

EAST OF NEW ENGLAND: REORIENTING THE EARLY
WRITINGS OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON AND HENRY DAVID
THOREAU

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This dissertation offers a new perspective on the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau by exploring the Orientalism in their juvenilia and early journals. This study seeks, in part, to restore the polysemy of the term “Orient” to literary criticism of New England Transcendentalism. For Emerson and Thoreau, the Orient was not limited to the culture, people, and texts associated with non-Western lands. The Orient could also evoke the meanings that are encoded within the word itself: the Latin *oriens* signifying the eastern part of the sky in which the sun rises, as well as daybreak itself. As this study shows, the early Orientalism of Emerson and Thoreau reflects their attempts, through reading and writing about the East, to resist the unthinking, uncritical reproduction of Western European cultural forms, expectations, and traditions.

From the late-1810s to the 1840s, Emerson’s largely defined his Orientalism against the example of the British, with their desire to subject South Asia to the British Crown. Emerson yearned to be a literary voice of America’s incipient empire, and he excitedly took

up the so-called “Oriental theme” as a kind of literary apprenticeship, even a rite of passage, testing his hand as an essayist and poet in his submissions for prizes at Harvard College and in his private journals.

Thoreau's emergent Orientalism can be charted in his journals from 1837 to 1841, as he reflects on his vocational concerns, as well as nature, time, textuality, and consciousness. Through experiments in cognition and composition, Thoreau attempts to “reorient” himself around repeated encounters with natural phenomena, such as the tree-lined horizon or the depths of Walden Pond, and in doing so, reveals one of the central activities of his Orientalism: to achieve a paradoxical perspective where he could simultaneously see a thing and its opposite.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Edmund R. Goode grew up in Lakewood, Washington, a small town forty miles south of Seattle. He graduated with honors from Clover Park High School, where he was a National Merit Finalist, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, and a state medalist in swimming. As a student at Columbia College, he majored in English literature and graduated Phi Beta Kappa, *summa cum laude*. He spent his summer vacations as an instructor at the Washington State Governor's School, a progressive leadership program held at Seattle University, and an English teacher at a summer camp outside of Vilnius, Lithuania. After working in Seattle, he entered the doctorate program in the English department at Cornell University, where he was awarded a Provost Diversity Fellowship and the Clark Distinguished Teaching Award. He currently resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he is a Predoctoral Fellow in the English department at Villanova University.

To my mother and father, who prepared me for worlds that they
had never seen

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and proper spelling. Few people read, write, and talk about literature with Debby's combination of grace and tough-mindedness, and no one at Cornell has taught me more about the beauty, strength, and wonder of nineteenth-century American poetry and prose. In the most difficult stages of this project, she was an unyielding source of encouragement, stability, and good sense, and I could not have completed this project without her. I thank her deeply for her confidence and guidance, and I hope that our conversations will continue for many years to come.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: New England Transcendental Orientalism and the Early Writings of Emerson and Thoreau

What a benefit if a rule could be given whereby the mind, dreaming amid the gross fogs of matter, could at any moment east itself & find the sun. But long after we have thought we were recovered & sane, light breaks in upon us & we find we have yet had no sane moment. Another morn rises on mid noon.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journal*, June 1835

Orientalism in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, whether it takes the form of a literary trope, the adaptation of a non-Western poetic persona, the glimmer of a Neo-Platonic abstraction, or the quotation from a Hindu, Persian, or Chinese text, has often evoked a suspicion of burlesque among critics and readers. In November 1857, when the *Atlantic Monthly* published Emerson's controversial "Brahma" poem—"If the red slayer think he slays,/Or if the slain think he is slain,/They know not well the subtle ways/I keep, and pass, and turn again"—readers of the middlebrow magazine turned their bafflement with Emerson's idealism into so many "Brahma" parodies. In the most famous example, delivered in 1877 at a literary banquet sponsored by *The Atlantic Monthly*, Mark Twain poked fun at Emerson, who was

among the guests in the audience, as a whiskey-swilling euchre dealer:

I am the doubter and the doubt –
They reckon ill who leave me out;
They know not well the subtle ways I keep.
I pass and deal *again!* (Fatout 112-13).

In Twain's account, the "doubtful" paradoxes of "Brahma" are either the double-talk of a cardsharp or the blather of a writer who has had too much to drink. In 1885, Oliver Wendell Holmes offered a similar judgment of "Brahma" in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, a critical biography in the "American Men of Letters" series that helped to solidify Emerson's place in the literary canon. Holmes derided Emerson's 'Oriental idealism' as a foreign-bred mysticism that played at the edges of "insanity." In its poetic forms, it resembled "narcotic dreams, born in the land of poppy and of hashish," and as Holmes quipped, "Brahma" was the "nearest approach to a Torricellian vacuum of intelligibility that language can pump out of itself" (397).

Thoreau did not fare much better among readers of his day, especially when he dared to place the Buddha on equal footing as Jesus Christ in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. "I am sure that I am willing they should love their Christ more than my Buddha," Thoreau wrote conciliatorily to his would-be critics, "for the love is the main thing, and I like him [i.e. Jesus] too" (55). However, in a review for the *New York Tribune*, George Ripley, a reform-minded minister who had also been a member of the Brook

Farm community, called Thoreau's indelicate pairing of Christianity and Eastern religions "revolting alike to good sense and good taste" (Hodder, "Ex Oriente," 404). And in the *Massachusetts Quarterly Review*, the critic James Russell Lowell asked sarcastically, "What [. . .] have Concord and Merrimack to do with Boodh?" (404).

Over the last few decades, literary scholars have been uneasy with the strange combinations of Transcendental Orientalism as well. However, their suspicions revolve less around the rebelliousness of Transcendentalist rhetoric than the legacy of colonialism and the trafficking of derogatory stereotypes about the non-Western world. "Orientalism" has come to be identified, almost exclusively, with representations of the East as despotic, sexually licentious, and morally corrupt. As I shall show, however, there is more to the Orientalism of New England than the mere accretion of time-bound and bigoted misconceptions about the non-Western world. In this dissertation, I will offer a new perspective on the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau by exploring the Orientalism in their juvenilia and early journals. To frame a description of my own analysis, I will briefly review the context for New England's encounters with the Orient, and I will discuss the relevance of Edward Said's work to the Orientalism of the New England Transcendentalists. I will also offer a rationale for my methodological use of close readings and my decision to focus on the early journals of Emerson and Thoreau.

One way to begin thinking about the Orient in early and mid-nineteenth-century New England is to consider how it appeared on maps (Luedtke xv). On present-day maps, the center of the continental United States is usually assumed to lie somewhere around Kansas or Missouri, so the “East” of Asia is divided between the far-right of the east and the far-left of the west. Not so in the cartographic era of antebellum New England. Maps were documents of the Mercatorian world, which sought to provide a resource for European sea navigation, and they generally took Greenwich as their center. As a result, the Orient was a sprawling and uninterrupted region at the far right of the map, and North America, by contrast, was largely an unmarked vacancy on the left. One could thus read atlases and navigational charts from right to left, from East to West, as a cartographic history of civilizational progress, from Asia and Africa to Europe to North America.

Progress might have moved from East to West, at least in the minds of educated New Englanders, but commerce could just as easily, and profitably, move from West to East and back again. Indeed, commerce—and not colonialism—goaded the profiteering interest of New England in the Orient, an interest that Thoreau would write about repeatedly in his public and private writings. At the end of the eighteenth century, merchants along the northeast seaboard—in port cities such as Salem, Boston, and New York—often used the sea-route that Vasco de Gama charted in 1497-98, along the southern tip of Africa, to sail from Atlantic Ocean to the Indian subcontinent. In 1804, the India Wharf was constructed on

the Boston waterfront to accommodate the increased trade. Associations like the Salem East India Marine Society collected the maritime charts and sea logs of captains who had voyaged to India, along with a sampling of the artifacts that they brought back from their travel (Luedtke xviii-xix). In 1806, the commercial ice trade that Thoreau would describe in “The Pond in Winter” chapter from *Walden* was established (“Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well,” Thoreau observed as workers cut the frozen waters of Walden pond), delivering as much as 146,000 tons of ice to India at its peak in 1857.¹

As commerce grew, so did the exchange of culture, with the flow of Eastern literatures to New England arriving by way of European scholars. Western studies of India can be traced as far back as the India campaign of Alexander the Great from 327-325 B.C.E. However, there were two major events in the late-eighteenth century that inaugurated the modern age of European Orientalism. First, in 1798, almost two-hundred archaeologists, artists, scholars, and engineers accompanied Napoleon on his Egyptian campaign to complete the *Description de l’Egypte*. It was a massive project to catalog the French “rediscovery” of Egypt, and it was published in twenty-three enormous volumes from 1809 to 1828 (Said, 86). After the British defeat of the French in 1802,

¹ David G. Dickason, “The Nineteenth-Century Indo-American Ice Trade: An Hyperborean Epic,” *Modern Asian Studies* 25:1 (Feb., 1991): 53-89.

