indian's excellence in oratory, Jefferson argues that their genius is to be clearly revealed if they are compared to their counterparts— the early uncultivated European natives (Wind 39–41). In the context of such transatlantic encounters, Wind argues that Jefferson's "fusion of the image of the American land with that of the natives as sages in the tradition of ancient civilisation elevated the prospects of the young nation, which had yet to secure its spiritual and intellectual independence from Britain" (41).

The European views of America in the late eighteenth century significantly challenged the American mission to establish a civilization out of the wilderness. Norman K. Risjord, in his comprehensive study of the birth of the nation, Jefferson's America: (1760– 1815), asserts the Americans' painful feelings of cultural inferiority and their continuous quest for symbols of national identity, following the overthrow of imperial authority. In his record of the American literary scene, Risjord states that literary works were

essentially imported from Britain as the Americans obviously lacked a national literature, and perhaps were less inclined to write books in the first place. Most importantly, since printing and publishing were very expensive, it was much cheaper to import books and even pirate them. Accordingly, the literary tastes of American readers were profoundly shaped by British intellectual models. However, American literary voices found access to the public through newspapers of their own, which became widely circulated by the middle of the eighteenth century, particularly with the spread of literacy; newspapers were practically appealing to everyone's demands (57–8).

The growth of a national literature was challenged by the view that the Americans lacked a language of their own, and the “transplanted” language they used did not grow up with the nation, responding to people's demands and reflecting their thoughts and feelings. William Cullen Bryant in his “Poetry's Relation to Our Age and Country” (1825–1826), refutes this claim and emphasizes that the English language, with the distinctive American dialect, naturally and easily accommodates itself to the American nation:

The copious and flexible dialect we speak... has grown up, as every forcible and beautiful language has done, among a simple and unlettered people; it has accommodated itself, in the first place, to the things of nature, and, as civilization advanced, to the things of art; and thus it has

become a language full of picturesque forms of expression, yet fitted for the purposes of science. (Gado 140)

Markedly, Bryant's emphasis on the authority of nature in shaping the American dialect, naturally developed by "simple and unlettered people," reflects the Wordsworthian Romantic view that the language of common, rustic people is the most appropriate for poetic expression. In his "Preface" to Lyrical Ballads (1798), Wordsworth argues that such a language, being originally derived from nature, and less influenced by social vanity, "is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets" (Hayden 282).

Risjord further argues that the critical step towards intellectual and cultural independence was the formation of an American language corpus by Noah Webster. In 1828, Webster published the American Dictionary, which contained around twelve thousand new words reflecting the American language in form and usage (302). Webster lived in Amherst, Massachusetts; he was a co-founder of Amherst College with Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Emily Dickinson's grandfather. The Amherst poet's lexical creativity has partially been ascribed to her usage of Webster's dictionary to enhance her poetic composition. Although American writers had the linguistic means for expressing themselves distinctively, they continued to model their

works on British forms. The early literary American experience faced another serious obstacle hindering the formation of a national cultural identity. Risjord finds the intellectual atmosphere in America by the end of the eighteenth century to be “stifling” due to the effect of Calvinist orthodoxy; he briefly explores some of the radical literary attempts to defy the rigid, morbid traditional tendencies of Calvinism, including the work of poets such as Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau. Interestingly, it was Barlow’s visit to Europe in the 1790s that stimulated his radicalism, as he was exposed to the revolutionary ideas of Tom Paine in France during his trip. Risjord finds Barlow and Freneau’s poetic experiences, though not possessing great artistic merit, to reflect a distinctive American flavour: Barlow’s “The Hasty Pudding” (1793) is presented in a fresh form and an American humorous style, while Freneau’s “To a Wild Honeysuckle” (1786) and “The Indian Burying Ground” display the poet’s exploration of American landscape and his own ability to break free from British poetic conventions. Moreover, Risjord argues that Freneau’s lyrical poems tackling the beauties of nature anticipated the Romantic primitivism of Wordsworth and Coleridge (302–4). Remarkably, Freneau’s “To a Wild Honeysuckle” reflects a Romantic interest in nature; the poet sings his love for American “untouched” natural beauty. Contemplating the flower’s solitary appearance in nature, the

poet grieves for its short life. Comparing it to the flowers of Eden, which similarly faded away, the poet realizes its inevitable end, and addresses the honeysuckle flower:

Fair flower, that dost so comely grow,

Hid in this silent, dull retreat,

Untouch'd thy honey'd blossoms blow,

Unseen thy little branches greet:

No roving foot shall crush thee here,

No busy hand provoke a tear.

(Freneau 95)

In his sketch of the cultural environment in America during the early nineteenth century, Larzer Ziff claims that the basic problems facing the rise of an authentic national literature were history and nature. The newly-born nation had no past and hence lacked a distinctive identifying character of its own. The American people were intensely longing for a unifying, “identity-giving” event that could gather them all as a single entity and distinguish them from their European ancestors. Moreover, the taming of the mighty, stretched, primitive landscape made the national mission of establishing a culture out of such wilderness more difficult. Remarkably, the grand American scene seemed very empty of any associations and hence it obviously lacked the reference to any human experience. The majority

of the world viewed The United States as a rich soil, promising economical gains rather than any potential artistic accomplishments. The American cultural atmosphere could not be seen as capable of producing any type of cultivated literary work (8–9). Therefore, the American authors felt a desperate need to struggle in order to gain some measure of international admiration and respect for themselves. Their aim was not only to formulate a literature that could keep up with its British counterpart, but also to produce a literary Americanism through reflecting national issues in a distinctly American language.

Indeed the American writers were completely aware of their own dilemma and had various attitudes to handle the interrelated history-nature problem. In his critical analysis of the situation of American literature, “Poetry’s Relation to Our Age and Country” (1825–1826), Bryant acknowledges this problem:

Our country is decried as peculiarly barren of the materials of poetry. The scenery of our land these reasoners admit to be beautiful, but they urge that it is the beauty of a face without expression, that it wants the associations of tradition which are the soul and interest of scenery; that it wants the national superstitions which linger yet in every district in Europe, and the legends of distant and dark ages and of wild and unsettled times of which the old world reminds you at every step (Gado 132).



Throughout his essay, Bryant attempts to refute these claims on the ground that the use of such traditional mythologies in poetry has ruined its taste; the focus on the supernatural world of deities separates poetry from the actual human condition. However, Bryant argues that though superstitions do not suit the spirit of the present age, poets should make use of the abundance of preceding materials to create diverse poetic situations. He gives examples of great English poets who went out of their own national circumference to far-fetched realms in quest of such poetic experiences (Gado 135–9): “Spenser’s celebrated poem take[s] place within the shadowy limits of fairyland. Shakespeare has laid the scene of many of his finest tragedies in foreign countries. Milton went out of the world for the subject of his two epics. Byron has taken the incidents of all his poems from outside of England...” (Gado 139).

Ziff argues that Washington Irving succeeded in resolving the history-nature problem in his celebrated work, The Sketch Book (1819–1820), which was the first widely read American literary work in Britain and Europe (9). Surprisingly, very little of the book is dedicated to American subjects, as most of it tackles English character and landscape. At the beginning of the book, Irving’s pseudonymous narrator, Geoffrey Crayon, expresses his fascination with his homeland nature: “never need an American look beyond his own

country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery” (Irving 4). However, the European “charms of storied poetical association” seem irresistible to him; he decides to sail to Europe out of his desire to escape from the American realities to “the shadowy grandeurs of the past” (Irving 4). Ironically, catching sight of the European land, the American traveler, overwhelmed with excitement, calls it “the land of promise” (Irving 12):

The needy European, emerging from tradition with an empty stomach, regarded America as the land of promise, but the native son, his stomach full and his imagination starved, reversed the application of the biblical phrase. (Ziff 9)

Examining Irving’s view of Europe, Ziff argues that Irving attributes the rich suggestiveness of the European landscape, with such “storied associations,” to the site itself, rather than the imagination of the observer. The European scene, being inherently inspirational, seems more capable of stimulating memories and feelings, which are so essential to literary creation, while its American counterpart, so mute and wild, refers only to itself. The American scene, primarily characterized by the lack of reference to any human experience, could not provide the American artists with such inspiration. In this respect, one of the views, held by American thinkers, proposed that the treatment of the American scene, hence, entailed a greater working of

the artist's imaginative faculties. According to this approach, American writers should resort to legends about such wild silent landscape as a source of imagination until with the passage of time the American scene would have its own past. The centrality of an established past in formulating imagination is highly emphasized as history is seen as a powerful source of inspiration to the artist (11).

With the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson in attempting to maintain a national intellectual identity another point of view was introduced. According to this outlook, the superficiality of American history was not necessarily an obstacle to the rise of an authentic American literature. Emerson believed that the shallowness of American history could rather be an enabling factor that might help American writers to learn from nature itself rather than imposing their own verbal exercises upon it. Nature does not need the "storied associations" of history to affect man, since man is an inseparable part of it. According to Emersonian philosophy, natural scenes were not simple events that can provoke our memories and sentiments; they are rather everlasting revelations that powerfully affect man as long as he is alert and open to it. Emerson affirmed the elevation of nature over history; and as a result, it was nature that shaped the American poetic language rather than being expressed through it. Emerson, thus, confirmed that the real identity of American culture was deeply rooted

in nature. Emerson's ideas found their way easily and deeply among the American people and soon constituted a powerful force controlling American intellectual and social life in the nineteenth century. His views and lectures, considerably dedicated to his revolutionary philosophy, were a source of inspiration to almost every American writer in the nineteenth century and even afterwards (Ziff 15–18):

Emerson's ideas of the relation of nature to the self delivered Americans into the custody of America. Instead of regarding their identity as historically determined consciousness that must impose itself upon the mindless matter of the wild, they were encouraged to see that their land was another expression of the soul centered in themselves, that it beckoned to them to realize their true relation with it. American history could be the history of nature's reassuring alienated man to itself rather than the history of man's warfare with it. (Ziff 19)

Remarkably, Emerson's call in his essay "Nature" (1836) to "enjoy an original relation to the universe" (*SE* 35) is not a new one. It finds its roots back in the Romantic belief in man's initial, instinctive union with nature, which he loses as a result of social constraints, and spends his life in quest of his primary innocent natural state. Emerson's essay "Nature" (1836) was the start of the American intellectual movement called Transcendentalism, with its literary, social, religious and cultural implications. The movement was a revolution as a whole against the eighteenth-century principles of reason, against the

conventions of the American capitalistic society, against the Unitarian doctrine and strict religious practices, against the constraints imposed on the individual by society, and against the overwhelming rise of materialism over spirituality. The revolutionary movement was celebrated by many New England intellectuals and writers, including Henry David Thoreau, who retreated to Walden Pond, in the same way William Wordsworth earlier, retreated to the Lake District, to achieve a close relationship with the natural world. Moreover, the transcendental philosophy had its influence on other succeeding American literary figures such as Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

Transcendentalism can not be understood outside of the context of German Idealism and British Romanticism. In his lecture, “The Transcendentalist,” delivered at the Masonic Temple in Boston in (1842), Emerson emphasized that Transcendentalism was not a new idea; it was, indeed, the typical Idealism but in a new form:

The first thing we have to say respecting what are called *new views* here in New England, at the present time, is, that they are not new, but the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times.....What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842. (SE 239)

Transcendentalism, just like Idealism, rejected all types of rational logical knowledge and pursued a more spiritual experience. The American Transcendentalism of Emerson and his followers rebelled against the Unitarian emphasis on the use of the intellectual reason in order to reach divine wisdom, and the Transcendentalists rather adopted the Romantic concept that the intuitive feeling is the best way to reach such divine truth: “For the Transcendentalists, as for the Romantics, subjective intuition was at least as reliable a source of truth as empirical investigation, which underlay both deism and the natural theology of the Unitarians” (Finseth par.7). Thus, Transcendentalism was deeply rooted in English Romanticism:

For American intellectuals in the early nineteenth century were deeply affected by the revolutionary impulses of Romanticism, with its emphasis on openness to nature and to feeling, its idea of grand individual selves set free— or at least capable of being set free— from the constraints of tradition and decorum, with its view of society as a set of illegitimate constraints on free development of the self. (Lauter et al. 1481–2)

Emerson’s essay titled “The American Scholar” (1837) had been regarded by Oliver Wendell Holmes as the real “intellectual Declaration of Independence” (Lauter et al. 1228). The revolution induced in American society by Transcendental ideas during the 1830s and 1840s significantly paved the way to the unprecedented flourishing of American literature around the mid-nineteenth century.

David Morse likens the unexpected, sudden rise of American literature to the summoning of “a genie out of a bottle,” since it did not naturally develop into such a prosperous state, but rather suddenly exploded, out of the American people’s feelings of cultural degeneration and inferiority, in the face of European supremacy (1). The term “American Renaissance,” generally used to describe this glowing literary success, was first coined by F. O. Matthiessen in 1941 in his book, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman. The term is roughly applied to the creative American literary masterpieces in the period between 1850 and 1855, and it is more broadly extended to the years from 1835 to 1865. In any case, it signifies the unexpected and unparalleled flourishing in American literature in the mid-nineteenth century until it faded with the outbreak of the Civil War. Matthiessen confines this literary triumph to the works of five American literary giants: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman.

The term “American Romanticism” is sometimes used to speak of the “American Renaissance” since many of the authors of this period had substantial literary parallels with the European Romanticism both in theory and practice. However, Denise D. Knight, in his study of the writers of the American Renaissance, criticizes the

usage of both terms as synonymous, on the grounds that, while American Romantics richly contributed to the American Renaissance, other literary contributions should be equally recognized and included. Knight refuses Matthiessen's exclusive overemphasis on a limited number of literary figures, and claims that "the renaissance produced a rich and diverse body of work, which included not only Romantic literature but also slave narratives, political tracts, frontier adventures, tall tales, social satire, occasional poetry, and moral protests" (xii).

Romanticism, then, is undoubtedly a major component in the rise of the American Renaissance; its strong links to the American Transcendentalism are equally unmistakable. In establishing their authentic national literary canon, the American authors could not break free from the mother English literary tradition. Accordingly, the new American literature is intellectually and artistically rooted in English and, more generally, European Romanticism. Why the Romantic legacy was particularly inspiring and influential on the young American writers during the age of Emerson is a crucial question. In his attempt to explain the deep Romantic impact on Emerson's generation, Richard Gravil argues that the situation of "idealistic Americans" in the period 1823–1862 is closely parallel to that of their English counterparts during the years between 1789 and 1819 (xiii). Both English and American men of letters were reacting



against the tyranny— of society over the individual, of reason over intuition, of outworn norms over novelty, of materialism over spirituality. That is how the American rise in literature is sometimes seen as a succeeding outgrowth of English Romanticism.

Gravil further delineates the chronological co-existence of the two movements, since in 1819 Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Carlyle, Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau were all contemporaries. Gravil also shows how familiar the American reader was with Coleridge, Shelley and Keats in the 1820s, since they were popularly presented by the Galignani editions (xiii). Notably, what significantly links nineteenth-century American literature to Romanticism is its intense interest in nature. The American authors turned to their native natural landscape as a source of cultural identity, in the obvious absence of any historical one. The wild American scenery, with its extended prairies, vast deserts, high mountains and tremendous oceans, ideally provokes the Sublime. David Morse emphasizes the American awareness of the symbolic significance of their native wildness:

The United States had no great cathedrals, palaces or other historic places; it lacked sculptures and paintings; it had no acknowledged writers, philosophers or composers. There was no distinct American language. So everything had to be staked on the grandeur of the

American landscape, which could serve as the most potent symbol of everything that America was and, more importantly, could be. (3)

Morse further discusses the very peculiar relationship which developed between the American artist and his native natural environment; the immediate exposure to such pure and virgin nature challenges the artist and arouses his deepest potential powers. Accordingly, the sublimity and grandeur of the spectacle provokes the greatness of the viewer, as proposed by Kant and Schiller in the theory of the Sublime. Moreover, by metaphor, the extended, vast American landscape is seen as analogous to the unlimited possibilities that the American character can achieve. In correspondence with the scale of American spatial vastness, the spirit of the American people is seen to reflect a parallel greatness (4–6). Whitman declares this idea in his Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass: “The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen” (Kaplan 6). Morse sees that the Americans, at this stage of their history, went to the extreme in their faith in the corresponding potential greatness of the American character and the immense possibility to develop one’s inner being, totally rejecting any boundaries or challenges that could constrain utmost self-achievement. He provides evidence for his claim through the extravagant way in which the Americans romanticized

their heroes— the pioneer explorers and discoverers of America as well as contemporary heroic figures. Although the American writers were still building on European heroic models, their portrayal of American heroes was excessive. Morse argues that it is this shift in emphasis that differentiates the American heroic figure from those of British and German Romanticism (7–29):

The excessive heroes of American Romanticism are not spontaneously produced by their American cultural environment but are local adaptations of European models. Nevertheless there are significant shifts in emphasis. The heroic figures of British and German Romantic literature are always the carriers of an implicit social critique. They gesture in the direction of alternative worlds that will offer more freedom, more scope for the imagination, more autonomy, even more sexual pleasure, than the existing one. But at the same time there is the risk that the protagonist may go too far in an intransigent rejection of the laws of society or of God. In American writing such limitations are effectively removed. (28–9)

Explicitly, the Romantic ideals of individuality and freedom seem to find their practical interpretation in the American democratic experiment. Within the American society, the common man, highly valued by the Romantics, has an equal opportunity with others to achieve his potential; and most importantly, has the right to freely express his ideas and opinions. In more intellectual terms, Emerson's Transcendentalism significantly celebrates the uniqueness of the

individual; in his essay “The Transcendentalist” (1842), Emerson traces his philosophy back to Idealism with its insistence on the power of the individual rather than the circumstances:

You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstances. Let any thought or motive of mine be different from that they are, the difference will transform my condition and economy. I —this thought which is called I—is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax. The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould. You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the power of me... As I am, so shall I associate, and so shall I act; Caesar’s history will paint out Caesar. Jesus acted so, because he thought so. (*SE* 243)

Morse argues that the most characteristic feature of American Transcendentalism is “the indignant rejection of any kind of restraint” (119), and describes the individual sketched by Emerson in this sense as “Superman.” Emerson refuses to submit to Jesus Christ, as a model of the “divine man” that should be imitated, out of his Romantic belief that each person should submit only to his own unique potent inner soul (119–20):

For there can be nothing that is already given in the world of experience that can correspond to or match the potentiality that lies within, and which is all the more powerful for being unarticulated and unformulated. To propose a pattern is to violate the principle of creativity and to strike at the very root of identity itself. (Morse 120)

Emerson's Romanticism, then, substantially depends on ideas borrowed from theories of German Idealism and British Romanticism. Richard Gravil challenges Emerson's theory of a self-reliant literary culture, and calls it the "Emersonian myth" (xii). From a transatlantic cultural perspective, Lance Newman, in his introduction to Sullen Fires Across the Atlantic: Essays in Transatlantic Romanticism (2006), argues that these echoes and lines of continuity between the American and British literary tradition during the age of Emerson go beyond the idea of literary influence and intellectual exchange to the extent of a vision of a transatlantic Romantic culture. Newman sketches an interactive transatlantic world where "romantic genres and structures of feeling moved fluidly back and forth across the Atlantic." Newman agrees with Gravil in arguing that ideas flow around the rim of the Atlantic in an intricately tangled circular pattern:

After all, republicanism achieved its first full flowering during the American Revolution, then crossed the Atlantic to reinvigorate English radicalism and inspire the French Revolution. But heroism and idealism crop up first in Germany, then find their way to England, and much later to New England. (par. 11)

The dynamic transatlantic world, with its complex web of cultural interrelation, reflects a reciprocal Anglo-American literary dialogue. However, this study will be confined to exploring the way in which

British Romanticism, during the nineteenth century, played a significant role shaping the newly born American literary tradition, which, though yearning for autonomy continued to rely on British models. This dependence paradoxically challenges American claims of originality. The study examines major poetic works of key American nineteenth-century poets within the context of transatlantic Romanticism in quest of explanation for such a paradoxical situation. I have chosen these poets so as to be representative for the developing line of nineteenth-century American poetic tradition.

## **Chapter Two**

Explorations of American Landscape: William Cullen Bryant  
and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Considering the nineteenth century as the time of establishing an authentic American literary canon, credit has been often attributed to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson for achieving genuinely distinctive American poetic standards. However, less acclaim has been dedicated to early poetic attempts to break free from British literary authority and assert Americanism in literature. I do believe that these early stages, preceding the American Renaissance, have been crucially important for directing and shaping the developing American literary culture. This chapter attempts to approach the poetic experiments of William Cullen Bryant and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow from a transatlantic perspective. It attempts to settle the question of how early New England poets like Bryant and Longfellow reacted to the dominant British literary culture, worked on establishing the new national canon and succeeded in shaping America's literary profile.

Both Bryant and Longfellow wrote during the early nineteenth century, reflected distinctive Romantic currents in their work, demonstrated immense interest in representing American nature, and contributed to transatlantic cultural and literary dialogues. Both poets derived ideas from European literary legacy, particularly the British models, while attempting to introduce original American themes. Fully aware of the American dilemma of lacking an established



history, Bryant and Longfellow focussed on presenting the American landscape, and their representations were powerful and charged with national pride.

William Cullen Bryant occupies the very centre of American literary history and tradition, since he was the “founding father” who established the canon for all following American poetic voices. Frank Gado argues that publishing Bryant’s Poems in 1821 marked a milestone for American poetic tradition (153). Writing at a critical time, the early years of the nineteenth century, enabled him to play a significant role as the transmitter of Puritan thought into the American Romantic Movement. Unlike his own successors, Bryant found very little national literary tradition to build on. However, he was the true embodiment of how the New Englanders attempted to establish an authentic American literary identity of their own. American pastoral verse can not be approached without tackling Bryant’s work and acknowledging his own contributions to it (Donovan 519–20). Accordingly, his place in American literary heritage is well established and his poetic works are most celebrated:

In the near-century since Bryant’s death he has been known almost as a poet, the first authentic American voice to sing of native birds like the brown thrasher and bobolink rather than the skylark and nightingale, of the spicebush or the late-blooming fringed gentian rather than Britain’s gorse

or primrose, of the grandeur of his country's mountains and broad prairies rather than the curried and combed landscape of England. (Brown 2)

After political independence, the United States strongly needed a national bard, expressing America's idealized profile as a nation and spelling out the ideals of the American dream:

Political independence had immediately mandated a view of the new nation as the creature of history, working to accomplish a divinely appointed destiny. Literary independence was soon coupled to expression of that unique role: being a major American poet entailed bardic celebration of the nation's founding as the climax of Western civilization. (Gado 154)

In his edition of Bryant's prose and poetry, Frank Gado argues that Bryant worked to establish himself as the national bard, and he secured this state with the publication of his Poems in 1821 (157). Bryant's poetic representation of the American scenery as well as his enthusiastic emphasis on a literary output of a distinctive national colour connected him to the figure of the national poet— a model that was eagerly sought by the American people at this time. Whitman in his preface to Leaves of Grass (1855) depicts the required American poet figure:

The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races. Of them a bard is to be commensurate with a people. To him the other continents arrive as contributions... he gives them reception for their sake and his own sake. His spirit responds to his country's spirit... he

incarnates its geography and natural life and rivers and lakes. Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls... When the long Atlantic coast stretches longer and the Pacific coast stretches longer he easily stretches with them north or south. He spans between them also from east to west and reflects what is between them. On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock... and forests coated with transparent ice and icicles hanging from the boughs and crackling in the wind....and sides and peaks of mountains... and pasturage sweet and free as savannah or upland or prairie... (Kaplan 6–7)

Bryant fitted in that model of the patriotic poet easily with his enthusiastic representations of the authentically American landscape. According to Charles L. Sanford it was this sense of national self-consciousness that significantly shaped the rise of American nature art: “National pride in the rude native scene as opposed to effete European civilization helped to produce our first school of landscape painting as well as the nature writing of Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, and Thoreau” (434).

Bryant’s poetic outcome, deeply reflecting Romantic currents, has been viewed by both readers and critics in connection with Romantic English models. However, it is worthy of note that Bryant was derivative but not completely imitative. While adopting aspects of English Romantic thought both in theory and practice, Bryant’s main target was to emphasize the genuine American literary identity. Thus,

while his poetry reflected unmistakable Romantic impulses, it also expressed a distinctive American spirit. Inspired by the English Romantic legacy, Bryant found his subject in the American landscape, and he vigorously described its picturesque features and beauties. Bryant's poetry succeeded in acquiring critical acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic and marked a milestone for early national literary history.

A careful examination of Bryant's work is essential to a real understanding of nineteenth-century American literary production. Edmund Clarence Stedman, in his Poets of America, attempts to evaluate nineteenth-century American poetry on a patriotic basis, rather than on literary merit. His main emphasis is on the relationship between the American poet and native landscape. The most important point that Stedman's criticism highlights is his indication of how nineteenth-century American poets asserted in their poetic representations the image of America as "untouched" land (Meyer 194–5). In his sonnet, "To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe", Bryant asks his friend not to forget the magnificent wild nature of the American landscape on seeing the marvellous scenes of Europe. The European landscape, full of human associations, is contrasted to the virgin land of America:

Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest—fair,  
But different—everywhere the trace of men,

Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen

To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air. (Lauter et al. 2710)

Obviously, Bryant was one of those American poets who became deeply engaged in the attempt to understand the complex connection between poetry and place: that is to say the relationship between the land, as it stood as a physical and historical entity, on the one hand, and the landscape as the poetic representation of such an entity, on the other hand (Meyer 165).

Alan B. Donovan argues that Bryant formulated his poetic theory depending on three intellectual traditions: Calvinism, neo-classicism and Wordsworthian Romanticism. These were the main sources of his early education and they intensively nurtured his poetic character (505). Bryant was born in Cummington, Massachusetts, in 1794; he was the son of a physician who had a lively interest in politics and reading. Dr. Bryant, the father, was a strict Calvinist and hence his son adopted Calvinism, since it was the only belief of the whole surrounding religious community (Bigelow 13–4). Bryant was such a talented boy that he started reading at a very early age and his father's library provided him with access to the literary works of Pope, Cowper, Wordsworth, Southey, Henry Kirke White and others (Bigelow 21). That was how Bryant became acquainted with both the neo-classical and the Romantic traditions which deeply influenced his work. Bryant's early interest in poetry awakened his senses to the

beautiful natural landscape of Cummington and soon he became passionately fond of it, as revealed by John Bigelow in his biography of the poet, William Cullen Bryant:

“I was always,” he says, “from my earliest years, a delighted observer of external nature, — the splendors of a winter daybreak over the wide wastes of snow seen from our windows, the glories of the autumnal woods, the gloomy approaches of the thunderstorm and its departure amid sunshine and rainbows, the return of the spring with its flowers, and the first snow-fall of winter. The poets fostered this taste in me, and though at that time I rarely heard such things spoken of, it was none the less cherished in my secret mind.” (14)

In constructing his poetry, Bryant acted in accordance with the Puritan systematic plain style. Donovan argues that Bryant adhered to the neo-Calvinistic theory of Jonathan Edwards which introduced a radical Calvinistic view of nature. Edwards’s theory was based on stating analogies between natural truths and spiritual realities. Such correspondences between the material domain and the moral one anticipated Emerson’s final conclusion that natural realities are confirmations of spiritual facts. Bryant employed images of natural beauty primarily to intensify the influence of moral sentiment, rather than to prove any divine truths. Edwards’s vision, offered in his volume Images or Shadows of Divine Things, significantly foreshadowed all forthcoming views of the following American men of letters (505–7):

Culturally considered, the assumptions of Edwards' vision seem radical and prophetic. They specifically adumbrate the preoccupations of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman with nature and its meaning, with the possible correspondence between the material and the nonmaterial worlds. Bryant addresses himself to such possibilities earlier than these authors. Though his conclusions are not original, they seem to be the first nineteenth-century American version of Edwards' perceptual theory. (Donovan 507)

Since Bryant, in writing his nature poetry, was not concerned with the illustration of any divine truths, he accordingly used Edwards's religious theory for a rather secular purpose (Donovan 508). In writing his masterpiece "Thanatopsis", first published in 1811 and revised many times, Bryant followed the structure of the Puritan sermon: doctrine, reasons, and uses, to approach the problem of universal mortality (McLean, "Bryant's Thanatopsis" 474). However, while the form of the poem conformed to the Puritan legacy, such a theory could not be applied to its content. The religious attitude displayed in the poem was obviously unorthodox in the sense that the morbid fact of death was not justified on the typical religious basis of the rewards of the afterlife. Thinking of the type of motivation that made the young poet write about human mortality, Charles H. Brown sees that Bryant's early occupation with the idea of death is due to the pressure of the Calvinistic religion to which he was exposed. Brown, further, claims that in "Thanatopsis", Bryant found in nature reconciliation

with his fear of death that settled his inner quarrel (6). Bryant starts his most celebrated poem with the idea of communion with nature which is, outstandingly, personified:

To him who in the love of Nature holds  
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks  
A various language... (Gado 32)

Albert F. McLean thinks that the opening lines of “Thanatopsis” serve as an introduction to Bryant’s whole work, primarily because they reflect what nature meant to him. The result of the communion with nature is neither delight nor consolation, but rather a “language” which can express the most challenging values that puzzle man, like the problem of death in the case of “Thanatopsis”. Bryant felt the necessity to learn the language of nature and he succeeded, in his most creative achievements, in establishing a type of a dialogue with nature which is seldom personified. However, in the process of communion, nature is still capable of communicating with the poet and transforming his ideas. Although Bryant was not always able to understand the “various language” of nature, as he sometimes could not find the human morals paralleled to natural objects, it remained the leading power in his poetry and in his own personal quest for meaning as well (Bryant 22–3). The way in which McLean discusses Bryant’s Romantic attitude towards nature presents him as a link between British and American Romantic Movements: “Like



Wordsworth, he endeavoured to look steadily at his subject; and, like Emerson, he sought for poetic material in the least of Nature's creatures as well as in the greatest" (Bryant 22).

McLean argues that Bryant's problem in "Thanatopsis" is essentially a philosophical one: a quest for a universal truth explaining the mortality and destruction of man. Bryant's choice of the voice of Nature to be his narrator expands his vision and grounds his theme on universal facts rather than personal realizations. Bryant could not find adequate answers to his anxious questions about death, but only some compensation in the idea that man would not confront his doom alone since all human beings "shall leave/ Their mirth and their employments, and shall come/ And make their bed with thee." Moreover, man should not feel the loss of dignity and should rather accept death as the undoubted fact to which everyone, regardless of his rank or position in life, is subject ("Bryant's Thanatopsis" 475–78):

Thou shalt lie down

With patriarchs of the infant world—with kings,

The powerful of the earth—the wise, the good,

Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,

All in one mighty sepulchre...

(Gado 32–3)

According to Donovan, Bryant was equally greatly influenced by the neo-classical values of reason, discipline and scientific precision. He was indebted to Pope, whose wit and verbal talent were

reflected in Bryant's lucid and logical style. Bryant embraced the eighteenth-century conviction of order in nature as represented in the Great Chain of Being. He believed in the existence of a quasi-deistic God ruling this vast system. Fondness of the details of such a universal system made Bryant a keen observer of his native natural landscape with its peculiar features. Thus, his poetry came as a catalogue which recorded the unique aspects of American nature. Bryant's study of botany provided him with profound insight into the world of nature and its complex processes; this scientific precision is reflected in his nature poems. Although reason helped Bryant in his close studying of nature, it was only the Romantic intuition that provided him with the whole comprehension of it (509–12). Therefore, while "neoclassicism fostered his appreciation for the general and particular order of nature... the spirit of romanticism confirmed that primacy of feeling and imagination which led him to search for meaning behind the pasteboard masks of creation" (Donovan 512). The intellectual faculties seemed to be much more limited in comparison with the potential power of following one's own intuitive feelings. It is worth remarking that Bryant reflected upon the Wordsworthian outlook, stating that scientific interpretation of natural phenomena was only superficial and that truth could be reached through the feelings of the heart, not the workings of the mind. Lacey offers an apt summary of Wordsworth's views:

Stop analysing with the mind, says Wordsworth. Give up attending to science and art: come forth into the open air and let Nature be your teacher. The intellect is not to be trusted. Nature will feed our minds if we can learn a wise passiveness. This does not mean doing nothing. We are to bring to Nature 'a heart that watches and receives'. These two verbs are equally active. We are to watch, not with the intention to of judging or comparing but simply to take in deliberately what we see. (4)

Thus, in "The Tables Turned" (1798), Wordsworth declares that Nature is the best teacher whose "ready wealth" and "Spontaneous wisdom" far exceed the knowledge offered by dull books:

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man;  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can. (Gill 131)

In this way Bryant formulated his poetic theory, depending on the three intellectual traditions which he so harmoniously synthesized, but within this mixture, the Romantic thought was powerfully overwhelming and lasting:

His natural imitation of Edwards' perceptual process alerted him to the symbolic potential of nature; neoclassicism fostered his appreciation for the general and particular order of nature; but more than these, the spirit of romanticism confirmed that primacy of feeling and imagination which led him to search for meaning behind masks of creation. (Donovan 512)

Frank Gado emphasizes the central influence of the Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, on Bryant's thought, and he argues further that Bryant is a creative Romantic poet:

The association with the chief revolutionary of English Romantic poetry properly assigned Bryant to the surge of the future instead of the forms and sensibilities of the receding eighteenth century. The Romantic poet did not merely advocate a new mode of writing; he manifested a different understanding of the world, of the human relationship to that physical universe, and of art as the mediating element. Bryant registered the literary and philosophical changes that were in process, but what has not been sufficiently recognized is that he was an authentic innovator. (Gado 157)

Wordsworth kept his heart open to the teachings of nature and, in the same way, Bryant was alert to the wisdom that nature brought. Wordsworth finds in "The Daisy" (1802) his best friend soothing his melancholy and giving him much pleasure and wisdom:

Have I derived from thy sweet power

Some apprehension;

Some steady love; some brief delight;

Some memory that had taken flight;

Some chime of fancy wrong or right;

Or stray invention.

