The Perfect Poet:
the Verse of Ralph Waldo Emerson

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Ralph Waldo Emerson published 166 poems between 1829 and 1882, the year of his death, and 67 translations, most of them in three collections of verse: *Poems* (1847), *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1867), and *Selected Poems* (1876).¹ He began writing poetry in 1812, when he was nine.² By October 1842, he had published half of the 18 or 20 poems that still tend to represent him in anthologies. Between 1840 and 1844, he printed 24 poems in the *Dial*, a quarterly magazine he founded with Margaret Fuller and edited in its last two years. He published only eight poems between 1847 and 1857. Of these, “Brahma,” Emerson’s paraphrase of a passage in the *Vishnu Purana*, is the most important. It was parodied 27 times within two months of its printing (CW 9: lxxxi, lxxxv, n. 66). His son, Edward, reported that Emerson “never failed to be completely overcome with laughter” when anyone recited the “imitation” beginning: “If the gray tom-cat thinks he sings,/Or if the song think it be sung.”³ Emerson was not without a sense of humor. Nor was he glib. Pressed once to declare his belief in the immortality of the soul, he said, “Madam, we are not swill.”⁴

Emerson’s verse has not been called “swill” by most of his critics, but,

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like swill, it has been left in the glass by most of them, who favor his prose, his journals in particular. “Like Cicero perhaps,” Emerson’s aunt told him in 1822, “your verse will not be valued because your prose is so much better.” Mary Moody Emerson spoke accurately. Against the bad, lukewarm, and mixed reviews his verse received over the decades, Emerson held his own. In 1873, he told the Irish poet William Allingham: “If I don’t know what poetry is, I don’t know anything.” This word to Allingham restates what in 1852 Emerson had judged “the best words on record of Thomas Moore”: “Moore said, ‘If Burke or Bacon were not poets, (measured lines not being necessary to constitute one,) he did not know what poetry meant.”

Emerson knew what poetry meant, but he knew something else too. In 1876, he seems to have considered publishing the following verse, which he wrote in 1845, in his Selected Poems:

Thus the high Muse treated me—
Directly never greeted me,
But when she spread her dearest spells,
Feigned to speak to some one else;
I was free to overhear,
Or I might at will forbear;
Not the less that causal word,
Thus at random overheard,

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Was the symphony of spheres,
And proverb of a thousand years (W 9: 324)\textsuperscript{8}

Remembering these lines in 1855, he wrote:

My best thought came from others. I heard in their words my own meaning, but a deeper sense than they put on them: and could well and best express myself in other people’s phrases, but to finer purpose than they knew (W 9: 506).

Emerson could not say of himself what he said of Michelangelo in “The Problem”: “He builde better than he knew.” I builde better than they knew was as close as he could come to that. Hence this self-portrait, as Cupid, in “Initial, Daemonic, and Celestial Love” (“IDCL”):

Oft he keeps his fine ear strained,
And Reason on her tiptoe pained
For aery intelligence,
And for strange coincidence.
But it touches his quick heart
When Fate by omens takes his part,
And chance-dropped hints from Nature’s sphere
Deeply soothe his anxious ear. (W 9: 106)

But Emerson was going over old ground in 1845, 1855, and 1876. He was aware of the derivative character of his verse, or of his deficiency as a poet, in 1831, when he called himself

A dull uncertain brain
But gifted yet to know
That God has Seraphim who go
Singing an immortal strain
Immortal here below\(^9\)
I know the mighty bards
I listen when they sing
....
And if to me it is not given
To fetch one ingot thence
Of the unfading gold of Heaven... (ECPT 340)

In 1863, Emerson writes his full apology to himself:

I am a bard least of bards. I cannot, like them, make lofty arguments in stately continuous verse, constraining the rocks, trees, animals, & the periodic stars to say my thoughts—for that is the gift of great poets; but I am a bard, because I stand near them, & apprehend all they utter, & with pure joy hear that which I also would say, &, moreover, I speak interruptedly words & half stanzas which have like scope & aim (EHJ 508).

Emerson is trying to insure himself after an accident. Starting from a “least” with its “I cannot,” he moves to a “but” with its “because,” then mounts by its tacit “can” (“stand & apprehend”) and emphatic “all” to the summit of

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\(^9\) See Emerson’s essay on “Milton” in CW 10: 93, and Paradise Regained, 4: 356-62, where Milton’s Jesus tells the classicist Satan that the orators of Greece and Rome are “far beneath” “our Prophets”, in whom “is plainest taught, and easiest learnt, / What makes a Nation happy, and keeps it so.” Emerson adapts the lines in “Ode to Beauty”: “Olympian bards who sung / Divine Ideas below, / Which always find us young, / And always keep us so.” These lines are also in Emerson’s ear in “A dull uncertain brain”: “That God has Seraphim who go / Singing an immortal strain / Immortal here below” (ECPT 340).
“moreover” and “like.” “A dull uncertain brain” has the same compensatory grammar. But in “Monadnoc,” “Woodnotes I,” “Woodnotes II,” “Fable,” “To Rhea,” “Song of Nature,” and “Sea-Shore,” all published before 1863, Emerson does “constrain” “the rocks, trees, animals, & the periodic stars to say” his thoughts, if roughly, topically, and discontinuously. Nor are his “arguments” less than “lofty.” He takes positions, he makes assertions, he defines, and he draws conclusions:

Beauty is unripe childhood’s cheat (“Each and All”)
Line in nature is not found / Unit and universe are round (“Uriel”)
Every thing is kin of mine (“Mithridates”)
One thing is forever good; / That one thing is Success (“Fate”)
Talents differ; all is well and wisely put (“Fable”)
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being (“The Rhodora”)
If I could put my woods in song...All men would to my gardens throng (“My Garden”)

More than that, though, Emerson in his verse is publishing his autobiography. “Genius,” he writes in May 1859, “never needs to allude to his personality, as every person & creature he has seen serves him as an exponent of his private experience. So he communicates all his secrets, and endless autobiography, & never lets on that he means himself” (EHJ 485).