Egyptian inscriptions and antiquities were taken to London, where Jean-Francois Champollion was able to decipher the Rosetta Stone in the early 1820s. This hermeneutical breakthrough helped to create the conditions for the Egyptian revival that consumed Western Europe and then the United States in the early nineteenth century.²

The second major event of modern Orientalism involved the British founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. Established to encourage the study of Indian civilization, and thereby to advance British economic and political interests in the region, the society began to publish *Asiatic Researches* in 1788, a scholarly journal that went through twenty volumes over the next fifty years. Until it ceased publication in 1839, it was the primary means by which information about India was disseminated to the West, and it featured the work of a number of British scholars and magistrates who made significant contributions to the study of India. Foremost among them was Sir William Jones (1746-1794), a renowned legal scholar and polyglot linguist who arrived in India eager to add Sanskrit translation to his list of intellectual achievements. As early as the 1790s, books began to arrive in Boston from the printing presses of Calcutta, particularly the works of Sir William Jones. Jones pioneered the idea that Sanskrit and Greek shared a common linguistic heritage, and he translated a

² It was a cultural phenomenon whose influence on the American Renaissance has been studied by John Irwin, "The Symbol of the Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance," *American Quarterly* 26:2 (May, 1974): 103-26.

canon of texts that found a readership in New England, including *Shakuntala; or, The Fatal Ring*, *The Muhammedan Law of Inheritance*, and *Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Menu*, which I will discuss in detail in the section on Thoreau's Orientalism.

It is through the scholarly efforts of these modern Orientalists that the New England fascination with non-Western cultures took root in actual texts—and it is also through this connection that the strongest criticism of the New England fascination with the “Orient” flows. Orientalism as a scholarly endeavor, led by the aforementioned scholars from Great Britain and France, purported to offer a neutral means of describing, analyzing, and interpreting the non-Western world to Westerners. According to Edward Said, however, this enterprise largely served as a vehicle for the projection of Western desires and anxieties on the Middle Eastern, African, and Asian “other.”

Edward Said offered this argument in *Orientalism* in 1978, a now-classic work of cultural revisionism on the relationship between the colonizing “West”—Great Britain, France, and to a much lesser extent, Germany—and the colonized “East,” an area that stretched from Persia to the former Ottoman Empire—Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia, the Barbary States. Said's work inaugurated the field of post-colonial studies, and he developed his thinking at the intersection of Foucault's discourse theory and Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In *Orientalism*, Said offered the subject of his critique as

a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of basic geographical distinctions. . .but also of a whole series of “interests”. . .it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world (12).

It is important to note Said’s ontological claims in this passage: Orientalism “is” rather than simply “expresses” a certain desire to not only “understand” but also “control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different [. . .] world.” From a methodological standpoint, to find a “Western” writer referring to the “Orient” is already to discover the “is” of ulterior interests, instead of textual evidence that might or might not “express” an economic or political agenda, an evidentiary threshold that expressly would not make distinctions between the ironies and evasions of a poem, for example, and a brutal political policy. Said describes Orientalism as both a style of thought and a mode of discourse that facilitated the colonial expansion of European powers into the Orient in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Orientalism turned on an invidious division of the world between the “Orient” and the “West,” where the cultural and historical particularities of the non-Western world were summarily collapsed into a totalizing category: the vast and inscrutable Orient.

But what relevance does Said have to writers such as Emerson and Thoreau, who were not professional scholars or employed in any colonial endeavors? In his original argument, Said only addressed the nineteenth-century United States in passing. In fact, he did not account for attempts within the United States to engage with, evoke, or represent Asian or Middle Eastern cultures until the country reached its “hegemonic” status after World War Two and remade European Orientalism into Area Studies. As Said explained:

[t]he American experience of the Orient prior to that exceptional moment [i.e. after World War Two] was limited. Cultural isolatos like Melville were interested in it; cynics like Mark Twain visited and wrote about it; the American Transcendentalists saw affinities between Indian thought and their own; a few theologians and Biblical students studies the Biblical Oriental languages; there were occasional diplomatic and military encounters with Barbary pirates and the like, and the odd naval expedition to the Far Orient, and of course the ubiquitous missionary to the Orient. But there was no deeply invested tradition of Orientalism, and consequently in the United States knowledge of the Orient never passed through the refining and reticulating and reconstructing processes, whose beginning was in philological study, that it went through in Europe. Furthermore, the imaginative investment was never made either (290).

Contacts between the United States and the Orient were sporadic and undertaken by “cynics” and “[c]ultural isolatos,” and these failed to match the concerted “imaginative investment” and scholarly desire to master the Orient that was a defining feature of European Orientalism. Still, scholars such as Malini Johar Schueller and Alan Hodder have adopted aspects of Said’s polemic in their approach to Transcendental Orientalism, demonstrating that a Saidian critique can easily extend to the mid-nineteenth century literary culture of the Northeastern United States. I will briefly take up Schueller’s and Hodder’s work as a way of contextualizing my own approach to the early Orientalism of Emerson and Thoreau.

In *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890*, Scheuller examines the literary construction of the Orient, or what she refers to as “Asia/India,” in Emerson’s writings.³ Scheuller argues that Emerson’s deployed “Asia/India” as a kind of empty backdrop, a screen against which he could work out his anxieties about masculinity, materialism, and nationhood.

According to Schueller, the “more Emerson read Indic texts, the more he began to use the Orient to stand for an absolute spiritual past, against which a whole and unified New World nationhood as the latest seat of the westerly, Anglo-Saxon movement of civilization could be formulated. This

³ Malini Johar Schueller, *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998).

construction of Asia as unproblematic spiritual territory, dissociated from materiality and power relations, was also a political necessity for Emerson, because it allowed him to co-opt the idea of unified space in order to negotiate the idea of a fragmented nationhood (157).

For Schueller, the salient historical context for Emerson's Orientalism is the anti-slavery movement in the antebellum United States. By using Asia as "unproblematic spiritual territory," Emerson could "negotiate the idea of a fragmented nationhood," by which Schueller means the preservation of the Union.

Schueller's readings are suggestive, and she rightly brings attention to Emerson's essentialist views on race in *Representative Men* (1850) and *English Traits* (1856). To cite one example, which also shows her dialectical style of argumentation, Schueller offers some remarks on the "erotics" of *English Traits*. *English Traits* is a celebration of Anglo-Saxon superiority that mixes crystalline prose with crude stereotypes, and in its reified and reductive treatment of racial difference, it casts a shadow over Emerson's earlier and more egalitarian work. For Schueller, Emerson's paeon to the excellence of the British people does not just involve issues of gender, race, and nationhood, but also sexuality. For instance, in a description of British camaraderie, Emerson "betrays a lingering, if anxious, homoerotic desire," as he admires the quality of

loyal adhesion, that habit of friendship, and homage of man to man, running through all classes,--the electing of worthy persons to a certain fraternity, to acts of kindness and

warmth. . . which is alike lovely and honorable to those who render and those who receive it; which stands in contrast with the superficial attachments of other races (171).

Schueller reads a veiled reference to the East in the phrase “other races.” She maintains that this allusion helps to create a working definition for “Western manliness.” It is comprised of “(non bodily) relationships” that must necessarily exclude “deviant, fleeting (bodily) attachments among men of non-Western races.”