(Gill 251)

The "sweet flower" accompanies Wordsworth in his own retreat to nature and inspires him with glimpses of wisdom and thoughts of gladness. The poet is so closely connected to the flower which, he believes, has "concord with humanity" more than any other flower in

the forest. The daisy has a meek and humble nature that makes it a source of sympathy to everyone while it is “oft alone in nooks remote.” Out of his fascination, Wordsworth wrote many poems to the daisy flower; in “To the Same Flower” (1803), he addresses it again:

Is it that Man is soon deprest?  
A thoughtless Thing! Who, once unblest,  
Does little on his memory rest,  
Or on his reason,  
And Thou would'st teach him how to find  
A shelter under every wind,  
A hope for times that are unkind

And every season? (Gill 254)

Bryant finds in the flowers of his native landscape a source of equal pleasure and wisdom. The humble appearance of the bent yellow violet with its “faint perfume” teaches the poet a lesson of modesty. Bryant addresses “The Yellow Violet” (1814), with words similar to those used by Wordsworth while talking to “The Daisy”:

Sweet flower, I love, in forest bare,  
To meet thee, when thy faint perfume

Alone is in the virgin air. (Gado 35)

Again, the sense of solitude unifies the poet and natural objects as if the loneliness of the poet is reflected in nature. Likewise, “the Fringed Gentian” (1829), which “waitest late and com'st alone” attracts Bryant.

The sight of the bright blossoming of the flower while looking  
“through its fringes to the sky” teaches him a moral lesson:

I would that thus, when I shall see

The hour of death draw near to me

Hope, blossoming within my heart,

May look to heaven as I depart.

(Gado 73)

Bryant’s attempts to find moral values in natural phenomena delineate his Romantic concern with nature, while his emphasis on peculiarly American natural forms presents him as a national bard celebrating his native homeland.

“To a Waterfowl” (1815) reflects Bryant’s religious and philosophical outlook as well as his own preoccupation with Romantic thought. The poem, in general, tackles the Romantic self-world problem through developing an analogy between the bird and the poet. Bryant chooses to follow the Romantic legacy of addressing the birds. Just as Shelley addresses the “Skylark”, Wordsworth addresses the “Cuckoo”, and Keats addresses the “Nightingale”, so Bryant directs his words to the “Waterfowl”. The bird’s ability to fly away from the land has always been attractive to Romantic poets. It is the sense of individual freedom which the poet is yearning to achieve that attracts him to the flying bird. The poet asks the waterfowl a rhetorical question about the place it is seeking while flying alone in the sky. The waterfowl flies very high, so that no hunter is able to harm it. The

sky is crimson as it is the sunset; hence “the last steps of the day”. Bryant asks the bird whether its destination is “the plashy brink/ Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide, / Or where the rocking billows rise and sink/ On the chafed ocean-side?” The question gives a panoramic view of the vast American landscape, reflecting its lakes, rivers and oceans. On seeing the bird floating in the sky, the poet realizes that:

There is a Power whose care  
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast—  
The desert and illimitable air—

Lone wandering, but not lost. (Gado 39)

The message is assuring since the bird is alone but not lost. Bryant reflects the typical Romantic idea that there are guiding spirits who help people make their own way in life. Notably, Bryant emphasizes the vastness of the American landscape and stresses its peculiar aspects, including the ocean and the desert. The determination of the waterfowl to go on its journey, in spite of darkness and cold, teaches Bryant a lesson of endurance and persistence. The poet affirms to the bird that it will arrive to its nest where it will find warmth, rest and company. Although the bird disappears in the darkness of the sky or “the abyss of heaven,” the influence of its sight struggling to find its way is still there in the poet’s own heart. The whole experience gives the poet the belief and confidence that God will lead him in life as

well as He leads the bird. In this way, the bird turns out to be a metaphor of the poet's own condition in life:

He who, from zone to zone,  
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,  
In the long way that I must tread alone,  
Will lead my steps aright. (Gado 39)

In "The Poet" (1863), Bryant defines the poet's mission in a way that is plainly consistent with the Romantic tradition. He depicts the poet as a man who is always engaged in working upon the "words of flame" in order to create an immortal song which "haply may endure from age to age." In this poem, Bryant advises every poet to work in solitude, day and night, attempting to write poetry that will "touch the heart or fire the blood". While Bryant's poet-figure is meant to be an ordinary man living in the middle of his "brethren of mankind", he, at the same time, is different from everyone else. Such a difference stems from the miraculous power the poet possesses which can change people's mood with its "written spells." In his attempt to answer the question: "What is a Poet?" Wordsworth earlier took the same stand:

He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is



in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. (Hayden 288–9)

Bryant believes that it is only through meditation that a poet can find the glorious thoughts which he should immediately seize before they lose their power. However, immediacy provides only the spark to “the burning words” and it produces a type of verse that seems “Halting and harsh, and all unaptly wrought.” Bryant thinks that it is still essential to the poet to recall and contemplate such passionate moments in order to write great, immortal poetry “that shall live within the general mind”:

Then summon back the original glow and mend

The strain with rapture that with fire was penned. (Gado 96)

Again, Bryant’s view of poetry conforms to Wordsworth’s: “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind” (Hayden 297). Bryant views inspiration as a wind: “A Blast that whirls the dust/ Along the howling street and dies away;” and only after such a wind calms down, the poet should start to recollect in tranquility the emotions of the experience. Moreover, Bryant holds the

Romantic idea that the poet should be alert to the beauty of nature and completely ready to grasp its moral lessons; and he emphasizes the importance of the sublime:

Let all that beauty in clear vision lie,  
Look on it with exceeding love, and write  
The words inspired by wonder and delight. (Gado 97)

In accordance with Wordsworth's view of the poet, Bryant resembles the patriotic poet who is always occupied with national themes and issues. In "Abraham Lincoln" (1865), Bryant finds his subject in what Wordsworth has described earlier as "the great national events which are daily taking place" (Hayden 284). The poem is an elegy to the assassinated American president who took the courageous decision to abolish slavery.

Examining Bryant's poetry in the context of Romanticism, it is highly important to consider his own views on the question of literary influence. In his thoughtful article "Originality and Imitation" (1825–1826), the American pioneer admits the inevitability and even necessity of dependence on tradition to some extent for the sake of literary creation. It is not only the authority of his predecessors that Bryant acknowledges, but also the influence of contemporaries, since the writer "cannot escape the action of their minds on his own" (Gado 130). The fact that the same language, used by the writer in the present time, has been cultivated and refined by his precursors

enhances the idea of continuity in art. The antecedent writers have also provided their successors with substantial tools of writing including various forms and modes of expression. Thus, Bryant sees literary creation as a process of accumulation and progression (Gado 129–30):

The poet must do precisely what is done by the mathematician, who takes up his science where his predecessors have left it, and pushes its limits as much farther, and makes as many new applications of its principles, as he can. He must found himself on the excellence already attained in his art, and if, in addition to this, he delights us with new modes of sublimity, of beauty, and of human emotion, he deserves the praise of originality and of genius. (Gado 130)

Bryant is against complete reliance on tradition without introducing any new addition to literary art as well as excessive originality, which leads to imperfection in poetry and deprives the poet from making use of the abundant knowledge that already exists (Gado 130–1). Thus, while Bryant notably depends on English Romantic models, his explorations of American landscape define him as an innovator. However, presenting new subjects does not necessarily mean producing original literature. Therefore, the examination of his poetry in a Romantic context helps to settle the question of his originality as a poet.

In his early poems Bryant describes the scenery of New England where the landscape does not obviously display many

peculiar American aspects, while his later poems, tackling the West of America, are intensely packed with distinct national characteristics. In his early topographical poetry, Bryant represents nature as a healer as well as a teacher. In poems like “Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood” (1818) and “Green River” (1819), the image of nature is not associated with any obvious moral implications, but rather with the idea of renovation. Bryant has the same Wordsworthian faith in nature’s ability to heal and renew the spirit of man. He depicts the natural world as innocent and pure, in contrast to the daily world with its “guilt and misery”. While “the haunts of men” cause much distress and heartsickness, “the haunts of nature” bring gladness and tranquility just like “a balm” that relieves pain. Bryant further argues that by retreating to nature man can regain his primal innocence which he lost with the Fall and he can also restore the purity of his soul which is corrupted by the experience he gains as he grows up. In his “Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood” Bryant invites all those who feel like strangers, as a result of the cares and fears of life, to enter the natural world and muse on “the haunts of nature”:

Stranger, if thou hast learned a truth which needs  
No school of long experience, that the world  
Is full of guilt and misery, and hast seen  
Enough of all its sorrows, crimes, and cares,  
To tire thee of it, enter this wild wood

And view the haunts of nature...

(Gado 37)

Tackling nature as his theme, Bryant does not address nature itself, he rather chooses to start an imaginary dialogue with a “Stranger”, telling him about the benevolence and purity of nature. Bryant introduces the woodland scene in a very attractive way, full of vivid colours, merry sounds and sweet odours. He portrays the wood as “the abode of gladness” where the roof of such a house is green and alive with the singing of birds and the movement of branches. The floor is equally full of music and motion as the squirrels happily chirp and move. Crowds of insects dance in the warm atmosphere between above and below. So harmoniously, all aspects of nature celebrate life and enjoy existence. The green trees bend with the wind, expressing their own happiness and contentment and the sun sends its warm beams, blessing the celebration scene. The same sense of joy and satisfaction is applied to the destructive aspects of nature: “Scarce less the cleft-born wildflower seems to enjoy/ Existence, than the winged plunder/ That sucks its sweets.” The rejoicing scene is enriched with the merry melodies of the rivulet that moves lightly up and down as a gifted dancer. The addressee is then advised to “tread the marge” gently so that he may not disturb the tiny little wren dipping its beak in water. Bryant promises the “Stranger” that he will never pass the scene ungreeted by nature which is benevolent enough to comfort his sorrows. Just as the wind makes the trees contentedly bend and

playfully stirs the stream, it will come to the “Stranger” as a lover and give him “its light embrace”. The image of the wind with its cool sweet effect on all the surroundings emphasizes the inextricable unity of the whole universe.

Bryant’s “Inscription” (1818) is heavily loaded with obvious references to an earlier poem by Robert Southey which has a similar name, “Inscription for a Tablet on the Banks of a Stream” (1797). The similarities between the two poems are numerous; in addition to displaying very similar ideas in his description of nature, Bryant employed a title very near to Southey’s. Bryant does not only borrow the theme of his “Inscription” from Southey, but he also uses the same mode of addressing a stranger and inviting him to “sojourn in the woodland cot/ Of INNOCENCE”. Moreover, there are a number of interesting verbal parallels in the two poems:

Stranger! awhile upon this mossy bank  
Recline thee. If the sun rides high, the breeze,  
That loves to ripple o’er the rivulet,  
Will play around thy brow, and the cool sound  
Of running waters soothe thee. Mark how clear  
It sparkles o’er the shallows, and behold  
Where o’er its surface wheels with restless speed  
Yon glossy insect, on the sand below  
How the swift shadow flies. The stream is pure  
In solitude, and many a healthful herb

Bends o'er its course and drinks the vital wave:

But passing on amid the haunts of man,

It finds pollution there, and rolls from thence

A tainted tide. Seek'st thou for HAPPINESS?

Go Stranger, sojourn in the woodland cot

Of INNOCENCE, and thou shalt find her there. (Pratt, Poetical Works 67)

Apparently, Southey's "Inscription" presents the same invitation to communion with nature as a way to regain innocence and happiness.

The "woodland cot of INNOCENCE" is contrasted to the polluted "haunts of man". Since the stream finds purity in nature and pollution in the village where men live, Bryant goes further in the "Green River" to claim that the river "windest away from haunts of men". Everyone is hence invited to escape from the futile urban life and retreat into the comfort of pastoral.

Southey wrote a series of inscriptions in the mid 1790s when he revitalised the genre which has such a potential public nature. Southey's inscriptions "emerge out of and into a context in which both real and projected monuments and inscriptive writing were gaining increasing significance as means of defining and transmitting to one's contemporaries and to posterity an image (or images) of national identity" (Pratt, "Writing and Romanticism" par.9). The echoes of Southey's inscriptive writing in Bryant's poem can not be taken as a mere co-incidence in the light of Bryant's patriotic quest for formulating images of national identity as well. The use of an

inscription as a monument implies “the inscription’s potential for redeeming the nation’s character” (Pratt, “Writing and Romanticism” par.9). John Bigelow, in his biography of Bryant, remarks of the poet’s early interest in Southey’s poetry which he found in his father’s library that Bryant soon “became thoroughly imbued with what was least perishable in the writings of Burns, Cowper, Thompson, Wordsworth, and Southey...” (21).

The woodland scene with its possible renovating powers remains central to Bryant as a source of lasting joy and unflinching calmness. In “Green River” (1819), Bryant revisits, only in his imagination, the banks of the Green River as the scene of his early childhood and seeks his earlier and more immediate relationship with nature. He again establishes the image of nature as a resort to which he escapes from “the eating cares of earth”, seeking peace and comfort. The Green River is the embodiment of nature with its beauty, purity and healing powers. The stream wanders alone singing in the wood with its green water reflecting the colour of the herbs on its banks. Its water is not only green; it is so pure and bright as well that both the coloured pebbles at the shallows and the whirling eddies at the depths are obvious. At the beginning of the poem, it seems that Bryant is recalling an image of the Green River scene, describing its natural beauties in all seasons, while addressing an anonymous character in a relaxed, conversational tone:



as you walk the hill,

The quivering glimmer of sun and rill

With a sudden flash on the eye is thrown,

Like the ray that streams from the diamond-stone. (Gado 41)

As the poem continues, the intellectual image of the river becomes clearer and Bryant starts to address it as if it stands before him: “Yet, fair as thou art, thou shunnest to glide, / Beautiful stream!” Bryant concretely emphasizes the distinction between the world of men and the natural world when he describes the way in which the Green River with its purity avoids gliding through the village and turns away from “the haunts of men.” The contrast between the two worlds is highlighted throughout the poem in order to enhance the typical Romantic argument presenting the natural world as a source of innocence and tranquility while its more civilized counterpart is associated with the sad painful experiences of maturity.

Again, the isolation and loss of the poet are reflected in the solitariness of nature as the “forest, and meadow, and slope of hill, /... are lonely, lovely, and still,” as well as the stream itself which looks “Like a traveller singing along his way.” The loud, wild, gushing music of the river brings the dreaming poet back to the world of the present and he realizes his sense of loss: “That fairy music I never hear, / Nor gaze on those waters so green and clear (Gado 42).”

The sad sudden realization that the poet is no longer there in that dreamy world of the Green River and that his place now is the real world of men brings him more agony and sorrow. Like Keats in his “Ode to a Nightingale”, written only a year or so before “Green River”, Bryant recalls the world’s “weariness, the fever, and the fret (Allott 526).” Bryant wishes he led such a tranquil life, free of cares and distress, but he is imprisoned now by his own social responsibilities. He has to do the daily, long, hard, boring jobs in order to gain the most unworthy and poorest reward of life; with his own “barbarous pen,” he is obliged to write in an untidy, unskillful way to earn his living. In the conflict of life, the poet is pushing roughly against his rivals who are not easy, in any way, to detect or describe. While the landscape of the “Green River” is derived from the rural Massachusetts of Bryant’s youth, his yearning desire to live the peaceful dreamy life of the stream that “glides along/ Through its beautiful banks in a trance of song” reflects his later sense of “displacement and nostalgia.” As Jack Vespa points out, Bryant’s landscapes are a complex blending of imagination and actuality:

The scenery of Bryant’s native Massachusetts figures prominently in his early work, although these landscapes are often tinged with feelings of displacement and nostalgia. The “woodland scene” that Bryant paints in “Green River” (1821), is a highly aestheticized and introspective one initially; “the stream with waters of green” features the “stain” of local

flora, as well as the coloring of his imagination. This scene soon exhibits some markedly pastoral hues; the green river “windest away from haunts of men” in cities in favor of more rural climes. And if men are in the vicinity, such as an “angler” to fish the stream, or a “simpler” gathering medical herbs, or “some idle dreamer” like the poet himself, they are among denizens who live in primitive harmony with nature, which is full of woodnotes as well as the “mild music” of the stream itself, with its “mellow murmur and fairy shout....” The angler, simpler, and dreamer are all figures for the poet, who from “thicket to thicket...,” with “basket and book,” has looked to the natural world to derive materials for his poetry. (286)

Vespa argues that the human world described in the “Green River” is the same one tackled early in “Inscription for the Entrance to a Wood”; since the social responsibilities of family and work are nothing but various images of “sorrows, crimes, and cares” (287).

Gazing upon the river scene will not only bring peace to the restless heart of the poet, it will also let him dream of his “greener years;” the pure water of the stream reflects Bryant’s calm, young, innocent life. This intellectual drama ends with the idea that while man is mortal, nature is innocent, everlasting, and eternally young as the green colour suggests. Vespa claims that while the river “glides along, /...in a trance of song,’ unencumbered by human concerns...Bryant is left to ‘envy’ the stream and its perpetual poetry” (287). He argues further that the Green River is “ultimately a figure

for the poet's youthful exuberance and embrace of the natural world" and it resurfaces "a wellspring of poetic renewal" in Bryant's work, where "An image of that calm life appears' (a calm that prompts 'a kindred calm,' as the poet suggests in 'Inscription'). It represents a renewed sense of the natural communion 'That won [his] heart in [his] greener years'" (287). The poem as it stands suggests that Bryant seeks the renewal of his heart as a man, of his inspiration as a poet, and of his intimate relation with nature as a Romantic.

In "The Rivulet" (1823), the meditation upon landscape is more openly connected to the ideas of maturity and mortality; with the perception of the perpetuation of nature comes the perception of man's own internal change and decay (Vespa 287). These ideas are presented in a strong autobiographical tone; Bryant is reflecting on his own childhood, poetic experience, and growth into an adult. The rivulet stands for the unchanging face of nature in contrast to the human vulnerability to ageing and death. The poem displays the development of the relationship between Bryant and the rivulet, since they are portrayed as two companions passing the journey of life together. The relationship between them corresponds to Bryant's larger relationship with nature. The title of the poem specifically locates the setting as the banks of the rivulet; the poet revisits the "play-place" of his childhood, gazing upon the "little rill", and again he recalls his early days "when life was new." Revisiting the past

brings Bryant to the awareness that it is not the rivulet scene that has changed; it is rather himself who has become different. Following the traditions of the topographical genre, Bryant describes the rivulet scene in detail, appealing to the reader's eyes and ears. The poem starts with the image of the rivulet as a young child playing and babbling, just as young as the poet himself whose "little feet" were attracted to the "warbling waters". Then Bryant moves to the days of his boyhood when he, out of his obsession with nature, used to leave home without excuse to play on the banks of the rivulet. Bryant remembers that time when both the poet and the rill were "young and gay". At the banks of the rivulet, the young poet, "With blooming cheek and open brow", full of idealistic visions of life, dreamed of fame and started his early poetic efforts.

Time passed so soon and these days are nothing now but memories. Bryant, with melancholy and wonder, realizes the quick passing of time as well as realizing how the rivulet is still amazingly vigorous and young:

Years change thee not. Upon yon hill  
The tall old maples, verdant still,  
Yet tell, in grandeur of decay,  
How swift the years have passed away,  
Since first, a child, and half afraid,  
I wandered in the forest shade.

(Gado 54)

The lively energetic movement of the rill reflects its vigour and youth. It is still jumping, prattling, “sporting with the sands”, “dancing”, and laughing as a child. Nature, as represented by the rill, is still “pure”, “bright”, “fresh”, joyous and colourful, while the poet is aging: “Thou changest not—but I am changed”. Time has left its prints on the poet, who is no longer the young boy happily ranging the banks of the rivulet, but rather “the grave stranger” who comes to see the place of his childhood and, to his disappointment, can not find any trace of him. His visions of the world are no longer happy and colourful; he acknowledges that they were “too beautiful to last.” Deceptive experience has replaced his primal innocence, and his attempts to come to terms with the world have proved his earlier idealistic fictions to be imaginative. Bryant’s triumphant declaration is that the ultimate truth has always been there in nature:

Yet well has Nature kept the truth

She promised in my earliest youth.

The radiant beauty shed abroad

On all the glorious works of God,

Shows freshly, to my sobered eye,

Each charm it wore in days gone by.

(Gado 55)

With the fullest realization of maturity and physical change comes the recognition of inevitable death. More years will pass and the poet will be weaker and older, waiting for his last minute. However, if the

mysterious agent of Fate gives him the chance to live one more day he will choose to go back to the banks of the rivulet:

Then dimly on my eye shall gleam

The sparkle of thy dancing stream;

And faintly on my ear shall fall

Thy prattling current's merry call... (Gado 56)

In the same way, other children will come to play on the banks of the rill, and then they will get old and die. While this is the human condition, the rivulet will continue to flow “glad and bright”, passing its “endless infancy” and shall “mock the fading race of men.” The smooth flowing of the rivulet is connected to the swift passing of time, and they are both reflected in fluid and natural form of the poem which is written in run-on lines. Moreover, the poem is a naturally spoken monologue whose language is both simple and plain, reflecting the poet's desire to speak from the heart and away from any extravagant or eloquent style. Writing in a simple language and plain style, without excessive refinement and decorum, is evidently Romantic.

The lines of continuity between Bryant's “Green River” and “The Rivulet” and Wordsworth's poetic work are explicitly evident. Wordsworth tackles the same subject of childhood memories and communion with natural beauty in poems like “Tintern Abbey” (1798) and the “Intimations of Immortality” Ode (1807). In these poems,

Wordsworth discusses the loss of the pure, intimate relationship with nature in the course of the process of aging and gaining maturity. He goes on to claim that the retreat to nature as well as childhood memories can provide access to the early spiritual experience with the natural world. Wordsworth shares with Bryant the same realization of the passing of time and feeling different from boyhood days, as well as the same faith in nature. While Bryant declares that “Yet well has Nature kept the truth / She promised in my earliest youth”, Wordsworth affirms that “Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her (Gill 134).” However, Wordsworth finds compensation in the mature vision of nature which he develops as an adult. He finds himself now more able to perceive and grasp natural truths than in his earlier days when he was thoughtless and unable to understand what nature generously offered him. That is how he managed to formulate in his “Intimations of Immortality” Ode a much more mature and sophisticated argument of his theme. As a grown-up, Wordsworth can now see earthly life as a dim shadow of the glorious, innocent life that man experienced in the world of pre-existence. A child can still enjoy some glimpses of this earlier, purer state, but as he grows up he forgets the glories of the instinctive life. Wordsworth’s mature vision is heavily charged with Platonic philosophy, which views the earthly life as the world of shadows containing nothing but imitated copies of the real facts of pre-existence.



Bryant moved away from the superficial imitation of Romantic English poetic models with the overwhelming patriotic spirit and domestic stamp of his own poetry. While apparently displaying orthodox Romantic elements, “The Prairies” (1832) goes further to intensify a distinctively American identity in an earnest nationalistic tone: “The poem is more than a piece of patriotic, breast-beating oratory; it recognizes values more inclusive and more profound than those of political slogans ” (McLean, Bryant 24). The poem is inspired by Bryant’s trip to Illinois to visit his brother and it records the poet’s own vision of the wild natural scenery of the American west. McLean sees “The Prairies” as another successful dialogue with nature where the majesty and vitality of the scene evoke questions about the history of the human race as well as the present and future. The pressure of the overwhelming emotions of the poet is reflected both in the fluctuating rhythms of the blank verse and in the abundance of imagery. McLean goes further to claim that such an intense reaction to the powerful open spaces makes Bryant neglect presenting an introduction to his poem and go straight forward into its content with an emphatic “These” (Bryant 24–5):

These are the gardens of the Desert, these  
The unshorn fields, boundless and beautiful,  
For which the speech of England has no name-  
The Prairies. I behold them for the first,

And my heart swells, while the dilated sight

Takes in the encircling vastness.... (Gado 77)

Alan B. Donovan suggests that Bryant presents in “The Prairies” a Romantic vision—of the vast spaces, the ocean, the Rocky Mountains, the solitude and the elegy upon the ancient inhabitants—which basically reflects upon the poet’s own loneliness (518). Ralph N. Miller argues that such Romantic tools were suggested to Bryant not only through the careful observation of his own natural environment, but also from the ongoing debates around the natural history of America. There were attempts to form a theory explaining the differences in geographical, geological and natural life between Europe and America while, at the same time, refuting the claims of degradation and inferiority against the physical features of the New World. Similarly, Bryant in his poem attempts to fashion a myth about the builders of the “mighty mounds”, very popular in the mid-west, which were erected for ceremonial and burial purposes. In their advanced architectural style, that ancient race was similar to the Greek (228–31):

A race, that long has passed away,

Built them; —a disciplined and populous race

Heaped, with long toil, the earth, while yet the Greek

Was hewing the Pentelicus to forms

Of symmetry, and rearing on its rock

The glittering Parthenon... (Gado 78)

Bryant suggests that such a civilization was destroyed by the red man before the white settlers came to the continent. However, while Bryant emphasizes the image of America as a virgin land, he proposes this problematic theory of the mound dwellers. In this way, Bryant's representation of the American scene entails a dangerous paradox: while he praises the wild icon of America as "untouched" land, he manages to impose historical and cultural associations upon the place. Furthermore, Bryant, paradoxically, associates the Romantic icon of American landscape with the practical view of the land as a commodity when he tells about the future prosperity which America promises. Mclean sees that the poet's imagination has converted the humming of bees into the noises of the coming settlers (Bryant 25):

The sound of that advancing multitude

Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground

Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice

Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn

Of Sabbath worshippers...

(Gado 80)

Such paradoxes arouse many compelling questions. In his attempt to defend his own homeland against the charges of degeneration and inferiority, why does Bryant choose to retreat to nature? In his poetic engagement with American nature, Bryant consistently emphasizes the moral and spiritual attributes of the place. In so doing, did he really succeed in concealing the image of the materialistic America?

Hyatt H. Waggoner explains this sense of “incoherence” associated with Bryant’s poems on the basis of a controversial duality: “a duality deeply rooted in American history: America as a geographical and historical entity in which land is considered a commodity or a speculative investment, and America as icon in which land is viewed as a moral emblem” (Meyer 198).

While the dialogue with nature in “The Prairies” promises the future prosperity, nature, once again, speaks its “ various language ” when the vision is stopped and the poet is left in solitude: “ All at once/ A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,/ And I am in the wilderness alone.” McLean argues that while the ending may seem philosophically confusing, it is certainly the source of strength of the poem, in the sense that it reveals Bryant’s consciousness of not being too optimistic about diving into the benevolence of nature (Bryant 25-6).

The innovations brought by Bryant to the American literary life paved the way for the rise of the American Romantic Movement. In spite of the claims that Bryant was a pre-Transcendentalist, he regarded transcendental thought as obscure and lacking coherence. However, he admired Emerson’s impressive manner and earnest tone (Glicksberg 533). Bryant played many roles in nineteenth-century American intellectual, social and literary life; he was a poet, a lawyer, an editor, a translator and a politician. In spite of all these roles, he

was most celebrated during his life time as America's first leading national poet. Moreover, it was his reputation that persisted as a poet although he was overlooked by later generations, who paid little tribute to his poetic achievement. Bryant wrote most of his famous and important poems during his youth, and then his poetry started to show some signs of decline. In "Summer Wind" (1824), the summer's natural scene is a metaphor of the poet's own condition of listlessness and languor. While all aspects of the scene are filled with the feeling of losing energy and lacking enthusiasm, Bryant is similarly lying "Languidly in the shade". Vespa argues that Bryant's imaginative dilemma can be seen as a poetic commonplace since 1824, when "Summer Wind" was actually published, is one of Bryant's most prolific years. However, Vespa sees that this sense of languor primarily started to find its way into Bryant's work early in 1815, during the years of Bryant's engagement with practicing law, and even after quitting law practice and starting working as an editor, some surviving aspects of this languor persist (289). The poem starts with the poet's attempts to persuade the wind to come while it keeps delaying its coming. The summer wind is the wind of inspiration, whose absence makes everything languidly motionless and soundless, hence "There is no rustling in the lofty elm" and "All is silent;" even the clouds are "Motionless pillars of the brazen heaven." The poet's situation is similar to external natural surrounding:

for me, I lie

Languidly in the shade, where the thick turf,

Yet virgin from the kisses of the sun,

Retains some freshness, and I woo the wind

That still delays his coming. Why so slow,

Gentle and voluble spirit of the air?

Oh, come and breathe upon the fainting earth

Coolness and life! Is it in his caves

He hears me?

(Gado 57)

Shelley, earlier in his “Ode to the West Wind” (1820), presents the image of wind as a benevolent natural agent whose presence helps towards regeneration of life by delivering seeds to their place of implantation. The image of wind in “his caves” echoes Shelley’s depiction of the wind as the “breath of Autumn’s being” whose “unseen presence” drives the dead leaves “like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.” Both Bryant and Shelley evoke the image of Aeolus, the ruler of the wind in Greek mythology, sitting in his cave, while his strong breath stirs up natural surroundings. The way in which the eventual coming of the wind is portrayed in Bryant’s poem emphasizes this supernatural character:

he is come,

Shaking a shower of blossoms from the shrubs,

And bearing on their fragrance; and he brings

Music of birds, and rustling of young boughs,

And sound of swaying branches, and the voice

Of distant waterfalls. All the green herbs

Are stirring in his breath...

(Gado 57–8)

The use of the short sentences in describing the state of nature waiting for the coming of wind reflects the sense of boredom, while with the actual coming of wind the sentences pick up speed and pace.

The decline in Bryant's poetic powers has been interpreted by many critics in the light of the increasingly busy life that he led. Not mainly dedicated to writing poetry, Bryant was considered to finish his poetic career in 1825 when he turned to work in journalism: "Whittier and Emerson were certain that the newspaperman's 'daily twaddle' and penchant for the 'thistles and teazles of politics' undermined both his virtue and his creativity" (Ferguson 432). However, Bryant's poetic achievement presents him as a major literary pioneer, whose work succeeds in combining traditional forms and innovative poetic explorations. Frank Gado argues that Bryant's verse, while displaying unmistakable Romantic currents, also presents the poet as "authentic innovator." Gado provides evidence for his claim from Bryant's essay "On the Use of Trisyllabic Feet in Iambic Verse," which he wrote when he was about sixteen or perhaps younger. The article unveils the poet's innovative exploration of prosody. Although Bryant was trained by his father to write verse in classical forms, particularly Pope's, he did not accept the authority of classical tradition for the monotony it brought to poetry. Gado argues

that the article's simple idea of inserting an extra syllable in an iambic-meter foot has serious implications, as it signals Bryant's questioning of popular adherence to metric standards. Gado records Bryant's interest in blank verse and concludes that Bryant's "attention to the rhythms of speech and relaxation of poetic conventions do not in themselves add up to free verse, of course, but they clearly lead in that direction" (163). Gado's analysis of the metric scheme of "Thanatopsis" displays Bryant's challenge to conventional strict metric discipline as well as his anticipation of Whitman's future poetic revolution. Delineating the way in which Bryant's innovative ventures anticipate Whitman's "barbaric yawp" (Kaplan 87) in Leaves of Grass (1855), Gado asserts the less recognized connection between the two American bards. In his argument, Gado presents Bryant as a major link between English Romantic legacy and the growing American literary tradition. While Wordsworth asserts primarily a new diction for writing poetry, derived from daily conversations of ordinary people, Bryant goes further to explore the possibility of a new metre (157–63). Viewing his work from a transatlantic perspective, it becomes clear that Bryant depends, to some degree, on the English Romantic poetic models, yet his exploration of the American landscape and his attempts to romanticize America's image have brought certain currents of originality to his Romantic verse.