Emerson had long known that he had “the talent,” as noted in 1840, “of tacking together the old & the new” (JMN 7: 490). Reading King Lear, for example, Emerson could hear that 1604 play in “the very dialect of 1843,” but his “Ode to Beauty,” published that year in the Dial, struck Henry David Thoreau as inferior to the prose Emerson published in the same issue (a “Letter to Contributors” and a lecture on “The Comic”). “I have a good deal of fault to find with your Ode to Beauty,” Thoreau wrote to him:
The tune is altogether unworthy of the thoughts. You slope too quickly to the rhyme, as if that trick had better be performed as soon as possible, or as if you stood over the line with a hatchet, and chopped off the verses as they came out, some short and some long. But give us a long reel, and we’ll cut it up to suit ourselves. It sounds like parody. “Thee knew I of old,” “Remediless thirst,” are some of those stereotyped lines. ..I had rather have the thought come ushered with a flourish of oaths and curses. Yet I love your poetry as I do little else that is near and recent, especially when you get fairly round the end of the line, and are not thrown back upon the rocks.10

“Slope too quickly to the rhyme,” “sounds like parody,” “stereotyped lines”: these criticisms, which hold for many poems besides “Ode to Beauty,” and for many critics besides Thoreau in the past 175 years, may have prompted Emerson to change a word or two, but no more, because if “the benevolence of God”11 had taught him anything, it was that his “context” would be “justified” by others “in a very remote hereafter.”12 In tacking together the idiom of 1604 and the idiom of 1843 in his verse, Emerson made the result sound like neither idiom and like nobody else’s. In “Mithridates,” “Alphonso of Castile,” and the “Ode,” he catches up a fierce indicative mood from a Jacobean playwright, John Fletcher, in a passage from the latter’s Bonduca (c. 1613) that he copied in his journal. Emerson likes this heedless tone in his prose, too, and in “The Transcendentalist,” “The Conservative,” “Self-Reliance,” “Fate,” and “Considerations by the Way” gives way to it for paragraphs at a time, even pages:

Ye rogues, my company eat turf & talk not;
Timber they can digest & fight upon it;
Old mats & mud with spoons, rare meats, your shoes, slaves,
—Dare ye cry out of hunger & those extant?
Suck your swordhilts, ye slaves, if ye be valient,
Honor will make them marchpane. (JMN 7: 497)

Emerson approved the argument of the lines too—material doesn’t win wars, mind does—and uses versions of it in a number of his poems, as here in “Mithridates”:

I cannot spare water or wine,
Tobacco-leaf, or poppy, or rose;
From the earth-poles to the Line,
All between that works or grows,
Every thing is kin of mine.

Give me agates for my meat;
Give me cantharids to eat;
From air and ocean bring me foods,
From all zones and altitudes;—

From all natures, sharp and slimy,
Salt and basalt, wild and tame:
Tree and lichen, ape, sea-lion,
Bird, and reptile, be my game.

Emerson’s mind could handle anything, his virtue turn poison into marchpane. Accordingly, he told himself to insert the proverbs “The worse things are the better” and “Blessed be nothing at all” into “Circles,” an essay he was about
to publish in a volume of *Essays* he would offer as “an apology to my country for my apparent idleness” (JMN 7: 497, 404).

In 1878, Emerson “assured” Franklin Sanborn, an early Thoreau biographer who lived long enough to read Robert Frost’s first two books of poems in 1913 and 1914, that “it was settled that he could not himself write poetry; and a few moments after he added, ‘Others have found this out at last, but I could have told them so long ago.’” In those two remarks, Emerson summarized the case that had been built against his verse since 1847, and the defense he had been mounting since 1822, when his aunt reminded him that nobody reads Cicero’s verse. Emerson was 25 and unpublished when he wrote in his journal that the poems of Herbert, Shakespeare, Marvell, Herrick, Milton, and Ben Jonson

set me on speculations. They move my wonder at myself. They suggest the great endowments of the spiritual man. They open glimpses of the heaven that is in the intellect. When I am caught by a magic word & drop the book to explore the infinite charm—to run along the line of that ray—I feel the longevity of the mind; I admit the evidence of the immortality of the soul.\(^{14}\)

The “speculations” these poets set Emerson on are the positions and drifts of his verse: wonder at himself (“Woodnotes II,” “Monadnoc”), endowments of the spiritual man (“Guy,” “Love and Thought”), heaven in the intellect (“Ode,” “The Apology,” “Xenophanes”), longevity of the mind (“The Sphinx,” “Two Rivers,” “Waldeinsamkeit”), and evidence of the immortality of the soul (“Uriel,” “Brahma,” “Musketaquid”). Those who dislike these topics will probably dislike Emerson’s poetry. Those who read poetry, as Emerson did, for its “necessary and autobiographic basis,” may find that his poetry

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\(^{13}\) F. B. Sanborn, *The Personality of Emerson* (Boston: C. E. Goodspeed, 1903): 111.

interests them in the “two ways” he said Dante interested him (W 8: 31): “1. in the thought which makes or should make me a party to it—2. in the fact that a man said these things, thought these thoughts” (JMN 7: 499). Emerson talks, or sings, as if no other “thought” but his “should make me a party to it.” That moves my wonder at him.