The strength of Schueller’s reading, here as elsewhere, lies in its provocation. The weakness is in the details. In *English Traits*, Emerson takes pains to praise the British over the Irish, Scots, and Welsh—which is to say, he champions the English over other Western and English-speaking races. The point is not so much Western superiority, as British superiority, particularly among other Westerners in its commonwealth. In turn, Emerson’s reference to the “superficial attachments of other races” is actually more strident than a dismissal of non-Westerners; he discounts the loyalty of *all* other races. As to the “lingering [. . .] anxious, homoerotic desire” that Emerson betrays, Schueller concludes her point in a way that shows her tendency to argue by assertion:

It is clear that Emerson’s conceptions of empire and Anglo-Saxon superiority are complicated by the mutual implication of boundaries between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the distinctions between which define Western constructions of masculinity (171).

It is, perhaps, not so “clear” that “the superficial attachments of other races” should be taken to mean the “deviant, fleeting (bodily) attachments among men of non-Western races,” and therefore “the mutual implication” of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Perhaps it does elsewhere—in Emerson’s work, in another writer’s—but here, the notion that Emerson associated homosexual promiscuity with non-Western races is textually ungrounded, revealing more about scholarly discussions involving empire and sexuality than it does about Emerson’s writing.

Prescriptive—and polemical—approaches to American forms of Orientalism have their place in scholarly discourse. But they are limited in what they can reveal to us about writers who grapple, question, reflect, and otherwise think about cross-cultural encounters in more than superficial terms. In her analysis, Scheuller gives little indication that Emerson’s writing could offer any resistance to her own ideas. Indeed, Emerson’s work seems to be more or less valueless except as it can be instrumentalized in the service of readymade readings of “Orientalism.”

In this dissertation, I seek to offer an alternative to readings where almost any allusion to the Orient—however probing, ironic, or experimental—is treated as transparent, trans-historical, and trans-geographic evidence of Western stereotyping and homogenization of the non-Western world. Instead, I will offer a series of close textual analyses that seek to be responsive to the ways in which the New England Transcendentalists explored the expressive possibilities of language. In the early writings of

Emerson and Thoreau, evocations of the East were often a means to seek alternatives to—instead of simply endorsing— the prevailing orthodoxies of thought, expression, and perception in antebellum New England. To chart the evolution of this kind of Orientalism is not simply to track discrete thoughts but also the interrogation of accepted ways of knowing oneself and one's own place in the world.

Emerson and Thoreau frequently pursue this kind of writing in their early journals, which is why their journals feature so prominently in this dissertation. In studies of Emerson's and Thoreau's journals, the subject of Orientalism is not taken up.⁴ In studies of Transcendentalist Orientalism, the early journals do not play a prominent role, either.⁵ For instance, Alan Hodder dismisses Emerson's early engagements with the Orient in general as reflecting "conventional bigotry" and "Christian-inspired prejudice and xenophobia" ("Concord Orientalism" 200). And in Thoreau's early journals, he mainly finds references to India that

⁴ See, for example, Lawrence Rosenwald, *Emerson and the Art of the Diary* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988) and Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (New York: Oxford P, 1985).

⁵ See, for example, Frederick Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1930). Arthur Christy, the son of Christian missionaries to China, also produced an important study in the 1930s, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (New York: CP, 1932). See also Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-century Explorations* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981); Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religion* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

are “conventionally derogatory” and reflecting a “familiar Orientalist pastiche” derived from the imagery of “domes and minarets” from eighteenth-century Oriental tales (202). These are strong condemnations that I will address in the following chapters. For now, however, I would simply say that these judgments are bound to faulty assumptions about how we should read the early writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Indeed, in this dissertation, I emphasize three major and neglected features of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s engagements with the East, as I offer close readings of their earliest writings.

First, I seek to restore the polysemy of the term “Orient” to studies of New England Transcendentalism, in part to explain why Emerson and Thoreau wrote with such expressive energy about the Orient. For these graduates of Harvard College, the “Orient” was not just limited to the culture, people, and texts associated with the aggregate of non-Western lands first delimited by the ancient Greeks: Persia, the Ottoman Empire—Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia, the Barbary States—India, China, and other parts of the East Indies. The “Orient” could also evoke the cluster of meanings that are encoded within the word itself: the suggestive Latin *oriens* signifying “the eastern part of the world, the part of the sky in which the sun rises, the east, the rising sun, daybreak, dawn” (“orient, n. and adj.”). This alluring invitation to look East, to gaze upon aurora, grounds the Transcendentalist use of tropes of daybreak and fresh beginnings when talking about the Orient. It also helps to remind us of the fundamental relativity of

the term. After all, what is the “Orient” to a writer in New England—that is, what lies directionally to the east—is not necessarily the same as a writer in “Old” England. In fact, as Emerson points out, what lies to the East of New England is actually Western Europe. If the Orient is defined by where you stand in the world, then where do Emerson and Thoreau stand when they look east?

Second, I will also argue that there is a key difference between the Orientalism of New and “Old” England, between Boston’s and London’s Cambridge, at least, in the early writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Unlike their British counterparts, the young Emerson and Thoreau were not guided in their Orientalism by a need to represent or define the Orient as a proper noun (although, as we shall see, Emerson does offer a new definition for the term “Orientalism” in 1841). These New England writers did not seek to master Hindu scripture, to travel to India, or to otherwise amass quantitative knowledge about the East. Instead, Emerson and Thoreau were fascinated by the experimental power of the “orient” as a verb, the ability to *reorient* themselves away, through reading and writing about the East, from the unthinking, uncritical reproduction of Western European cultural forms, expectations, and traditions. In this way, their early Orientalism was the self-conscious act of locating themselves, as writers of a former British colony, in relation to a cultural inheritance. I will contend, for instance, that one way in which Emerson believed that the United

States should distinguish itself from England was precisely by developing a different way of responding to the Orient.

Third, the Orientalism of Emerson and Thoreau is not a peripheral but a central feature of their early journaling. Moreover, the Orientalism that we encounter in these journals is not scholarly and methodical, but creative and exploratory, and it usually signifies that the boundaries of convention and orthodoxy are being playfully transgressed.

In chapters two and three of this dissertation, I will look anew at Emerson's interest in the "East" and non-Western literatures from the late-1810s to the 1840s, from his years as an aspiring writer at Harvard College to his emergence as a trans-Atlantic literary figure. In these years, Emerson yearned to be a poet of America's incipient empire, so he excitedly took up the so-called "Oriental theme" as a kind of literary apprenticeship, even a rite of passage, testing his hand as an essayist and poet in his submissions for prizes at Harvard College and his private journals. It is in this context, as he tried to make sense of Professor Edward Everett's ideas of cultural history and literary permanence, that Emerson's Law of Compensation coalesces around his meditations on the "knowable" Greek empire and the "unknowable" Egyptian empire. Emerson became convinced that for the West he knew there had to be a reciprocal and always-yet-to-be-explored East—even if, in the 1820s, he did not yet know where the "mysterious east," to which Everett told him that "all roads lead," would lie, nor grasp how mysterious or how familiar it would turn out to be. A key

feature of Emerson's Orientalism is that it defines itself against the "Old" English designs on the Orient, with its—for young Emerson—tyrannical hunger to subject South Asia to the British Crown. In focusing on this "early" period of Emerson's intellectual and literary development, which is largely discounted by critics of his Orientalism, I will show that Emerson's early Orientalism is an effort to develop a distinctly American engagement with the non-Western world, one that rejected—as a former British colony trying to establish its own viable intellectual identity—Great Britain's Orientalist model of commercial exploitation and imperial expansion.

In chapters three and four, I will explore the patterns and experiments in cognition as well as in composition of Thoreau's Orientalism in his journals from 1837 to 1841. My aim is to disclose new ways of thinking about Thoreau's "Orient" while also further illuminating this formative period in Thoreau's journals. For Thoreau the young thinker and writer, the years after his graduation from Harvard in 1837 were a time of new beginnings. Thoreau begins to write at length in his journals about his vocational concerns, to ruminate intensively on the natural world, and to otherwise meditate on the nature of time, textuality, and consciousness—all topics, as I shall show, that are related to Thoreau's emergent interest in the East. I will show how Thoreau attempts to "reorient" himself repeatedly around particular phenomenon and how these patterns reveal one of the central activities of Thoreau's Orientalism: to achieve a paradoxical

perspective where he could simultaneously see a thing and its opposite. Finally, these chapters will focus on the formal features of the journals, in part, to emphasize the organicism of Thoreau's Orientalism, which is to say, how so much of it arises out of the habitual act of Thoreau's speculative digressions about his own private—and often obscure—imaginings of the East.