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) is another nineteenth-century American poet whose work reflects the early attempts to establish a distinguished native literary identity. In so doing, Longfellow attempted to bridge the gap between radical originality and the imitation of European models; hence, he profoundly contributed to transatlantic cultural and literary dialogues. He helped in transmitting the rich literary European heritage into an emerging American culture through his translations of French, Spanish, and Italian literary texts. In addition to translations, his essays and lectures on foreign European languages and cultures charged the cultural life of nineteenth-century America.

Longfellow developed an eager interest in American nature early in life; born in Portland, Maine, a coastal city in New England, he was attracted to both the Atlantic and the nearby woods. During his childhood, the New England landscape haunted his imagination, and the memories of his happy childhood were reflected later in his verse. Newton Arvin argues that Longfellow was preoccupied with the image of the sea, which dominated his verse: "Longfellow was to be as much a poet of the sea, as little a poet of the hills or mountains, as Whitman; the breathing of the sea is audible in his work from almost the beginning to the end." (5). While still a student at Bowdoin College, Longfellow expressed his strong passion for reading and writing. Pursuing his literary ambitions, he started publishing his

poems and essays in such places as the American Monthly Magazine and the United States Literary Gazette. After graduation, Longfellow was offered an opportunity to travel to Europe to study and master seven European languages in order to teach at Bowdoin College. At this point in his life, Longfellow started to develop a sense of growing tension between his literary ambitions and his scholarly career. However, his trips to Europe put him in direct contact with the European cultural and literary legacy; this encounter is significantly important for the way Longfellow has contributed to shaping Anglo-American dialogues in the nineteenth century.

In 1826, Longfellow made his first trip to Europe; such an experience brought him to identify with classical literary traditions as well as contemporary currents in thought and art. For three years he travelled through France, Germany, Spain and Italy, studying the languages and meeting new people. The outcome of his trip was Outre Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea (1835), which was heavily influenced by other literary models as he apparently imitated Washington Irving's travel sketches and Lord Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Back home in America, Longfellow started his academic career as a professor of modern languages at Bowdoin College from 1829 to 1835. During this period, he had not much time for writing poetry as he was much more engaged with writing essays and translating texts for his classes. However, most of such scholarly

writings were dedicated to literary subjects. In 1835, he left again for Europe with his young wife Mary who unexpectedly died there as a result of a complicated miscarriage. However, he soon met the great love of his life, Fanny Appleton, who rejected his love for seven years, then eventually agreed to marry him. Returning to America Longfellow took up a teaching appointment at Harvard, and regularly wrote for newspapers and magazines. Longfellow also continued his attempts to win Fanny's affection; his love for her was the inspiration of his most celebrated works, including Voices in the Night (1839) and Ballads and Poems (1841). They lived happily together for eighteen years and had six children; however, Fanny died suddenly in a fire accident which affected Longfellow as well. His face was badly burned during his futile attempts to rescue his beloved wife. Fanny's tragic death was a turning point in Longfellow's life.

Longfellow's work can not be seen in separation from early efforts to shape a genuine American literary stamp. Early in his literary career, Longfellow, who was then only eighteen years old, expressed his views on this theme in his Commencement oration on "Our Native Writers," which he delivered at the graduation of the Class of 25 at Bowdoin College in 1825. While calling for original and peculiar artistic achievement, Longfellow admits the impossibility of breaking the literary ties with England. His high appreciation of English literary legacy is indisputably revealed in this oration:

“English literature is a great and glorious monument, built up by the master-spirits of old time, that had no peers, and rising bright and beautiful until its summit is hid in the mists of antiquity” (Higginson, Longfellow 31–2). The young orator is equally aware of the obstacles hindering American literary prosperity, especially in a nation regarding poetry in association with storied historical experiences, which the Americans obviously lack. However, Longfellow, in “Our Native Writers,” enthusiastically argues that the lack of the past should be compensated for by the majesty and inspiration of American landscape:

Every rock shall become a chronicle of storied allusions; and the tomb of the Indian prophet shall be as hallowed as the sepulchres of ancient kings... after all, there is nothing which so frees us from the turbulent ambition and bustle of the world, nothing which so fills the mind with great and glowing conceptions, and at the same time so warms the heart with love and tenderness, as a frequent and close communion with natural scenery. The scenery of our own country, too, so rich as it is in everything beautiful and magnificent, and so full of quiet loveliness or of sublime and solitary awe, has for our eyes enchantment, for our ears an impressive and unutterable eloquence. Its language is in high mountains, and in the pleasant valleys scooped out between them, in the garniture which the fields put on, and in the blue lake asleep in the hollow of the hills. (Higginson, Longfellow 33–5)

This extract from Longfellow’s oration, “Our Native Writers,” evidently delineates the Romantic elements in his thought. Longfellow,

while calling for establishing a national literary canon, proposes that expressing American nature is the best way to do so. The lack of history can be compensated for by the inspiring, telling scenery, whose richness and magnificence can evoke “sublime and solitary awe.” Only “communion” with nature and receiving its language can fill the minds of Americans with “great and glowing conceptions,” and their hearts with “love and tenderness.” Unlike Bryant, Longfellow acknowledges the Native Indians as the original inhabitants of America, and he even regards the Indian ruins— “the tomb of the Indian prophet”— as sacred as “the sepulchres of ancient kings.”

Edward Wagenknecht argues that Longfellow formulated his debate later in a more mature manner in his article titled “The Defence of Poetry,” published in The North American Review in January, 1832, reviewing a new edition of Sir Philip Sidney’s “The Defence of Poesy.” Such a development does not only take the debate over “Americanism in literature” further, but also predicts many of Emerson’s opinions expressed five years later in “The American Scholar.” In his essay, Longfellow urges the American people to seek glory not in materialistic gains but rather in artistic achievements. The key to such an achievement lies in Sidney’s maxim— “Look in thy heart and write,” as Longfellow advises young American writers (133–4). Though grounding his debate in Sidney’s views, Longfellow

calls for originality rather than superficial imitation of classical formalities, and again he emphasizes the influential role of American scenery on native writers in creating such a national literary character. Longfellow further highlights the peculiar American-Indian tradition as an example of authentic cultural and literary heritage. He calls on American writers to adhere to actual American landscapes as their primary source of inspiration rather than being guided by books and models:

I could wish, then, that our native poets would give a more national character to their writings. In order to effect this, they have only to write naturally, to write from their own feelings and impressions, from the influence of what they see around them; and not from any preconceived notions of what poetry ought to be, caught by reading many books and imitating many models. This is peculiarly true in descriptions of natural scenery. In these, let us have no more skylarks and nightingales. For us they warble in books alone... when [a native poet] sings under an American sky, and describes a native landscape, let the description be graphic, as if it had been seen, and not imagined. The figures and imagery of poetry should be characteristic, as if drawn from nature, and not from books. (Longfellow, Outre Mer 235–6)

Longfellow's proposition echoes Wordsworth's call, in "The Tables Turned" (1798), to "quit" books and learn from nature. Although Longfellow takes Wordsworth's argument further to a nationalistic domain through his emphasis on the peculiarities of American

landscape, still Longfellow's call originates in the Romantic view of nature as the best source of knowledge. Longfellow's fervour for literary independence was revived later on by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his oration "The American Scholar," which he delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society, at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in August 1837. Emerson, too, called on the native writers to get rid of stereotyped ideas and experiences or "foreign harvests"; to discard traditional "mechanical skill" in writing literature; to get their most important influence from nature; and not to be led by the authority of the past as represented by books. The scholar may get inspiration from books, but for the sake of original creation, he should depend on his own "active soul" (Ziff 83–9).

Arvin equally argues that Longfellow was occupied with the production of American literature of a distinguishable character of its own as well as with the position of the man of letters in American life. In "Our Native Writers," Longfellow calls on Americans not to be confined to the materialistic view of the land, and to transcend it to muse on the artistic, moral and spiritual value of the American landscape:

It is true, says the young orator, that the mind of America is almost exclusively occupied with the practical and the "operative," but the land itself is rich in the materials of poetry, and the time is coming when it is to be "indeed the land of song." (Arvin 13)

In this sense, he is indebted to the older poet, William Cullen Bryant, whose verse profoundly influenced Longfellow's intellectual life and poetic practice. Arvin justifies this Bryantesque strong effect on Longfellow on the basis of shared religious influence; Bryant's verse calmly and reasonably expressed the Unitarian doctrine. In their meeting in Heidelberg, Longfellow acknowledged his own debt to Bryant: "When I look back upon my earlier years," Longfellow said, "I cannot but smile to see how much in them is really yours" (9–10).

Like Bryant, Longfellow was accused of conformity to traditional English models without original exploration of anything but the American landscape (Spiller 196). The echoes of Bryant are so evident in Longfellow's verse, particularly in those poems that have to do with nature. Longfellow holds the same Romantic premises that nature is holy and beautiful, and that communion with nature brings holy thoughts to the human mind. In "The Secret of the Sea" (1850), gazing upon the natural scene of the sea, the poet recollects his earlier pure visions and happy dreams:

AH! what pleasant visions haunt me

As I gaze upon the sea!

All the old romantic legends,

All my dreams, come back to me. (Longfellow, *PW* 181)

The vivid audible representation of the poem brings such "romantic legends" of childhood back to life. The audible drama of "Count



Arnaldos” and “the ancient helmsman” evokes the reader’s eagerness for “the sailor’s mystic song,” in the same way it fills the poetic speaker’s heart with longing for “the secret of the sea.” The mournful melody of the song is the dominant image within the poem; it is so powerful, even though it fades with the passage of time. Longfellow, in this poem, examines the relationship between man and nature or, as Bryant puts it, man’s “communion” with nature’s “visible forms.” The poem reflects the Romantic element of subjectivity, as well, since the poetic speaker is expressing and sharing his personal thoughts and feelings:

And the heart of the great ocean

Sends a thrilling pulse through me. (Longfellow, *PW* 181)

This final Romantic image of “the heart of the great ocean” [sending] “a thrilling pulse through” the poetic speaker emphasizes the Romantic ideal of uniting with nature. In his record of his first trip to Europe, Outre Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea (1835), Longfellow earlier expressed his attitude towards nature:

...there is no scene over which my eye roves with more delight than the face of a summer landscape dimpled with soft sunny hollows, and smiling in all the freshness and luxuriance of June. There is no book in which I read sweeter lessons of virtue, or find the beauty of a quiet life more legibly recorded. My heart drinks in the tranquillity of the scene; and I never hear the sweet warble of a bird from its native wood, without a silent wish that such a cheerful voice and peaceful shade were mine. There is a

beautiful moral feeling connected with every thing in rural life, which is not dreamed of in the philosophy of the city; the voice of the brook and the language of the winds and woods are no poetic fiction. What an impressive lesson is there in the opening bud of spring! [What] an eloquent homily in the fall of the autumnal leaf! How well does the song of a passing bird represent the glad but transitory days of youth! [And] in the hollow tree and hooting owl what a melancholy image of the decay and imbecility of old age. (Outre Mer 30–1)

Longfellow's approach to nature obviously steers in the Romantic direction. It echoes Wordsworth's maxim: "Let Nature be your teacher," which was earlier expressed in his poem "The Tables Turned" (1798), as well as his call to retreat to rural life. Pondering over natural forms does not only bring feelings of tranquillity and relief to the heart; it brings moral thoughts and spiritual values to the mind as well. Romanticism shifts the emphasis from reason to intuition for the sake of reaching universal truth. The Romantics regard nature as the best source of knowledge for man; Wordsworth calls people to be open and receptive to such "Spontaneous wisdom," which far exceeds that found in books or preached by "the sages:"

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife,

Come, hear the woodland linnet,

How sweet his music; on my life,

There's more of wisdom in it.

(Gill 130)

While such Romantic views were quite popular and accepted during the nineteenth century, Wagenknecht argues that, with the modern shift in modes of thinking, claims of weakness and sentimentality have been raised against Longfellow's work. According to most modern critics, the process of attributing spiritual realities to natural forces is highly contentious or simply unacceptable. He goes further to argue that it is actually a challenging problem for modern art to reconcile natural phenomena and human realities. Although he accepts that modern critics are justified to some extent, Wagenknecht advocates Longfellow's use of natural symbols on the grounds that nature is significant to man on the spiritual level as well as the materialistic one (116–7): "For if nature has no *significance* for man—if it merely supplies him with materials to construct pleasant pictures, quite external to himself and his most vital concerns— then it can have no very deep significance for poetry either" (117). Wagenknecht concludes that in spite of Longfellow's earlier invitation in "Our Native Writers" to communion with natural scenery, he was never completely and strictly committed to Wordsworth's thesis that "spirituality and morality are somehow an emanation of the landscape" (118).

Longfellow was intensely interested in the past since the communion with nature was primarily associated with the recollection of his youthful dreams and visions. However, the way in which he

idealized the past has brought him to be generally categorized as a dreamy, Romantic poet. Edward Wagenknecht argues that Longfellow acknowledged the Romantic element in his own work, and that he was fully aware of the temptation of Romantic imagination. The interest in the past is not a sign of weakness as long as the poet's imagination is capable of transforming this past into literature (108–9):

After all, to reproach a creative writer for being more interested in the past for what his imagination can make of it than for what it was objectively is to reproach him for being a creative writer... When a writer has such energy, when his imagination is sufficiently vital to be able to use the past so that it takes on fresh life in the present, then past and present have coalesced. (Wagenknecht 108–9)

Wagenknecht's defence of Longfellow is grounded on the Romantic view of imagination as essential for literary creation through his emphasis on creativity as the results of the workings of the mind of Romantic writer on his natural surroundings.

The “mournful melodies” of “the ancient helmsman” are echoed later in the last poem Longfellow wrote, “The Bells of San Blas” (1882). On the shore of the harbour of Mazatlan, the bells of San Blas are mysteriously calling in “a strange, wild melody.” However, no one can understand the real message of this calling but the speaker:

But to me a dreamer of dreams,

To whom what is and what seems

Are oft one and the same,—

(Longfellow, *PW* 848)

The poetic speaker finds it difficult to separate reality and illusions, like his counterpart in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), who can not decide what is real and what is ideal, as he ends the Ode wondering whether he is sleeping or not:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music...Do I wake or sleep? (Allott 532)

The poetic speaker hears the "voice of the past" in the desperate ringing of the bells which are lamenting the glorious past when "the Priest was the lord of the land." The religious zeal of the early Spanish settlers has now declined; the chapel is forsaken and "crumbled into the dust," and the bells are turning green with rust. The bells are wondering whether they have been deserted for the sake of "some new faith:"

That we are forced to remain

Naked to sun and rain

Unsheltered and ashamed? (Longfellow, *PW* 848)

Again the audible image of the bells, passionately praying and earnestly begging for a second coming of their own, vividly expresses such a crisis of faith:

'Oh, bring us back once more

The vanished days of yore,

When the world with faith was

filled;

Bring back the fervid zeal,

The hearts of fire and steel,

The hands that believe and build.' (Longfellow, *PW* 848)

Longfellow's poetic practice in representing nature owes much to the Romantic tradition since nature in his verse is always as alive and dynamic as a living creature. While Wordsworth in his sonnet "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge" (1802) uses the "garment" image to describe the beauty of the city in the morning, Longfellow employs the same image to personify the night in "Hymn To The Night" (1839). The personification of the night makes the scene of its coming so magnificent and impressive:

I HEARD the trailing garments of

the Night

Sweep through her marble

hall!

I saw her sable skirts all fringed

with light

From the celestial wall!

I felt her presence, by its spell of

might,

Stoop o'er me from above;

The calm majestic presence of the

Night,

As of the one I love.

(Longfellow, *PW* 3)

The use of voices in his verse is very remarkable; the beginning of the poem is so emphatic, “I HEARD,” conveying the sound of the “trailing garments” to the reader. In other poems, “The Bells of San Blas” for example, Longfellow allows natural objects to speak; the bells are the key figure of the narrative telling their own sad story. Again, it is the Romantic relation between man and nature; the poet projects his own emotions and thoughts on natural objects. When he is sad nature is melancholic and gloomy; and when he is happy nature rejoices and celebrates. Adherence to the Romantic legacy is not merely confined to thoughts and images; it is applied to diction and forms as well.

John D. Rea traces the origin of Longfellow’s sonnet “Nature” (1878) and he believes it to be Southey’s epitaph found “in some part of Yorkshire,” and published in Southey’s Common-place Book, the fourth series. The epitaph seems to be the basis of a sonnet, which was probably not developed by Southey (48):

As careful nurses to the bed do lay

Their children which too long would wanton play,

So to prevent all my ensuing crimes

Nature my nurse laid me to bed bedtimes.

(Rea 48)

The similarity to Longfellow’s sonnet “Nature” is evidently marked and undisputed. In the octave, Longfellow depicts the image of a caring mother attempting to put her son to bed, but the unsettled son

feels too anxious to sleep. The little boy wants to go on playing with his toys, and the promises of others that he shall play tomorrow can not give him comfort and assurance. The sonnet turns in the sestet to reveal this symbolic riddle; the mother is nature, taking our beloved items “one by one”. We, just like the child, do not know whether we will see those things again or not. Experiencing the same state of anxiety, doubt and even ignorance, we never understand Nature’s ways:

So Nature deals with us, and takes away  
Our playthings one by one, and by the hand  
Leads us to rest so gently, that we go  
Scarce knowing if we wished to go or stay,  
Being too full of sleep to understand  
How far the unknown transcends the what we know.

(Longfellow, *PW* 715)

In “The Spirit of Poetry” (1828), Longfellow proposes that it is the poets who give a “delicate ear of thought” to the voice of such visible forms of nature: “Hence gifted bards/ Have ever loved the calm and quiet shades,” where “the sweet spirit” of poetry “dwells.” Longfellow again uses audible images of nature; he dedicates the first part of his poem to the description of the voices of nature dominating every aspect of the woodland; such voices are the reason why the poets have always been attracted to the “quiet shades” where they enjoy communion with nature. The second part of the poem displays a



more subjective tone, hence the voices of nature represent a source of joy and inspiration to the poetic speaker himself:

My busy fancy oft embodies it,  
As a bright image of the light and  
    beauty  
That dwells in nature; of the hea-  
    venly forms

We worship in our dreams,... (Longfellow, *PW* 13)

In such early works as “The Spirit of Poetry,” Longfellow tackles the American natural landscape without emphasizing any native peculiar aspects. The representation of nature reflects an intensely Romantic stamp in thought and poetic practice; the poem focuses on the creative power of wind as the source of inspiration using typical Wordsworthian diction— most notably the word “dwells” in the opening lines:

THERE is a quiet spirit in these  
    Woods,  
That dwells where'er the gentle

South-wind blows; (Longfellow, *PW* 12)

As far as nature is concerned, Longfellow found in his own native landscape and legends a powerful source of inspiration. In such a time of fighting to maintain New England’s status as a literary force, he was intensely concerned with representing native American themes. In addition to writing about the native landscape, he also explored

American history and tradition, and he developed a strong interest in the culture of native American Indians. Longfellow is particularly remembered for his narrative verse where he fused all such American themes in a poetic melting pot. In his most celebrated work, “Evangeline” (1847), he succeeded in creating a distinctively American narrative poem through the use of the old themes of love, separation, exile, search, loss and constancy. The events of the story take place in 1755 during the deportation of the inhabitants of the French province of Acadie, modern-day Nova Scotia, by order of the British authorities. Being separated from her bridegroom, Evangeline Bellefontaine decides to wander over the United States in search of him; however, she is reunited with him on the day of his death. Through such wandering, the American landscape— rivers, prairies, woods, mountains— is brilliantly explored. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his review of “Evangeline,” argues that the simplicity of the plot is reflected in the poem’s simple form since the events naturally flow with the hexameter:

Mr. Longfellow has made what may be considered an experiment, by casting his poem into hexameters. The first impressions of many of his readers will be adverse; but, when it is perceived how beautifully plastic this cumbrous measure becomes in his hands— how thought and emotion incorporate and identify themselves with it— how it can compass great ideas, or pick up familiar ones— how it swells and subsides with the nature and necessities of the theme— and, finally, how musical it is,

whether it imitate a forest-wind or the violin of an Acadian fiddler— we fully believe that the final judgment will be in its favor. Indeed, we cannot conceive of the poem as existing in any other measure. (Hoeltje 235)

Longfellow started writing his first epic in November 1845 and he finished it in February 1847. The poem falls into two parts, each part consists of five cantos. Such a big poetic work serves as a panoramic catalogue to the local geography, history and culture of the American west during the period of the Acadian wars:

Far in the West there lies a desert land, where the mountains  
Lift, through perpetual snows, their lofty and luminous summits.  
Down from their jagged, deep ravines, where the gorge, like a gateway,  
Opens a passage rude to the wheels of the emigrant's wagon,  
Westward the Oregon flows and the Walleway and Owyhee.  
Eastward, with devious course, among the Wind-river Mountains,  
Through the Sweet-water Valley precipitate leaps the Nebraska;  
And to the south, from Fontaine-qui-bout and the Spanish sierras,  
Fretted with sands and rocks, and swept by the wind of the desert,  
Numberless torrents, with ceaseless sounds, descend to the ocean,  
Like the great chords of a harp, in loud and solemn vibrations.  
Spreading between these streams are the wondrous, beautiful prairies,

(Longfellow, *PW* 166)

However, although depending on such cultural background, “Evangeline” is still a work of fiction rather than a factual record of a true story. Longfellow’s use of native folklore in constructing his narrative poems refutes the charges raised against his poetic

achievement as being heavily dependent on European culture, but rather an American experience rooted in native soil. His Indian poems, including “Evangeline” and “The Song of Hiawatha,” are evident examples of his own celebration of “the Yankee past” and fervour for native themes (Ward 188).

Longfellow equally depended on native American oral history in writing his second classic epic “The Song of Hiawatha” (1855), which has enhanced his own reputation as a myth-maker. Just like “Evangeline”, “Hiawatha” is not a mere representation of native Indian American tradition; though heavily depending on it, Longfellow’s imagination reshaped the story to create a distinctly American Romantic legend. Written in trochaic tetrameter, the narrative flows to unfold the legend of Hiawatha, the Indian hero, and his lover Minnehaha. The epic was one of the most popular literary works in the nineteenth century; it was widely read and celebrated as a valuable addition to the emerging American literary canon. Cecelia Tichi argues that for more than a century since its publication in 1855, the critical responses to “The Song of Hiawatha” focused on the historical sources of the love story and the way in which Longfellow transformed his material into a peculiar American epic (549). Joe Lockard argues that despite the decline of Longfellow’s reputation after his death in 1882, the interest in “Hiawatha” continued to flourish. While for most recent critics Longfellow is seen as a minor

American poet, his epic's popularity survived as a representation of the transformation of old native Indian American culture and its fusion into the new Europeanized world. "The Song of Hiawatha" has been translated into forty five languages, and it still admired for its cross-cultural amalgamation (110). Unlike Bryant, who was not interested in primitive Indian culture, Longfellow's representation of native Indians reproduces the Romantic image of "the noble savage." Longfellow's Romantic vision of his native landscape, culture and history defines him as a major New England poet attempting to shape the direction of American literary culture in the nineteenth century.

Both Bryant and Longfellow wrote poetry in a very critical time of American literary history and persistently worked on shaping the new developing national tradition. Although they were intensely anxious to establish America's cultural independence, they refused extravagant originality and continued to depend to a large extent on English Romantic models. Reliance on English literary tradition aroused much debate around their status as creative poets and a frequent criticism has been that their contributions to American literature were confined to exploring the American landscape. However, a closer critical scrutiny of their work casts light on their original poetic characteristics, and presents them as major American poets who attempted to transfer the Romantic legacy to American soil.

## **Chapter Three**

## Emerson and the Romantic Heritage

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) holds a unique and secure place in American culture as the first public intellectual in the history of the United States, founder of American Transcendentalism and the prime figure of American Romanticism. The scope of his work and achievement is difficult to encompass since he made a profound contribution to literature, philosophy, religion, social reform and thought. The significance of his place in American thought and letters is primarily due to his persistent, direct and indirect influence on his own contemporaries and successors, as well as his own substantial published works. His name was associated with what F.O. Matthiessen called the “American Renaissance” in reference to the period of flourishing in American literature in the mid nineteenth century. His verse and prose writings record the whole nation’s quest to shape its own cultural, intellectual and literary identity. Emerson’s relation to his precursors reflects the tension between tradition and innovation underlying the Anglo-American literary anxiety.

In the early years of his life, Emerson enthusiastically and sincerely declared his commitment to the ministerial path of his family, and he studied to be a local minister following the steps of his own father and brothers. However, as a young minister, Emerson was completely unsatisfied with the current state of religion and philosophy in New England and he started to search for new ideas and

views of life. Lawrence Buell recounts how Emerson started gradually to lose faith in institutionalised church since his religious doubts increasingly grew as his thought developed and his readings widened. The real change came with the tragic death of his wife Ellen Tucker Emerson, after whom he could never find any compensation for their intense emotional relationship. For the sake of recovery, Emerson went on a trip to Europe in 1833 after resigning his pulpit; he visited Italy, France, and England, where he met Thomas Carlyle, Walter Savage Landor, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Wordsworth (12–15).

Emerson's visit to Europe came out of intellectual demands as well as emotional purposes. It seems that Emerson idealized his favourite writers, but when he actually met them he was disappointed to find that they could not share his enthusiastic views and visions. Ralph L. Rusk claims that Emerson was not really interested in London, quoting the American minister's unfavourable comment: "Immense city, very dull city." In spite of his uncomfortable status, he was very anxious to meet his hero, Coleridge, who lived in London. In this meeting, Emerson was shocked by the limited religious views of Coleridge who, though once a Unitarian, had become an energetic advocate of the Church of England. Coleridge severely attacked Unitarianism, not caring about Emerson's remark that he himself was a Unitarian (190–2): "Emerson had seen his man but had found him



‘old and preoccupied’ and unable to ‘bend to a new companion and think with him’ ” (Rusk 192). Though very disappointed with his visit to Coleridge, Emerson was still determined to meet Wordsworth and Carlyle. The meeting with Wordsworth was equally disappointing; Emerson stated that Wordsworth saw American society as “being enlightened by a superficial tuition, out of all proportion to its being restrained by moral culture” (Rusk 195). However, Emerson’s visit to Carlyle was the most impressive event in his trip and it was the start of their transatlantic friendship. Emerson was already acquainted with Carlyle’s writings, and he was deeply concerned with the latter’s ideas about the struggle for religious faith and spiritual conviction in such a material age. It was Carlyle’s openness and warmth of feeling that impressed Emerson, although he was still equally disappointed with Carlyle’s views of literature and limited insight into religious truth (Lease 178–80). With his heart seeking recovery and his mind seeking knowledge, Emerson’s visit to Europe brings him to encounters with major Romantic figures. The American minister, full of fervour and passion, is disappointed with the limitedness and unconcern of those he has regarded as the great men of their age. This chief fruitful event of Emerson’s meeting with Carlyle signalled the start of an intense Anglo-American friendship and a significant connection between the two cultures across the Atlantic. Correspondence between the two

genuine writers reflects their constant involvement and persistent sharing of ideas and visions.

The Unitarian emphasis on the use of intellectual reason in order to reach divine wisdom aroused Emerson's religious anxiety; instead he embraced the Romantic concept that intuitive feeling is the best way to find divine truth. Ian Frederick Finseth argues that Transcendentalism emerged as a reaction to Unitarian rationalism since the transcendentalists felt an intense need for a more emotional and spiritual experience. Eventually, Emerson refused to administer the Lord's Supper (communion) viewing it as a formal constraint which stemmed from false faith and totally contradicted the essence of Christianity, which he thought to be freedom. Lawrence Buell argues that Emerson's defiance of conventional religious institutions in public invoked New Englanders to examine the prevailing religious, social and political principles in the light of Puritan republican values. This debate significantly affected Emerson's mature formulation of his own theory of individualism which he chose to call "Self-reliance" (15-7).

Thus, the roots of the transcendentalist philosophy extend back to American Puritanism with its appeal to inner spirituality. The core religious conviction of the transcendentalists is that finding God depends "on one's inner striving toward spiritual communion with the divine spirit" (Finseth par.6). However, such a state of spiritual

communion is not to be achieved through the mediator of institutionalised church, but rather can be sought in all aspects and forms of nature. Emerson proposes that at an early stage in life, man was spontaneously united with nature, speaking a true and poetic language; and in the course of time, he loses this connection with divine truth, but if he reconnects himself again to nature, he can restore his primary innocent state (Morse 127–8). Holding nature in such a holy status reflects Emerson’s Romantic preoccupations and premises; he views nature as sacred and fully capable of teaching and preaching human beings, as he states in “Nature” (1836):

All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun,—it is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields. (*SE* 59)

Addressing nature in this light relates Emerson to Wordsworth, whose view of nature formed a “radical theology” for the anxious American minister (Pace, “Lifted to Genius?” 127).

Since the lines of connection to European Romanticism are significantly evident, particularly in the literature of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Goethe, Thomas Carlyle and Victor Cousin, Transcendentalism, therefore, is not “a purely native movement” (Finseth par.7). Emerson founds the basis of his transcendental philosophy on German Idealism, filtered through the writings of

Coleridge and Carlyle and expressed in the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. In his attempt to define the American transcendentalists, Perry Miller states:

They may be defined in a somewhat wider perspective as children of the Puritan past who, having been emancipated by Unitarianism from New England's original Calvinism, found a new religious expression in forms derived from romantic literature and from the philosophical idealism of Germany. (ix)

Perry Miller asserts that American Transcendentalism is grounded on both national and European cultures; he emphasizes its link to the Romantic legacy as well. Julia Power argues that the spread of the Unitarian doctrine in the United States during the early nineteenth century contributed towards the readiness of the American society to accept German philosophy and Romantic theories (10). David Morse argues that Emersonian Transcendentalism is based on the idea that “the soul is the only authority” (119); this claim obviously echoes the Romantic ideals of the uniqueness and freedom of the individual. Emerson rebelled against all types of repression of human inner powers, including the traditional religious ambition to copy the divine model of Christ (119–21). Every person should submit only to his own inner law, as Emerson states in “Self-reliance” (1841): “No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature” (*SE* 179).

In his lecture “The Transcendentalist”, which he delivered at the Masonic Temple in Boston in 1842, Emerson himself emphasizes that Transcendentalism is not a new idea; it is the typical Idealism but in a new form. According to the idealists, the human senses perceive only representations of objects, but not real objects themselves. Thus, the real knowledge goes further beyond the perception of the senses to a higher realm of thinking and inspiration. Therefore, there is always a spiritual fact that completes such a sensuous fact. The idealistic vision of the world starts from one’s own consciousness. Thus, Transcendentalism was deeply rooted in English Romanticism: “For the Transcendentalists, as for the Romantics, subjective intuition was at least as reliable a source of truth as empirical investigation” (Finseth par.7).

The broad fact that American Transcendentalism is greatly indebted to English Romanticism is clearly undisputed. Indeed, the Romantic thinkers occupy the very centre of New England transcendental philosophy. Matthiessen sees Coleridge’s critical views as the most influential power behind American Transcendentalism, since Coleridge was widely read in New England following the publishing of Aids to Reflection in 1829 (6). Similarly, Lucy Pearce argues that Coleridge was the vital link between European Romanticism and its American counterpart, since Emerson got acquainted with German Romantic philosophy chiefly through

Coleridge's translations and interpretations. His second best source of German thought was Carlyle's essays, which he had read in 1829–30 before he learned German in order to read Goethe's works. Through the adoption of the values of German Idealism and English Romanticism, Emerson gave expression to a new philosophy, deeply rooted in European Romanticism but distinctively American in spirit and style. Transcendentalism shared with European Romanticism an interest in history, nature, intuition, self-world relationship, the belief in the worth and potentialities of the common man, the power of imagination and the freedom of self-assertion over social restraint (47–8).