His wonder at himself controls his poems, whether his titular subject is “The Sphinx”—

The Sphinx is drowsy,
    Her wings are furled;
Her ear is heavy,
    She broods on the world. (ECPT 5)

—or “Woodnotes”:

Lover of all things alive,
    Wonderer at all he meets,
Wonderer chiefly at himself,—
    Who can tell him what he is?
Or how meet in human elf
    Coming and past eternities? (ECPT 36)

Emerson was certain that he could “see, under a thin veil,” “the opinions, the feelings, even the incidents of the poet’s life, still reappearing” in his poems.15 The poet’s life he refers to here in 1838 is Milton’s; elsewhere it is Dante’s, Tennyson’s, Swedenborg’s, Goethe’s— or Byron’s: “What has Lord Byron at the bottom of his poetry, but, I am Byron the noble poet who am very clever but not popular in London?” (JMN 7: 320). When he read

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Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* in 1859, Emerson couldn’t praise the portrait of Merlin highly enough:

A collection there should be of those fables which are agreeable to the human mind. One is the orator or singer who can control all minds. The Perfect Poet again is described in Taliessin’s Songs, in the Mabinogion. Tennyson has drawn Merlin. (J 9: 208).

The fable of “the orator or singer who can control all minds” was certainly agreeable to Emerson’s mind. By putting “orator” before “singer,” he makes room for himself as an orator who describes “The Perfect Poet” to come.

He had been trying to do that for more than thirty years in his verse. By 1859, Emerson had made sketches of The Perfect Poet—of himself—in “The Sphinx,” “Uriel,” “The World-Soul,” “Woodnotes I,” “Woodnotes II,” “Monadnock,” “Merlin I,” “Merlin II,” “Bacchus,” “Saadi,” “May-Day,” “The Test,” “The Solution,” “Nature,” and “The Titmouse.” In *May-Day and Other Pieces*, “May-Day,” “Merlin’s Song,” “Sea-Shell,” and “Song of Nature” were further studies for the painting of The Perfect Poet. In 1876, Emerson extracted 120 lines from “May-Day” and framed them as “The Harp.” That, together with “Maiden Song of the Aeolian Harp,” he published in *Selected Poems*. In these, in “The Harp” especially, he perfected his doctrine of poetry—the control, the conduct of poetry—by eliminating the poet and replacing him with the wind-harp, since only that “is sure”:

One musician is sure,
His wisdom will not fail,
He has not tasted wine impure,
Nor bent to passion frail.
Age cannot cloud his memory,
Nor grief untune his voice,
Ranging down the ruled scale
From tone of joy to inward wail,
Tempering the pitch of all
In his windy cave.
He all the fables knows,
And in their causes tells,—
Knows Nature’s rarest moods,
Ever on her secret broods.
The Muse of men is coy,
Oft courted will not come;
In palaces and market squares
Entreated, she is dumb;
But my minstrel knows and tells
The counsel of the gods,
Knows of Holy Book the spells,
Knows the law of Night and Day,
And the heart of girl and boy,
The tragic and the gay,
And what is writ on Table Round
Of Arthur and his peers,
What sea and land discoursing say
In sidereal years.
He renders all his lore
In numbers wild as dreams,
Modulating all extremes,—
What the spangled meadow saith
To the children who have faith;
Only to children children sing,
Only to youth will spring be spring.
Who is the Bard thus magnified?
When did he sing? and where abide?

Chief of song where poets feast
Is the wind-harp which thou seest
In the casement at my side.

Aeolian harp,
How strangely wise thy strain! (ECPT 143-44, 223-24)

The poet is eliminated from the poetry, and poetry is purified. The wind-harp on the sill in the casement at Emerson’s side is almost omniscient, like Monadnoc, who knows many of the same things—which is impressive in both cases, all things considered. More important, the harp domesticates “the monstrous difference” beyond the wall and relieves Emerson of his effort at being one of “the great poets.”

Most poets failed to execute what Emerson called “the office of poetry.” They, along with most readers of it, resorted to poetry for the wrong reason. When “literature is resorted to as consolation, not as decalogue,” he told himself in 1845, “then is literature defamed & disgraced” (JMN 9: 162). Emerson’s poems are not consoling. They command. They ordain and enjoin. They reverse common sense, they refuse what most people think. The basis of each is a text, an order, a law, a moral, a god, a personification, an abstraction, an ideal. The poem affirms or supports that; and, as before a green screen on a film lot, Emerson make-believes:

Leaves twinkle, flowers like persons be,
And life pulsates in rock or tree. (“Saadi,” ECPT 102)

The lonely Earth amid the balls
That hurry through the eternal halls,
A makeweight flying to the void,
Supplemental asteroid,
Or compensatory spark,
Shoots across the neutral Dark. (“Compensation,” ECPT 199)

From his neural dark, Emerson directs the reader’s seeing, knowing, and thinking. A long passage from his journal, written at the time he was putting together the manuscript for Poems in 1846, shows him seeing his plan, which is “seemly and noble,” but also seeing its “details,” which are “melancholy” (E 328):