Chapter 2

Orientalism and its Antidote in Ralph Waldo Emerson's Early Poetry and Prose

If I had a pocketful of money I think I should go down the Ohio & up & down the Mississippi by way of antidote to what small remains of the Orientalism – (so endemic in these parts) – there may still be in me, to cast out, I mean, the passion for Europe for the passion for America.

Emerson in a letter to Margaret Fuller, April 22, 1841

Land of our pride! The guardian angel stood;
Flushed from her strife in Freedom's conquering cause,
She holds the charter of sword-sanctioned laws;
Fair as the dayspring, clad in burnished mail,
Queen of the East! she hastes to bid thee hail

Emerson, "Indian Superstition," 1821

I. Introduction

In a letter to Margaret Fuller on April 22, 1841, Ralph Waldo Emerson offered a new definition for a term that had entered the English language in Great Britain less than a century earlier: Orientalism. Although this letter is commonly known among Emerson scholars, it does not appear in the major studies of Emerson's Orientalism. Scholars neglect this letter for two reasons.

The first reason is chronological. Scholars believe that Emerson's Orientalism does not come into its own until 1844, which is three years after this letter. They believe this, because in that later year of 1844, there is a dramatic rise in the number of allusions to Eastern literatures in Emerson's writings. The second reason that this earlier letter is neglected is epistemological. Scholars have tended to define "Emerson's Orientalism" in the terms of historical positivism. That is, they generally look for the places in Emerson's writings where they can clearly mark, tabulate, and track explicit allusions to non-Western texts.

In the next two chapters, I offer a different approach to Emerson's Orientalism, one that is more expository than prescriptive, focused more on the difficulties of literary and intellectual pluralism in early and mid-nineteenth century New England than on the failures of epistemic purity (a hazard that the orthodox-defying Transcendentalists were habituated to court). To this end, I will look anew at Ralph Waldo Emerson's interest in the "East" and non-Western literatures from the late-1810s to the 1840s, from his years as an aspiring writer at Harvard College to his emergence as a trans-Atlantic literary figure. During this early phase of his development, Emerson's Orientalism is less a static set of ideas or even prejudices about "the Orient" than an evolving, and idiosyncratic, set of responses to what Raymond Schwab has described as the "Oriental Renaissance": the broad effect, from philosophy to politics, of the rediscovery of ancient Sanscrit texts in the nineteenth century by Western European scholars, an event

that revived the same “atmosphere” as the arrival of Greek manuscripts and Byzantine commentators in the fifteenth century after the fall of Constantinople (11). In the United States in the nineteenth century, readers—like Emerson—were indebted to British scholars for English-language translations of these works (an exception is the translations of Ram Mohan Roy, the Bengali religious reformer⁶), but they came to differ from the British scholarly establishment in how they read these texts, not to mention in how they conceived of the Orient from which these texts were taken.

In the late 1810s and early 1820s, Emerson mainly conceived of his literary ambitions in terms of a theory of civilizational progress that was known as “improvement.” “Improvement” was the logic of succession whereby progressively greater empires arose to the west of the empires that they eclipsed, so that over the course of centuries, one could trace a series of empires—India, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Great Britain—that arced steadily across the globe from East to West. Like many New Englanders, including members of the faculty at Harvard College, Emerson believed the United States would assume the role of

⁶ Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was a Bengali reformist who worked to reform practices within Hinduism (such as the *sati*, the funeral practice, in which a widow sacrificed herself on her husband’s funeral pyre). He introduced the word “Hinduism” into the English language, and translated such works as the *Upanishads* and *Vedas*. See Bhattacharyana, “Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833).”

world-dominant empire from Great Britain. “I dedicate my book to the Spirit of America,” Emerson wrote in his journal in July 1822, a “Spirit” that partook of the trans-historical momentum of imperial progression (*The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2:3. Hereafter cited as *JMN*). Emerson yearned to be a poet of the incipient American empire, so, like the European poets of empire, he took up the skill-testing Oriental theme as a form of literary apprenticeship, even a rite of passage, when he submitted essays and poems for prizes at Harvard College, as well as when he wrote in his private journals. Rather than simply mimic European posturing towards the civilizations of the East, however, Emerson tried to forge a distinctly American engagement with the non-Western world. As a former British colony trying to establish its own viable intellectual identity, America should reject the colonial model of Great Britain, with its emphasis on commercial exploitation and imperial expansion.

In the 1820s and 30s, Emerson moves steadily away from a conception of the Orient shaped by British positivism, with its desire to collect information about, in order to better govern, the Orient. Emerson moves towards a range of conceptions shaped by the idealism—and in some cases, mysticism—of German poets, writers, and philosophers. He learned his German Idealism secondhand from his reading of Madame de Stael’s *Germany* and

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Friend and Aids to Reflection*.⁷ Indeed, as Emerson grew into his literary and intellectual maturity, the "Orient" came to imply more than the cultures and peoples associated with the aggregate of non-Western lands first delimited by the Greeks: Persia, the Ottoman Empire—Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Arabia, the Barbary States—India, China, and other parts of the East Indies. Emerson's Orient also encompassed the part of the heavens in which the sun and other celestial bodies first shine, deriving from the suggestive Latin *oriens* signifying "the part of the sky in which the sun rises, the east, the rising sun, daybreak, dawn" ("orient"). This alluring invitation to look East, to gaze upon aurora, has puzzled literary historians who search Emerson's writings for an Orientalism that is systematic, scholarly, and based in the archive, instead of experimental, creative, and rooted in the active imagination. These tropes of daybreak and the dawn also preserve the trace of New England's struggle to emerge from the colonial shadow of "old" England, as I shall show in my discussion of the American Scholar address that Emerson delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Harvard University in 1837.

II. The Critical Reception of Emerson's Orientalism

Before turning to Emerson's own understanding of Orientalism, we must briefly survey the scholarly record. For many

⁷ For a rich discussion of the ways in which Emerson engaged with the ideas of German romanticism in his later work, see especially Brantley, 153-59.

contemporary critics, the word “Orientalism” has become narrowly identified with a strain of Western exoticism that portrayed the East as despotic, sexually licentious, and morally corrupt, a land of civilizations—decayed, if not ruined—that could only be revived through the expansion of European colonialism. “Orientalism” began this descent into lexical notoriety with the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, a now-classic work of cultural revisionism on the relationship between the colonizing “West”—Great Britain, France, and to a much lesser extent, Germany—and the colonized “East,” an area that, for Said, mostly entailed India and the “Bible lands” of the Near East (4). Said described “Orientalism” as a style of thought and a mode of discourse in which the cultures and peoples of the non-Western world were systematically misrepresented—stereotyped, homogenized, even infantilized—to serve the economic and political interests of the West. In his original argument, however, Said did not account for attempts within the United States to engage with, evoke, or represent Asian or Middle Eastern cultures until the country reached its “hegemonic” status after World War II and remade European Orientalism into Area Studies. The reason was simple: the controlling factors of Said’s thesis did not seem to apply to the mid-nineteenth century United States. Until the end of the century, the United States held no Asian or Middle Eastern colonies, dispatched no scholars to excavate and translate Oriental texts, and largely looked to East Asia to build trade and commerce, instead of the Middle East, the dominant focus of Said’s work.

Over the past few decades, however, scholars such as Malini Johar Schueller (*U.S. Orientalisms, Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890*) and Alan D. Hodder have tried to adapt Said's analysis to the Orientalism of the New England Transcendentalists. Hodder has dismissed Emerson's Orientalism as a "recrudescence" of Saidian Orientalism, rejecting it for trafficking in European Orientalist stereotypes, failing to engage in a rigorous, scholarly exploration of non-Western texts, and seeming to participate in a kind of intellectual colonialism. In Hodder's view, Emerson uses Hindu concepts solely for the kind of analogies they could provide for his own ideas: "karma" as a correlate to his Law of Compensation (which I will return to later), or the Vedantic "maya" as a figuration of Nature's propensity to propagate illusions (198-99).