R. P. Adams emphasizes that it was the rejection of static mechanism rather than the rejection of European models that led to the rise and flowering of Romantic American literature in the middle of the nineteenth century. American Romantics, influenced by the European legacy of Goethe, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle, partly depended on the solid foundation of European Romanticism to give Romantic literature a new life on American soil. Their deep resentment towards the prevailing social forces of their own time helped them to formulate a Romantic American literature that broadened the concept of Romanticism more than any other national literature ("Romanticism" 432). Although Romantic thought in itself is not new, the originality lies in the attempt to apply it to American

society. Lucy Pearce regards American transcendentalism as “a peculiarly American twist on the ideas of the European romantics” (47). Pearce further argues that the unique way in which Emerson interpreted and developed Romantic ideas distinguished him as the vital link between American and European Romantic movements. Emerson’s main contribution was the attempt to turn abstract Romantic ideas into practice (48). That is to say that the transcendentalists attempted to achieve “a practical philosophy for the advancement of the individual which drew heavily on their local spiritual and philosophical vocabularies: German idealism and Puritanism” (Pearce 48).

The lines of continuity between the Romantic heritage and Emerson’s work can be clearly detected on reading his essays. In “Self-reliance” (1841), Emerson calls for a free individual expression in the same way the Romantics emphasize the importance of the self over the tyranny of the social system. In his examination of the background of Emerson’s theory of individualism, Lawrence Buell locates three sources: Protestant spirituality, international Romanticism, and republican-democratic political theory. Buell further argues that in “Self-reliance” Emerson not only explains the theoretical framework of his own theory, but also provides his reader with practical steps to be self-dependent (60–5). Emerson calls everyone to look inward, to speak what he thinks, to trust his own

sentiments and never to reject his own thoughts: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages” (*SE* 176). A self-reliant person should be able to act genuinely by rejecting the influence of others’ opinions and following his own instinct. Emerson views the child as the prime example of self-reliant individualism: while adults adapt themselves to their contemporary social values, the child’s vision of the outside is much more comprehensive because he primarily trusts his own feelings. Emerson argues that the youth equally has the same power to express themselves in the same natural independent attitude, and hence, they have the ability to induce the change sought by the whole nation. While the old generations seem to have lost their ability to independently express themselves away from social constraints, the young people still have a childish self-reliance (*SE* 177–8):

    Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody; all conform to it; so that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it. So God has armed youth and puberty and manhood no less with its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and gracious and its claims not to be put by, if it will stand by itself. Do not think the youth has no force, because he cannot speak to you and me. Hark! In the next room his voice is sufficiently clear and emphatic. (*SE* 177)



In comparing the attitudes of self-expression of children and adults, Emerson reflects typical Romantic ideas. According to the Romantics, a child can express himself freely and spontaneously without any consideration of the way in which others may receive his ideas. However, as he grows older, he loses this simple innocent way of acting; he starts to conform to his own society and mould his views in accordance with others' conceptions. Emerson equally realizes the vice of conformity to social constraints and the way in which a man, through such "conformity", loses his own primal innocence: "These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world" (*SE* 178). Obviously, Emerson's views echo Wordsworthian Romantic idealization of childhood; Wordsworth previously expresses the same ideas in many of his works, notably his "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" (1803–6). Wordsworth holds the belief that children have an instinctive wisdom that adults lack:

Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep  
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,  
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,  
Haunted for ever by the eternal mind, —

Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!

On whom those truths do rest,

(Gill 300)

Wordsworth regards the child as the “best Philosopher,” the “Mighty Prophet” and “Seer blest” for his ability to grasp the great spiritual truth of the universe. Adults are “blind;” their eyes are no longer ready to see eternal facts beyond superficial, shallow appearances. Wordsworth warns the child that his eager attempts to imitate adults will lead him to lose his primal innocence:

Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke  
The Years to bring the inevitable yoke,  
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?  
Full soon thy Soul shall have her earthly freight,  
And custom lie upon thee with a weight,  
Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life! (Gill 300)

Wordsworth believes that the child’s innocence gets corrupted with the experience he gains from society, and hence, he loses his instinctive readiness to conceive immortal truth. Emerson’s views, as expressed in “Self-reliance,” remarkably steer in the same Romantic direction of Wordsworth.

Therefore, Emerson argues that each man should be “a nonconformist” in the sense that he should rely on himself in exploring real values instead of accepting those imposed on him by his own society. A person should act in life according to what he intuitively believes to be his duty, not according to what others imply he should do: “It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion;

it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” (*SE* 181).

“Self-reliance” entails that a person should not only disengage himself from the influence of his society, but also free himself from the authority of his own past. Emerson argues that we should speak what we believe to be true at the moment, and tomorrow we should equally act according to what we think to be true, even if it may contradict our previous convictions and situations. We should not care much about what others may think of such a contradiction, because it actually reflects a symmetrical natural harmony that might not be easily realized. While consistency makes a person a prisoner of his own past, genuine actions make him great (*SE* 182–4). If man acts genuinely he will be the centre of history: “When private men shall act with original views, the lustre will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen” (*SE* 186). The rejection of conformity and consistency will lead to such “original views,” and people will stop depending on sages’ opinions and beliefs. This pattern of confident self-expression parallels the ways of nature:

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment

of its existence... [Man] cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time. (*SE* 189)

Emerson deduces the ideals of nonconformity and nonconsistency from nature; he thus gives more credit to his theory and universalizes his message. Depending on nature as a source of knowledge and wisdom is markedly Romantic.

In addition to subjective intuition and Individualism, Emerson embraced another Romantic concept of critical importance—organicism. R. P. Adams argues that Emerson did not follow the Platonic view of the universe as a copy of an ideal reality, nor did he perceive the universe as a static machine, but rather saw it as a living plant or animal (“Emerson” 118). Such a dynamic state of the universe entails the potential ability to change in the same way a living plant or animal grows and changes. In “Circles” (1841), Emerson refuses the static outlook of the natural world: “There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees” (*SE* 226). The circle metaphor is used to praise the power of change and the state of flux in nature and human life: Emerson believes that everything in the world is meaningfully connected with organic relationships unifying all parts, and man has to use his own imagination to find out those vital organic relations. In “The American Scholar” (1837), Emerson places considerable emphasis on the importance of discovering such organic relations binding all universal

items as well as the role of insight in finding them out (*SE* 86). Emerson attempts to practice his organicist thought in most of his writings:

Emerson believed in organic unity. The universe is One, it is vitally informed with Spirit and vitally interrelated, and all parts of it are faithful representatives of the whole, if they are properly viewed. The All is in Each, and Emerson's writing continually strives to embody this revelation in words of power. (Fogle 6)

In his poem "Each and All" (1839), Emerson attempts to examine this complex pattern of organic relations controlling the whole universe through a series of parallels and analogies. The poem begins with the situation of an observer who is looking across a landscape displaying these apparently irrelevant objects: the "red-cloaked clown", "the heifer, that lows in the upland farm", and the "sexton tolling the bell at noon". Such observations on nature bring the observer to this moral value:

All are needed by each one;

Nothing is fair or good alone. (CW 4)

The key to understanding Emerson's philosophical argument in "Each and All" is to be found in his own prose writings. In "Nature" (1836), Emerson proposes the idea of "the totality of nature" in reference to the perception of unity as an essential condition to the perception of beauty: "Nothing is quite beautiful alone; nothing but is beautiful in the whole" (*SE* 47). The poetic speaker is fascinated with the heavenly

sound of a sparrow singing at dawn, so he takes it home. However, the bird's song loses all its charm when it is taken out of its natural context; without the sight of the river and the sky the sparrow's song is not pleasing at all. Equally, when the speaker brings the "delicate shells" from the shore to his house, their beauty disappears, as if left behind with "the sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar." Emerson further enhances his argument with the story of the lover who is enchanted with "his graceful maid/ As 'mid the virgin train she strayed", but when she becomes his wife, the "gay enchantment [is] undone" and he can not see her beauty at all. Therefore, the poetic persona seems to lose his faith in beauty and he screams: "I covet Truth". At this moment of despair, nature inspires him with the "Truth" he is seeking:

As I spoke, beneath my feet  
The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,  
Running over the club-moss burrs;  
I inhaled the violet's breath;  
Around me stood the oaks and firs;  
Pine cones and acorns lay on the ground;  
Above me soared the eternal sky,  
Full of light and deity:  
Again I saw, again I heard,  
The rolling river, the morning bird;—  
Beauty through my senses stole;

I yielded myself to the perfect whole.

(*CW* 5–6)

The viewer now realizes that beauty is the outcome of the organic relations connecting all natural objects to each other, and that each of these natural objects alone is not fair enough. Within every natural landscape each object appeals to one sense such as sight or hearing, and the feeling of beauty comes with the way these objects work on all our senses simultaneously. That is how the speaker regains his faith in beauty, allows himself to be overcome by “the perfect whole,” and equally realizes himself as part of the higher unity. David Porter argues that the way in which Emerson builds “Each and All” gives deeper insight into his habit of constructing his poems following the pattern of exploiting the particulars in order to reach “a philosophical revelation”. The seemingly irrelevant forest scenes develop gradually towards a meaningful conclusion; the meditations of Emerson’s poetic personae undistractedly unfold his own moral concern (18):

DEEPER THAN the language, restraining it, is Emerson’s distinctive linear schema. Its origin and effect seem clear enough. As the poems record a rationalized, most often symbolic, experience, the activity necessarily unfolds in sequence. The encounters and thoughts of the speaker-meditator proceed to a conclusion, almost without exception to a revelation. (Porter 17)

In addition, “Each and All” provides a stunning model of Emersonian poetics; Emerson follows his typical strategy of designing his plot as proceeding from fact to truth, and eventually, reaching suddenly his

moral principle in an inexplicable way. At the end of the poem, the viewer, out of the catalogue of surrounding natural items, abruptly joins the “facts” together into philosophical thought (Porter 94–5):

In “Each and All,” it is the speaker of simple talent or fancy who “aggregates” experiences, collecting a sparrow and seashells without discerning the plan of “the perfect whole” from which they are organically inseparable. Here again, the speaker starts out misled into thinking he can possess things as he pleases; he soon discovers that removed from their place in the great circuit, they become, like the shells, “poor, unsightly, noisome things.” Through a slow, deliberate version of the eyeball experience, the speaker’s consciousness finally rises so that he “sees” the larger beauty. (Porter 79)

Thus, in terms of its content, the poem enacts Emerson’s philosophical belief in an organic universe, while in terms of its own construction, it conforms to the Emersonian typical linear structure of starting with a state of ignorance or confusion which is developed until a state of knowledge and clarity is reached.

Like other Romantic poets, Emerson was attracted to nature, which was a major theme in most of his prose and poetic writings. In his poem “The Snow-Storm” (1841), Emerson uses the beauty of nature as a metaphor to explore the beauty of art and literature. “The Snow-Storm” equally displays Emerson’s habitual strategy of extracting philosophy from the observations of a natural landscape. The poem portrays the scene of a snowstorm that veils all nature and



shuts everyone indoors in “a tumultuous privacy of storm”. The images used to depict this scene show nature to be “so savage” as well as “So fanciful”. Despite the apparent cruelty of the snowstorm that heavily covers everything and makes life almost stop, the “wild work” of nature creates wonderful forms of beauty that a human mason can never compete with:

On coop or kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;

A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;

Fills up the farmer’s lane from wall to wall,

Maugre the farmer’s sighs, and the gate

A tapering turret overtops the work.

(CW 42)

The “fierce artificer” brings his material from “an unseen quarry”, and playfully and quickly creates his own awesome architecture without caring for “number or proportion”. When the sun shines, people are left astonished as they attempt to “mimic in slow structures, stone by stone/ Built in an age, the mad wind’s night-work, / The frolic architecture of the snow”. Nature creates in a spontaneous, savage way and the result is beautiful and astonishing. The process of creation by its very nature is “fanciful” or following imagination rather than reason. By analogy, the poem asserts that it is Romantic imagination, rather than the rigid rules of classical art, that can produce fantastic works. Significantly, the snowstorm comes “Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,” just like the wind of

inspiration in Romantic legacy. Notably, Emerson's "The Snow-Storm" recalls Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (1820) by invoking the image of the wind as a creator. Shelley earlier in his Ode tackles the impact of the blowing wind on natural surroundings. He asserts the benevolent, generative power of the wind in delivering seeds to their place of implantation:

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,

Each like a corpse within its grave, until

Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill

(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)

With living hues and odours plain and hill;

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;

Destroyer and Preserver; hear, O hear! (Reiman and Powers 221)

Shelley asks the wind to drive his thoughts across the universe "Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth" (Reiman and Powers 300).

Porter notices the analogy between Emerson's snow-storm and the idealized storm of poetic creation. According to this analogy, the works of free imagination and those of ordered art are respectively compared to the "fanciful" workings of fierce nature and forms of human architecture (85). In terms of construction, Porter argues that in "The Snow-Storm" Emerson depends on his own typical formulaic

schema of moving from ignorance to knowledge. The state of confusion and chaos provoked by the activity of the snow-storm is paralleled with ignorance, while the reader is eventually taken to knowledge through the moral revelation ending this earlier state of chaos (36):

The poem's dramatic structure, once again, carries from confusion to clarity, converting experience into statement, moving from dim and clogged activity into the sun, and setting there a sculptured monument to natural revelation. (Porter 37)

Such a dramatic structure, followed by Emerson, inherently conforms to the typical image of the Romantic poet attempting to come to terms with the outer world with its chaos and disorder. The Romantic experience endeavours to bring to comprehension the confusing contradictions of daily life through its examination of the relation of the self to the universe. Moving towards some measure of light, Emerson constructs his poems in a process from unrest and doubt towards clarity and assertion. Therefore, in theory and practice, Emerson's poetics flows from the Romantic tradition, despite his own insistence on originality and self-reliance.

The way in which Emerson tackles nature in almost every piece of his writing reflects a special concern and adherence to it. For Emerson nature is the central determining force in man's life; it "is the law, the final word, the supreme court... [and his] basic teaching is

that the fundamental context of our lives is nature” (Richardson 97). Robert D. Richardson in his “Emerson and Nature” examines such a relationship while emphasizing its dynamic aspect, in the sense that the meaning of nature for Emerson is to be found in the way in which we immediately experience it:

Nature for Emerson was a theory of the nature of things— how things are; it was a guide to life, a foundation of philosophy, art, language, education, and everyday living. “Nature is what you may do.” It was the green world of gardens and parks, and the wild world of the sea and the woods. Above all, and running through all his thought on the subject, nature was for Emerson the experience of nature. Some of the most often-cited passages in Emerson’s writings are accounts of immediate physical experience... Even the famous passage about becoming a transparent eyeball is best understood not as a theory of nature, but as an actual moment of experience, a feeling. (104)

Clearly, Emerson embraces nature in every sense; he is not only concerned with it in ideological terms, but also engaged with the actual experience of observing and studying the natural world. Richardson brings ample biographical evidence that clarifies Emerson’s attachment to the natural world:

As a boy, Emerson rambled in the woods and fields outside Boston. As a young man, he thought for a while of becoming a naturalist. As a father, he took his children on nature walks and taught them all the flowers and birds and trees. All his life his interest in nature was rooted in his delight [in] and close observation of nature. (Richardson 97)

As we have seen, the decisive moment in his life came when he quitted the Unitarian ministry, and decided to start a new career. He sailed to Europe in 1833 seeking cure for his soul after the tragic death of his young wife, who died in 1831 of tuberculosis, and there he found his new role in life. In Paris, Emerson attended scientific lectures and studied the biological exhibitions at the Jardin des Plantes; he reached his final decision: "I will be a naturalist." In his lecture "The Uses of Natural History", his main lesson is that the perfect symmetry between the parts of the human body is equal to the symmetry existing between man and the universe (LaRosa 13). In "Nature", he calls people to break away from tradition, biography, history, and criticism; and to attempt to "enjoy an original relation to the universe" (*SE* 35). Emerson argues in "Nature" that instead of following tradition, poetry and philosophy should follow insight; religion equally should be based on revelation instead of the history of the foregoing generations. The way in which Emerson sees the relationship between man and nature is of crucial importance to his own views of American history and culture:

Emerson's ideas of the relation of nature to the self delivered Americans into the custody of America. Instead of regarding their identity as a historically determined consciousness that must impose itself upon the mindless matter of the wild, they were encouraged to see that their land was another expression of the soul centered in themselves, that it beckoned

to them to realize their true relation with it. American history could be the history of nature's reassuring alienated man to itself rather than the history of man's warfare with it. (Ziff 19)

Larzer Ziff argues that Emerson holds the typical Romantic idea that there was a time when man lived instinctively in nature as “an inseparable part of it.” Then, as he grows and gains experience he becomes more immersed in matter, his soul forgets about reality, and he gets alienated from nature. With the retreat to nature searching for its laws, man seeks “partial reunion” with it, but he realizes how far he is now separated from nature (17). Emerson's Romantic premises bring him to the conclusion that American culture is deeply rooted in nature. The superficiality of American history is compensated for with the power provided by American landscape. Ziff further argues that Emerson's rejection of the individual's “consistency” is equally applied to the concept of history as a series of past events: “history is a lived present rather than a shaping past. It is not a chronology but an instantly available cosmos” (20). The dynamic flux of the process of communion with nature is the primal source for such a view of history as a “lived present.”

Moreover, in “Nature”, Emerson outlines a theory of aesthetics grounded in nature. Nature provides man with an essential need for his life, which is beauty; every natural object has the ability to give man delight and pleasure. The perception of beauty depends on the

interaction of the human eye, light, and natural landscape (*SE* 42). This is the “perfect whole” which appeals to our senses, as Emerson claims in his poem “Each and All”:

All are needed by each one,

Nothing is fair or good alone.

(*CW* 4)

In addition, Emerson clearly echoes the Romantic belief in the healing and renewing power of nature in his emphasis on the retreat to nature as a cure for distress and anxiety:

To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. (*SE* 43)

Likewise, Emerson dwells on the Romantic view of nature as the best teacher for man as he declares in his early essay “The American Scholar” (1837). He calls for a disregard of traditional forms and embrace of nature for the sake of creativity and originality:

Not out of those on whom systems of education have exhausted their culture, comes the helpful giant to destroy the old or to build the new, but out of the unhand-selled savage nature; out of terrible Druids and Berserkers come at last Alfred and Shakespeare. (*SE* 94–5)

Since nature inherently contains moral truth, knowledge and wisdom, the artist should rely on it, rather than convention, in shaping, formulating and appraising his work. Emerson maintains that literary works should not be only be evaluated according to artificial standards

of tradition, but should rather be judged by nature since art is based organically on it. He shares with Coleridge the belief that literary forms should innately stem from nature instead of following mechanical laws of decorum. Emerson affirms that if we succeed in having a direct relation with the “basic forces” of nature, by retreating to a primitive, simple life, we will be able to reinvent genuine, organic forms (Matthiessen 133–6). In “Nature”, Emerson further argues that nature provides us with language as well as with an explanation of the use of language. Every word in language is a symbol of a natural fact; for example, “right” is a sign for “straight” while “wrong” means “twisted”. Similarly, we borrow the word “heart” to express emotion and the word “head” as analogous to thought. Both the abstract and the concrete find their roots in the visible forms of nature. Moreover, every natural fact corresponds to some spiritual fact. We symbolically use “light” and “darkness” to express knowledge and ignorance. Obviously, Emerson believes in such a link between the language we use and physical nature (*SE* 48–9). Buell argues that Emerson’s assertion that we are assisted by nature in the formation of language and the expression of meaning echoes Wordsworth’s claim proposed in his preface to Lyrical Ballads. According to Wordsworth, the best language for writing poetry is the language of rural people since it is closer to nature than refined poetical language. Buell goes further to argue that Emerson adapts Wordsworth’s Romantic claim about the



language of nature by adding “an American-democratic twist” to the American poetic language (110–11):

Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labors; in town; in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. Life lies behind us as the quarry from whence we get tiles and copestones for the masonry of to-day. This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made. (*SE* 93–4)

The varieties between the English and American natural landscapes are reflected in the forms of poetic language inspired by each of them. Emerson echoes the Romantic ideals of Wordsworth, but he casts them in a peculiarly American mould: “Just as Wordsworth inverted the cultural authority of borderland and metropolis, so for Emerson the rustic postcolonial state that Europeans thought culturally impoverished seems a positive advantage” (Buell 111). Despite the claims of impoverishment made against the American natural environment, Emerson formulates out of such a wild natural landscape new theories of culture, history and art.

Moreover, in “The American Scholar”, Emerson argues that the major influence that affects the human mind is that of nature. That is why the scholar engages himself with finding out the value of nature.

Nature is analogous to the human spirit in the sense that both are “boundless” and continuous with no beginning or ending. It is the task of the mind to attempt to discover the analogies between the apparently remote things in nature. The scholar should be aware of this relation to nature since a true knowledge of the self is inseparable from the careful study of nature (*SE* 83–7). Notably, the basic orientation of Emerson’s ideas about the relationship between man and nature is Romantic:

The romantic will manifest itself in a determination to wring meaning out of a universe that seems to be beyond understanding, to bring order to a world which seems to be condemned to eternal chaos, and in the process to define and comprehend man’s place in the world. In the face of anomie the romantic confronts his environment with a restless striving and nervous search for meaning and order. And it makes no difference that the understanding and order that are sought seem to be forever out of reach, and that liberation is never attained, but always pursued. (Smith 306)

The way in which Emerson constructs his poems is significantly consistent with the image of the Romantic writer struggling to bring order to the chaotic universe. David Porter argues that the dramatic structure of Emerson’s poems moves from a state of confusion and turmoil to a state of recognition and clarity (37).

In “The American Scholar,” Emerson equally argues for the need for literary self-reliance, claiming that poetry will be the leading force of the new age. Emerson believes that the American scholar has

many events and actions to record and express, away from the foreign stock of ideas and styles that do not suit the American people any more (*SE* 83–4). In his study of the Anglo-American literary relation, Benjamin Lease points out Emerson's view that the only way to rescue American culture from the danger of imitation is the continual communion between man's inner world and external nature. The new nation was fully aware of its own literary dependence on England, and felt the challenge to express itself in a genuine way while borrowing from and depending on the stock of English diction. The study of nature was believed to lead the Americans back to the truth of the great scheme of nature and to the one cause of being (182).

David M. Robinson argues that Emerson's "The Transcendentalist" (1842) dramatizes "the mood of resistance to established conventions and expectations, and the desire for rethinking and remaking, that characterized the movement" (14). Robinson further indicates that the transcendentalists felt the sense of hope that their own insistence on absolute honesty would eventually change the world and transform the individual (14). The transcendentalists regarded poetry as their main medium to express the new philosophy, and hence their poetic expressions reflected the way in which they put their own doctrines into practice. Such poetic expressions conveyed the message from the realms of transcendental truth (P. Miller 195).

While Emerson's status as an intellectual is secure in American history, his status as a poet has always been much more controversial. Emerson's poetic output has always been a neglected area of his work, in spite of the fact that his artistic accomplishments are as profoundly influential as his intellectual achievements:

He was, in addition, a poetry theorist of profound reach, a revolutionary committed to the introduction of a radical aesthetics. This aim subsumes all others in Emerson's achievement. We neglect his innovative genius if we confine ourselves simply to the ways he codified the nationalistic clichés and furnished the American consciousness with its images of identity and self-reliance. (Porter 1)

There has been a recent interest in rediscovering Emerson as a poet, and in evaluating the kind of poetry he wrote. In spite of the various views about Emerson's poetry, it has been seen as central and essential to a comprehensive understanding of American poetry (Yoder 255). Emerson saw himself primarily as a poet and he always felt a sense of alienation when people repeatedly identified him as a thinker and a reformer (Morris 218).

In his essay, "The Poet" (1844), Emerson proposes his own definition of the nature and role of the poet or as he calls him "the man of Beauty." He clearly idealizes the poet as a "representative" figure: "He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth" (*SE* 260–1).

Emerson shares with Wordsworth the belief that it is only the poet who is capable of reporting the messages we receive from nature. Although everyone is relatively open to have communion with nature, no one can interpret this conversation but the poet, since he is “the man without impediment... in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart” (*SE* 261). This ability to express human experiences is due to what Wordsworth earlier calls the poet’s “more lively sensibility,” while Emerson echoes the same idea of the poet as having a “more delicate ear”:

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully... (*SE* 262–3)

In his poem “The Poet,” Emerson depicts the poet as someone coming from a supernatural world, hence “Born and nourished in miracles,” and has the power to act on surroundings in a magical way. Even if people can not see the glory of his work, eventually his “wingèd words” will “steer and sing” into the heaven, because these words are just like a strong “tempest” which can tear “from oaks their branches broad, / And stars from the ecliptic road.” The connection between the poet’s ability to induce change and reform, and the

potential force of the wind to spread the word of revolution echoes Shelley's theme in his "Ode to the West Wind." The Muse has given him such a special force; he has been taught and trained so that "His flesh should feel, his eyes should read / Every maxim of dreadful need." He wanders in nature with piercing eyes "To read new landscapes and old skies," binding whatever he sees to the universal whole:

And through man and woman and sea and star  
Saw the dance of Nature forward and far,  
Through worlds and races and terms and times  
Saw musical order and pairing rhymes. (SE 259)

Emerson emphasizes that, having the Wordsworthian "lively sensibility," the poet is capable of hearing the gods' divine dialogue when they "talk in the breath of the woods."

A familiar critique of Emerson's poetic expression is that it lacks a distinctive original style. This charge is, to some extent, correct, and Emerson himself was fully aware of this shortcoming. However, he advocated himself and his work, in his essay titled "Circles" (1841), on the basis that he was "an experimenter" or "an endless seeker" rather than a sage who had sure confidence about true and false issues (Yoder 255). Emerson argues that human thought is in a continual dynamic state and hence man can never adhere to a single system of fixed ideas: "What I write, whilst I write it, seems the most

natural thing in the world; but yesterday I saw a dreary vacuity in this direction in which now I see so much; and a month hence, I doubt not, I shall wonder who he was that wrote so many continuous pages” (*SE* 229).

Matthew Arnold does not see Emerson as a great poet and he further believes that his poetry “lacks directness; it lacks concreteness; it lacks energy” (68). According to Arnold, with only a few exceptions, Emerson had hardly produced a wholly clear poem. Arnold accounted for this sense of obscurity on the basis of the ambiguous grammatical structures that Emerson used (68). In an early review (1888), John Morley explains the reason why Emerson’s poetry fails to be great on the basis of its lack of spontaneous overflow of emotions. Morley argues that Emerson wrote poetry out of intellectual reasons rather than emotional motivation. Again with a few exceptions, most of Emerson’s poems do not fulfil the essential requirement of pleasing the reader (80). Morley provides an insightful analysis of Emerson’s poetic expression:

Taken as a whole, Emerson’s poetry is of that kind which springs, not from excitement of passion or feeling, but from an intellectual demand for intense and sublimated expression...The measure, the colour, the imaginative figures, are the product of search, not of spontaneous movements of sensation and reflection combining in a harmony that is delightful to the ear. They are the outcome of discontent with prose, not of that highstrung sensibility which compels the true poet into verse... There

are too few melodious progressions; the melting of the thought with natural images and with human feelings is incomplete; we miss the charm of perfect assimilation, fusion, and incorporation; and in the midst of all the vigour and courage of his work, Emerson has almost forgotten that it is part of the poet's business to give pleasure. (80)

Morley argues that although some poems, for example, "The Snow-storm" and "Threnody," are impressive and pleasant, Emerson's verse still lacks the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (80).

In contrast, George Edward Woodberry argues that in spite of the claims against the poetic talent of Emerson, his verse still reflects major qualities of excellence. Woodberry attempts to refute such claims that Emerson "was fundamentally a poet with an imperfect faculty of expression" (129). Woodberry thinks that Emerson lacked the gift of writing poetry that is characterised as being technically perfect. However, the excellence of Emerson's poetry is not due to its form, but rather to its meaning. Although, in many cases, the meaning can be far-fetched and even ambiguous, a comprehensive understanding of Emerson's thought can be the key to the real meaning of his verse. Woodberry claims that the best guide to Emerson's thought is his own essays, of which the poems are only "a more brief and condensed form" (129). While Emerson's essays polarize his thought, the imaginative powers of his poems give the same ideas new colours and dimensions. Moreover, Woodberry



believes that poetry has given Emerson the opportunity to mix his thought with his own personality, daily life and human concerns in an intimate autobiographical tone. Writing poetry is a purely private and personal experience for Emerson, where he has felt free from the obligations of addressing an audience (129–30). Woodberry emphasizes that Emerson wrote poetry to please himself rather than his audience:

He was the very type of a private man at heart, and always mixed with the world under protest and by the strict compulsion of life. He would have preferred to remain in his garden and the adjoining fields and woods, to live with nature and to the soul, and let the world go by. He managed his life so as to command much leisure of this sort, to be a vagabond of the day with the plants and birds, the woods and quiet streams, the sky and the distant mountain, and to come home laden with natural thoughts as a bee with honey, or laden only with the peace of his own soul. He spent much time in this loitering and revery and apparent emptiness of mind, happy with the heat and the quiet and the bloom of things, or pleased with the snowy silence under the winter pines; and the *Poems* are the fruit of this long leisure, slowly matured from the spontaneous germs but tended with all a poet's love for his own. (130)

Given such controversial debates around Emerson's status as a poet, we need to examine his verse in the Romantic context so as to evaluate his poetic achievement. Emerson believes in the power of poetry and he even asserts its ability to lead the new age. Whether he

has managed to fulfil the image of poetic creation he called for is a crucial question.

“The Dirge” (1838) is one of those personal poems in which Emerson so intimately allows the reader into his own private life. In this elegiac poem, Emerson laments the loss of his brothers Edward and Charles; he so tenderly expresses his grief while recalling memories of childhood as well as the early relation with nature. Emerson revisits the wood where he used to play with his own brothers as young children, and he pauses and looks around contemplating the scene of their early days. The place is full of the spirits of the past; and the poet, wandering up and down, is preoccupied with hosts of ghosts. These are the spirits of his own brothers who are gone, Emerson says in a sympathetic tone:

But they are gone,— the holy ones,  
Who trod with me this lonely vale,  
The strong, star-bright companions  
Are silent, low, and pale. (CW 146)

He recalls how they used to come to the place to play, and how nature reacted to them: “Stars flamed and faded as they bade,” and “All echoes hearkened for their sound.” The woodlands were for them “A cell for prayer” as well as “a hall for joy.” While the visible and the audible world of the poem appeals to our sense, Emerson engages the senses of touching and smelling as well:

I touch this flower of silken leaf

Which once our childhood knew

Its soft leaves wound me with a grief

Whose balsam never grew.

(CW 146)

Paradoxically, the soft leaves of the flower wound the poet, and his wound is never healed. He now calls upon the “traveller” asking him to listen to the song of the warbler, which it sings for the poet. However, only those people with sharp ears can hear the song; and it is the deep grief that makes their ears sharp and ready to perceive the “heavy dirge divine.” Now, Emerson allows us to hear the voice of the warbler:

‘Go, lonely man,’ it saith,

‘They loved thee from their birth;

Their hands were pure, and pure their faith,—

There are no such hearts on earth.’

(CW 147)

It seems that the message of nature states that there is no compensation for his loss, since there is no one on earth with such a pure heart. The warbler, which can be seen as the agent of nature, goes on to say that the poet’s heart has nothing to do now but sing the dirge:

‘Ye cannot unlock your heart,

The key is gone with them;

The silent organ loudest chants

The master’s requiem.’

(CW 147)

It is worth noting that the poem owes much to the Romantic canon in terms of its form, content, and language. The poem is written in quatrains following a common pattern of the Lyrical Ballads and the rhyme scheme is: abab cdcd... etc. The themes tackled in this elegy are typically Romantic as well: recalling the memories of childhood, lamenting the loss of the beloved ones, and the retreat to nature for consolation. In terms of its content, "The Dirge" echoes Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas", where he is mourning the loss of his brother John Wordsworth, who died in a shipwreck in 1805. Inspired by a picture of Peele Castle, in a storm, painted by Sir George Beaumont, Wordsworth writes his elegy in memory of the lost brother. The painful emotion of mourning evokes the mode of recollection of memories of his brother and the parting day. With the retreat to nature, Wordsworth finds consolation, peace, and comfort. The "Meek Flower" acts as a "ministrant" soothing and relieving Wordsworth's pain; while the "soft leaves" of Emerson's flower "wound [him] with a grief/ Whose balsam never grew." Thus, while nature helps Wordsworth to be reconciled with his grief, it fails to give the same support to Emerson. The only consolation is to keep singing the dirge or perhaps to keep writing poems. The language of "The Dirge" also echoes Wordsworthian diction: "lonely", "cell", and "pure."