Byron is no poet: what did he know of the world & its Law, & Lawgiver? What moment had he of that mania which moulds history & man, and tough circumstance,—like wax? He had declamation; he had music, juvenile & superficial music. Even this is very rare, and we delight in it so much that Byron has obtained great fame by this fluency & music. It is delicious....The office of poetry I supposed was Tyrtaean,—consoling, indemnifying; and of the Uranian, deifying or imparadising. Homer did what he could,—& Callimachus, Pindar, & the Greek tragedians; Horace & Persius; Dante was faithful, & Milton, Shakspeare & Herbert. But how shall I find my heavenly bread in Tennyson? or in Milnes? in Lowell? or in Longfellow? Yet Wordsworth was mindful of the office....Yes, we want a poet, the genuine poet of our time, no parrot, & no child. The poets that we praise, or try to, the Brownings, Barretts, Bryants, Tennysons,— are all abortive Homers; they at least show tendency, the direction of Nature to the star in Lyra. Boys still whistle, and every newspaper & girl’s album attest the ineradicable appetite for melody. O no, we have not done with music, nor must console ourselves with prose poets...We wish the undrawn line of tendency to be drawn
for us. Where is the Euclid who can sum up these million errors, & compute the beautiful mean? We do not wish to make-believe be instructed; we wish to be ravished, inspired, and taught: we do not want prison melodies, nor Jim Crow songs, but the Godhead in music, as we have the Godhead in the Sky & in the creation. (JMN 9: 378-9)

I find it impossible to read most of Emerson’s poems as anything but an endless campaign of “make-believe” for “heavenly bread.” And as for his sense of the office of poetry, only Walt Disney, James Cameron, and Hayao Miyazaki have been able to take anything like Emerson’s imperatives seriously; and not even animation, CGI, and virtual reality have enabled something like the “indemnifying” and “imparadising” that Emerson saw in his mind’s eye:

Coin the daydawn into lines
In which its proper splendor shines;
Coin the moonlight into verse
Which all its marvels shall rehearse (ECPT 429)

O sun! take off thy hood of clouds,
O land! take off thy chain,
And fill the world with happy mood
And love from main to main (ECPT 430).

Teach me your mood, O patient stars!
Who climb each night the ancient sky,
Leaving on space no shade, no scars,
No trace of age, no fear to die (ECPT 430).

It would require an alternate universe to enact that legislative agenda, and Emerson didn’t want one. Thought sufficed for him, and “Utterance,” he
said, “is place enough” (JMN 5: 142). In his essay on “Love,” his allegiances are clear as the yields of his experience, and so too are the reasons why his prose is more compelling, more like poetry, than his verse:

   Every thing is beautiful seen from the point of the intellect, or as truth. But all is sour, if seen as experience. Details are melancholy; the plan is seemly and noble. In the actual world—the painful kingdom of time and place—dwell care, and canker, and fear. With thought, with the ideal, is immortal hilarity, the rose of joy. Round it all the Muses sing. But grief cleaves to names, and persons, and the partial interests of today and yesterday. (E 328)

In his verse motto to “Experience,” Emerson makes “Temperament without a tongue” one of the “The lords of life” (E 469; ECPT 198). In his poems, he personates, or vests, every “Temperament without a tongue” with his tongue. Both the more exacting and the more voluminous speakers in his verse are, anatomically speaking, tongueless: besides the wind-harp in “May-Day,” “The Harp,” and “Maiden Speech of the Aeolian Harp,” they are the pine-tree in “Woodnotes II,” the poplars and the river in “To Rhea,” the Earth in “Hamatreya,” the blackberry vines in “Berrying,” Mount Monadnoc in “Monadnoc,” the flowers in “To Ellen,” the sea in “Sea-Shore,” and Nature in “Song of Nature.” Every thing Emerson took an interest in had to be engaged in the same “self-registration” he was engaged in. Every thing had to be a writer and a speaker. “Nature will be reported. All things are engaged in writing their history,” he writes in “Goethe; or, the Writer” (E 746). Human persons in his poems are trivial, and with few exceptions he wastes no time characterizing or locating them. He gives four lines each to establishing the fictions of “The Sphinx,” “Uriel,” “To Rhea,” and “Woodnotes II.” In his best self-portrait, as Cupid in “IDCL,” Emerson is two colorless eyes (CW 9: 200-204, ll. 19-53). His most telling speakers
are the narrator of “IDCL” and Mount Monadnoc. The pine-tree, Nature, the sea, the World-Soul, the Earth, God—the speakers of “Woodnotes II,” “Song of Nature,” “Sea-Shore,” “The World-Soul,” “Hamatreya,” and “Boston Hymn”—all orate in the same commanding tone at the same high volume from the same high platform. Few poets who direct gods in their productions procure the baseless fabric of their vision as rapidly, or use it as negligently, as Emerson does, and few seem more content to leave not a rack of it behind.

Emerson’s imperative to report was as strong as his imperative to identify, so that he could only state his temperament strongly enough if he reported himself as, and for, each and all; if, from his “routine,” he could “paint” the whole:

In some hours I walk in a world of glass. I see then the equivalence of all circumstances, that each life is a repetition of every other, so that there is no presumption, but good reason, in assuming to paint the Age from one man’s routine. (EHJ 233-34)

By personification, or “impersonation,” or animation, Emerson in his verse puts an end to temperaments not his own. He brings them into two dimensions out of three, getting them down on paper and making them be of his mind—or, as he prefers to say, “the mind,” that “One Mind common to all individual men” he asserts the existence of in the first sentence of “History” (E 237). The writer does what the archaeologist does who, as he writes later in the essay,

digs and measures in the mummy pits and pyramids of Thebes until he can see an end of the difference between the monstrous work and himself. When he has satisfied himself, in general and in detail, that it was made by such a person as he, so armed and so motived, and to ends to which he himself should also have worked, the problem is
solved; his thought lives along the whole line of temples and sphinxes and catacombs, passes through them all with satisfaction, and they live again to the mind, or are now (E 241).