Since the early 1930s, with the publication of Frederic Ives Carpenter's *Emerson and Asia* and Arthur Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, the scholarly consensus about the "Orient" is clear: there is little of "Eastern" significance in Emerson's writings before 1844.⁸ Emerson might have lurked in the pages of non-Western literatures with a fascinated skepticism before the mid-1840s, but with the exception of a few tantalizing episodes to be found in his personal journals and correspondence—a passing admission to his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson ("I am curious to read your Hindoo mythologies," June 10,

⁸ Frederick Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (New York: Haskell, 1930).

1822), or the sketch of an Oriental tale scribbled in his journals (“I am the pampered child of the East,” January 1822)—scholars have found little to demonstrate that the Orient played an important role in Emerson’s intellectual development.

We should note that for most scholars, researching Emerson’s “Orientalism” is a chiefly a matter of verifying the influence of non-Western texts on Emerson’s writing, and the methods for determining this “influence” on Emerson’s work have been constrained to two types. In the first, a scholar tallies the uses of key words (e.g. Buddhism, the Orient) and explicit references to non-Western texts and makes a commonsensical argument on largely quantitative grounds: the greater the number, the greater the influence. In the second, the scholar draws on a superior knowledge of a non-Western religious or philosophical system to point out the unlikely ways in which Emerson’s thought managed to reproduce the insights of a foreign tradition, even though his exposure to foreign literatures was relatively limited. The latter approach veers towards the speculative and laudatory, and as Beongcheon Yu has pointed out, it tends to blur the distinction between “influence” and “parallels.”⁹ Was an

⁹ Yu observes the difference between “influence” and “parallels” as he discusses the two major scholarly approaches to Emerson’s Orientalism leading to the publication of his own study in 1983. Yu does not take issue with the way that the field has divided, although he cautions against measuring “influence” solely in terms of the books that Emerson read. See his chapter on “Emerson,” especially 26-30, in *The Great Circle, American Writers and the Orient*. Detroit: Wayne State, 1983.

Emersonian idea indebted to his Hindu reading or simply similar to a Vedantic idea? The former approach veers towards the restrictive and defensive, delimiting—often stridently—where Oriental ideas intruded and where they did not. For example, Stephen Whicher held firmly that the increasing “frequency of references” to non-Western literatures in Emerson’s journals after 1845 “indicate[d] the depth of their influence. . . on his thought,” and as a logical consequence, Emerson’s engagements with Asian materials before he was over forty years old did not merit close attention. In fact, in a May 1954 book review of F.I. Carpenter’s *Emerson Handbook*, Whicher dryly derided Carpenter for—in Whicher’s mind—exaggerating the importance of Oriental influence. Although a half-century old, Whicher’s pithy assessment is still, I think, widely shared by scholars:

If I had been asked to list the general influences that formed Emerson’s mental world, in the order of their importance, I would have written: the traditions of Protestant Christian thought, and in particular of New England Puritanism; the eighteenth-century influences loosely indicated by the name of the Enlightenment; the indirect impact of German Romanticism; and, among older influences (not wholly distinct from the above, of course), the Stoic tradition; Plato and Platonism; and, as a poor last, the Orient. I am struck by the fact that Professor Carpenter almost exactly inverts this order, with omissions (265).

To be sure, there have been scholars who developed studies in dissent of this assumption. Kenneth Cameron scoured borrowing records, journals and notebooks, correspondence, curricula, and the lists of personal library holdings to show that even before Emerson entered Harvard College, he sampled from the expanding corpus of writings from and about South Asia, East Asia, and the Middle East.¹⁰ Scholars such as Kamal K. Shukla, Man M. Singh, and J.P. Rao Rayapati also examined Emerson's early Orientalism, mostly exploring the uncanny affinities between Emerson's Idealism and the primary tenets of Hindu metaphysics.¹¹ These scholars tried to show that non-Western writings exerted an influence on Emerson before the major shift in his public career from a successful Lyceum lecturer to international literary celebrity. This sky-bound trajectory begins with *Nature* in 1836 and continues with the Harvard "American Scholar" (1837) and "Divinity School" (1838) addresses. For most readers, this period of accelerating publication and fame is when Emerson fluoresces into maturity—as the co-founder of the journal *The Dial* and the author of the *Essays* (1841), *Essays: Second Series* (1844), and *Representative Men* (1850), the opponent of slavery ("Emancipation in the British West Indies," 1844), and public decrier of the Fugitive Slave Law (1852).

¹⁰ Cameron, 1992.

¹¹ See J.P. Rao Rayapati, *Early American Interest in Vedanta* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1973), Man M. Singh, "Emerson and India," diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1947, summarized in Carpenter, *Emerson Handbook*, 210-11, and Kamal K. Shukla, "Emerson and Indian Thought," diss., Wayne State University, 1973.

It is also during this period that Emerson's Orientalism is most conspicuous in his published writing, even if it was not favorably received: "Brahma" and the Hafiz poems; the essays "Compensation," "Plato," "The Oversoul," his preface to the first American translation of *The Gulistan or Rose Garden*, among others.

III. Emerson's Definition of Orientalism

Any attempt to understand the significance of Emerson's Orientalism should take into account his own definition of the term from the spring of 1841, which no major study of Emerson's Orientalism has done. This new definition does not exhaust the significance of the Orient for Emerson, but it does show that "Orientalism" encompasses far more for Emerson than merely the influences of non-Western cultures.

When Emerson offers this definition for "Orientalism" in his letter to Margaret Fuller on April 22, 1841, he is fixing the proofs for the publication of *Essays*, a prose anthology that would comprise a dozen original pieces including "Self-Reliance," "Compensation," "Spiritual Laws," and "The Over-Soul."¹² The six-month task of

¹² Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Essays* was originally published in 1841 (an alternative title was "Forest Essays"). Emerson was a fastidious self-editor, and he spent six months in 1841 correcting proofs for the first publication of *Essays*. By 1845, the original run of 1500 copies had been sold out, and in 1847, he reissued the first collection, with only minimal changes, as *Essays: First Series* (to distinguish it from *Essays: Second Series*, which had been published in 1844). *Essays* included "History," "Self-Reliance," "Compensation," "Spiritual Laws," "Love," "Friendship," "Prudence," "Heroism," "The Over-Soul," "Circles," "Intellect," "Art." For

editing his own work has put Emerson, in his thirty-seventh year, in a reflective mood, and perhaps, it has also begun to affect his health. As he tells Fuller, a lingering illness has placed “ridiculously narrow limits” on the exercise of his body, if not his mind. Soon, however, the season will change, and his friend Henry Thoreau will join the Emerson household in Concord, Massachusetts, to work “in the garden and teach me how to graft apples” (*The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 2: 394. Hereafter cited as *L*). In the spirit of rustic experiments, Emerson also mentions a stalled attempt—inspired by Bronson Alcott, a mutual friend of Emerson and Fuller—to share a common table with his household servants. (The cook, clinging to convention, refuses to take meals with her employers.) After sharing the recent news about Thoreau, Alcott, and his own wife Lydia, however, the convalescing Emerson has no one else to talk about. The following is the entire paragraph from the letter:

Henry Thoreau is coming to live with me & work with me in the garden & teach me to graft apples. Do you know the issue of my earlier plans – of Mr Alcott, Liberty, Equality, & a common table, &c? I will not write out that pastoral here, but save it for the Bucolical chapter in my Memoirs. I am sorry we come so quickly to the kernel & through the kernel of Cambridge society, but I think I do not know any part of our

additional information, see especially Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 1136, notes.

American life which is so superficial: the Hoosiers, the speculators, the custom house officers, -- to say nothing of the Fanatics, interest us much more. If I had a pocketful of money I think I should go down the Ohio & up & down the Mississippi by way of antidote to what small remains of the Orientalism -- (so endemic in these parts) -- there may still be in me, to cast out, I mean, the passion for Europe for the passion for America. My Aunt said to me when I was young, "I respect in a rich man the order of Providence." We must presently learn that the rich man is not Europe but America; and our reverence for Cambridge which is only a part of our reverence for London must be transferred across the Allegany ridge (3:394-395).