Another remarkable autobiographical work by Emerson is "Threnody", the heartfelt elegy in which he is mourning his firstborn

child, Waldo, Jr., who died suddenly, aged about five years, of scarlet fever in 1842. The poem reflects the grieving father's unbearable burden of losing a son; it falls into two parts: Emerson wrote the first part immediately after his son's death, while the second one was written two years later. Though being apparently autobiographical, "Threnody" further proposes philosophical questions about life, death and fate. The elegy tackles the human condition of responding to such a self-shattering experience. In her analysis of the poem, Sandra Morris points out that while the first part of "Threnody" represents Emerson's sorrowful lamentation on his young son and his own state of pain, doubt, and despair, the second part comes with the unexpected solution of this dilemma: acceptance and love of the universe. By presenting two such contradictory, unreconcilable perspectives, the poem has been criticised for its "tonal bifurcation". In her account of this philosophical tension, Morris argues that "the poem does not allow part two ever to neutralize the pain of part one, and it never explains how one can love a universe arranged so that one's five-year-old child would die" (229).

Earlier in his life, Emerson experienced similar moments of crisis: the death of his beloved wife Ellen in 1831, the death of his brother Edward in 1834, and the death of his younger brother Charles in 1836. Stephen Barnes examines Emerson's attitude towards these tragic events and he explains it in the light of the themes tackled by

Emerson in his essay “Circles” (1841). Emerson embraced the principle of change in nature and life; and since life is in a state of continual motion man should equally keep moving. Considering the idea that the end of a stage is the beginning of another, Emerson found out that he could do nothing in the face of death but to go on with his life. However, in spite of his hope for forgetfulness, it is really doubtful whether Emerson could actually cast off the memories of the loved ones he lost. In his conclusion of “Circles” Emerson writes:

The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle.

(*SE* 238)

To “draw a new circle” is simply to have a new start away from the painful experiences of the past; in this way, the transcending of suffering is an act of defiance. The death of Waldo was a turning point in Emerson’s life and thought. Once again he found himself in confrontation with death, but this time he could not react in the same earlier way. Barnes thinks that Emerson “is unable to react as he did to Ellen’s death. He cannot sever himself from Waldo. Instead, he adopts a radically new attitude, one of embracing rather than forgetting, of relations rather than individuality, and of mature acceptance rather than adolescent rebellion” (par. 1).

Once again we feel the need to resort to Emerson's prose writings in order to comprehend the radical shift in his thought brought by the death of his child, as well as the philosophical and structural tension in the elegy he wrote in memory of his late son. In "Experience" (1844), Emerson argues that grief is "shallow", in the sense that it never teaches us reality nor brings us closer to nature in spite of the costly price we pay by losing our beloved ones. This idea draws him to the conclusion that the only reality that is left to us is death itself (*SE* 287–8). Barnes notices such "a paradoxical tension" that while death represents the inexplicable source of our suffering, it is still the only reality that we can depend on. Emerson "is torn between the knowledge that the only thing he can hold secure is that which is causing him to doubt the security of everything. This paradoxical confusion is the absurdity of his situation" (Barnes sec. II). Emerson is no longer satisfied with the act of forgetfulness proposed earlier in "Circles" (1841) as a response to death; he rather wants now to understand his own situation and to know its reality. However, he is "already passing through the struggle between the desire to know and the realization that to know is impossible. And thus, the only possible resolution for Emerson is to hold these twin truths in mind, despite all the implicit contradictions and impossibilities" (Barnes sec. II) — such a solution which Emerson

called, in his essay “Fate” (1860), “the double consciousness” (*SE* 389).

In “Threnody”, Emerson allows such contradictions to coexist, and the mixture between the personal and the philosophical realms increases the tension. In the first part, the heartbroken father sadly states that his son can no longer enjoy “Life, sunshine, and desire,” because the son was lost and he “shall not return.” The whole surrounding landscape seems bleak and gloomy because of the disappearance of the “gracious boy.” Although nature has the ability to renew itself as the “trees repair their boughs,” it can not restore “the budding man”:

Nature, who lost him, cannot remake him;

Fate let him fall, Fate can't retake him;

Nature, Fate, men, him seek in vain. (*CW* 149)

Hence, the grieving father realizes that he can never regain what he has already lost. He addresses his son, in agony, asking him about his place; and wonders why he has been deprived of the right to watch his own child's steps and to know his place. He is moaning and asking young Waldo: “Hast thou forgot me in a new delight?” Through these questions Emerson attempts to understand the situation, as he still cannot comprehend the idea that he is now separated from his son forever. Emerson misses the voice and the sight of Waldo; he recalls his son's “daily haunts”: “The poultry yard, the shed, the barn”, the



“garden ground”, and “the brook.” Everything is still there except for  
Waldo:

The wintry garden lies unchanged;  
The brook into the stream runs on;  
But the deep-eyed boy is gone. (CW 151)

Emerson goes on to emphasize that natural processes of the world continue in spite of the absence of his young child, and that no natural force can ever “stoop to heal that only child,” or bring him back to life:

Each snow-bird chirped, each fowl must crow:  
Each tramper started; but the feet  
Of the most beautiful and sweet  
Of human youth had left the hill  
And garden, —they were bound and still. (CW 151–2)

In his attempts to understand Waldo’s death, Emerson justifies it to be the fault of the world that can not take the challenge of either Waldo’s genius or his beauty. Thus, nature goes on and Emerson equally goes on, but his questioning never stops and neither do his plight and suffering:

In this way, the world and Emerson are always in process, regrowing, and recreating themselves. His suffering is thus not overcome, but rather folded into him, allowing Emerson to transcend the absurdity of his condition through the salvific powers of continuity with his past. He no longer strives to feel and forget – in other words, to overcome. Rather, he

grows, embracing the horror of his loss as inseparable from his new life, in all of its wounded possibility. (Barnes sec. II)

While the first part of the poem records the painful experience of the father who has lost his child, the second part seems to be more complex with its philosophical claims concerning the theme of loss itself. The second part was actually written two years after the first one, and there have been arguments around the structural unity and tonal consistency of the two parts. In the second part, Emerson allows for another voice; it is the voice of the “deep Heart” or the Divine who is evoked by the speaker’s anguished cries for answers. The “deep Heart” reminds Emerson of the immortality of the soul, and tells him that his son has been only an agent, teaching him God’s love for man in the same way Jesus was, hence his death is inevitable:

My servant Death with solving rite

Pours finite into infinite.

Wilt thou freeze love’s tidal flow,

Whose streams through Nature circling go? (CW 156)

The message of the “deep Heart” asserts the certainty of death; it is presented as a part of a larger complicated, intricate scheme. The dynamic images presenting death as “love’s tidal flow” and the “circling” natural “streams” mirror the flux of life itself, and spell out the infinite circular scheme of death in life and life in death. Thus, the “deep Heart” acts as the agent that bridges the gap between the two

parts of the poem, and reconciles Emerson's painful experience with his own moral and philosophical engagement:

The first speaker in the poem, the father, is the experiencer who, because of ignorance, both doubts and misunderstands. He *mourns* and then *despairs* over the death of his son. The deep Heart speaks for the divine imagination and reveals the larger synthesis, argues the consoling significance of the death, and asserts the cosmic order in which the death no longer appears random or, worse, caused by neglect. Reconciliation comes through this larger vision that the deep Heart possesses. (Porter 42)

Significantly, the vision proposed by the "deep Heart" steers in the Romantic direction; the Romantics celebrate death as the gate to eternity while simultaneously bitterly recognizing human mortality. This tension can be found in many Romantic works, for example Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), where the poetic speaker says to the flying, singing nightingale:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain... (Allott 529)

Realizing the inevitability of death and seeing it everywhere in life scenes, Keats celebrates death for the relief and comfort it brings. Therefore, suffering implies insight, and death entails life. There is no

need for Emerson to cast off the past or to forget the painful wound. The son is only seemingly lost, but he will go on as one with his father since he is “Lost in God, in Godhead found”:

*Hearts are dust, hearts' loves remain;*

*Heart's love will meet thee again.* (CW 157)

The poem ends with the assertion that if our hearts are mortal, love is immortal, and hence, the separation is temporary and the reunion is certain and everlasting.

Examining such a conclusion, Porter views “Threnody” as a figure of deliverance since the desperate father is liberated from doubt and ignorance into moral understanding:

The plot to that conclusion advances along the characteristic Emersonian path from ignorance that imprisons to knowledge that liberates. The initial loss (“I mourn / The darling who shall not return”) is followed by confusion and ignorance (“Was there no star... / No watcher... / No angel... / Could stoop to heal that only child [?]”). Bitter despair results (“I am too much bereft. / The world dishonored thou hast left. / O truth's and nature's costly lie! / O trusted broken prophecy!”), but leads into the consolatory declaration of the deep Heart whose account ends excessively neatly with the balance-sheet entry “Lost in God, in Godhead found.” (33)

The superficial tensions of the poem are settled by the view of death as the beginning of a new life; Emerson affirms his claim, earlier stated in “Circles” (1841), that: “there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning” (SE 225). Through the display of mourning and

consolation in distress, “Threnody” echoes Wordsworth’s Ode on “Intimations of Immortality” (1803–6). Patrick J. Keane sees “Threnody” as “an Emersonian version of Wordsworth’s elegiac and affirmative ode” (4). Both poems are about loss and grief, which finally lead to acceptance and gain. In his Ode, Wordsworth mourns the “things which [he has] seen [and he] now can see no more”; he laments that “there hath past away a glory from the earth”; and he raises typical anguished questions:

Wither is fled the visionary gleam?

Where is it now, the glory and the dream? (Gill 298)

After reacting negatively and desperately to his problem of loss, Wordsworth regains a sense of joy and celebration when a “new-fledged hope” is born in his heart. The past is no longer a source of torment and agony, but rather of “Perpetual benediction.” Recollections of the vanished glory become, in effect, “the fountain light of all our day”, and even “a master light of all our seeing.” Likewise, out of the Platonic view concerning the life cycle, comes the decision that we should transcend suffering and embrace pain:

We will grieve not, rather find

Strength in what remains behind,

In the primal sympathy

Which having been must ever be,

In the soothing thoughts that spring

Out of human suffering,

In the faith that looks through death,

In years that bring the philosophic mind.

(Gill 302)

Both poems end with the positive realization that the experience of loss entails a consolatory sense of gain. The insightful thoughts we gain are deeper than suffering and pain. This hopeful way of perceiving loss is reflected as well in Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas" (1805), where he celebrates the "gains" which are associated with the "pains" of the sorrowful situation of "parting". Even in those dark, bleak moments of life "there comes a mild release;" the beauty of the simplest forms of nature, the "Meek Flower" as suggested by Wordsworth, may act as a "ministrant/ To comfort and to peace." In this way the beauty of nature, acting as a supporter or helper to soothe pain, will be a "joyful tide" for those who are in distress:

Haunted as he was by Wordsworth's ode, it is all but inevitable that Emerson would be engaged in a related struggle— most fully developed if less than successfully resolved in "Threnody"— to find light in the lethal darkness, to regain what was "lost." Dealing with Emerson's supposed obliviousness to the pain and evil of the world and his mode of mourning the repeated early deaths of those he loved, I argue that this final affirmation is colored by Wordsworthian consolation, in the form either of "the light of all our day" or of Wordsworth's sober and muted assertion (in "Elegiac Stanzas") that it is "not without hope we suffer and we mourn." In that Wordsworthian light, Emerson's forms of mourning for his wife, brothers, and son— including the elegy for Waldo, "Threnody"— emerge as related and deeply felt exercises in the art of losing. (Keane 398)

Therefore, Emerson's prose and verse are oriented in the Romantic legacy of Europe and particularly English Romanticism. However, his nationalistic tone is clearly reflected in his pastoral poems, where his treatment of American landscape, though primarily grounded in Romantic thought, yet displays peculiar American flavour. While rethinking Romantic ideals, Emerson looks for his native natural scenery for inspiration of original poetic rules and forms.

Emerson called for intellectual independence and for the formation of an authentic American literary canon. He was very concerned with reflecting a peculiar national image of American nature in literary works. Thomas Carlyle, in his preface to Emerson's English edition of Essays, First Series, points out the way in which Emerson's work represented America:

A breath as of the green country, –all the welcomer that it is *New England* country, not second-hand but first-hand country, –meets us wholesomely everywhere in these “essays:” the authentic green Earth is there, with her mountains, rivers, with her mills and farms. (19)

Emerson reflects a peculiar aspect of American natural life in his poem “The Rhodora” (1839); the rhodora is a native flower of eastern North America (its name was given to the journal published by the New England Botanical Club since 1899). In an intensely intimate language, Emerson addresses the flower, comparing it to the English rose: “O rival of the rose!” Emerson follows the Romantic heritage in

seeking an emotional, spiritual connection with nature, and from such a connection insightful, moral lessons are acquired. He begins his poem with a question about the time when the rhodora flower appears in the woods. The time is actually a very harsh one; it is May “when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,” and nature seems rather unpleasant as reflected in the sight of “the desert and sluggish brook” and “the black water”. Then comes the rhodora to give pleasure to the whole surrounding scene with its charming beauty and its purple petals that exceed the red colour of the American robin. Such a scene makes “the sages” wonder why the rhodora should waste its beauty on the harsh natural surroundings. The answer suggested by the poet is “that if eyes were made for seeing, /Then beauty is its own excuse for being”. This moral truth echoes Emerson’s views in “Nature”: “The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty” (*SE* 47–8). Emerson further believes that the “self-same Power that brought [him] there brought [the flower].” The last line of the poem echoes Bryant’s “To a Waterfowl” (1815):

He who, from zone to zone,  
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,  
In the long way that I must tread alone,  
Will lead my steps aright. (Gado 39)



Both American Romantics attribute spiritual facts to their national scenery as well as connecting their own existence and state of being to the grand scheme of nature.

While William Cullen Bryant admits the necessity of a degree of reliance on tradition, Emerson takes an extremely defensive stand against the influence of his precursors. Joel Pace argues that Emerson's denial of the authority of earlier literary figures has been recently interpreted in the wake of Harold Bloom's theory of influence ("Lifted to Genius?" 125). Grounded in psychology, Bloom's theory argues that young poets tend to struggle against the influence of their preceding masters. Bloom asserts the idea of poetic influence, traces its historical origins, and develops a line of continuity through the Western canon, including classical, British and American poetry. He further, analyses the anxious relationship between young poets and precursors and proposes six devices of defensive strategy adopted by young poets struggling for independence. Poetic influence, as argued by Bloom, is a compelling pressure on the poet as well as a source of anguish and anxiety.

Not only does Emerson reject the influence of his predecessors, but also, out of his belief in the equal independence and individuality of his own readers, he rejects his image as a leading sage. Emerson was even quite satisfied with having no followers or a school of his own. The conviction of literary self-reliance makes Emerson reluctant

to be influential on others, and he appears in his writings as a “seeker” rather than a “guide”. Emerson explained that the reason for such loss of influence was that he was more interested in bringing men to themselves rather than to himself (Tufariello 162). However, it is generally agreed that most nineteenth-century American poets modelled their thought and work on Emersonian philosophy, most notably Henry David Thoreau. Moreover, the influence of the literary canonization achieved by Emerson extends to some twentieth-century American poets, most notably Robert Frost. The most important nineteenth-century figures whose work displayed much influence by Emerson’s writing are Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. In spite of the many apparent differences between them both in poetic practice, there are still many things that bring them together: for example, they both rejected the canonical English forms of writing poetry and searched for more novel poetic structures. Above all such similarities, is their own common interest in Emerson who acted as a bridge that brought Whitman and Dickinson together. Following Emerson, they both rejected the idea of literary influence and insisted on American self-reliance (Tufariello 162–3).

Lewis Mumford, American philosopher and historian, sees Emerson’s work as the corner-stone upon which later American poetic voices were built upon: “He was an original, in the sense that he was a source: he was the glacier that became the white mountain torrent of

Thoreau, and expanded into the serene, ample-bosomed lake of Whitman” (175). Whitman’s quest for a redeeming form started earlier by Emerson who was equally dissatisfied with eighteenth-century superficial ornamentation. Emerson believes that artistic works lose their spirit and become artificial when following the forms enforced on art by social moods. Ziff thinks that on deciding to break away from the traditional poetic forms and to write free verse, Whitman is apparently responding to Emerson’s assertion in “The Poet” that “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem” (24). However, both Emerson’s revolutionary ideas and Whitman’s poetic experiments can be traced back to Coleridge’s organic principle. Coleridge objects energetically to mechanical form as a pre-determined outside form impressed on the artistic material and not arising out of it; he rather enthusiastically advocated organic form as an “innate” form that arises from within the material and develops itself according to its properties in a very natural pattern (Matthiessen 133–4).

Therefore, Emerson is a major transatlantic link; his interest in the Romantic theories is evidently reflected in his work. While codifying the American literary canon, he could not avoid deriving from the broader Romantic literary tradition, despite his nationalistic call to break away from the authority of the past. Emersonian extravagant claims of originality and literary self-reliance are

challenged by the echoes and undercurrents of his predecessors in his own poetry and prose. Addressing Emerson's work in a transatlantic Romantic context reveals American Transcendentalism as an extension of European Romanticism rather than a genuinely original literary movement. Emerson played a significant role in transmitting the Romantic thought to America, and most importantly, in rethinking and reshaping it so as to appear as a genuine American philosophy. Emerson's truest achievement is inspiring American men of letters to draw from their native nature the rules and spirit of their art. Although the evaluation of him as a poet does not prove all of his claims, his disciples have succeeded in displaying more artistic authenticity.

## **Chapter Four**

## Whitman: Romantic Tradition and Innovation

The early attempts to establish a national literary canon seemed to be remarkably fruitful with the emergence of the poetic voice of Walt Whitman (1819-1892), whose appearance added much energy to the developing American literary scene. Whitman's revolutionary poetry laid much emphasis on Americanism in both its form and content; such a patriotic eagerness qualified him to be regarded as the central poet of nineteenth-century American literature. Whitman's name was associated with the term "American Renaissance" since his book Leaves of Grass (1855) was seen by F. O. Matthiessen as one of the works that marked the Romantic period of literary flourishing in America during the mid-nineteenth century. Considering his assertion of individualism and freedom, rejection of established conventions and forms, elevation of imagination and intuition above the intellect and adherence to originality and variety, Whitman's work has always been viewed in the context of Romantic thought. The American literary atmosphere, densely charged with the ideas of democracy, equality and liberty, allowed Whitman to reformulate Romantic concepts, endowing them with a fresh national stamp. Though being primarily steeped in British Romanticism, the Romantic Movement in America appeared original in terms of its flavour, colour and impact;

such a radical departure was the result of Whitman's intellectual innovations and poetic experiments.

Throughout his literary career, Whitman eminently strove to emphasize American supremacy and uniqueness as a literary force. His engagement with literary nationalism is clearly manifested in the first word opening his preface of Leaves of Grass (1855)—“America.” In the preface, Whitman declares America's intellectual and literary independence as well as his own revolutionary poetic vision. He expresses his belief in the great potentialities of rising Americanism in literature since America is the richest soil for poetic production: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature;” hence, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Murphy 741). Later, in his visionary article, “The Poetry of the Future” (1881), Whitman asserts the necessity of originality in creating a distinctive national literature: “The stamp of entire and finished to any nation, to the American Republic among the rest, must be sternly withheld till it has expressed itself, and put what it stands for in the blossom of original, first-class poems. No imitations will do” (195).

In the preface to Leaves of Grass (1855), Whitman formulates his theory of literary art and poetic expression, which, in spite of Whitman's assertion of originality, is remarkably oriented towards

Romantic thought. The preface emphasizes the supremacy of the common man as the central hero of Whitman's American epic: "The pride of the United States leaves the wealth and finesse of the cities and all returns of commerce and agriculture and all the magnitude of geography or shows of exterior victory to enjoy the breed of full-sized men or one full-sized man unconquerable and simple" (Murphy 742). The many various details of daily American life are nothing but "unrhymed poetry" waiting to be sung, and this is what he believes to be the role of the national poet. Whitman tackles the relationship between the poet and society; and he emphasizes that the former should be able to respond to the enormous diversity of American geography, history, natural life, recent political and economical transformations as well as future expectations. He calls for national poetic voices capable of singing American themes. The United States are in desperate need of great powerful poets, who could meet the enormity of the task they had set themselves:

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer....he is individual...he is complete in himself....the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not. He is not one of the chorus....he does not stop for any regulation...he is the president of regulation. What the eyesight does to the rest he does to the rest. (Murphy 746)



It is noteworthy that Whitman's image of the American poet significantly mirrors Emersonian poet-figure who "stands among partial men for the complete man" (*SE* 260); he is "the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty" (*SE* 262).

Karen Karbiener argues that such statements declared by Whitman in the beginning of his poetic career, in his 1855 preface, remained crucial to him throughout his literary life. Although he kept revising and reformulating his ideas with the various editions of Leaves of Grass, the originality and greatness of the American artist remained a pivotal case for him. His belief in the potentialities of the American artist finds expression in such "poetic transcriptions" as these lines first published in his second edition of Leaves of Grass in 1856:

A Nation announcing itself,

I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated,

I reject none, accept all, then reproduce all in my own

forms.

(Murphy 362)

This passage was first published as the introduction to "Poem of Many in One," then it was changed into "By Blue Ontario's Shore." Karbiener claims that this passage provides a substantial example advocating her argument: the passage was never changed with the

various editions of the Leaves since it polarizes the core of Whitman's thesis (145–6). Remarkably, Whitman identifies his own personal quest to achieve poetic fulfilment with America's struggle to define itself as a new nation. Eldrid Herrington remarks that while the first word celebrated in Whitman's prose manifesto, the preface to his first edition of Leaves of Grass, is "America," the first word in his poetry is "I": "I celebrate myself." By this analogy, Whitman claims that he represents the whole nation: "'America' and 'I' are yoked together and held at the same level: nation and self-identity inaugurate Whitman's writing life and describe the ambition of the scale he sings, a range he makes an equation" (122). Killingsworth explains this process of identification with America on the grounds that American history and culture provide the context in which Whitman's poetry is deeply rooted rather than a mere background of the poetic texts. This sense of involvement is due to his actual participation in the current events of his time: Whitman worked as a school teacher, a skilled carpenter, a journalist, a fiction writer, an editor, a hospital aide during the Civil War, as well as a poet who dedicated his voice to democracy and reform (13).

So eager was Whitman to achieve originality and to assert an individual poetic stamp of his own that he has become a challenging figure where questions of influence and literary debt are concerned.

However, it is undisputed that his work displays unmistakable Romantic impulses that can be traced back to English as well as American Romantics. In her attempt to examine Wordsworth's place in American literary culture, Karen Karbiener argues that it is really difficult to trace direct lines of continuity between Wordsworth and Whitman. The connection between the two poets is so complex; it can be rather sensed than clearly recorded. There is substantial evidence of the parallels between the two poets in the writings of Whitman's own close friends and associates. However, Whitman never commented on such critical views or even made any public reference to Wordsworth's work (145–7). Karbiener provides a rare example of Whitman's traceable borrowings from Wordsworth:

Whitman's own reticence, his destruction of notes, and his extensive revisions make tracing his influences unusually difficult; in this case, he left a significant clue in a promotional extract bound in the second imprint of *Leaves of Grass* (1855). Writing of the need for poetry to become the 'exponent of a new spirit through new forms', Whitman continues:

The new forms are not to be judged by the old models, but are to be judged by themselves. Wordsworth truly said that every original first-rate poet must himself make the taste through which he is to be fully understood and appreciated.

The original formulation is from 'Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)', though Wordsworth's phrasing is slightly different: 'Every author, as far as he is great and at the same time *original*, has had the task

of *creating* the taste by which he is to be enjoyed' (657-8). Whitman was either familiar with Wordsworth's original essay, or he read extracts and criticism about it in contemporary periodicals; indeed, one such article exists, heavily annotated by Whitman, among his private papers. (146)

Whitman's refusal to be judged by conventional standards is challenged by his own dependence on Wordsworthian Romantic tradition in explaining his thought.

Most critics have regarded Emerson as the most influential intellectual and literary figure on Whitman, who is even sometimes classified as a transcendentalist. Whitman himself acknowledged his indebtedness to Emerson in his famous expression: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil!" (Trowbridge 163). Killingsworth argues that Whitman eminently draws upon Emersonian philosophy particularly in his attitude towards nature and his transformation of biblical sources. However, he shifts from transcendental thought in his devotion to the working class and his view of the human body. These two aspects aroused some kind of uneasy feeling in Whitman's relation to the college-educated transcendentalists, who found his sexual writings to be blunt; and this bluntness, as they thought, was due to his own lower social origins. Despite this tension, Emerson's ideas are strongly expressed in Whitman's early work, particularly the 1855 preface and "Song of Myself." Moreover, Emerson represents the vital link to contemporary

European thought, since he introduced Whitman to the work of English Romanticism and German Idealism (22–3). In any case, Whitman’s self-assertive literary innovations are nothing but a natural response to Emerson’s call in “Nature” (1836) to break away from established traditions, and to Emersonian fervour for individuality and nonconformity expressed in “Self-Reliance” (1841), as reflected in “Song of Myself”:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the

origin of all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are

millions of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand,

nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the

spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things

from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (Murphy 64–5)

This extract from “Song of Myself” (1855) echoes Emerson’s call for establishing an “original relation to the universe” (*SE* 35); since Whitman asks his readers to stop seeing the world through others’ eyes and to make their own judgements and views through careful

observation of nature. The depiction of conventional figures as evil ghosts “in books” delineates Whitman’s rejection of influence.

Emerson received Whitman’s first edition of Leaves of Grass (1855) with enthusiastic praise and admiration, seeing it as “the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed,” as he wrote in his letter to Whitman encouraging him in the light of such a great achievement:

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying & encouraging.

(Greenspan 39)

Whitman was so happy with such a generous response from his master that he published Emerson’s letter in the second edition of Leaves (1856) without his permission. However, Emerson’s letter to Carlyle (1856) indicates that he, afterwards, changed his mind about “the worth of the wonderful gift of Leaves of Grass” particularly concerning its morals; the clash between The Harvard-educated lecturer and the barbarian poet was inevitable. In his letter to Carlyle, Emerson described the book as “a nondescript monster, which yet had terrible eyes and buffalo strength, and was indisputably American... it is only an auctioneer’s inventory of a warehouse, you can light your

pipe with it” (Gohdes 85). In his study of the relationship between Whitman and Emerson, Clarence L. F. Gohdes explains this contrast in attitudes:

This letter illustrates a certain aspect of Emerson’s attitude toward the “Poet of Barbarism”. His parochial New England heritage and his critical faculty, nurtured by classical models, were offended by the utter lawlessness of Whitman’s genius; but his poetic spirit, his transcendental belief in the power of Western democracy to assert itself in literature, recognized the sincerity of the overwhelming impulse behind the crudities of expression. In spite of his shortcomings, Whitman seemed to him to possess some, at least, of the characteristics of the Singer of America that he had prophesied in his discourse before the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Society almost a score of years before. (85)

Regardless of this sense of anxiety dominating their relationship, it is clearly realized that Emerson is Whitman’s most inspirational figure, and most importantly, his direct link to Romantic thought. However, Frank Gado affirms the authoritative influence of Bryant on Whitman; he argues that the emphasis on Emerson’s influence on Whitman should not conceal “his more nutritive association with Bryant” (163). Drawing possible lines of continuity between the two American Romantics, Gado further claims that Whitman’s revolutionary poetic form and style are to be grounded in Bryant’s exceptional departure from metric conventions. Moreover, Whitman’s early poems reflect

Bryant's occupation with death and universal mortality; and his elaborate work Leaves of Grass mirrors Bryant's mystical experience of union with his native land presented earlier in "The Prairies" (1832) (163–7). In his autobiographical scrap book, Specimen Days (1882), Whitman recounts his walks with Bryant in Brooklyn streets, listening to the latter's accounts of European landscape, art and architecture; Whitman calls Bryant "the bard who loved Nature so fondly, and sung so well her shows and seasons" (Kaplan 820).

In spite of the fact that Whitman's art naturally flows from preceding literary traditions, still his claim of originality seems strong. Whitman liked his work to be perceived as wild, primitive and fresh; an original art that is mainly prompted and inspired by nature. Whitman claims that his work does not conform to previous established literary conventions, and he refuses to be judged in the light of any established cultural or literary context. Although he was so anxious to imprint on his readers this "barbaric" image of himself as poet and of his art, an informed critique of Whitman's work indicates that it reflects a much more sophisticated artistic model than he claims. There have been arguments that the scrutiny of Whitman's work clearly points to possible lines of continuity with precedents. Following such a systematic procedure, Richard P. Adams examines "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and manages to prove



that Whitman looked to the tradition of pastoral elegy for inspiration. Adams argues that the “Lilacs” elegy conforms to seven characteristics of conventional mourning poetry:

They are the announcement that the speaker’s friend or alter ego is dead and is to be mourned; the sympathetic mourning of nature, with the use of the so-called pathetic fallacy; the placing of flowers on the bier; a notice of the irony of nature’s revival of life in the spring, when the dead man must remain dead; the funeral procession with other mourners; the eulogy of the dead man; and the resolution of the poem in some formula of comfort or reconciliation. (Lilacs 479)

The assumption that Whitman may not have been acquainted with the tradition of classical and Romantic pastoral elegy is highly doubtful. He is likely to have read John Milton’s masterpiece “Lycidas” (1637), which gathers most of the conventions of the genre. There are aspects of similarity, as well, between “Lilacs” and Shelley’s greatest elegy “Adonais” (1821) in terms of thought and imagery. Both elegies use the symbol of light, which is depicted as a star, to represent life, and the symbol of moisture, which is embodied as a mist or a cloud, to represent death. In “Lilacs,” Whitman utilizes the image of Venus, the western star, as a symbol of Lincoln’s life, while the image of the dark cloud implies his death (Adams, Lilacs 480–1). Shelley addresses the star of Venus in the epigraph to his elegy, as he translated Plato’s aphorism:

Thou wert the morning star among the living,

Ere thy fair light had fled—

Now, having died, thou art, as Hesperus, giving

New splendour to the dead (Reiman and Powers 409)

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (1865) offers an example of Whitman’s ability to build on poetic conventions in order to achieve authentic originality, as well as his own ability to cover and conceal such poetic links. In this elegy, he is reacting to the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in Washington D.C., on Good Friday, April 14, 1865. In the same year of the murder, Whitman wrote four elegiac poems mourning the death of the fallen leader: “Hush’d Be the Camps To-day,” “This Dust Was Once the Man,” “O Captain! My Captain!” and the greatest of his elegies, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Killingsworth argues that Whitman draws upon the traditions of English elegies through not mentioning the name of the person he is mourning since it is implicitly known to everyone. In addition to being derivative, Whitman has been original in utilizing formulaic structure which he has earlier devised and used in his poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1860). Both poems significantly utilize the singing bird, a coastal setting and the retreat to nature, though they apparently differ in their attitude towards nature and death (64):

Both poems have the elegiac tone and operatic structure, the singing bird that is a “brother” to the poet (a thrush rather than a mockingbird in “Lilacs”), a setting near the shore of the US eastern seaboard (a swamp this time rather than a beach), and the poet returning to nature to mourn and to seek redemption and atonement. But the attitude of the two poems toward nature and death differs. The mood is more somber in “Lilacs,” the release from the initial distress never complete. Whitman’s experience of the war, his witness to the suffering and death of his fellow citizens followed by the assassination of President Lincoln, undermines his certainty that death “avails not” (as he said in the exuberant flood-tide poem “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”). (Killingsworth 64)

Through the depiction of the great national tragedy as well as the greater loss of the innocent victims killed in the civil war, Whitman introduces his own treatment of the theme of death. “Lilacs” is a pastoral elegy following traditional classical and English patterns, and remarkably echoing Virgil, Milton and Shelley. What Whitman shares with his precedents is the integration of the natural world with its human counterpart in response to the death experience. Through the use of the central natural images of the sprig of lilac, the western star and the hermit thrush, Whitman makes nature mourn the death of Lincoln in the same way humans do. Remarkably, the meaning of these symbols is never stable; each one develops and changes as the poem proceeds in order to reflect a new meaning in a wonderful poetic and dramatic framework. While the western star alludes to a fixed

point of time, it metaphorically stands for death since stars set and vanish westward; it also suggests the poet's own grief that "holds and detains" him, and it further symbolizes Lincoln himself hence the "great star disappear'd." Whitman links Lincoln's death, taking place in April, to natural phenomena: the coming of spring, the blooming of lilacs and the emergence of the star of Venus in the Western sky. Such an association makes Lincoln's memory as eternal as these "perennial" natural phenomena. Whitman's premise anticipates his final conclusion that death is the gateway to rebirth since both life and death are intricately woven in a cyclical pattern.