So Emerson satisfies himself in his poetry. It is “an end of the difference” between himself and the many things that “Deceive us, seeming to be many things, / And are but one,” as he says in “Xenophanes.” Using personification, he suborns and disposes all things in an apparently hearty and cheerful tone, because in personification, as least as Proclus and Plotinus used it,

every abstract idea, every element, every agent in nature or in thought, is strongly presented as a god...so that the universe is filled with august & exciting images. It is imaginative & not anatomical. It is stimulating (JMN 9: 150).

Emerson’s poetry hasn’t been called “august & exciting,” but it has been called mystical, gnomic, bardic, spiritual, philosophical, and gnostic. Frost said that in Emerson’s verse and prose we have “the rapture of idealism.” None of those namings accounts for the despotistic teacher, the severe preacher, and the disgusted satirist that sound off in “The Sphinx,” “To J. W.,” “Hamatreya,” “Woodnotes,” “Monadnock,” “Ode,” “The Park,” “Sursum Corda,” “Alphonso of Castile,” “Merlin,” and “Bacchus.” Emerson, like Solomon, will “advertise us of our wants” (J 9: 151-52). His “unconcealed dissatisfaction” with us pays us “only this one compliment, of insatiable expectation” (E 202). Matthew Arnold called Emerson “a friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit.” Emerson’s own naming is better: he calls himself, sympathetically, a “terrible friend” (E 201-02). Having been “permitted to see that all is one stuff, cooked and painted under many counterfeit appearances” (my italics; W 7: 173), Emerson paid the tax on his privilege: “Monotone. Chicadee dee, says the titmouse; pee pee, pee pee
pee, says the ‘Peabody bird,’ each as long as he lives; and the man who hears, goes all his life saying his one proverb, too’ (J 9: 155). In “Xenophanes,” Emerson utters his defining doctrine, the doctrine of One:

By fate, not option, frugal Nature gave
One scent to hyson and to wall-flower,
One sound to pine-groves and to waterfalls,
One aspect to the desert and the lake.

That doesn’t pass a sniff test or a sound test, but then Emerson, borrowing the name of an archaic Greek teacher, designed it to assert, “against all appearances,” that

all things
Are of one pattern made; bird, beast, and flower,
Song, picture, form, space, thought, and character
Deceive us, seeming to be many things,
And are but one.

Emerson seems less stimulated and excited than bored by his “frugal” lesson, but he gave “Xenophanes” one of the 67 places in his Selected Poems. Seven repetitions of the word “one” in 19 lines (nine, if mono and uni are counted) are six more than it takes to say “All things are of one pattern made.” Nor is Emerson persuasive in making himself one of the deceived. The “Us” in “Xenophanes,” like the first-person plural in “Blight,” “The World-Soul, and “Ode,” is Emerson pretending to be party to a delusion so that he may teach us us as if he taught us not.

Emerson was an impatient poet. In 1883, Arnold noted the “want of clearly-marked distinction between the subject and object” of Emerson’s verse sentence—which is one way to describe the price Emerson paid for insisting
on first-word force, couplet rhyme, short measures, and bardic manners.  

With these and other forms of abruption, he attacks his “poetical ethics,” the subject of “Saadi,” and executes—“the”—“doctrine of poetry”: “The doctrine of poetry reverses the common sense, for it is the doctrine that the soul generates matter.”  

“The common sense,” “the popular code,” “what the people think”: these provoke Emerson’s poetry, but he gives them as little tongue as he possibly can.  

There is, for instance, almost no live-action in his poems. Drawn, voiced, edited, and directed by Emerson, they are two-dimensional cartoons—but not for children. Dropping into the past tense in “Give All to Love” for one line after 17 in the present tense, Emerson insists that love “was never for the mean.” From the beginning, that is, love was not intended for most people—perhaps not even for people:

   It requireth courage stout.
   Souls above doubt,
   Valor unbending (ECPT 72)

Are you man enough? Emerson doubts it, but he dares you. His poems, like Milton’s “opinions on all subjects,” “are formed for man as he ought to be,” for a nation of Emersons (W 12: 275).

“The doctrine of poetry” had greater authority with Emerson than his own or anyone’s poems had. It was primal; “Poetry” itself gave it forth. For the “judicious” and “sensible” version of the doctrine, Emerson had relied on Pope since 1824:

   both precepts and example tell

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18 The other two phrases are in “Self-Reliance, for which see W 2: 74, 53.
That nature’s masterpiece is writing well (EHJ 50; E 1232)

Nature itself wrote well, and Emerson looked at it imperatively for “precepts and example.” Nature was a writers’ colony. “All things are engaged in writing their history. The planet, the pebble, goes attended by its shadow. The rolling rock leaves its scratches on the mountain”—and so on, in one of the happiest paragraphs in his books (E 746). In nature, in the woods alone, Emerson finds “analogue for his intellectual performances.” But persons in Emerson’s poems are almost utterly insignificant. “Guy” is a fantasy so airy it beggars belief that a man over 40 could devote himself to recording it. Like Guy, Cupid in “IDCL” has no physical features, much less a body, though he is the subject of a long blazon. Monadnoc is probably the most interesting speaker Emerson wrote, the most differentiated from the others and almost the only one who has at least two tones to his voice.