Emerson apologizes for the thinness of "Cambridge Society" before contrasting it with a motley array of American frontier-types. He cites the river-boating "Hoosiers" from Indiana, a state in the northwestern corner of the United States that abutted the actual frontier states of Illinois and Michigan. There are also "the speculators," the quick-money opportunists whose unbridled speculation in the land-markets of the American West, aided by reckless credit policies, led to the Panic of 1837. There are "the custom house officers," who presided as agents of the government over the cargo that flowed into the United States (a job that Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emerson's friend and fellow Concordian,

would assume in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1846).¹³ And finally there are “the Fanatics,” those whose lives were radicalized by the evangelizing fervor of the Second Great Awakening, a group usually associated with the frontier of the Southwest. In short, Emerson believes that the bracing turbulence of frontier-life, and not a continuing fealty to European culture, should direct the inquisitive passions of Americans.

Amid this tableau, Emerson offers his idiosyncratic definition of “Orientalism”—“a passion for Europe instead of a passion for America”—and he avails himself of two tropes to explain what he means: a venom (“what small [part] remains” that requires an “antidote”) and a possessing demon (that needs to be “cast out”). Taken together, these figures illustrate what we might now describe as a post-colonial malaise: Emerson admits that he suffers, as snake-bit New England still suffers, from a passional mistake, a habituated reverence for old England, the ‘old World,’ and altogether old habits of cultural identification. Recalling an apothegm that his Aunt Mary Emerson shared with him as a child—“I respect in a rich man the order of Providence” (L 2:395)—Emerson affirms that “[w]e must learn that the rich man is not Europe but America and our reverence for Cambridge which is only

¹³ Nathaniel Hawthorne took the oath of office as surveyor of the port of Salem on April 9, 1846, a position he held until 1848. The job only took three and a half hours of Hawthorne’s time each day, but he found it “numbing” nevertheless. See Edwin Haviland Miller, *Salem is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Iowa City: Iowa UP, 1991), 257-77.

a part of our reverence for London must be transferred across the Allegany ridge.” Mary Moody taught her nephew that the accumulation of a rich man’s wealth is orchestrated by Providence and should therefore command our respect. In a similar way, Emerson believes that the transfer of empire from England to the United States is orchestrated by a greater power and should command the respect of Americans. To cast out a reverence for London is to replace the over-refined, pseudo-European personalities that flow from Harvard (i.e., “our reverence for Cambridge”) with the spirited, adventurous personalities from beyond the “Allegany ridge.” It is to shift one’s admiration from the “East” across the Atlantic Ocean to the West of the rollicking frontier.

And yet if he is trying to convey a misdirected sense of cultural allegiance, it is hardly obvious why Emerson would use the term “Orientalism.” Over the previous century, English-language definitions for “Orientalism” had carried an antiquarian tinge, with the “Orient” serving as a marker for the exotic “other” in a storied past (“*Orientalism*, *n.*”). There were the oriental traits discovered in the epic poems of Homer and Virgil; the “sublime” punishments endured by the stolid Job; and even a somewhat fanciful explanation for the appearance of dragons in early English Romances. (The flight of dragons was related, somewhat obscurely, to those of birds and stars, the provenance of Arabian philosophers.) Despite their semantic ingenuity, however, none of these usages—and they are British usages—conveys the vexed

self-awareness and verbal play of Emerson's neologism. Indeed, that Emerson could use the word "Orientalism" to express a combination of worry and whimsy—and without any reference to non-Western art, religion, or scholarship—demonstrates how flexible the term could be for him. Emerson can refer to "Orientalism" as a passion for things European rather than things non-Western or non-European. To find the "Orient," you do not have to circle the globe; there is an eastern land, a land of the dawn, right across the Atlantic, if you are looking East from Concord: the old World, Europe. After all, where you locate the "Orient" depends upon where you stand.

Emerson was thinking about his earlier Orientalism, not only as the psycho-social legacy of British colonialism on American sensibilities, but also as a nostalgic memory of exhilarating experiences of reading and writing from his college days. In the letter to Fuller, Emerson spends a good deal of time discussing the next issue of *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist periodical that Emerson and Fuller edited together. It is a good reminder of how practically involved he was in the enterprise of awakening the literary genius of New England. Beyond his editorial involvement with *The Dial*, Emerson also traveled to college campuses to give literary addresses, and it is in his ironical description of an upcoming address that we can see how his thoughts about "Orientalism" begin to crystallize around more private concerns. "Do you know that in August I am to go to Waterville a Baptist college [present-day Colby College] & deliver a literary oration to

some young men,” he asks before joking—“For which of my sins?”(396) Emerson shifts from thoughts of the young men at Waterville to the profound literary experiences of his own youth. “Why should we read many books,” he asks Fuller, “when the best books do not now avail us to yield that excitement & solid joy which fifteen years ago an article in the *Edinburgh* or almost a college poem or oration would give”?(396) In light of Emerson’s redefinition of “Orientalism” at the beginning of the letter (i.e., as an overweening “reverence for London”), the connection between the “*Edinburgh*” and “a college poem or oration” and previous forays into Eastern literatures should perhaps come as no surprise. The *Edinburgh Review*, a Scottish periodical founded in 1802, was a pioneering journal in Eastern studies and published a trove of articles about India.¹⁴ In May 1818, Emerson enthused to his brother William about its inspiring quality. “You like the *Edinburgh Reviews*,” he wrote, “by only reading one solid dissertation there, where the finest ideas are ornamented with the utmost polish & refinement of language you will feel some enthusiasm to turn your own steps into a *new* path of the field of belles lettres”(L 1:61). When Emerson sought to turn his “own steps into a *new* path” in the “college poem” that he delivered at graduation ceremonies at Harvard University on April 14, 1821—“Indian Superstition”—he excitedly drew on articles that he found in the *Edinburgh Review*, including “The Renovation of India, A Poem. With the Prophecy of the Ganges, an Ode,” by Thomas Brown; “Religion and Character

¹⁴ See Christie, 2009.

of the Hindus” and “Taylor’s Translation of an Ancient Hindu Drama,” published anonymously; “Southey’s Curse of Kehama” and “Teignmouth’s Life of Sir William Jones” by Francis Jeffrey; and “Maurice’s Modern India,” by Alexander Murray. In other words, when Emerson looks back from April 1841 to the *Edinburgh Review* and his own class poem titled “Indian Superstition,” he is looking back on his earlier reading and writing about the Orient. For Emerson—if not, as we have seen, for many scholars of Emerson—there is an Orientalism before the 1840s that is worth recalling.

As we have seen, in 1841 Emerson construes “Orientalism” as the poison or demon of Europhilia, of looking East of New England, a condition that is “endemic” to Cambridge society and that is best exorcised by travelling up and down the western waterways of the frontier, an aqueous counterpoint to the Atlantic Ocean to the east. Scholars argue that “Orientalism” is not a significant influence on Emerson’s thinking and writing before the 1840s because they ignore his own definition of “Orientalism”—the “Eastern” influence of Europe, London, Cambridge.

As the end of Emerson’s letter to Fuller suggests, he also associates “Orientalism” with the reading and writing about non-Western cultures that he had undertaken many years earlier while a student at Harvard College, in the form of poems and articles in the *Edinburgh Review* and his own class poem “Indian Superstition.” As I will argue in the following pages, in this collegiate stage of Emerson’s early Orientalism, his reading and

writing about the Orient serve as an antidote for European influence, teaching a new poet—Emerson himself—and through him a new nation, how to become its own author.

IV. New England Orientalism, Empires, and Improvement

One could date the birth of New England Orientalism to a dead letter that the Massachusetts Historical Society sent to Sir William Jones, the most celebrated British Orientalist of the age, in January 1795. The Massachusetts Historical Society wrote to Jones at his colonial outpost in British-controlled India to inform him that he had been elected as one of their corresponding members. “Your character and the attention which the world allows you to have paid to learning have induced us to pursue such measures as we hope will obtain your good wishes,” beamed the New England historians, eager to exchange “observations” about the Americas, as well as “any other part[s] of the world”(499). Twenty years earlier, in January 1784, Sir William Jones had founded the Asiatick Society in Calcutta, then the capital city of the British Raj, and it is likely that the Massachusetts Society took its self-conception as “learned” body from Jones’s example. In February 1784, in his inaugural discourse to the Asiatick Society, Jones announced that the Society’s objects of inquiry were “MAN and NATURE” as they were found within the sprawling boundaries of Asia.¹⁵ In this brief but pioneering lecture, Jones raised the study of “History and Antiquities, the Natural Productions, Arts,

¹⁵ Jones, 20-27. For his inaugural speech and the founding of the Asiatick Society, see also Cannon, 203-204.