The poet expresses his intense feelings of grief through the sentimental image of the lilac flower, which also, with its purple colour and short life, acts as a metaphor for death and refers to the suffering of the Passion. Since assassination occurred during Easter time, the biblical allusion to the Crucifixion, through the lilac's colour, strongly implies resurrection as well. Moreover, the "heart-shaped leaves" of the lilac-bush effectively convey people's affection and love for President Lincoln. The unexpected breaking of the lilac-sprig is paralleled to the sudden heartbreaking news of the cruel murder as well as the break with Lincoln himself. The repeated image of the broken "sprig" not only indicates separation, but also involves the idea that this separation came very early in the same way it has been so

early for the small young-grown twig to break. As the poem progresses, the broken “sprig with its flower” becomes the tribute paid by the poet to the funeral procession. The dead body of Lincoln was carried by train in a long procession through various American cities back to Springfield, Illinois, where he was buried on May 4, 1865. In his depiction of the coffin’s journey, Whitman moves from rural to urban America, hence the individual States themselves are depicted as “crape-veil’d women” mourning the loss of Lincoln. The coffin passes through the woods and fields, and nature responds with similar images of death as “every grain from its shroud in the dark-brown fields uprisen.” The sorrow of the pastoral scenes extends to the cities which are covered and darkened by “the great cloud,” just like the poet himself who is imprisoned by the “harsh surrounding cloud.” In the dark lanes and streets, the mourners stand silently holding “flambeaus” and “torches” and waiting for the coffin, while “the mournful voices of the dirges” come out of the “dim-lit churches” to surround it. According to biographers, Whitman did not witness the funeral scene, but he now imagines himself standing among the crowds with his “sprig of lilac” to give to the dead leader as a token of honour and respect. He passionately calls upon the passing coffin:

Here, coffin that slowly passes,

I give you my sprig of lilac.

(Murphy 353)

In a turning point in the elegy, the sprig turns to “Copious” sprigs, to “bouquets of roses” and lilies; all are introduced by Whitman in homage to the souls of the dead in a ceremonial confrontation with death itself, which he directly addresses now:

thus would I chant a song for you

O sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,

O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,

But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,

Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,

With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,

For you and the coffins all of you O death. (Murphy 353)

Killingsworth argues that Whitman now uses the hero-figure of Lincoln as a symbol of all American heroes; in the same way he has earlier used the first person “I” in “Song of Myself” (1855) to represent the common people of America. According to such a relationship between the individual and the collective, the loss of Lincoln is analogous to the sacrifice of those Americans who died in the war; and equally through his memory, the thoughts of all patriotic heroes will survive (63).

With such reconciliation with grief, the elegy brings a sense of healing to the overwhelming pain felt by the American people, as well as bringing Whitman himself to a deeper comprehension of death. Thus, the grief and sorrow gradually turn into compassion and consolation and eventually acceptance. Whitman utilizes such a concrete image to convey his final conclusion; he walks in the funeral trail accompanied by both the actual death of Lincoln and the thoughts he has developed about death, both as his own “comrades”:

And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of

death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,

And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,

And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the

hands of companions,

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not... (Murphy 356)

The poet celebrated death with abundant roses and lilacs, and now he is walking with it, hand in hand, as friends.

In the face of loss, the poet has a companion, the hermit thrush, which warbles in solitude the death-song of “the bleeding throat.” Killingsworth argues that the poet is not simply accompanied by the

bird, but he is rather identified with it. According to biographers, Whitman, during that time, was back home in Brooklyn, just like the thrush “hidden” and “withdrawn to himself.” Seeking relief from his work in Washington’s hospitals, and feeling stressed from the terrible scenes of wounded soldiers, he stayed at his mother’s house, writing on other topics irrelevant to war, mostly inspired by the past. The bird’s reaction to the experience of loss is typically Romantic; it is “avoiding the settlements” and hiding in “the swamp in secluded recesses,” hence like the poet, retreating to nature (64–5). While such a recent critical view provides biographical grounds for Whitman’s identification with the bird, the implied link to the Romantic tradition has always been clear to other earlier critics such as Richard P. Adams. The identification between the poet and a bird was earlier stated by Shelley in his essay, “A Defence of Poetry,” written in (1821): “A poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why” (Reiman and Powers 516). Shelley establishes the link earlier in 1821, in his poem, “To a Skylark” (481):

Like a poet hidden

In the light of thought,



Singing hymns unbidden,

Till the world is wrought

To sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded no...

(Reiman and Powers 305)

Hearing the death-song and feeling unable to free himself from the compulsive grip of grief, the poet wonders what he himself should sing in tribute of Lincoln or what perfume should he put on his grave. He will blend the breath of his song with the mixture of the sea-winds blowing from the Western sea and the Eastern sea and meeting on the prairies. Pictures of American landscape, both pastoral and urban, shall be hung on the walls to “adorn the burial-house.” It is highly significant as well that the dead leader will be memorialized by pictures of life, hence scenes of life imply death in the same way death entails resurrection and rebirth:

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,

With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke

lucid and bright...

And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of

chimneys,

And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the

workmen homeward returning.

(Murphy 354)

The way in which nature is incorporated into the elegy is strikingly novel; Whitman goes further to allow both pastoral and urban scenes to share the poet's emotional moods and state of mind. The American city, still capturing the poet's imagination with its high buildings and busy working people, is united with the open, untouched and wild spaces of American natural landscape. In expression of his patriotic ambitions, Whitman achieves a unified vision of all diverse geographical elements within America:

Lo, body and soul—this land,

My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and

hurrying tides, and the ships,

The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the

light, Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,

And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and

corn.

(Murphy 355)

In spite of all such attempts to commemorate the fallen leader, including writing this elegy, which stands as a memorial to him, Whitman is still haunted by the thoughts of death and the emotions of sadness: “yet the star holds me” and “the lilac with mastering odor

holds me.” The song of the thrush is the only hope of redemption:

O liquid and free and tender!

O wild and loose to my soul— O wondrous singer! (Murphy 355)

The poet is absorbed in the charm of “the carol of death,” which celebrates “*lovely and soothing death*” that equally comes at anytime to everyone. Death is now most welcome and praised “*with joy*” as the “*strong deliveress*,” for its ability to redeem and purify “*in the loving floating ocean*” and “*the flood of [its] bliss*.” The song of the hermit bird sets the poet free; now he is able to see; he seems to have visions of the dead “comrades”. Among the terrors of the battle-fields and the ruins of the killed soldiers, Whitman realizes that they all now rest in peace. The dead do not suffer anymore; it is the survivors who intensely suffer the sorrow and mourning feelings— a message which he emphasizes through the repetition of the word “suffer’d.” The living people are confined by the experience of loss, haunted by the memories of their beloved ones and unable to go on with their lives. With such a realization, the poet stops questioning the natural cycle of life and death; he declares his final acceptance and submission. Whitman is ready to go on with his life; he says good-bye to his “comrades”: the western star, the hermit thrush and the lilac flower. He will stop mourning, but he will never forget the dead heroes, particularly Lincoln, “the sweetest, wisest soul of all [his] days and

lands.” The lilacs, left “in the door-yard, blooming,” will return with spring, and bring with them the thoughts of the beloved dead one. The narrative structure of the elegy naturally flows into its final resolution as if it simply manifests the stages representing the human situation in the face of death. Killingsworth states that Whitman never included the “Lilacs” elegy among his greatest poems. Coming from a poet who is intensely keen to assert his own poetic individuality, this attitude may be justified on the grounds that the poem heavily draws upon the English conventions of elegiac poetry (67). Considering the “Lilacs” elegy in the Romantic context, it becomes clear how it challenges Whitman’s claims of originality and self-reliance. However, the way in which Whitman depicts the American landscape, mixing urban and pastoral sights, presents him as an innovative Romantic.

Whitman is the first American Romantic poet to celebrate the city as well as the countryside; his poems present the dualism of urban and rural landscapes. He was born in Long Island on the coast of the Atlantic; then, at the age of four, he started to move around Brooklyn with his family in search of good opportunities for a fulfilling life. He spent nearly all his adult life in cities; he settled in New York, Washington, D. C. and eventually in Camden in Philadelphia area. During his life time he kept revisiting Long Island: as a child to see

his grandparents and as an adult for self-renewal and reflection. The sea remained a source of inspiration for Whitman and a dominant image of freedom, mystery and rebellion in his poetry. He reflects on his boyhood memories on the Long Island shore in his poem "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1859), expressing his early desire to be a poet. His fondness for the built environment is no less than his love for natural settings. In his poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" the journey of the boat becomes a symbol of the journey of life itself. William Pannacker argues that although Whitman values the typical solitary encounters with nature celebrated by most Romantic poets, he still prefers the crowded city, which he sees as the future of American democracy. Both the urban and the rural are synthesized in Whitman's own outlook on nature, rather than standing in opposition. In so doing, his complicated Romantic vision contradicts the typical Romantic nostalgia for the pastoral, pre-industrial state as the source of inspiration and relief (Kummings 42). Whitman finds in the daily life of the crowds of city-dwellers his subject matter; he sketches in his poems the activities of average Americans seeking freedom and opportunity. Whitman's family moved from rural Long Island to urban Brooklyn in search of opportunities to rise and gain money; thus, the city, with its potential offer of a better life, becomes analogous to the United States themselves which offer the same dream to immigrants. However, Whitman is equally aware of the dark sides

of the city; since not all dreams come true the city can be a place of unfulfilment, despair and destruction. Moreover, the materialistic ideals of the city allow everything to be judged on a purely economic basis; hence human beings have turned into commodities such as slaves, prostitutes and exploited factory workers. According to Pannapacker, the rapid growth in the population of New York city in the middle of the nineteenth century was a serious challenge facing the government, which struggled to maintain a safe, stable civil life. Crowded with immigrants from different ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds, New York was “on the brink of mass violence, anarchy, and revolution” (Kummings 47). Whitman is fully aware of such a domestic situation, and these tensions between the dark and bright sides of the city were evident in his urban writing. However, he believed that the apparent differences can be dissolved if they are seen as complementary opposites. While Blake attempts in his work to synthesize innocence and experience, Whitman, similarly, seeks to achieve a reconciliation of all American paradoxes.

In Romantic conventions, the urban has always been held in direct opposition to the rural; the city has been seen as a place of vice, danger and potential destruction, in contrast to the beauty, peace and tranquility of the country. The Romantics highly value solitary encounters with nature as the main source of relief and self-renewal,

and they express a burning nostalgia for pre-industrial, rural existence. In Romantic poetry, the pastoral always triumphs over the urban, as Wordsworth declares in his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802):

Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Hayden 282)

Therefore, in Romantic convention, the city has always been held as a symbol of misery, corruption and suffering. The most famous Romantic treatment of urban life is William Blake's "London" (1794), which depicts the city as a destructive and dehumanizing society. The poem is generally seen as a critique of the social and political conditions of eighteenth-century London. The poem is a short one; it falls roughly into four stanzas which act as snapshots recording different aspects of city life. The scene is the city of London during the ending of the eighteenth century; the narrator wanders around its streets exploring the misery and suffering of its inhabitants. The poetic

speaker is expressing his negative attitude towards the dangers of urbanization in a very pessimistic tone; the city has robbed people of their freedom, strength, happiness, property and wealth. The poem moves from visual images of the faces of innocent victims to audible images reflecting their own cries and sighs as well as the noisy atmosphere of the city. Appealing to the senses, deeply involves the reader in the tragic situation; Blake attempts to bring his reader to be identified with the victims. Confronted with the sufferers' faces and voices, the reader's sense of confinement is paralleled to their entrapment:

In every cry of every Man,

In every Infant's cry of fear,

In every voice: in every ban,

The mind-forg'd manacles I hear. (Erdman 26)

The main focus is on people since the narrator, in spite of his personal involvement as embodied in the use of "I" in the opening of the poem, withdraws to the shadow, casting light on his dramatic agents. The poet has chosen three characters to represent human suffering: the chimney-sweeper, the soldier and the harlot; they are respectively symbols of religious, political and moral corruption. Blake assigns the same role to the buildings he depicts in his poem; the church and the palace stand for religious and political authorities. Corruption is



physically embodied in the description of such representative buildings, hence the church is “black’ning” and the walls of the palace are red, covered by the soldier’s blood.

Likewise, Wordsworth sketches a dark, evil image of the city in his long narrative poem “Michael” (1800), which unfolds the tragic story of the shepherd, Michael, and his son, Luke. Facing some financial troubles, the family has to choose either to sell a portion of their estate or to send their only son to the city to work. Luke has to leave the pastoral Forest-side in Grasmere Vale and depart to the city to save the family’s property. Before his departure, the broken-hearted shepherd warns his son against the temptation of the city life and asks him to lay the corner-stone of a sheep-fold as a symbol of a covenant of love binding the father and the son:

When thou art gone away, should evil men

Be thy companions, let this Sheep-fold be

Thy anchor and thy shield; amid all fear

And all temptation, let it be to thee

An emblem of the life thy Fathers lived... (Gill 235)

However, away “in the dissolute city,” the shameful son is led astray, giving himself to wicked, evil courses that led him to his own doom. The destruction of the son leads to the destruction of the whole family:

his parents die out from grief and the estate is sold; nothing is left but the oak tree beside their door and the remains of the unfinished sheepfold. The story ends with such a bleak image of the ruins of the place, leaving the reader to contemplate the dangerous impact of the city.

Yet, in spite of the Romantic anti-urban tendency, Wordsworth, in his later treatment of the city, attempts to romanticize London in his sonnet “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” (1802). Wordsworth shocks his reader by stating that the scene, which is “so touching in its majesty,” and whose beauty is so unique that “Earth has not any thing to show more fair,” is not a natural one. In contradiction to Romantic conventions, the poet is fascinated with the sight of London in the morning; the image he sketches of the city is so fair and visionary that it evokes deep feelings of calmness and tranquility. Unexpectedly, the urban landscape arouses such emotions in the viewer’s heart. From his spot on Westminster Bridge, the speaker displays a panoramic view of the city, listing a catalogue of the things he can see, which, surprisingly, are man-made: “Ships, towers, domes, theatres and temples.” Remarkably, such a Romantic vision of the city is due to it being silent, quiet and empty of people. There is no contrast between the city and nature in Wordsworth’s vision since London lies “Open unto the fields, and to the sky,” and looks “bright and glittering in the smokeless air.” This integration with nature gives the lifeless city a

spirit, hence its “mighty heart is lying still.” As the poet personifies the sun and the river, he personifies the houses and the whole city as well. The speaker goes further to claim that the spectacle of this urban beauty far exceeds that of nature:

Never did sun more beautifully steep

In his first splendor valley, rock, or hill;

Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep! (Gill 285)

Wordsworth celebrates urban landscape, regarding its majesty and grandeur as equal to the charms of its natural counterpart. Despite this attempt to present the city in a more positive way, the conventional Romantic repertoire is still considered to react negatively towards encounters with urban life. The Romantics view the city as a source of sorrow, weariness and heart-sickness; they retreat to nature, seeking comfort, happiness and self-renewal. There is a world of difference between Blake's London and Wordsworth's idealized image of the same city; while Blake focuses intensely on people as victims of urbanization, Wordsworth's London is almost a deserted place. Such a contrast is highlighted by the description of the river: Wordsworth depicts it as gliding freely “at his own sweet will,” while Blake, on the other hand, sketches the “charter'd Thames.” The river, which is typically regarded as a symbol of freedom, life, renovation and natural power, is imprisoned, hence owned by the elite; nature is

tangibly responding to man's imprisonment by the "mind-forg'd manacles."

According to Whitman's poetic creed, a Romantic poet should be revolutionary and rebellious towards established conventions and social constraints; however, he does not necessarily need to be an outcast. Unlike other orthodox Romantics, Whitman does not escape from society and retreat to the woods in solitude, seeking communion with nature; he equally finds in urban settings typical opportunities for such spiritual and emotional encounters. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (1860), Whitman's most famous celebration of the city, he is rather among the crowds of American ordinary people riding the ferry back from Manhattan to Brooklyn by the close of a working day, and yet reflecting on intensely transcendental ideas in a special moment of communion with the beautiful forms of nature surrounding him. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a city poem which presents a lively dramatization of a harbourscape; it depicts the vigour and movement characterizing urban life. James Dougherty notes that it is this sense of action which the poet likes about urban life: "For Whitman the city was a vortex – or a spectacle– of dynamic forces. Almost always he presents himself in motion, walking Broadway, riding an omnibus, crossing Fulton ferry: part of the cities' endless flux, yet sufficiently detached to enjoy it as a 'show' " (487).

Although the start is remarkably unconventional, the way in which nature appears to be so close and intimate to the narrator is strikingly Romantic; the poetic speaker addresses the “flood-tide” and the “clouds of the west,” saying: “I see you face to face!” The phrase “face to face” echoes Emerson when he, in “Nature” (1836), wonders why shouldn’t we, in our present time, have “an original relation to the universe,” similar to the previous generations who “beheld God and nature face to face” (*SE* 35). According to Whitman, and again unlike most Romantic poets, the spiritual experience depends on physical existence; nature is approached, perceived and expressed in a more physical, and even sometimes erotic, way. Without the body, humanity can not reach transcendental realms; the body is the physical vehicle for taking part in the most spiritual experiences. Since the body houses the soul and exists in the world, accordingly it has the capacity to bridge the gap between the inner and the outer. The human body is where the self and the world can come together; hence it is an integral part of spiritual communion.

In “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” Whitman uses the classical archetypal image of the ferry journey to propose, through such a common experience of daily life, questions of life, death and immortality. The poem appeared for the first time in the 1865 edition of Leaves of Grass under the title of “Sun-Down Poem,” and it

consisted of eleven sections. It received its final revision in the 1881 edition; and it was modified to contain only nine sections. The evocation of the classical image of the ferry crossing over the rivers of death paves the way for Whitman's "meditations" and their deep, philosophical ramifications. The simple daily journey implies more than commuting from shore to shore; while investigating the relationship between man and place, the ferry trip symbolically represents the journey of life itself.

The poem focuses on this common experience of riding the ferry, shared by almost everyone, and hence unites everyone in every time, either now or in the past or even in the future. On board the ferry, the poetic speaker celebrates a glorious moment of communion with nature; he enjoys the "flood-tide" below him as well as the sun and clouds over in the sky. All are so close and intimate as he can see them "face to face;" the phrase implies both the personification of and identification with nature. By analogy with the sensual experience of commuting on board the ferry together, the emotional and spiritual experience of encountering nature can be shared as well:

As the poem begins Whitman is struck with an overwhelming sense of presence, a "face to face" encounter, not only with the anonymous people around him on the ferry from Manhattan to Brooklyn but also with the harborscape, most especially the shipping, the moving waters and the waning sunlight.....To read the poem within its Romantic context is to

follow a meditative process leading Whitman to recognize a spiritual presence pervading the landscape and incorporating the speaker-poet and his fellows into a common universal being. And it is to both the setting and the future passengers that he speaks. (Dougherty 485)

The unity of human spiritual experience beyond the barriers of time and space is Whitman's main argument: "It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not." The speaker celebrates the beautiful whole that joins unique individual parts together; he praises the universal scheme unifying all people:

The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself

disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the

scheme...

(Murphy 190)

While asserting the individuality and uniqueness of everyone—"every one disintegrated"—the speaker-poet affirms and celebrates the neat, solid system binding all together. Remarkably, this uniting whole can be interpreted as the United States, bringing together all unique entities, while keeping their sense of individualism and independence. The common experience of riding the ferry, thus, implies more than physically changing position from one side to the other; it can be itself such the "simple, compact, well-join'd scheme," uniting the "disintegrated," "hundreds and hundreds that cross" now, as well as the others who "shall cross from shore to shore years

hence.” The daily journeys of the ferry back and forth, paralleled to the continuous natural motion of the tide below and the sun and clouds above, are analogous to the universal dynamic state of moving and growing. The ferry’s cyclical movement from shore to shore is a metaphor of the process of generations— of the cycle of life and death. The view of the universe as a dynamic, rather than static, entity is a key Romantic principle. This sense of mobility and continuity of human experiences provides a clear indication of immortality, or at least the ability to survive after death:

This shared experience makes humanity, if not eternal, certainly durable well beyond the short space of a single lifetime. The eternal return of the generations is represented by the cycle of the tides. Much as the earlier Romantic poet Shelley had taken comfort in the cycle of the seasons, musing that “If winter comes, can spring be far behind” in “Ode to the West Wind,” so Whitman finds joy in the tidal river’s ebb and flow. The return of the flood tide carries the ferry eastward away from the setting sun, suggesting the life of the human race beyond the single sundown or death of the individual. A myth-making impulse emerges from such lines as “I too many and many a time cross’d the river of old” (309). The East River of nineteenth-century New York becomes “the river of old,” across which every soul must take passage. (Killingsworth 49)

Accordingly, the persistent journey of the Brooklyn ferry becomes an emblem of the everlasting cycle of life and death. Whitman succeeds in expressing such a philosophical statement through the dynamic



scene of daily commuters, utilizing the traditional metaphor of life as a journey.

In his poetic meditation on the beauty of the natural world in “Ode to the West Wind” (1819), Shelley earlier found in the motion of the blowing wind an icon of reproduction and continuity; the dead leaves scattered by the west wind will bring life again with the coming of spring. Hoping for the eternity of his art, the poet asks the wind to bear his words, just like the “withered leaves,” among the world so that they may bring a new birth. Notably, while Shelley sets his poem in autumn, Whitman sets his own at the time of sunset: both times explicitly imply death as well as potential rebirth.

The theme of the potential ability of landscape to evoke sublime emotions and imaginative faculties is not in itself new, and nor is the idea that such spiritual experiences can be shared and even thought to transcend the limited boundaries of space, time and mortality. Wordsworth earlier, in his masterpiece “Tintern Abbey” (1798), explored the power of the place on human spirits, while revisiting “again” the banks of the Wye river:

And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far moor deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things... (Gill 134)

Wordsworth's poem conveys the same image of the neatly-compressed, "interfused" scheme of nature, both containing everything and inspiring everyone. Since this mystical experience can be shared, Wordsworth invites his sister, who is accompanying him; to enjoy "these wild ecstasies" he had felt before:

and in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting lights  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while  
May I behold in thee what I was once... (Gill 134)

The impact of the experience is so deep and everlasting; it challenges time since it impressed the poet in the past, and now it affects him and his sister and this memory will endure with its "healing thoughts" and

“tender joy,” as Wordsworth tells his sister. James Dougherty sees that “Tintern Abbey” provides the prototype to which Whitman looked back for inspiration in writing “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and further explains the Romantic outline of both poems:

Like the prototypical “Tintern Abbey,” Whitman’s poem begins by situating a speaker in a moment of powerful response to a landscape, describing that landscape in some detail, and searching for the ground of his response. The search deepens into meditation, arrives at an insight, and returns to the original setting, with which it has never completely lost touch. (485)

Whitman addresses the typical Romantic theme of the relation between the self and place. However, unlike most Romantic poets, he does not restrictively think that elevated thoughts and spiritual truth are to be derived mainly from communion with rustic, natural landscape. Whitman succeeds in achieving this Romantic experience while situated in the middle of the flux of city life; he emphasizes the potentiality and capability of urban scenery to evoke transcendental thoughts and emotions.

What brings Whitman together with most other Romantic poets is politics; they all have a democratic interest based on the evaluation and supremacy of common man. According to Whitman, democracy is not merely a political system, but rather a way of living. All humans are distinctive and unique; they are all equally integrated within a

larger comprehensive entity uniting them all. In his study of the relationship between Whitman and New York, M. Wynn Thomas focuses on the city as the place of natural equality between apparently diverse men. Living in Manhattan, New York, as one of its working class explains Whitman's positive response to urban life:

Seeing people at work in this way allowed Whitman to interweave urban and agricultural work into one magically seamless garment of description. The whole of human society seemed, in its harmonious variety, to be a microcosm of the miraculously integrated living universe. City and country were not hostile opposites or stark alternatives. They naturally complemented each other. (364–5)

Therefore, the American experience has helped Whitman to reformulate the traditional Romantic legacy, since for Americans the city is the core of their sought moral achievement as well as financial prosperity. Unlike most Romantics, Whitman holds different views of the city, which can be grounded on the American attitudes towards urban life and its potential role in achieving the American dream. In addition, the United States is meant to bring all seeming diversities together in an inclusive scheme, including dualities of rural and urban as well as agricultural and industrial.

The integration of the individual and the collective is a major theme in Whitman's poem, likewise most of his works. The reconciliation of unique individuality and the union, as embodied in

the United States of America themselves, is reflected in Whitman's lifelong poetic project, Leaves of Grass, and the title itself mirrors this complex relation. The commonality of the ferry experience makes it applicable to everyone; hence, Whitman argues for the unity between himself and future "generations:"

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or  
    ever so many generations hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I  
    felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a  
    crowd,  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the  
    bright flow, I was refresh'd,  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the  
    swift current, I stood yet was hurried,  
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the  
    thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.                   (Murphy 191)

In depicting this scene, Whitman strikes a wonderful balance between natural and man-made images, emphasizing his view that both pastoral and urban landscapes can equally provide opportunities for mystical experience. The repetition of words, phrases and images is a major technical device used by Whitman in constructing his poems in

order to enforce a thematic line on the enormous, scattered and apparently irrelevant ideas forming his work.

The speaker, who is generally taken to be Whitman himself, proceeds in his “meditations,” and now he observes the ability of opposites to coexist together within the same entity without any tensions. Whitman is explicitly not presenting a new philosophical claim; he is reflecting Blake’s theory of complementary opposites or correspondences. In his book, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793), Blake states that “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence” (Erdman 34). Throughout the poem, Whitman has already established dualities: the poet and the reader, high and below, present and future, pastoral and urban; and now he introduces his key motif, the “Twelfth-month sea-gulls:”

Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls, saw them high in the

air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,

Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies

and left the rest in strong shadow...

(Murphy 191)

While “floating” high in the sky, the wings of the sea-gulls are “motionless;” both movement and stillness are entailed together in the same body. Yet, the most curious thing about the sea-gulls is the way

they are depicted using contradictory images of light and darkness. The parts of the sea-gulls' bodies facing the sun are bright, while the rest is dark; again light coincides with darkness. Since light symbolically suggests knowledge, communion with nature becomes a source of enlightenment for the poet:

Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,

Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,

Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the

shape of my head in the sunlit water...

(Murphy 191)

It is not only wisdom that nature can bestow; a moment of harmony with nature can also bring man to an elevated state, as suggested by the iconic holy image of the poet with a halo of light surrounding his head. In Romantic faith, man is innately holy and nature is divine. In a significant radical departure from Romantic conventions, the landscape charged with divinity is an urban, dynamic, industrial one as the viewer describes "the vessels," the "sailors at work," the "round masts," the "swinging motion of the hulls," the "large and small steamers in motion," the "quick tremulous whirl of the wheels," the "granite storehouses" and the "foundry chimneys." Unlike most Romantics, who viewed industrialization as evil, Whitman exuberantly accepts it. Whitman even finds sublimity in the scene of

“the fires” glowing from “the foundry chimneys,” with its contrasting colours and shapes:

On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry

chimneys burning high and glaring into the night,

Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and

yellow light over the tops of houses and down into the

clefts of streets.

(Murphy 192)

Urban and pastoral are complementary opposites; both are inseparable in the whole natural texture; and hence the poet responds to them equally: “I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river.” Whitman then evokes another duality—that of the spirit and body. He emphasizes that, by his body, he had received his own identity and physical existence. Whitman’s experience of crossing the river is sensual and emotional as well; his body and soul are of equal importance and integral in this process. Such a peculiar emphasis on the body as the necessary vehicle for penetrating spiritual realms makes Whitman unique in his Romanticism. In “Tintern Abbey” (1798), Wordsworth emphasizes that during the mystical experience of communion with natural beauty, it is only the spirit that is able to transcend “this unintelligible world.” In order to reach such an



elevated state, the spirit can be open to receive sublime tides of blessing only when the body stops existing in a sense:

—that serene and blessed mood,

In which the affections gently lead us on,

Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,

And even the motion of our human blood

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:

While with an eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things. (Gill 132–3)

According to Wordsworth, the body needs to stop so that the spirit can “see into the life of things,” while Whitman asserts the significance of physical existence in receiving mystical tides:

I too had receiv'd identity by my body,

That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I

knew I should be of my body. (Murphy 193)

Since such dualities coexist together, there is no barrier then between Whitman and his future reader. This conclusion brings him back to his main argument: “What is it then between us?... Whatever it

is, it avails not— distance avails not, and place avails not.” Being human entails that we are united in our experiences, Whitman claims. He tells his future reader that what you pass through right now in your time, I have been through before. I have had those typical moments of doubt, disappointment, illusions and even wickedness:

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,

The dark threw its patches down upon me also... (Murphy 193)

The image of dark implies evil, and the poet recognizes now his own share of contraries and admits: “I too knitted the old knot of contrariety.” Using his technical device of catalogue, Whitman openly lists his own evil deeds:

Blabb’d, blush’d, resented, lied, stole, grudg’d,

Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,

Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly,

malignant,

The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,

The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish,

not wanting,

Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none

of these wanting,

Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest... (Murphy 193)

What Whitman appears to display here by openly listing his own evil deeds is the Romantic free expression of emotions rather than a suppression of them in an attempt to conform to custom. In his allegorical poem “A Poison Tree” (1793), Blake warns people against the vice of repressing bad feelings because they grow worse if not expressed. When man shows his anger, it is released; but concealing it and attempting to enforce it to conform with social rules result in its growth into a destructive power. Whitman astonishes nineteenth-century readers by his frank expression of his own erotic desires when he declares that he “was call’d by [his] nighest name by clear loud voices of young men as they saw [him] approaching or passing, felt their arms on [his] neck as [he] stood, or the negligent leaning of their flesh against [him] as [he] sat” (Murphy 193). Maire Mullins argues that Whitman challenged nineteenth-century cultural conventions, which strongly restricted discussing sexuality in public. Mullins states that it is really difficult to interpret Whitman’s own concept of sexuality, particularly in the light of the way in which he incorporates sexual themes in his Leaves of Grass. Whitman, in highly suggestive poetic language, celebrates “his own male body and its many erogenous zones, and then widened that celebration to include the bodies, the desires, and the sexualities of others” (164–5).

The lively drama of the harbour scene in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” echoes the sound of the sea, which is frequently audible in Whitman’s poetry. Whitman always reflects on the sea-image of his early childhood in Long Island, where he had his first intimate relation with nature. In his “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” written in 1859 and published in the 1860 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman allows his reader to share with him a crucial moment of retrospection. As a young “curious boy,” Whitman habitually went to the seaside of Paumanok, the native Indian name of Long Island, to watch a couple of mockingbirds nesting together. He was very fond of watching their daily activities and listening to their cheerful song. Suddenly, one day the she-bird disappeared and never returned. The he-bird cried out of agony pleading for the return of his beloved. The bird’s song, now full of grief and mourning, touched the child’s heart; and as he grew older he never forgot “those beginning notes of yearning and love.” Confronted with the experience of loss, young Whitman started to ask questions about life and death, which triggered off an endless, lifelong process of introspection:

Demon or bird! (said the boy’s soul),

Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?

For I, that was a child, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have

heard you,

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,

And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer,

louder and more sorrowful than yours,

A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,

never to die,

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,

O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease

perpetuating you...