Emerson wrote the first draft of “Monadnoc” in his journal in 1845 and time-stamped it: “3 May, 4 hours, 10 minutes A.M.”:

I stand
Upon this uplifted land
Hugely massed to draw the clouds,
Like a banner unrolled
To all the dwellers in the plains
Round about a hundred miles.
In his own loom’s garment dressed,
By his own bounty blessed,
Thus constant giver
Yielding many a cheerful river
Appearing an aerial isle,
A cheerful and majestic pile
Which morn and crimson eve shall paint
For bard, for lover, and for saint;  
The country’s core,  
Inspirer, prophet evermore;  
And which God aloft had set  
So that men should not forget;  
It should be their lives’ ornament  
And mix itself with each event;  
Their almanac and dial,  
Painter’s palette, sorcerer’s phial  
Mysteries of colour duly laid  
By the great painters, light and shade,  
And sweet varieties of time  
And chance,  
And the mystic seasons’ dance;  
The soft succession of the hours  
Thawed the snowdrift into flowers.  
By million changes skilled to tell  
What in the eternal standeth well. (J 7: 41-2)

In the summer of 1846, Emerson was finishing “Monadnoc” against an October deadline for the manuscript of Poems. His 25th college reunion was also approaching. He declares:

I can spare the college bell,  
And the learned lecture, well;  
Spare the clergy and libraries,  
Institutes and dictionaries.

Now that he has matriculated, read, studied, written, graduated, preached, published, edited, and lectured, Emerson can spare all that. This is one of
hundreds of declarations Emerson makes in his poems that isn’t actually, and perhaps not even ideally, true. In lines that Alexander Pope might have admired for sense, if not for art, Emerson has Monadnec say:

But well I know, no mountain can,  
Zion or Meru, measure with man.  
For it is on zodiacs writ,  
Adamant is soft to wit

Monadnec knows Biblical mountains, zodiacs, Greek mythology, Britain, Germany, architecture, and geology. “Mute orator! well skilled to plead,” Emerson exclaims in his peroration,

Thou dost succor and remede  
The shortness of our days,  
And promise, on thy Founder’s truth,  
Long morrow to this mortal youth.

Emerson makes the wise mountain promise him the “long morrow” that his “ambition of immortality” had desired in 1823. Then, Emerson was looking to Solomon, Bacon, and Pope to “succor and remede” him. Now, Monadnec wants Emerson to do what Emerson wants to do: make the mountain be of his mind:

I await the bard and sage,  
Who, in large thoughts, like fair pearl-seed,  
Shall string Monadnec like a bead.  
Comes that cheerful troubadour,  
This mound shall throb his face before,  
As when, with inward fires and pain,
It rose a bubble from the plain.

“Comes” gives Emerson the strong initial accent he likes; it is also starts an elliptical expression of “When that cheerful troubadour comes.” “Comes” executes a writ of habeas corpus: here is Emerson, beading Monadnock now. In 1864, he noted that William Cullen Bryant “learned where to hang his titles, namely, by tying his mind to autumn woods, winter mornings, rain, brooks, mountains, evening winds, & woodbirds. Who speaks of these is forced to remember Bryant” (EHJ 525). Before his death in 1882, Emerson had forced some Americans who spoke of Monadnock to remember him. He had also tied his mind by title to Concord (“Hymn, Sung at the Completion of the Concord Monument,” is known as “Concord Hymn”), “The Humble-Bee,” “The Rhodora,” “The Titmouse,” “Boston,” “Brahma,” and “The Sphinx.” Emerson nonetheless became known as “the Concord Sage” or “the Sage of Concord,” not as the Concord Bard or the Bard of Concord.

Well before the end of the poem, Emerson is standing Mount Monadnock’s head, where the Sphinx stands at the end of “The Sphinx.” The Sphinx had beamed herself up there to get away from “a poet” who proved not to be “the seer” the Sphinx had “awaited.” This “bard and sage” is also eager, but he is a more complex character. He asks of a local he saw near the base of the mountain:

Is yonder squalid peasant all
That this proud nursery could breed
For God’s vicegerency and stead?

After venting his disgust at the “sordid” “mountain folk,” Emerson blames the muse for his outburst, as in “Days” he blames the Days for his failed ambition. But he gets a hold of himself—or of his muse, which he now seems to identify with himself: “Soft! let not the offended muse/Toil’s hard
hap with scorn accuse.” He launches a paean to the small vocabulary (“Four score or a hundred words/All their vocal muse affords”) of the “churls,” a passage of 22 lines beginning “Now in sordid weeds they sleep” that would make Robert Frost say: “I am as sure that the colloquial is the root of every good poem as I am that the national is the root of all thought and art.”\(^{19}\) Emerson’s own “vocal muse” afforded him a great deal more than 100 words, a fact that Frost tacitly acknowledged by not saying a word about the other 396 lines in the poem.