Sciences, and Literature” of Asia to the scholarly status usually reserved for the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome (21). In doing so, Jones also opened the possibility of studying North America with the same seriousness and dedication. Why couldn’t a Society of scholars—with Sir William Jones superintending from afar—study the history, geography, arts, and sciences of the Northeastern United States?

By the time the New England historians signed their letter to Sir William Jones, however, he was dead. In fact, by January 1795, Jones had been dead for nine months from inflammation of the liver (Cannon xix). The lengthy delay in news about Jones’s death helps to illustrate the remoteness of New England—geographically, temporally—not only from Asia and the Middle East but also from the major figures of Asian and Middle Eastern scholarship. A ship built in the late-eighteenth century would take at least forty days to sail, in calm waters, from England to Massachusetts, and the voyage from Bengal to Boston—in a maritime world without clipper ships or the Suez Canal—would be even more arduous. One can see how difficult, if not futile, it would be to convey timely information between North America and South Asia, and how this barrier could irrevocably condition how a New Englander might imagine the Indian subcontinent—and, indeed, how India, Arabia, or China could become so closely identified with imagination itself. Moreover, even though we tend to think of prejudice in social and psychological terms, the logistical impossibility of keeping in regular contact with Asia or the Middle

East also can help to explain the popularity of knowledge that seemed “timeless”: generalizations about social, legal, and religious customs that easily devolve into so much crude and deterministic stereotyping. Any account of ordinary life in Asia or the Middle East, either spoken or written, would already be months old by the time the ship finally docked in New England, making conditions amenable for “perennial”—and sensational—misconceptions about the “Orient” to flourish.

In 1954, in the first serious essay on the subject, Kenneth Cameron’s description of Emerson’s early Orientalism portrays it as a kind of patrilineal legacy, one with ties to Sir William Jones and the Massachusetts historians (Cameron 56). The legacy was transmitted in the form of the personal library of Emerson’s father, the late-Reverend William Emerson, who had become a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society after the letter to Jones. The Reverend’s library reflected the wider “romantic and missionary climate of opinion,” with its “interest in the faraway and in the primitive” (56) and it included writing about the ancient texts of the Hindu tradition that Jones and the Asiatic Society were translating from Sanscrit into English. It also included copies of the *Monthly Anthology*, formerly edited by Reverend William Emerson, that carried selected articles on Asia and Sir William Jones’s translation of the “Sakuntala.” For clerics like Emerson’s father, the newly translated Hindu scriptures were a means to corroborate the deluge described in Genesis, particularly after Carl Linneaus

(1707-1778), the Swedish naturalist, claimed there was no physical evidence for the great flood.

Like the rest of his brothers, Ralph Waldo inherited the library of Reverend William, but he did not inherit his concerns. Indeed, Ralph Waldo Emerson's interest in the Orient steadily departs, in expectation, approach, and tenor, from everything his father and his father's generation would come to represent to him: a stuffy and unimaginative academism, one guided by a rigid and unapproachable masculinity. In Ralph Waldo's early journals and correspondence, it is not his father, but his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson—the sister of Reverend William—whom Emerson mentions in connection with Hindu books and figures. And when Ralph Waldo contrives the anagram "Tnamurya" for his Aunt Mary Moody—an affectionate moniker that Phyllis Cole describes as "pseudo-Asian," an "oracular name for access to the divine" (173)—we see the scion of a family of preachers in Unitarian New England in playful retreat from a social world of stiflingly "proper" transactions.

Emerson would continue to associate the unknown, the feminine, and the creative with the East into his adulthood, referring to his second wife Lydia as "Mine Asia" ("Lydia" was also a kingdom in Asia Minor) as well as occasionally adopting the poetic surname "Saadi" for himself. It is worth noting that Emerson does not use these convention-defying identifications as an opportunity to denigrate himself or non-Western cultures. In fact, there does not seem to be anything parodic or critical about these

adopted “pseudo-Asian” names. Rather, they seem ingenuous, naïve, and altogether personal, as if the Orient made available a special and private vocabulary of closeness and intimacy.¹⁶

The younger Emerson also differed from his father in his preoccupation with the fledgling “Empire” of the United States and the fate of one of its aspiring poets: Ralph Waldo himself. Indeed, to read Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journals from the late-1810s and 1820s is to see that an obsession with empire is one of the great—and overlooked—subjects of his early writings. Thought about empire is virtually inseparable from his attempts at expository and poetic creativity, insinuating itself into his submissions for college prizes at Harvard, his correspondence with family members, and most voluminously, in his personal journals. The circumstances that allow empires to emerge, the reasons why they flourish, and the causes of their ruin (the subject of Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a book Emerson read with interest) were of abiding importance to Ralph Waldo, leading him to long meditations on vast stretches of Mediterranean and European history.¹⁷

¹⁶ Carpenter observes that “Emerson was always trying to realize for himself what Orientalism meant; and he knew that the emotional element in it was strong” (30). Carpenter focuses on the nickname that Emerson gave to his second wife, Lydia—Mine Asia—speculating that she embodied the corresponding feminine principle to his masculine principle. As Emerson wrote in his journals in 1842, “Always there is this Woman as well as this Man in the mind; Affection as well as Intellect.”

¹⁷ For example, see Emerson’s journal entry from December 21, 1822, *JMV* 2, pp. 72-73.

But how does the prospect of a future American empire relate to the Orient? To grasp the connection, we might consider two poems, a famous poem by Bishop Berkeley, “On the Prospect of Planting Learning and Arts in America,” published in 1752, and a lesser known poem by Emerson himself, “Improvement,” which he delivered to the Pythologian Society in 1820.¹⁸

“On the Prospect of Planting Learning and Arts in America” is organized around the idea of the heliotropic or westward progress of civilization, an idea that might be as ancient as the assignation of divine powers to Apollo—the Greek god of the sun, who was also the god of arts and learning—and that would also find itself refashioned in the continent-striding efforts of Manifest Destiny.¹⁹ Like many reformers before him, Berkeley cast his eyes westward out of growing alarm at the moral decline of Europe. In “An Essay Towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain” (1721), Berkeley decried the way in which “Vice and villainy have by degrees grown reputable among us” (Cochrane 231-232). Drawing on his experience of a few trips to the New World, Berkeley decided to

¹⁸ Berkeley, 1060. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Improvement: a Poem delivered before the Pythologian Club,” in *Firstlings of Emerson the Writer*, 48-52.

¹⁹ The heliotropic or Apollonian theory of westward progress is a commonplace, appearing in its religious variation in John Donne (in his Christmas Day Sermon from 1624: “his [God’s] chariot, moves in that communicable motion circularly; it began in the east, it came to us, and is passing now, shining out now in the farther west”) and the poetry of George Herbert (in “The Church Militant”: “Religion, like a pilgrim, westward bent,/ Knocking at all doors, ever she went”). On this issue, see Cochrane, 1954.

found a college in the Bermudas, or Summer Islands, where natives and colonists from North and South America could join for moral and religious instruction. In June 1725, after securing a charter for his college, Berkeley sailed for the Americas and waited for King George II to deliver the funds he had promised. In 1731, after waiting in vain for the money for three years, Berkeley—who was then just George Berkeley—returned to England to pursue moral, mathematical, and transcendental philosophy. Bishop Berkeley published “Prospect” in 1752, but he penned an earlier version of the poem in 1726, under the title, “America or the Muse’s Refuge: A Prophecy.” The final poem, which is comprised of six rhymed quatrains in heroic verse, retains Berkeley’s optimism from the mid-1720s. Berkeley’s “On the Prospect” appears to be the first poem to place “the coming period of earthly perfection which was to arise in the last age of the world” in America. Moreover, it also seems to be the first poem to reference the westward course of “empire” in the sense of an expanding political dominion, instead of religion or humanistic learning (232).