(Murphy 280)

Moved by the agony of the he-bird and unable to interpret the sudden vanishing of the she-bird, the young boy turns to the sea asking for some “clue” or an explanation. Responding to the dilemma of the bird and the young poet, the sea whispers the “delicious word death, and again death, death, death, death.” Mark Bauerlein raises the prospect of the poem as an archetypal elegy moving from lament and mourning to inspiration and acceptance. It is the final assertion of death provided by the sea that gives this inspiration that there is nothing to be done about universal mortality except to sing it: “The sea’s patient answer solves nothing. Instead, it lifts the question out of its local context, provoking a universalization of the she-bird’s departure, a conversion of individual pain into natural law” (par. 3). The fusion of the melancholic song of the mockingbird and the “hissing melodious”

answer of the sea awakens Whitman's desire to sing as well, hence to write poetry. The act of singing is incorporated into his art; a substantial number of his poems are titled "song," such as, "Song of Myself," "Song of the Open Road," "Song for All Seas, All Ships" and "Song of the Banner at Daybreak;" in addition, there are other poems holding the word "sing" as a title, such as, "I Hear America Singing," "I Sing the Body Electric," and "These I Singing in Spring." Singing in the face of death is the final resolution of the poem; the sweet song of death whispered by the sea is the answer given by nature to the anxious poet. The death experience gives Whitman thoughtful insights and broadens his own perspective in a way that allows him to examine his place as a unique individual within the larger complex scheme of the universe.

The poem as it stands, with its simple narrative line and such deep philosophical implications, is a sentimental dramatization of mortality intensely reflecting Romantic currents. Wordsworth earlier in his autobiographical poem, The Prelude (1805), similarly goes back to origins in order to examine his own birth as a poet and record his artistic development. It is worth noting that the bird-image echoes previous bird-images in Romantic legacy: Wordsworth's "cuckoo," Shelley's "skylark," Keats' "nightingale" and Bryant's "waterfowl" as

well. In every case, the encounter with nature as embodied in meditating the bird brings the poet a revelation.

M. Jimmie Killingsworth equally argues that although Whitman shares with his American contemporaries, Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier, Thoreau and Emerson, an interest in nature poetry, he evidently marks a shift not only in his further interest in the city, but also in the way he tackles the natural landscape:

While the trend among the poets of his day was largely pastoral – a view of nature as the place of spirit, a site that offered relief from the stress and intensity of the materialist city, a more innocent and largely lost environment – *Leaves of Grass* treats the natural world as the body of the earth, an eroticized material entity with a character that alternately entices and resists the poet's curious questions and probings. The human body, with its spontaneously responsive and richly sensual impulses, is treated as continuous with nature. Whitman makes love to the land, pleads to the ocean as a child to its mother, looks curiously into the eyes of animals, and discovers in himself the same energies and materials that bring the earth to life. As much as his relation to the earth is material, it is also mystical. It identifies the self with this larger, more powerful, and only partially knowable entity... His more original outlook, however, involves an understanding of nature as integral and inescapable, as much a part of city life and the experience of the body as it is something separate, a nonhuman environment. (19–20)

Describing his Romantic encounter with nature, Bryant earlier in “Thanatopsis” (1817) uses a highly spiritual language as the word “communion,” with its intense religious allusions, suggests, while Whitman’s language is densely charged with passionate erotic implications. In “Song of Myself” (1855), he uses sexual imagery to express his intimate relation with nature; the human body physically merges with nature:

I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised

and naked,

I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

(Murphy 64)

In her examination of Whitman’s theory of nature, Diane Kepner argues that in spite of the emphasis Whitman places on materialism in his own view of reality, as expressed in the language he uses in his poetry, he cannot be classified as a materialist. Kepner justifies her claim on the grounds that Whitman’s poetic diction is equally densely charged with philosophical idealistic claims, in addition to his own assertion of a sort of mystical oneness. This tension between idealism and materialism, or between science and mysticism, leads Whitman himself, in his “Song of Myself” (1855), to raise the question: “Do I contradict myself?” Kepner argues that Whitman’s theory of nature depends essentially on reconciliation between philosophical idealism



and materialism; it is the same theory, which Emerson called for earlier in 1836, in his essay “Nature” (180–2):

Whitman’s theory of nature offers to explain the sense of unity Emerson feels when he looks upon a rich landscape without denying existential reality to the particular objects of that landscape. There is indeed a unity in the universe, according to Whitman, and it exists in every particular object at every moment in time... If we can learn to recognize and understand the expression of universal unity within every particular object we see and every sensation we feel, then, in Whitman’s view, we can come to a better sense of our place in the universe, even of our own immortality, than is possible through scientists or priests. (Kepner 183–4)

Whitman attempts to achieve unity with nature, laying the emphasis on being both spiritually and physically connected to it. Killingsworth argues that Whitman’s treatment of nature reveals an anxious dilemma; he is suspended between two positions: the view of man as alienated from nature and the opposite view of man as continuous with it. The complexities and paradoxes in Whitman’s life and work remained unresolved and they further anticipated the anxieties of modern troubled America (20).

Therefore, Whitman’s interest in nature is deeply rooted in the Romantic tradition. However, he shifts from the conventional Romantic idealistic approach to nature by his particular emphasis on being both spiritually and physically connected to it. His view of

nature proposes a reconciliation between mysticism and materialism. He emphasizes the importance of physical existence for the sake of mystical experiences, regarding the human body as the necessary vehicle to reach sublime spiritual realms. The body can bring the self and the universe together, and hence, it bridges the gap between the inner and the outer. In Whitman's harmonious view of nature, dualities of body and spirit as well as pastoral and urban are complementary opposites:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,

The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell

are with me...

(Murphy 83)

Whitman's major theme is America, as Richard H. Fogle puts it: "America is the archetypal body of his poetry" (24). Whitman represents America through a variety of other themes, such as democracy, liberty, racism, slavery, death, immortality, sexuality, the Civil War, as well as the American natural scene. In a radical challenge to Romantic conventions, Whitman views the city through American eyes, and highly values it as the centre of future aspirations and the epitome of the American dream.

Whitman's poetics have received immense critical attention for their lasting significance and profound complexity. In parallel with

Romantic thought, Whitman rebelled against strict forms, regular metres and all restrictions of established classical literary tradition. Breaking the boundaries of conventional poetic forms is his most important achievement, and writing distinctly American free verse has been seen as the long-expected liberating act. As a literary form, free verse can be traced back to the fourteenth century when it appeared in biblical translations. Whitman used this type of cadenced free verse based on the Bible; and although many poets experimented with the form, such as Christina Rossetti and Matthew Arnold, Whitman's poetic contribution breaks new ground in the history of verse. Killingsworth regards the preface of Leaves of Grass as Whitman's poetic and political manifesto, and the place where he declares his poetic theory; as it stands, it enacts Whitman's principles of language and style. The limitless expansion of American land is reflected in the flowing speech of the orator as represented in his use of an abundance of sentences and phrases connected together with "and" (86). Whitman's astonishing ability to list items as if he is displaying a catalogue reflects his imaginative powers and ability to move between images and examples in a vivid, smooth, panoramic manner. Using this technique enabled Whitman to pack enormous poetic detail into his poems. However, the apparent idiosyncrasy has been a source of weariness and depression to his readers who may sometimes fail to find the relation binding these piles of images together, or even lose

the key idea of Whitman's work. Gado argues that the seeds for Whitman's "anaphoric catalogues" are to be found in Bryant's verse, notably "The Prairies" (167).

Whitman's diction manifests his Romantic rejection of the mechanical nineteenth-century view of language as something to be learned from a dictionary, rather than vigorously acquired from actual life experiences. Matthiessen records Whitman's admiration of Coleridge as the embodiment of the primitive poet freely naming things "like Adam in Paradise" (518). Whitman thinks that a writer should be immersed, with all his senses, in every social experience; he should enjoy using words so as to identify himself with them. The miraculous power of words gives him pleasure; and this linguistic fervour finds its way into his experiments with language. Whitman sees American life as the richest soil in which the English tongue might flourish and develop in response to the vigorous American experience itself (Matthiessen 517-8). Whitman expresses in the preface his belief that the English language in America is actually growing and developing a distinctive character of its own, and that, since American English naturally responds to the needs of American society, it is the best tool for expressing its native character (Kaplan 25). In this way, Whitman's poetic language delineates a national defining quality of his art and also presents to the reader what is

peculiar about America:

Largely because of the powerful rhetoric of Whitman's poetry, it is his language and its forcefulness that receives the most sustained critical attention from Matthiessen and other critics of this period. His poetry is read as encoding peculiarly American speech patterns, the "distinct identity" of American English that provides Matthiessen with the starting point for his examination of Whitman's great American "language experiment". But it is thereby felt also to present a new poetic relation to reality, to the America that unfolds in his verses. (Selby 57)

In his verse, Whitman asserts himself as a national bard and poet, and maintains the image of America as a great, creative nation.

While Whitman's poetic innovations are significantly representative of the American Romantic canon, they still reveal distinctive lines of continuity with English Romanticism. His "barbaric yawp" displays much sophistication in the face of his claims on behalf of primitive art, innately inspired by American nature. Whitman's poetry reflects a Romantic subjective approach in its celebration of individualism, idealization of nature, disregard of rigid poetic conventions, freedom in thought and expression, and belief in intuitive feelings and imaginative powers. The echoes of his precursors in his work challenge his assertions of utter originality. His work inherently flows out of its sources and influences in the face of his claim that "the poems distilled from other poems will probably

pass away” (Kaplan 26). Reading his work in a transatlantic Romantic context sheds some light on his inspirational sources, although he has succeeded in many cases in masking them. However, Whitman has remarkably reformulated Romantic ideals, and his originality is manifested in his attitudes towards nature, the human body and the urban landscape, as well as in his experiments with poetic language and form.

## **Chapter Five**

## The Self and the Other: Dickinson's Romantic Dilemma

Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) are considered by most critics to be the founders of the American poetic canon, though they represent different directions in American verse. The rise of Dickinson's fame as a distinctive poetic voice by the end of the nineteenth century asserted the authentic American literary identity, which most nineteenth-century American men of letters attempted to achieve. Like Whitman, Dickinson rejected established conventions and attempted to break away from all accepted poetic decorum. However, in writing poetry, she was not motivated by contemporary calls for literary nationalism; her poems were rather the expression of her persistent quest for reconciliation between herself and the outer world. Joseph Allard argues that, throughout the canon, Dickinson's obsession with the inner self and its border with the other is clearly evident:

Dickinson chose to dedicate her life to the transmission of articulated truth from inner to outer, to make manifest and objective in poetry her sometimes painful, always profound discoveries about the only world to which she had real access—the world of her own soul. (158)

Equally, like Whitman, her work, while displaying radical originality, still reflects Romantic traits with its appeal to the inner world and its attempts to come to terms with the universe. The two poets broke new ground with their own original poetic style, form and subject matter;



their work brought fresh currents into nineteenth-century American poetics, anticipated twentieth-century modern impulses and helped to shape Anglo-American tradition.

Both poets roughly belong to the same period, yet they are still strikingly different. Whitman is the poet of the city, reflecting its expansive, crowded, noisy scene. In contrast, Dickinson is the poet of solitude, reflecting herself and her own restricted surrounding space. While Whitman's poetry displays the massive open American landscape, Dickinson's seems to be more domestic and confined in the scope of its scenery. Whitman loudly and openly sings the seen, external beauty of the human body, life and America. Dickinson, on the other hand, can be better defined as an introspective poet, strongly focussing on the invisible interior realms of nature, life and the human soul: "As Whitman so powerfully addresses the exterior of American life, so Dickinson addresses—or has she helped create?—its unknowable interior" (Oates 807). The two American pioneers share a love of nature, but approach it from different perspectives. Whitman attempts to achieve unity with nature; in most of his poems he is dynamically engaged in the flux of dramatic events, acting as an active part of the scene. However, Dickinson is habitually an observer, contemplating natural phenomena and attempting to discover and analyse them, yet she is still, passive and detached from her surroundings.

In terms of style, Whitman is an ambitious poet aiming to write an epic as grand and great as the United States themselves. Dickinson, in contrast, is a very economical poet writing compressed, short poems, which may be characterized as cryptic and enigmatic, yet astonishingly original and splendid. This sense of obscurity, overwhelming her poetry, is a major problem for her readers, who sometimes fail to understand her work as a result of the absence of a declared poetic theory of her own. Unlike Whitman, she did not write an informative preface clearly defining her views of poetry and the role of the poet. Although the two poets show different poetic styles, they still share the fascination of poetic experimentation and the quest for radical originality and freedom from literary conventions, which are themselves familiar Romantic traits. Dickinson's words, just like herself, are physically confined to a very limited area, but her ideas extraordinarily transcend the boundaries of human experience and the barriers of time and space.

Unlike Whitman, Dickinson is almost detached from all surrounding social or political events; although she lived during the time of the Civil War, her poetry does not react directly to this national trauma. Her main topic is herself, her own personal doubts and anxieties about identity. Though steeped in subjective vision, her poetry tackles crucial human experiences that can be related to anyone at any time. The solitary soul, while expressing her own hunger,

suffering and pain, speaks of the human condition as a whole. Adhering to limited topics with boundless universal concern, her poetic achievement is still peculiar in its aesthetic character and artistic style.

Some readers, and even critics, heavily depend on Dickinson's letters to interpret her work, as she sometimes wrote comments on her own verse as well as on others'. This prevailing tendency to approach her work on a strictly biographical basis narrows the scope of her thought and vision. However, no matter how risky biographical interpretations may seem, still the author and her work are intimately connected. Dickinson lived her life as a recluse; she rarely went out of her house in Amherst, Massachusetts, or even received visitors. However, in such a state of physical isolation from the outside world, she had a very active and busy life pursuing her art. Away from her own domestic responsibilities, she spent her time contemplating, reading and writing. For over thirty years, during the long afternoon hours, she restlessly got engaged in writing poetry and letters; such letters were the only means of communication with her relatives and friends. In her seclusion, Dickinson reflected upon her own view of solitude and the universe. Although she was prolific, she was unknown as a poet during her lifetime; only around a dozen of her poems were published out of over 1700, which were found in her room after her death, written and organized into booklets or fascicles.

Her poems are short in form and compressed in meaning; their tight form mirrors her own limited world, but their deep, rich implications echo the poet's boundless potentialities. Hence, her poetry is the outcome of her own private world and personal experience; she wrote poetry only because she wanted to so, not for the sake of fame. Inspired by Dickinson's inner conflicts, her poems speak powerfully of pain, suffering, love, longing, affection, grief, loss, death and hope of eternity. The intensity in expressing such emotional experiences defines Dickinson as a passionate poet; it further gives deeper insights into her mystical philosophy. Her intense suffering is inseparable from her spiritual growth; her own eventual sublime spirituality urged her to seek immortality. Her poetic art, as it stands deeply immersed in the inner world and strongly attempting to come to terms with the universe, and to bridge the gap between the self and nature, relates her specifically to Romantic thought. The seeming idiosyncrasies of Dickinson's work come to a profitably rich, comprehensive meaning when they are read within the context of Romanticism.

While Dickinson's prolific poetic outcome reflects continuities with the Romantic tradition, it also displays peculiar experimental forms and new American literary explorations. Examining her language and style, Sandra McChesney claims that Dickinson's complexities of thinking are reflected in her dense, compressed language and her unique style. The way she uses words and

punctuation is so unconventional that it has always puzzled her readers. The yielded sense of mystery, associated with her work, has led some of Dickinson's earlier editors to correct her punctuation, particularly her famous untraditional, extensive use of dashes. Her poems were substantially modified in order to fit conventional nineteenth-century poetic rules. Later scholars, however, insist on publishing her poems in the same way they appear in original manuscripts, believing that Dickinson's peculiar use of language is not accidental, but rather central to a clear understanding of the workings of her mind (71–5). It was not until 1955 when a copy of her poems, based on the original manuscripts, was released.

The first collection of Dickinson's poetry was published four years after her death in 1886; it came as a culmination to the quest started by Emerson's declaration of America's intellectual independence in 1837 in his lecture delivered before The Phi Beta Kappa Society. It also followed the publication of Whitman's revolutionary work Leaves of Grass in 1855, which attracted much debate concerning Americanism in literature on both sides of the Atlantic. The early critique of Dickinson's work in Britain attacked its form of poetic expression though it still admired its startling thoughts and themes. In his review of Dickinson's Poems, published in 1890, Andrew Lang, comparing her technique to the British style, criticizes its lack of form, grammar and rhyme. Lang argues that the American

claims of democracy can not simply ignore grammar and retreat into savagery; and that such “savage successors” will, even unconsciously, conform to grammatical rules. However, in such a time of transatlantic cultural tension, Lang remarks that “the Western singers, whether better than ours or not, are, at all levels, different from ours, and therefore, so far, interesting” (387). While in the late nineteenth century Dickinson’s work was received with much scepticism, critical views in the early twentieth century regarded her as a major American poet. The fresh currents the Amherst poet has brought into American poetics and culture are still a subject of debate; her poetic outcome is still inviting intense discussion and research as well. Very few scholars, however, have given serious consideration to Dickinson’s work in the context of transatlantic cultural dialogues concerning Romantic ideas and ambitions.

Given the unstable state of Dickinson’s published material, it becomes clearly evident that there are various difficulties involved in examining her poetic outcome. In terms of her literary practice, she was not devoted to any artistic theory; and she was fully aware of her own poetic nonconformity. In 1862, Dickinson sent a few of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asking for critical advice in a serious step towards a poetic career. Higginson thought that the poems were great works of genius; however, he could not accept their obvious lack of organization and violation of the conventional

mechanics of poetry. In her poem 488, “Myself was formed a Carpenter,” (1862) Dickinson was responding to Higginson’s advice to conform to conventional rules of poetry (Thackrey 1–2):

Myself was formed – a Carpenter –

An unpretending time

My Plane – and I, together wrought

Before a Builder came –

To measure our attainments –

Had we the Art of Boards

Sufficiently developed – He’d hire us

At Halves –

My Tools took Human – Faces –

The Bench, where we had toiled –

Against the Man – persuaded –

We – Temples build – I said –

(Johnson, *CP* 234–5)

The “Art of Boards” refers to the poetic conventions to which her art should conform. Aware of her nonconformity, and most importantly of her poetic capacities, she confidently replies that the kind of art she is developing is extraordinarily holy; hence “We – Temples build.” Dickinson’s refusal to adhere to artistic formality as well as her belief in the holiness of art reflect her closeness to Romantic ideas and ideals. In his controversial book, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, composed between 1790 and 1793, William Blake remarks that “every

thing that lives is Holy” (Erdman 45). Wordsworth equally uses such holy attributes in describing the process of artistic creation and the role of imagination in his sonnet “In My Mind’s Eye a Temple, Like a Cloud” (1827):

IN my mind’s eye a Temple, like a cloud  
Slowly surmounting some invidious hill,  
Rose out of darkness: the bright Work stood still:  
And might of its own beauty have been proud,  
But it was fashioned and to God was vowed  
By Virtues that diffused, in every part,  
Spirit divine through forms of human art:  
Faith had her arch—her arch, when winds blow loud,  
Into the consciousness of safety thrilled;  
And Love her towers of dread foundation laid  
Under the grave of things; Hope had her spire  
Star-high, and pointing still to something higher  
Trembling I gazed, but heard a voice—it said,  
Hell-gates are powerless Phantoms when *we* build. (Curtis et al. 85)

Obviously, Dickinson’s poem owes much to Wordsworth’s “In my Mind’s Eye a Temple,” in terms of its theme and imagery, as well as language. Each poem attempts to display its author’s view of the process of artistic creation. Dickinson shares with Wordsworth the belief that while art is a craft that needs meticulous work on the part of the artist, it still heavily depends on the working of imaginative faculties and inspiration. It is this latter intangible aspect which makes



the artistic work peculiarly beautiful and gives it a holy status. In doing so, the two poets use both abstract and concrete images of physical constructions or buildings to describe a work of art. The usage of abstract images reflects the inspirational, creative nature of the process, while the concrete images entail that literary art is still a craft that needs to follow formal rules. The sonnet form chosen by Wordsworth to convey his theme reflects his poetic skill in developing his idea within the limits of only fourteen lines, following a strict rhyme scheme: abba acca deffed.

Both poems emphasize the notion that art is holy: Wordsworth uses an orthodox religious context for his idea, which defines the holiness of art in more Christian terms; Dickinson's poem, however, never clearly determines the basis of such holy attributes. According to Wordsworth, creation follows a circular pattern; the composition of poetry starts from and goes back to the Divine:

But it was fashioned and to God was vowed

By Virtues that diffused, in every part,

Spirit divine through forms of human art... (Curtis et al. 85)

Within the poetic work, portrayed as a "Temple," lie the three theological virtues: Faith, Love and Hope; each respectively has built a part of the "Temple:" the arch, towers and the heaven-pointing spire. The poetic speaker, shaken by the glamour of the imaginary scene, hears "a voice" saying: "Hell-gates are powerless Phantoms when *we*

build.” The final note of Wordsworth’s poem is that in the face of art, mortality is nothing but a shadow. Remarkably, Dickinson’s last line echoes Wordsworth: “We – Temples build – I said –”. While Dickinson’s “We” refers to herself and her “Plane,” or her art, Wordsworth’s “*we*,” as he highlights it with italics, refers to artists or poets, who are equally bestowed holy attributes as angels or even creative Deities.

Having no declared poetic theory to accompany Dickinson’s work, scholars have depended on her letters and verse in seeking to understand her conception of art. Donald E. Thackrey examines Dickinson’s method of composition, which he believes to be a matter of inspiration as well as a process of rational choice. Thackrey finds Poem 1126 (1868), especially illuminating in terms of the poet’s view of literary composition (11):

Shall I take thee, the Poet said  
To the propounded word?  
Be stationed with the Candidates  
Till I have finer tried–

The Poet searched Philology  
And when about to ring  
For the suspended Candidate  
There came unsummoned in–

The portion of the Vision

The World applied to fill

Not unto nomination

The Cherubim reveal—

(Johnson, *CP* 505–6)

Dickinson vividly dramatizes the situation; a poet is talking to words attempting to find the most suitable one for his or her poetic purpose. The way in which “the candidates” are “stationed” together waiting for the poet’s decision is very impressive. When the poet is about to take the final decision another “unsummoned” candidate unexpectedly comes and it turns out to be the most precise one for the poetic “vision.” Inspiration comes only after such strenuous labour in attempting to aptly choose the most expressive word; both inspiration and rational choice are integral parts in poetic creation. Like Poem 488 (1862), Dickinson again appears to be keen to associate art with holiness. While in the earlier poem she does not clarify the basis of such holy attributes, in Poem 1126 (1868), she uses a Christian context for her thought, obviously echoing Wordsworth. When the poet is about to nominate the most adequate word, she receives heavenly inspiration from the “cherubim.” Her muses are, as represented in the Bible, the winged creatures that support the Throne of God. Using the biblical image of such guardian spirits as the source of poetic inspiration, she presents poetry as heavenly and holy.

Examining Dickinson's poetry in the context of the Romantic tradition clearly manifests her close relation to particular Romantic poets. Joanne Feit Diehl, in her study, Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination (1981), claims that recently most critical assessments of Dickinson's work focus on interpreting it within the context of American literary tradition, and account for its eccentric nature as being the synthesis of the Calvinist and Emersonian philosophies. Other scholars argue that the Bible is Dickinson's major literary source in terms of themes, language, imagery and sublime vision of nature. Diehl finds these approaches useful, but she argues that ignoring the broader literary tradition to which Dickinson had access limits the context of her sources as well as her poetic achievement (5–7). Throughout the six chapters of her book, Diehl examines and re-evaluates Dickinson's relationship to Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Emerson, attempting to locate and define the ways in which Dickinson conforms to and departs from Anglo-American Romantic literary tradition, and justifies these appropriations on the grounds of the poet's gender. Diehl explains the difficulties of tracing such poetic relations as Dickinson manages to mask her own sources through using "obscuring strategies" and "rhetorical disguises." In this way, the reader, confronted by such manipulating techniques, focuses on the text in isolation and may never attempt to interpret it in the context of its literary origins (8). Most notably, Dickinson's stereotyped image

as a recluse clearly relates her to the Romantics; the scrutiny of her work equally reveals links to Romantic tradition.

In “Myself was formed – a Carpenter,” Poem 488, Dickinson obviously refuses to submit her art to the authority of another. This sense of nonconformity and self-reliance puts her in direct relation with Emersonian philosophy, since what she practices is closely aligned with what he preaches. American Transcendentalists, most notably Emerson, have a considerable influence in shaping Dickinson’s thought and writing: “The extreme individualism, the conviction of self-sufficiency of the Transcendentalists, is echoed by Emily Dickinson’s treatment of the individual soul’s sovereignty, infiniteness, and polar privacy” (Thackery 5). The writings of both Emerson and Dickinson share “the all-pervading spiritual power which inhabits and transfigures the physical world.... [as well as] a sense of the unified nature of the apparent diversity of the universe” (Thackery 5). Dickinson’s attempts to achieve sublime spirituality through developing a close relation to nature connect her to Transcendentalism and accordingly to Romanticism. She typically found industrial, materialistic society alienating man from eternal, spiritual facts, and obliging him to lose the connection with nature and God. Diehl argues that Dickinson’s poetic practice reflects Emerson’s image of the poet as “reader of the universe,” which he expresses in his article “The Poet” (1844), with her attitude of developing a close

relation to nature, observing minute natural phenomena, analysing them and attempting to find the relations binding the whole universe (162).

Donald E. Thackrey argues that not only American Transcendentalism but also New England Puritanism exerted a significant influence on Dickinson's intellectual repertoire, although her regular attendance at church services could not bring her to a constant puritan faith. She even publicly rejected orthodox religion while she was studying at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. The only thought she kept of puritan doctrine is the concept of immortal life, though her approach to eternity is more sensational than rational (4–5). In one of her most important poems, Poem 285 (1861), she declares her outlook as a New Englander seeing the world through American eyes:

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune –  
Because I grow – where Robins do –  
But, were I Cuckoo born –  
I'd swear by him –  
The ode familiar – rules the Noon –  
The Buttercup's, my Whim for Bloom –  
Because, we're Orchard sprung –  
But, were I Britain born,  
I'd Daisies spurn –  
None but the Nut –October fit –

Because, through dropping it,  
The Seasons flit – I'm taught –  
Without the Snow's Tableau  
Winter, were – lie to me –  
Because I see – New Englandly –  
The Queen, discerns like me –  
Provincially–

(Johnson, *CP* 131–2)

Crucial to Dickinson's world-view are two issues: her sense of pride in the place where she was born and raised up, and the Romantic concept of nature as a source of ideals. The poet emphasizes that she acquires her own standards of judgement from the natural environment she belongs to. Accordingly, she proudly declares the American robin as her "Criterion for Tune" and the buttercup as her favourite flower. Her choices are informed by the New England landscape; hence she sees "New Englandly." If she were born in Britain, her ideals might be the "Cuckoo" and the "Nut –October." Dickinson goes further in her assertion of her sense of provinciality to claim that "The Queen, discerns like [her] – / Provincially." Obviously, Dickinson attempts to express the difference between Britain and America not only in terms of natural landscape, but rather on deeper moral and cultural grounds. The way she holds Britain as a paragon to compete with highlights the idea that though Dickinson does not openly call for nationalism in literature, she still has in mind this sort

of trans-Atlantic cultural dialogue. Sandra McChesney emphasizes Dickinson's New England heritage:

In her more than 1,700 poems, Dickinson did "see New Englandly," combining her "Puritan heritage and the Yankee background," reproducing "as far as is possible in verse the qualities of New England speech, laconic brevity, directness, cadence" [(Whicher 165)]. What she saw, however, she then filtered through her own processes of perception and contemplation, her New England background providing the tools for thinking and her method of thinking providing an outlook that forged far beyond conventional mores. (49)

In Poem 285, the Amherst poet celebrates her American identity as well as her provincial environment, from which she has developed her standards and concepts. In this context, William Mulder interprets Dickinson's famous claim of seeing "New Englandly," proposing three planes of perception in her vision of the universe. According to Mulder, Dickinson "see[s] provincially" in terms of celebrating the landscape of New England and all existing life on it with love and affection. Beyond this simple basic level, lies the moral perspective of the land, where natural truths are transformed into the ethical codes of American tradition. Nature is seen as a didactic power, as a book of revelation where human beings can acquire morality through what Mulder calls "a secular sermon." The final plane of perception is to see nature "symbolically;" to attempt to transcend natural forms and to see them "inwardly" as shadows or reflections of sublime, divine truth



(550–1). Mulder’s analysis of Dickinson’s outlook on the universe, as it is declared in her claim “I see – New Englandly,” echoes the Romantic ideas of celebrating nature for its own sake, the conception of nature as the best teacher for man, and the intuitive attempt to go beyond visible natural forms in quest of transcendental truths.

Therefore, neither such an American stamp nor the distinguishable self-assertive tone prevailing in Dickinson’s work can conceal the continuing dialogues with other literary sources. Richard Gravil asserts her “peculiar intimacy with the lyrical canon,” and argues that Dickinson wrote many of her poems in response to other poets, including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats. Gravil further argues that Dickinson’s seclusion and privacy allow her to be “the most *bookish* poet in Anglo-American tradition,” giving her the opportunity to read and meditate on her precursors’ works; hence, some knowledge of her readings is essential to understand her work (187–8). In his preface to her poems, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson’s publisher and friend, emphatically categorizes her verse in terms of what Emerson called ‘the Poetry of Portfolio’ out of his belief that it primarily expresses the poet’s thoughts and feelings, and shows indifference to conformity to all accepted conventional rules. However, Higginson further confirms that while Dickinson attempts to achieve such an original literary standard of her own, her work is still reminiscent of Romantic ideals. He finds the quality of her verse

to be “more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found,—flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power, yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame” (Preface 43).

Although the innovations of her art fail to be oriented to any fixed artistic theory, still her work evokes other great literary works. Elizabeth Petrino argues that Dickinson “absorbed other writers without sacrificing her distinctive style, or her range of ideas on topics like mortality and fame,” and in her approach to such topics she owes much to Keats, since “Dickinson subtly reworked key images from his poems” (Allusion 80). Depending on the theory of echo, developed by John Hollander, Petrino explores Dickinson’s work in quest of allusive images, sounds and rhythmical patterns echoing other literary works, rather than following the traditional critical method of searching for direct quotations. The way in which Dickinson manages to transform other works into her own words and in her own original style creates challenges for those readers attempting to trace such echoes. Although Dickinson directly referred to Keats only three times in her correspondence, her interest in his art, life and poetic themes is undisputed. Still, the thematic similarities between the two poets, the interest in human mortality and artistic immortality can clearly be detected, though Dickinson tends to transform and even critically

challenge her precursor. The reason Dickinson's borrowings are complex and difficult to trace is that she engages herself in dialogues not only with Keats's works but also with others' treatments of Keats's poetic texts. Through such a complex, inextricable web of generative readings, Dickinson reworks her antecedent poets and expresses her own novel poetic vision. For example, in her poem 449, "I died for Beauty— but was scarce" (1862), she is clearly echoing Keats's most famous line in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820) — " 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty— that is all / Ye Know on earth, and all ye need to know' (Allott 537)." Dickinson subtly tackles the notion of the unity of truth and beauty:

I died for Beauty— but was scarce

Adjusted in the Tomb

When One who died for Truth, was lain

In an adjoining Room—

He questioned, softly, "Why I failed"?

"For Beauty", I replied—

"And I —for Truth— Themselves are One—

We Brethren, are", He said—

(Johnson, *CP* 216)

However, Petrino goes further to argue that Dickinson is reacting as well to both Emerson's echoes in "Nature" (1836) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's allusions in "A Vision of Poets" (1844) to the same line. While Dickinson shares with Keats the belief that it is the

artistic work that can be immortal rather than the artist himself, yet she challenges his idea that fame can transcend death (Allusion 83–8): “Until the Moss had reached our lips – / And covered up – our names”. Grivil argues that such lack of direct allusions to preceding Romantic works makes it relatively difficult to link Dickinson with the Romantics. He affirms Joanne Feit Diehl’s radical conclusion that Dickinson is likely “the most extraordinary instance of a mind in persistent dialogue with a broad range of other poets in the history of Anglo-American lyricism” (191).