Monadnoc recognizes Emerson’s difference, his elevation. Not only is he not a local; he is not a daytripper either, “not of that race bred/Who daily climb my specular head.” Having at last an adequate guest, Monadnoc takes Emerson into its confidence and tells him a story about a typical day-hiker, “the spruce clerk.” It is, I think, the greatest sustained passage in Emerson’s verse. It teems with animation—or personification, which Emerson can be careless with, as in “Days,” “Sea-Shore,” and “Song of Nature.” Here, he is precise. His tone and diction are Shakespearian, as when Prince Hal talks about Hotspur, or Hotspur talks to Glendower (1 HIV TK). His spatial imagination is Miltonic (Paradise Lost, 3: 56-78); his humor is Chaucerian. The total effect, though, is Emerson’s alone:

Oft as morning wreathes my scarf,
Fled the last plumule of the Dark,
Pants up hither the spruce clerk,
From South Cove and City Wharf.
I take him up my rugged sides,
Half-repentant, scant of breath,—
Bead-eyes my granite chaos show,
And my midsummer snow;

Open the daunting map beneath,—
All his county, sea and land,
Dwarfed to measure of his hand;
His day’s ride is a furlong space,
His city-tops a glimmering haze.
I plant his eyes on the sky-hoop bounding:
“See there the grim gray rounding
Of the bullet of the earth
Whereon ye sail,
Tumbling steep
In the uncontinented deep.”
He looks on that, and he turns pale.
‘Tis even so, this treacherous kite,
Farm-furrowed, town-incrusted sphere,
Thoughtless of its anxious freight,
Plunges eyeless on forever;
And he, poor parasite,
Cooped in a ship he cannot steer,—
Who is the captain he knows not,
Port or pilot trows not,—
Risk or ruin he must share.
I scowl on him with my cloud,
With my north wind chill his blood;
I lame him, clattering down the rocks;
And to live he is in fear.
Then, at last, I let him down
Once more into his dapper town,
To chatter, frightened, to his clan
And forget me if he can.’
The poem might well have ended here, but Emerson moralizes for another 60 lines. “We fool and prate,” he says to Monadnock, bathetically, “Thou art silent and sedate.” And yet his reflexive apostrophes—

Thou grand affirmer of the present tense,
And type of permanence!

his self-portraiture—

Thou seest, O watchman tall,
Our towns and races grow and fall,
And imagest the stable good
For which we all our lifetime grope

and his parting bid for immortality—“Long morrow to this mortal youth”—are weirdly genuine, and stand in sharp relief to similar scenes in poems by Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, W. S. Merwin, and Mary Oliver.

Emerson’s verse tells us that Emerson was someone in whom Emerson was well-pleased. “I can symbolize my thought by using the name of any creature, of any fact, because every creature is man agent or patient” (W 2: 31-3). He can, and he does, because the Glendower Problem—“I can call spirits from the vasty deep”; “But will they come when you do call?” (I Henry IV, 3.1. 52-54)—is obviated by Emerson’s doctrine of poetry. In his prose, the problem of mind control is sometimes stated as insoluble, e.g., “The astonishment of life, is, the absence of any appearance of reconciliation between the theory and practice of life” (E 705). In his verse, Emerson agently and impatiently “does” that problem “away” (E 241), introducing the Hotspur Solution (or “the Hotspur Variation”) in its place:
Glendower: I say the earth did shake when I was born.

Hotspur: And I say the earth was not of my mind (I Henry IV, 3.1. 20-21)20

Like “the doctrine of poetry” and “the ideal theory,” the Hotspur Solution not only “reverses the common sense,” but has “the advantage...that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind” (E 39). It is a theory as maximally esoteric and as minimally exoteric as it can be—since, Emerson says, “All writings must be in a degree exoteric, written to a human should or would, instead of to the fatal is: this holds even of the bravest and sincerest writers” (W 8: 30-31). When extremes meet, Emerson is always gratified. “Even the materialist Condillac,” he writes in 1842, “was constrained to say, ‘we never go out of ourselves; it is always our own thought that we perceive.’ What more could an idealist say” (W 1: 331)?

Elizabeth Hoar told Emerson that his aunt “tramples on the common humanities all day, & they rise as ghosts & torment her at night” (JMN 15: 67). We know this because Emerson recorded the remark in his journal. Unlike his aunt, he practiced deference all day, even with the forest. “O, you gentlemen pines,” a member of his Yosemite touring party observed him saying.21 Many accounts of Emerson’s social character are epitomized when O. W. Firkins writes that Emerson was “an eloquent listener, and his very presence was enkindling.”22 But in solitude, in the “neutral Dark” of writing, Emerson’s eloquent listening is a “wanton heed” and his presence a “giddy cunning” (“Compensation”; Milton, “L’Allegro,” l. 14123). After reading memoirs of Sir Walter Scott in 1838, Emerson wrote: “‘At night,’ said Scott,

21 James Bradley Thayer, Western Journey with Mr. Emerson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1884): 64.
23 Emerson copied and recopied this line in journals and notebooks, e.g., TN 2: 306.
‘the kind are savage.’ Then, at night be your kind” (JMN 7: 107). Emerson
bes his kind in “The Sphinx,” “The World-Soul,” “Alphonso of Castile,”
“Fate,” “Hamatreya,” “Berrying,” “Woodnotes II,” “Monadnoc,” “IDC,”
“Blight,” “Brahma,” “Sea-Shore,” and “Song of Nature.” He tramples on the
common humanities, however briefly, without deference or compunction—
and, he would like to think, without malice. In fact, he begins “To Rhea”
by saying:

Thee, dear friend, a brother soothes,
Not with flatteries, but truths,
Which tarnish not, but purify
To light which dims the morning’s eye. (ECPT 12)

This “zero degree of indifference” is Emerson’s desired state of being (W 6:
270). In “The World-Soul,” Emerson uses the definite article to difference
his politics, his letters, his voice, and his way from his republic’s (ECPT 23;
W 4: 186):

The politics are base;
The letters do not cheer;
And ‘tis far in the deeps of history,
The voice that speaketh clear. (ECPT 17)

The only voice Emerson can “individualize” enough to “generalize” again is
the voice that silences others, “the voice that speaketh clear” (E 246).

The mathematician G. H. Hardy once wrote of Shakespeare’s famous words
in Richard II, “Not all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm
from an anointed King”: “Could lines be better, and could ideas be at once
more trite and more false? The poverty of the ideas seems hardly to affect
the beauty of the verbal pattern.” For Emerson, “the poverty of the ideas” is unimportant, the paucity of ideas being already fatal. For him, there was really only one idea—the idea of one. He names it unforgettable in “Poetry and Imagination”: “the indigent unity” (W 8: 18). Whenever he can punish “our sumptuous indigence” with “the indigent unity,” his “high nature” is given “the refreshment and satisfaction of resistance” that it craves (W 2: 292).

One need not be a mathematician like Hardy to be chagrined by Emerson’s “ideas,” such as that Dante “wrote like Euclid,” or that Plato is “the Euclid of holiness” (W 8: 72; W 4: 87). Emerson aspired to be the Euclid of “all the grandeurs of love, faith, and duty” (LL 1: 304). “Euclid” is Emerson’s symbolic proof (“I can symbolize my thought by using the name of any creature”) that “the moral sentiment” is as necessary, unalterable, self-evident, beautiful, and ancient as Euclid’s geometry. “The moral sentiment” is Emerson’s nunc stans. Like Milton, he “stands erect, commanding...and reads the laws of the moral sentiment to the new-born race” (CW 10: 80). But what is “the moral sentiment”? As far as I can tell from Emerson’s verse, it is “The desire to...banish the Not Me & supply the Me,” “to abolish difference & restore Unity” (JMN 7: 111). To do that, “The kingly bard/ Must smite the chords rudely and hard,” as Emerson says in “Merlin I” (ECPT 91).

How many people in 1847 or 1867 or 1876 wanted, and how many in 2017 want, “The kingly bard”? Even in his own prime Emerson knew there wasn’t much call for “the kingly bard.” And yet his literary ambition, biblical in scope since 1823 (JMN 2: 265), was undiminished in 1861—at least in the precincts of his journal:

the old Psalms & Gospels are mighty as ever: showing that what people

call religion is literature; that is to say—here was one who knew how
to put his statement, & it stands forever, & people feel its truth, as he
did, & say, Thus said the Lord, whilst it is only that he had the true
literary genius, which they fancy they despise (EHJ 496).

Three years after he published his essay on “History,” Emerson wrote to
John Sterling, a poet Carlyle had introduced Emerson to in Scotland, that
there was only one “historical thing” he knew:

Sometimes I dream of writing the only historical thing I know, the
influence of old Calvinism, now almost obsolete, upon the education of
the existing generation in New England. I am quite sure, if it could be
truly done, it would be new to your people, and a valuable memorandum
to ours.25

I sometimes think that Emerson never wrote anything but “the influence of
old Calvinism” on himself and his contemporaries, and to read his verse is
to feel that he counted himself as one of Calvinism’s elect.

What does Emerson’s verse memorandum of Calvinism offer to the existing
generation of Americans, if anything? Only one of Calvinism’s elect would
report amusing himself “often,” on his daily walks, “with humming the rhythm
of the decasyllabic quatrain, or of the octosyllabic with alternate sexysyllabic
or other rhythms.” “Ah happy!,” he writes in his journal, already one-ing
himself for the page, “if one could fill the small measures with words
approaching to the power of these beats. Young people like rhyme, drum-
beat, tune, things in pairs & alternatives, & in higher degrees we know the
instant power of music upon our temperaments” (EHJ 452). Today, “the
power of these beats” is the idiom of hip-hop, and Emerson knew how far

25 A Correspondence Between John Sterling and Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Edward Waldo
back the power of dactyls, spondees, trochees, and iambs went.

Perhaps his memorandum may have less to say about the future of American poetry (at least on the page) than it does about the rise of American popular music. What most young people proved to like in the 1950s and 60s was not Whitman’s or Emerson’s poetry (or not more than the youth of the 1850s and 60s liked it), but “the instant power of music.” Emerson frequently spits four or six lines that young people may like as much as he liked the music of “small measures” in Chaucer, Milton, Bunyan, and Scott. The couplet rhyme of one, two, and three syllables he hits in “Woodnotes II” was also hit by Louis Jordan, Hal David and Burt Bacharach, and Run DMC. Edward Emerson quotes his father’s

We played in turn with all the slides
In Nature’s lamp of suns & tides
We pierced all books with criticism
We plied with doubts the Catechism,
The Christian Fold,
The Bible old— (ECPT 381; W 9: 512).

Busting rhymes and hitting beats, Emerson seems happiest when he’s predicking indicatives as fast as James Ellroy in American Tabloid. Here he is in 1840:

There is no better illustration of the laws by which the world is governed than Literature. There is no luck in it. It proceeds by Fate. Every scripture is given by the inspiration of God. Every composition proceeds out of a greater or less depth of thought, and this is the measure of its effect (E 1147).

Emerson sets his finite verbs on stun: indicatives in the present tense,
dependence on the copula, no qualification. The same attack marks *Poems:

The lord is the peasant that was,
The peasant the lord that shall be ("Woodnotes II," ECPT 41)

It is there for benefit;
It is there for purging light;
There for purifying storms;
And its depths reflect all forms; ("Astraea," ECPT 65)

But in these poems, as in "To Rhea," "The Visit," "Ode," and "Etienne de la Boeze" (the list goes on), Emerson doesn’t make it easy for those not "in the same truth with" him to go along with him (E 273).