Dickinson, similarly, has found in seasonal change a metaphor of universal mortality; the meditation upon the changeability of harvest landscapes due to the imminent coming of winter implies death as the final destination. Such an analogy between natural phenomena and human life is typically Romantic, and Dickinson appears to be reflecting on Keats’s central theme in “To Autumn,” which he composed in 1819 and published in 1820. She invokes Keats’s images of harvest scenes and the deceptive promises they give to the casual viewer; ripeness and fullness bring implied death—a fact that the spectator is usually unaware of (Petrino, Allusion 89–90). Keats depicts autumn as the time of warmth and “fruitfulness;” autumn with the “conspiring” help of “the maturing sun” manages to “fill all fruit with ripeness to the core.” The natural landscape reflects this moment of bounty and abundance as creatures come closer to a

state of maturity and fullness: bees enjoy the bloomed “later flowers,” “hazel shells” get plumped with “a sweet kernel,” and “full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn.” However, the temporality of this condition and the probability of loss are inevitable, as anticipated by the idea of conspiracy in the beginning of the ode:

While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue;

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river shallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies... (Allott 653–4)

Although the enjoyable moment may deceive natural creatures to “think [that] warm days will never cease,” they are still fully aware of the close ending as the “gathering swallows twitter in the skies” preparing for winter migration. Winter is analogous to death; this analogy takes the meaning of the poem far beyond the typical celebration of the fall’s harvest to the realm of universal mortality. Dickinson was equally interested in interpreting the New England landscape and attempting to deduct far-fetched, significant spiritual realities from surrounding natural phenomena. In this way, observation of nature summons the meditation on death.

Several critics have explored Dickinson’s interest in the cycle of seasons and equally emphasized the importance of the Indian summer poems in her canon. Ernest Sandeen typically asserts the

claim that Dickinson attempts in her poems to appropriate traditional interpretations of the seasons of the year to her own personal response to natural phenomena. Dickinson views summer as a time of life, vigour, colour and celebration, away from cares and responsibilities, and she expresses its merry, joyous atmosphere with images of liquor and drunkenness. While spring brings the hope of eternity and resurrection and summer embodies the happiness of this eternal life, winter, on the other hand, evokes death, cold, dullness and stillness—a major threat to hope of eternal happiness (Sandeen 483–5). Sandeen argues that among all of her seasonal poems, those dedicated to early autumn or more precisely to late summer hold significant importance: “Late summer, she discovered very early, was a metaphor which enabled her to bring into focus her conflicting reactions to life as these were represented by the other seasons and so to resolve them poetically if not philosophically” (485). Late summer is thus a critical turning point from past joys and pleasures to the coming mysterious ending; it recalls the condition of Keats’s “gathering swallows” getting ready to migrate to the unknown. Such a state of tension and expectancy induces a dark gloomy vision and evokes religious awe.

In his discussion of the theme of Indian summer in Dickinson’s nature poems, Thomas H. Johnson emphasizes the centrality of both the cycle of seasons and the way in which natural creatures respond to it. In her poem 1068, sometimes titled “My Cricket” (1866), she uses

the cricket as the central image to warn other creatures against the passing away of summer. In late summer, while nature is still so vigorous “No Furrow on the Glow,” the chirping of crickets announces that this glorious time is about to vanish with the coming change, hence the gradual “Grace”. Such small, unnoticed creatures gather, just like Keats’s “swallows,” in communion with Mother Nature, and their song or “spectral Canticle” becomes the symbol of nature’s winter sleep or “Repose.” This realization brings the poet much sadness and loneliness; she starts to remember the many summers she lost before (Interpretive Biography 185–7):

Further in Summer than the Birds

Pathetic from the Grass

A minor Nation celebrates

Its unobtrusive Mass.

No Ordinance be seen

So gradual the Grace

A pensive Custom it becomes

Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquiest felt at Noon

When August burning low

Arise this spectral Canticle

Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace

No Furrow on the Glow

Yet a Druidic Difference

Enhances Nature now

(Johnson, *CP* 485–6)

The cricket is in the focus of dramatic activity, while the narrator, who responds, interprets, meditates and feels sorrow and loneliness, is kept in the background of events. Dickinson usually takes the perspective of the observer in writing her poems; she may even sometimes, as in this poem, seem passive and still while the outer world is active and vigorous. Locating herself in the landscape, she sensitively reacts to surroundings; in the centre of experience, she exposes her deepest feelings and sentiments.

The choice of the cricket as a symbol of change is so striking; it further reflects Dickinson's close observation of natural objects as well as her powerful imagination that connects such an ordinary natural phenomenon with a deep philosophical meaning. However, Keats earlier used the same image in his poem "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" (1816), while meditating on the continuity of natural beauty in spite of the change of seasons:

The poetry of earth is never dead.

When all the birds are faint with the hot sun

And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run

From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead—

That is the grasshopper's. He takes the lead



In summer luxury; he has never done  
With his delights, for when tired out with fun  
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.  
The poetry of earth is ceasing never.  
On a lone winter evening, when the frost  
Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills  
The cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,  
And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,  
The grasshopper's among some grassy hills. (Allott 98)

Despite the change of seasons, nature goes on to be beautiful and the natural world powerfully renews itself. The octave presents the “grasshopper” as a poet who persistently works at his melodious song, while other natural creatures are languidly still, tired and lazy, seeking shelter of the hot summer weather. The sestet develops the idea, as the silence of the “long winter evening” is equally interrupted by the “cricket’s song,” which merrily brings warmth to frosty surroundings. While the octave and the sestet respectively compare a hot summer day and a long frosty winter evening, both notably tackle the same idea: the octave starts with “The poetry of earth is never dead” and the idea is further expanded and emphasized by the opening line of the sestet: “The poetry of earth is ceasing never.” The continuous chirping of the grasshopper and the cricket symbolizes the endless lifecycle of nature. While most natural creatures tend to experience change in a sense with the seasonal change, for example, birds migrate,

grasshoppers and crickets are there everywhere throughout the year. The two poems present Keats and Dickinson as keen observers of natural phenomena as well as reflecting their closeness to nature.

The reclusive poet found in nature the invisible realities of faith, life, death and eternity, which nineteenth-century American society failed to provide. Her solitude was a requirement for her mystical experience; her withdrawal acted as her own special way of exploring transcendent life. Dickinson's lonely quest for such universal, permanent truths started primarily from her own worldly existence. Although Dickinson lived in a relatively limited space, she was fully aware of the potentialities of her own surroundings. Her domestic space, as reflected in her work, was intensely charged with boundless opportunities to transcend the spatial physical barrier into the most spiritual realm of unsaid and unrecorded truths. Her work reaches out to complex thoughts and emotions and presents her as a poet who has an awed apprehension of the metaphysical world. The representation of nature in Dickinson's poems is the result of meticulous processes of contemplation and thinking. Moreover, her poetic expressions are not the result of immediate, spontaneous recording, but rather are the outcome of thoughtful processes of revising and editing. Kay Cornelius persuasively argues that Dickinson, in her own seclusion, closely observes natural phenomena, carefully examines and analyses them, and then expresses her own ideas and impressions in "concise,

yet strikingly original words” (36). Dickinson’s personal habit of observing the outer world from behind her bedroom window, in addition to her own study of botany at Mount Holyoke Seminary and Amherst College, gives her deep insights into nature. McChesney argues that Dickinson’s love for nature started very early in her life; while her father and brother were engaged with public planting of trees, she was more occupied with studying and discovering the life of tiny natural aspects like an insect or a leaf. Later on, in her poetry, the scope of her perspective of the world was expanded as she attempted to relate such small natural phenomena to the infinite universe (51). Thus, she finds in the chirping of crickets a sign of seasonal change—a natural phenomenon that is not often perceived in such an unusual attitude. In poem 794, sometimes titled “Summer Shower” (1863), the contemplation of falling soft drops of rain brings her to the realization that even such minute aspects of nature are so precious and valuable. Dickinson thought that such unnoticed tiny details of natural processes entail much knowledge and wisdom. She compares the falling drops to “pearls” in terms of their worth: “Were they pearls– / What necklaces could be.” The summer showers’ “Fete” represents an inspirational moment to Dickinson, in which nature promises the possibility of happiness. The way in which the landscape reacts to falling mild summer showers reflects harmony in nature; the drops

“kissed the eaves” and “made the gables laugh.” Rain drops so gently and brings life, hope and happiness to everything:

The Birds jocosely sung—

The Sunshine threw his Hat away—

The Bushes – spangles flung – (Johnson, *CP* 387–8)

Again, in poem 333 (1862), Dickinson’s careful observation of the minutest objects of the natural world is clearly manifested. Dickinson’s persistent pursuit of beauty in the humblest elements of nature reflects her own self-image as a neglected yet creative person. Accordingly, she repeatedly identifies herself with such simple natural elements as flowers and even hay, as she does in this poem. The typically Romantic pastoral setting, depicted in peaceful images, tells the life story of the “simple Green” grass and its eventual death by turning into hay. The grass is “too common” to be noticed; it has “so little” to do in life. However, by examining the ways in which it is related to other natural objects, the poet succeeds in turning it into an emblem of silent kindness and beauty. Out of admiration, she ends the poem with her wish to be hay: “I wish I were a Hay.” The way in which Dickinson transcends the Romantic pastoral mask to reach such sublime truths defines her as a sensitive Romantic poet. Her study of natural sciences brings her to a wonderful precision in expressing her natural subject, and enables her to approach such less beautiful aspects of nature in an attractive and memorable way. The grass is portrayed

as a humble, unnoticed natural element, yet it is harmoniously connected to the organic web of the universe:

The Grass so little has to do –

A Sphere of simple Green –

With only Butterflies to brood

And Bees to entertain –

And stir all day to pretty Tunes

The Breezes fetch along –

And hold the Sunshine in its lap

And bow to everything –

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearls –

And make itself so fine

(Johnson, *CP* 157)

By the repetition of “And,” Dickinson is listing the multiple tasks done by the grass; by beginning most of her lines with “And” she is attracting attention to the importance of the “so little” things that grass has to do.

Dickinson’s relation to the natural world has been central to her thought, an affinity that developed throughout her life as expressed in her poetry. While Whitman addresses the thrush so intimately saying: “dear brother,” she prefers to use the word “fellow” to talk about natural creatures. She describes a garden snake as “A narrow Fellow in the Grass” in poem 986, and she also addresses the worm eaten by

“A Bird that came down the Walk,” poem 328 (1862), with the same verbal intimacy:

He bit an Angeworm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw.

(Johnson, *CP* 156)

In her poem 986, sometimes titled “The Snake” (1865), Dickinson expresses her close relation to natural creatures, which she personifies as “nature’s people:”

Several of Nature’s people

I know, and they know me;

I feel for them a transport

Of cordiality –

(Johnson, *CP* 460)

This sense of “cordiality” is reflected in many of her poems tackling her close, intimate relation to nature. In poem 111 (1859), the speaker is at ease with nature on a summer day; the poem portrays the reaction of the inhabitants of the woods to her coming:

The Bee is not afraid of me.

I know the Butterfly.

The pretty people in the Woods

Receive me cordially–

The Brooks laugh louder when I come–

The Breezes madder play;

Wherefore mine eye thy silver mists,

Wherefore, Oh Summer's Day?

(Johnson, *CP* 53)

Dickinson's interest in nature clearly links her to the Romantic poets, though her approach to the natural world also marks a departure from typical Romantic views. Dickinson's vision of nature usually implies a sense of estrangement from nature as well as an expression of frustration and pain resulting from her failure to come to terms with the universe. In poem 1202, "The Frost was never seen" (1871), Dickinson uses the frost as a metaphor of her doubt and anxiety concerning nature. Being not able to determine how and when the frost comes, the poet sees its quick unexpected coming as sinister and focuses on its destructive aspects:

The Frost was never seen—

If met, too rapid passed,

Or in too unsubstantial Team —

The Flowers notice first

A Stranger hovering round

A Symptom of alarm

In Villages remotely set

But search effaces him

Till some retrieveless Night

Our Vigilance at waste

The Garden gets the only shot

That never could be traced.

(Johnson, *CP* 531)

No matter how vigilant we are, the frost comes suddenly and quickly as a gunshot affecting the sensitive, vulnerable “Flowers,” hence “The Garden gets the only shot.” Such despair leads the poet to the realization that it is not only the frost that we know nothing about; it is rather nature, life and death. Therefore, the frost turns into a metaphor of the human state of ignorance and doubt:

Unproved is much we know–

Unknown the worst we fear–

Of Strangers is the Earth the Inn

Of Secrets is the Air–

(Johnson, *CP* 531)

Considering the similarity of images and the echo of phrases, Diehl examines Dickinson’s poem in the context of Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight” (1798), which she sees as its “parent text” (10). In “Frost at Midnight,” Coleridge expresses the way in which natural scenery affects the workings of the poet’s mind; it examines the Romantic relation between nature and imagination. The midnight silent frosty landscape provokes the poet, in his solitude except for his “cradled infant” sleeping peacefully by his side, to muse upon the future through reflections of the past. The way in which the frost works outdoors silently at night brings people to be shut into their houses seeking warmth and rest and prepares the landscape, both indoors and outdoors, to work upon the poet’s imagination. In such a “strange and



extreme silentness,” gazing upon “the thin blue flame” of fire silently fluttering, the poet remembers his own childhood:

Only that film, which fluttered on the grate,  
Still flutters there, the sole unquiet thing.  
Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature  
Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,  
Making it a companionable form,  
Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit  
By its own moods interprets, every where  
Echo or mirror seeking of itself,  
And makes a toy of Thought.

But O! how oft,  
How oft, at school, with most believing mind,  
Presageful, have I gazed upon the bars,  
To watch that fluttering *stranger* !.... (Keach 231–2)

The poet finds in his companion, the film on the fire, the expression of his thoughts and the interpretation of his “idling Spirit.” In English culture, such thin flames of fire are called strangers as they portend the arrival of some absent friend; the poet similarly finds “that film” to interpret his past state of expectation as a school boy exploring the world. The memories of his childhood bring him to the realization that it was not the typical Wordsworthian happy time, as Coleridge was raised in the city of London, “pent ’mid cloisters dim, / And saw

nought lovely but the sky and stars.” Accordingly, he wishes his son a much happier childhood:

But *thou* , my babe! shalt wander like a breeze  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould

Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (Keach 232)

The Romantic image of the son wandering “like a breeze” around lakes, sandy coasts and mountains, and beneath the clouds reflecting the earthly landscape, expresses the Romantic vision of man’s communion with nature. Being that close to nature, the veils are dropped and the enigmas of nature’s divine “eternal language” are solved; nature starts to reveal its mysteries to man and inspire him with the questions and answers that “shall mould [his] spirit.” Coleridge’s past expectancy as a child parallels his future expectations for his son now as a father. The poem ends with the marvellous image of harmony with nature: when nature becomes the “Great universal Teacher” of man, he will find happiness and beauty in all of its

various moods. With the seasonal cycle, nature looks “sweet” in every season; listing such different faces of natural beauty brings the poem again to its opening key-image of the frost:

whether the eave-drops fall

Heard only in the trances of the blast,

Or if the secret ministry of frost

Shall hang them up in silent icicles,

Quietly shining to the quiet Moon. (Keach 233)

The image of the “silent icicles, / Quietly shining to the quiet Moon” portrays the process of Romantic communion with nature; as with the moon, nature influences the poet’s mind, which, in its part, silently responds to nature’s invisible inspiration. Therefore, the frost, with its creative powers, becomes an icon of nature’s bounty.

Diehl asserts that there is a general pattern characterizing Dickinson’s relation to the Romantics. The American Romantic uses a positive, creative image and transmutes it so as to reflect her own painful division from nature. The two poems use the image of frost; however, Dickinson’s vision of the frost is more apocalyptic, while Coleridge views it as a more productive and regenerative natural force. For Dickinson, the frost is a “Symptom of alarm,” but for Coleridge, frost’s “secret ministry” is a sign of creativity and bounty. Dickinson’s poem is an expression of her doubt and anxiety, but Coleridge’s is

ultimately a statement of faith in the beneficent power of nature (51–4).

Dickinson's nature poems are deeply steeped in Romanticism; they specifically relate her to both the established English and the newly emerging American Romantic traditions. Most importantly, she succeeds in disguising such Romantic echoes with her unique approach to typical Romantic themes. Dickinson sometimes adheres to the Romantic tradition of representing nature as an endless source of beauty and life, as she does in poem 790, "Mother Nature" (1863), where she develops the typical Romantic image of nature as a caring, gentle and patient mother. However, in many other poems she approaches nature with much scepticism and doubt; her anxiety stems from her inability to understand nature and her failure to unite with it. Poem 328, "A Bird came down the Walk" (1862), displays how Dickinson, while following the Romantic tradition of writing on birds, can not avoid her troubled feeling of uncertainty about nature. While depicting the bird devouring an Anglemorm, biting it "in halves" and eating "the fellow raw," Dickinson presents the bird as a symbol of the vigorous, untamed nature separating it from us as human. This difference between man and nature becomes so clear with the speaker's attempts to humanize the bird's behaviour while eating his meal:

A Bird came down the Walk–

He did not know I saw—

He bit an Angeworm in halves

And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew

From a convenient Grass—

And then hopped sidewise to the Wall

To let a Beetle pass—

(Johnson, *CP* 156)

The speaker adheres to the established Romantic tradition of watching and contemplating birds; however, the poem departs from tradition through reinforcing the savage nature hidden behind pretty and gentle appearances.

Dickinson's poems present snapshots of the natural world; she attempts to capture these unique moments, which open the door for the poet to access nature, exploring its mysteries and wonders. Cornelius calls these moments the "telling moments," since with their ability to bridge the gap between the sublime and the actual, they can tell much of the truth about life and our human condition:

Dickinson intended to encompass the truth of life and human experience and then capture those telling moments and recreate them through her poems. It was a large order, indeed... Dickinson sought rare moments when the barrier that separates the ordinary world from the sublime drops away. The overwhelming awe connected with these transcendent moments had an element of fear or terror, especially when the poet contemplated the great mysteries of death and immortality. (37)

Cornelius emphasizes Dickinson's quest for those "rare moments" in poems like "The Snake," where her ability to examine, expose, analyse and interpret is clearly manifested. In "The Snake," Dickinson's encounter with nature does not bring typical joy and tranquillity, but rather displays some threatening, dark side of nature (38). In this poem, Dickinson's poetic persona appears to be a little child, whose vision of the universe is innocent and romantic. The child, "barefoot" out in the garden, can not recognize the danger he or she is exposed to; the child mistakenly thinks of the snake as "a whip-lash." The snake stands for the dangerous, dark side of nature, for gained experience corrupting our pure innocence, and equally for evil, since it is held in religious tradition as a symbol of Satan. The way in which Dickinson tackles the duality of innocence and experience significantly echoes Blake, whose Romantic vision of the universe was equally expressed from an innocent child-like perspective. Dickinson, though expressing her intimate relation to natural creatures, can not avoid the passive feelings associated with the encounter with the snake; the snake looks attractive as well as fearful to the young child. The fear and terror associated with this experience bring one of those special moments: the image of innocent humanity in confrontation with destructive natural forces evokes overwhelming awe. While the sublime experience is traditionally associated with greatness or vast magnitude in external nature, Dickinson's

unorthodox evocation of the sublime is associated with small, tiny aspects of nature— a garden snake in this case. Yet, Dickinson shares the Romantic artist’s belief that these moments, with such strong overwhelming emotions of mixed terror and awe, are a vital source of aesthetic experience.

Dickinson believes that the sublime experience associated with these “telling moments” can be achieved through poetry as she states in one of her letters to Thomas Wentworth Higginson: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?” (Todd 265). The intensity of overwhelming emotions released by reading poetry gives access to sublimity. Cornelius further argues that Dickinson’s use of language to express such moments is equally unique; her words are chosen with much care and economy. Using highly figurative language, which can not be literally translated, enables Dickinson to reach deeper levels of human emotional experience. The way Dickinson expresses her fear of the garden snake is original and it reflects her unique style:

But never met this Fellow

Attended, or alone

Without a tighter breathing

And Zero at the Bone—

(Johnson, *CP* 460)

Inability to breathe is a typical sign of fear, while the expression “Zero at the Bone” is a peculiar metaphor to express how the intense feeling of terror deeply penetrates to “the Bone” (37–8). The overwhelming feeling of awe leaves you numbed and empty. You are isolated and absorbed within the experience of terror; the circle shape of “zero” imprisons and detains you. By using this condensed image “Zero at the Bone,” Dickinson is squeezing words in order to focus strongly on the sublime, emotional experience.

Crucial to Dickinson’s view of nature is her anxiety about the destructive power threatening human as well as natural creatures. Poem 986, “The Snake,” reveals Dickinson’s occasionally sceptical approach to nature; the poet can not trust the natural world with its dark, mysterious side. Though she still holds the same Romantic view of nature as a deeply spiritual force, Dickinson sees nature in a much more sinister light as a dangerous enemy. Diehl argues that even in Dickinson’s most typically Romantic poems, tackling natural subjects like flowers and bees, she can not avoid expressing her anxieties about nature. Her own awareness of the decaying, destructive aspects of nature makes her perceive nature “as an antagonistic force that must be subdued in order to be understood” (42). Diehl further argues that Dickinson repeatedly attempts to control nature, and when she fails she turns to create her own internal natural landscape which her imagination can control (42). In poem 328, “A Bird came down the



Walk” (1862), the bird image represents the beauty as well as the dangers of nature. The poem also represents the type of internal natural landscape Dickinson creates to manage and control.

Dickinson’s death poems provide a special access to the sublime with their thoughts of afterlife and immortality as well as their dramatization of the physical processes of death and burial itself. In his biographical study of Dickinson’s poetic outcome, Thomas H. Johnson dedicated a complete chapter to the examination of her death poetry, out of his belief that the theme of mortality is so central to Dickinson’s canon. Considering the various responses to death recorded in her poetry, Johnson argues that although Dickinson attempted to approach death from different angles, it remained to her an unsolved riddle. She sometimes expresses her fear of death as the mysterious, terrifying final destination, as the inevitable deceptive scheme of a deity; and at other times she welcomes death as the everlasting relief from all life’s discomfort and misery, as the gateway to glorious eternity and happiness. Johnson further argues that Dickinson’s death poems fall into three categories: those describing the act of dying where death is tackled as the physical end of the body; those meditating on death as the transitional bridge between mortal and immortal lives; and the elegies and epitaphs dedicated to paying homage to her loved ones (Interpretive Biography 203–4).

Dickinson's preoccupation with death is justified by the fact that she spent most of her life emotionally, intellectually and even physically surrounded by it. Living so close to the town cemetery, she was confronted by death scenes almost everyday; she could often watch funerals from her bedroom window. In addition, the nineteenth century was a time when people were much more exposed to death than nowadays; Dickinson herself suffered the sudden, tragic loss of many of her beloved ones. In more intellectual terms, the New England Puritan view of death heavily shaped the concepts of American people who were urged to think of the afterlife and prepare for death.

In her most famous poem 712, "Because I could not stop for Death" (1863), it becomes clear how Dickinson's view of death is closely related to her belief in eternal life. Death is personified as a lover or a suitor; it is portrayed as a gentleman who kindly takes the poet on a journey. She remains still in the moving carriage, as the courteous suitor drives slowly, out of consideration and tact:

We slowly drove— He knew no haste

And I had put away

My labor and my leisure too,

For his Civility—

(Johnson, *CP* 350)

It is the allegorical journey of life starting with childhood, hence, "We passed the School, where Children strove," then maturity, hence, "We

passed the Fields of Gazing Grain,” and eventually aging and death, hence, “We passed the Setting Sun.” Ironically, the images of futurity “Children” and “Grain” lead to death. Now it is rather the sun that passes the travellers; their death is implied by both darkness and coldness. The activity and vigour are gone and “The Dews drew quivering and chill.” The speaker is not properly dressed for the journey; she wears only very light clothes, “Gossamer,” “Gown,” “Tippet” and “Tulle,” perhaps she is not yet ready for death, though these garments might be suggestive of shrouds. As the story unfolds, they reach their new “House”— the grave as presented in such a superb gothic image:

We paused before a House that seemed

A Swelling of the Ground

(Johnson, *CP* 350)

She is now back to the womb of the earth, waiting for a new delivery— a new eternal life:

Since then— ’tis Centuries— and yet

Feels shorter than the Day

I first surmised the Horses’ Heads

Were toward Eternity—

(Johnson, *CP* 350)

Significantly, with leaving the world-bound life and starting a new one in the grave, the speaker shifts from past to present tense as well as from concrete to abstract imagery. We are not told what “Eternity” can look like; we are just left with this state of expectation and the

sense of immediately living in a grave. Dickinson's response to death in this poem introduces it as a pleasant, natural, and expected, hence, "surmised," agent in the typical journey of life, but of the afterlife we have no knowledge. "Immortality" has been there from the beginning of the poem, a silent, passive passenger on the same carriage driven by death. Remarkably, the final image of "the Horses" summons the biblical image of the horses of the Apocalypse signalling the Day of Judgement. Even more remarkable, however, is the strange sensation we have at the end of the poem of hearing a voice from beyond the grave.

The character of the experience tackled by Dickinson in this poem evokes the sublime. Gary Lee Stonum, in his study of Dickinson's sublime experience titled The Dickinson Sublime (1990), finds out that her poems conform to Thomas Weiskel's structural analysis of the sublime experience during the Romantic period. According to Weiskel, the Romantic sublime experience, whether philosophical or literary, goes through three stages: the first stage presents an ordinary individual passing through a normal daily routine; in the second stage this individual is suddenly overwhelmed by an ecstatic moment that makes him lose control over the self and thought; with the third stage comes the illuminating, visionary result when the individual reaches a resolution. Dickinson's poems generally tend to "hover" between the second and third stages, in the sense that ecstasy

does not lead to such a visionary resolution (Deppman 6–7). In poem 712, “Because I could not stop for Death,” the main focus is on the ecstatic journey with death in all its exhilarating details. However, the reader is left without any clear or categorical statement about either death or immortality.

The poetic power of Dickinson’s work lies in large measure in its ability to make the invisible, transcendent life so tangible, vivid and immediate. The way she brings the reader intimately close to sublime transcendent experiences, whether exploring the wonders of nature or the mysteries of death and the afterlife, is a driving force in her poems:

This sense of the intimate proximity of transcendent experience reappears again and again in dozens of disguises in Dickinson’s poetry, sometimes as a subject of celebration, sometimes as a source of pain, but always central to the experience of the poem. (Anderson 209)

Within the limitations of her short poems, her focus on a single moment or a snapshot of life helps her to penetrate deeply to the core of the recorded experience, bringing her reader face to face with sublime thoughts and feelings.

Addressing Dickinson’s work in a broader transatlantic context, it exhibits some measure of her concealed and complex relation to Romantic thought, as well as her lasting dialogues with the Romantics. She shares with the Romantic poets the interest in nature, and she

displays, in some poems, a typically positive attitude towards the outer world as a source of joy and beauty. However, her anxiety with nature overwhelms most of her works, as she cannot avoid her preoccupation with the dark, destructive natural powers. Given such a state of uncertainty, her encounters with the universe bring her despair and pain for her failure to come to terms with it. Dickinson strives to end her separation from nature, but she turns out to be limited and unable in the face of the tremendous power of the world. Accordingly, she retreats to her own controlled natural landscapes, where through her focus on a single, simple snapshot, she surprisingly generates many sublime feelings and transcendent thoughts. In this way, she perhaps departs from the conventional Romantic association of the sublime with immense, awesome scenes. Her poetry is profoundly implicated in the Romantic legacy; it both draws upon and extends the limits of Romantic experience. Dickinson transforms the Romantic ideals she appropriates for the sake of her anxious quest for acceptance. Given the extraordinarily isolated life she led, her verse astonishingly exhibits the extensive cultural horizons she reflected upon, and the far-reaching experiences she explored.

## Conclusion

After the political separation of America from the British Empire in 1783, the new nation struggled to break free from the intellectual and cultural dominance of Britain. The nineteenth century was a turning point in the American quest for cultural independence; the period was charged with nationalistic calls to cut loose from the authority of British culture and produce new forms of thought and art more suitable to the American taste. By the middle of the nineteenth century the attempts to establish an American literary tradition were beginning to bear fruit, with the emergence of distinctive American poetic voices. The new national poetic canon was enthusiastically celebrated by American people and men of letters as being novel, authentic and peculiarly American. In spite of such claims of originality, lines of continuity with the mother British literary tradition can still be detected and traced. Among various literary movements, Romanticism has been found to be the most influential on the developing American poetic tradition. American engagements with the ideals, aesthetics, and ideologies of Romanticism frequently masked more complex materialist and imperialist cultural concerns that were at odds with the idealist and spiritual Romantic ideas upon which American culture and society were founded. The roots of the twentieth-century imperialist America can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the former colony started its transformation

into a colonizer. This thesis has engaged with transatlantic Romanticism; it has been particularly concerned with the Romantic origins of nineteenth-century American poetic tradition. The five chapters of the thesis are informed by an awareness of the intricate and sensitive nature of Anglo-American cultural and literary relations during the nineteenth century, and how they address the ways in which major American poets of the time perceived, responded to and reformulated the Romantic legacy.

This thesis has largely avoided examining the reciprocal nature of Anglo-American literary relationship, adhering to my introductory assertion that the focus would lie on the debt owed by major nineteenth-century American poets to their Romantic precursors. Today, there is an interest in synthesizing the artificial divisions of American and English literatures in the light of the intricate, dynamic links between the two traditions. Key studies in the area confirm the circulation of ideas around the edges of the Atlantic, and assume a vision of one transatlantic literary culture. This study limits itself to certain aspects of Romantic influence on nineteenth-century American poetry; it looks at traceable lines of continuity between the two canons while examining the situation of selected American poets in relation to tradition and originality. Charged with the mood of resistance to British cultural supremacy, nineteenth-century American poets maintain excessive claims of authenticity and novelty, while still



drawing from the mother tradition. Prompted by Richard Gravil's call for further exploration of the "lost continent of literary exchange" (xix) between American and British literary cultures, the thesis situates borrowed Romantic ideals alongside fresh impulses endowed by the American experience to Romanticism. Throughout the thesis I have attempted to read selected nineteenth-century American poems against British Romantic models, highlighting reformulated Romantic ideals as well as novel American contributions. Although in my study I have concentrated on a selection of poetic works that I feel best exemplifies transatlantic Romantic dialogues, my work by no means claims to be all-inclusive; other nineteenth-century American poems merit further study and examination.

Nineteenth-century American poets shared with the Romantics an intense interest in nature. Holding the typical Romantic stand of viewing nature as a source of authentic knowledge and sublime truth, as well as a haven with regenerative powers for the human soul, American Romantics went further to rely on nature in defining themselves as Americans. For the Americans, nature was regarded as the source of national identity in the evident absence of a corpus of defining historical events. Bryant asserts the magnificent image of wild, virgin American scenery that surpasses European landscape, packed with historical associations. Both Longfellow and Emerson

called upon American men of letters to muse upon the native landscape, seeking inspiration for enduring, genuine art.

Not only did nature inspire the nineteenth-century American artist of the content of his work; it also shaped its form. Emerson echoes Coleridge in his ideas of the organic form; he shares with Coleridge the belief that literary forms should innately flow from nature instead of following mechanical laws of established decorum. Whitman defines the role of the American poet in the light of American nature, which the poet should express and sing in his attempt to achieve a measure of greatness and grandeur similar to its own. In his representation of nature, Whitman marks a departure from the orthodox Romantic fascination with rustic, rural landscape, through his emphasis on the potential capability of urban settings to evoke similar sublime thoughts and spiritual experiences. Equally, he shifts from the Romantic conventional assumption that physical existence needs to stop so that the soul can transcend to elevated spiritual realms, asserting the essentiality of both the body and the soul for mystical experience.

Caught in the Romantic dilemma of coming to terms with the outside world, Dickinson intensely expresses the painful, shattering experience of the human soul, seeking reunion with the universe. Confined to her seclusion, Dickinson portrays the domestic natural environment, and succeeds in evoking a sense of sublimity and awe

out of her encounters with nature. In her poems, Dickinson presents a new and different vision of the universe, where the seeming idiosyncrasies are alive, related and meaningful—such an outlook is the essence of Romanticism. Starting from Romantic premises, nineteenth-century American poets utilize native dialect, landscape, history and characters in order to express uniquely American issues.

Developing a chronological line of enquiry, my thesis highlights the paradox of writers seeking to establish an original, distinctive American literary canon while still heavily deriving ideas and techniques from other, non-American sources. Steeped in the Romantic legacy, nineteenth-century American poets managed to naturalize their borrowings within the American literary imagination. These tensions between tradition and novelty have been seen by many critics as anticipating modern anxieties concerning American identity. This study has attempted to contribute towards a novel evaluation of transatlantic Romanticism, and thereby open the way for a more informed positioning of Romanticism within American literary culture.

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