In the poem’s opening stanzas, Berkeley describes how “The Muse,” in disgust, withholds its inspiration from present-day Europe, which is “Barren of every glorious Theme.” Through the figure of the muse—who holds herself in abeyance, awaiting a new “Age” in a virginal and sun-favored “Clime”—the poem pivots on the distinction between artistic and natural production, between artistic and political “Subjects”:

The Muse, disgusted at an Age and Clime

Barren of every glorious Theme,
In distant Lands now waits a better time,
Producing Subjects worthy Fame:

In happy Climes where from the genial Sun
And virgin Earth such Scenes ensue,
The Force of Art by Nature seems outdone,
And fancied Beauties by the true:

In the “happy Climes,” we find an expression of eighteenth-century primitive idealism, where nature produces “Scenes” that are more plentiful and true than “The Force of Art.” In those latitudes is a “Seat of Innocence,” an Edenic utopia, where the stuffy “Pedantry of Courts and Schools” will not displace “Truth and Sense.” In fact, as the poem shifts into a prophetic register, it heralds that “[t]here shall be sung another golden Age” with the “rise of Empire and of Arts,” and the “Good and Great” will inspire “epic Rage,” which, in turn, will inspire the “wisest Heads and noblest Hearts.” This new “Empire” of the Americas will not continue the downward course that “Europe breeds in her decay,” but rather

Such as she bred when fresh and young,
When heav’nly Flame did animate her Clay,
By future Poets shall be sung.

Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way
The four first Acts already past
A fifth shall close the Drama with the Day

Time's noblest offspring is the last

The "Drama" of empire follows the diurnal course of the sun, moving from the East to the West, culminating in the fifth "Act" and "Time's noblest offspring." Berkeley does not list the "four first Acts," although they were probably India (or Egypt), Greece, Rome, and Great Britain. The westernmost and "fifth" empire of the United States and the easternmost and first empire had the symmetrical relationship that exists when two points of a line meet to form a circle, a notion that Walt Whitman would dramatize in "Facing West from California's Shores" (i.e. to look westward from the western coast of the continental United States was to stare into the East). Moreover, the United States stood to inherit a responsibility for the Orient, since Great Britain had made the renewal of India a project at the core of its own-self definition. For New Englanders of Ralph Waldo's generation, however, who could still remember the British threats to US sovereignty in the War of 1812, the design of Great Britain's empire-building was no pristine model for their own future course. The colonies of North America were the jewel of the British crown before India, and for Emerson, one way to distinguish the US from England was to reimagine a different relationship to India and the Orient, one not premised on the tyranny of imperial expansion.

Ralph Waldo Emerson composed "Improvement" for the Pythologian Society at Harvard College in 1820 (Cameron, *Firstlings* 48-52). In a letter he wrote to his brother Edward Bliss after delivering the poem, Ralph Waldo gives a somewhat

disarming indication of how familiar the underlying theme of “Improvement” would be to his younger brother:

Last night I delivered a poem before the Pythologian Society which I told you a long time ago that I was appointed to write. The subject—though nominally “Improvement,” yet actually seemed to waver between that and The course of Empire. Having given you the subject & informing you that it contained 250 lines no doubt your imagination will supply the rest but if you should be unwilling to get a copy of it in such a speculative way & lest also the midnight labours of the poor poet should be consigned to mature oblivion I shall endeavour to send you the performance if there be any large ship going capacious enough to hold it. (L 1:93-94)

In the first section of the sizable poem, Emerson decries the lack of formal innovation in verse, showing how the evolution of versification can also be understood as a product of “The course of Empire.” To Emerson’s mind, contemporary poets are still bound by “the silver fetters of old Rhyme,” and thus, in one of the paradoxes of modern improvement, they lack the prosodic freedom enjoyed by earlier bards:

Oblivion’s veil of weight too long has hung
O’er themes of fancy meet for poets’ tongue.
Pictures of glory which the bards of yore
Made vocal once, vocal alas no more.
And why? Ask not! The Muses blush to tell
Since gowned monks with censer, cross & bell

Clogged the free step & mighty march of Mind

While Rhyme the ethereal soul [of man] confined (1-8).

Despite Emerson's impatience with the straitening legacy of pious "monks"—"poetry still hangs her dropping head," he complains, "By Rhyme's dull powers in hopeless bondage led" (1. 35-36)—he himself cannot seem to abandon the allure of rhyming couplets, a scheme that continues throughout the two hundred and twenty lines. The second section of the poem begins with "The car of Empire [rolling] forever west," where "lettered Egypt"—the land of hieroglyphic writing—"welcomes it to rest" (2. 69-70), contributing the improvement of astronomy before sliding into ruin. From Egypt, the "car" proceeds to Greece, where "Sculpture, Painting, Science loved to dwell" (91), and then to "youthful Rome," where Apollo summons "the soul of musick from the strings" from his "wild harp" (120, 122), before "Death & Havoc" of the Germanic invaders "hasten from the North" (133). Emerson offers a paean to this circuit of empires swallowed by time:

Mad Babel's pile—Ambition's earliest path.

The boasted splendor of departed Rome

Or polished Greece—young Architecture's home—

Or Egypt's mightier pyramids—even they

Yield to the slow, strong progress of decay.

Slow sinks their pride before the giant pile

[Their monuments are] buried in laurel: (2.141-147).

Emerson then turns to the British Empire, "The island Queen" who delays the coursing chariot and throws "the chain of empire

round/O'er lands which Roman triumph never found" (3.154-155), bidding improvement to "rise on Indian plains—/That land of woe & of romantic strains" (157). Emerson takes palpable pleasure in describing a dramatically stylized India, one that fulminates with heat—"hot sands where human nature fails" (160) beneath "the fierce ardor of the noon-tide sun" (170), a "burning storm" that "Brahma's self" (177) cannot quench. In Emerson's rendering of Britain's incursion into India, the emphasis is not on subjugation, but the inevitable and redemptive force of Improvement:

Thy name, oh Albion, shall be honoured long
When thy Improvement has dispelled the wrong.
The unbought admiration of mankind,
The grateful joy in human breasts enshrined,
The free obedience of the good & brave,
The blessing of the emancipated slave—
These are the trophies of Britannia's fame,
Triumphant Empire destitute of blame! (179-186).

Emerson glorifies Britannia as the vehicle of humane progress, liberating the sweltering Indians from religious slavery, and he sings hopefully about the "free obedience of the good & brave" —a forgiving stance towards British colonialism, to say the least, that he would alter within the year. In fact, in a rough draft of this poem that survives, Emerson takes a view opposed to the one he espouses above: "Britain withdraw her legions from the land," he orders, so "Hindoo heroes" can "rule their native shore" and

“heaven the long lost boon of peace restore.”²⁰ In the final version of the poem he delivered, however, he makes no such protest. Instead, from Albion’s “golden throne,” Improvement wheels westward once more where “Columbus breaks the pitchy cloud,” and the “promised land [comes] bursting through the gloom!” Arriving in the Americas, the poem hesitates in its conclusion:

Ages unborn must see the muses rear
The throne of universal empire here.
Nor Heaven allows to be developed now
The mighty plans to which the world must bow
The tree of promise blossoms—full & fair—
But other plants must claim our present care.

This anticlimactic ending, a seeming acknowledgment that history beckons for something American culture has yet provide, could be a dramatic call-to-action by Emerson, one calculated to rouse the audience into delivering the defense of national greatness that the poet has omitted. But if that were the case, what could the fellows of the Pythologian Society in 1820 have offered by way of comparison to the likes of Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Great Britain? In what ways had Bishop Berkeley’s pre-Revolutionary prophecy been fulfilled?

The faculty at Harvard College evidently had similar questions on their minds. During the first year of Ralph Waldo’s college career, Harvard Professor Andrews Norton spoke to the special claims of “Improvement” in the pages of the *North*

²⁰ See Cameron, 833.

American Review in January 1818 (Cameron 54). “In this country,” he wrote, “mankind seem to be subjected to an experiment to determine their power of improvement instituted under circumstances incomparably more favourable than ever before existed.” These “circumstances” included a “youthful freshness and vigour,” and a freedom from “those institutions transmitted to us, by which other nations are enthralled, and held back, and allied to the ignorance and vices of their progenitors.” In Norton’s article, he attributes the dearth of literary labor to the burdens of having to “[hold] the plough in one hand and the musket in the other.” Now that the rudiments of a civil society had been secured, however, “the period has arrived when we must have a literature of our own.” To establish a national literature is not an ornament, he argues, but “a safeguard of our best principles, habits, and feelings,” and true men of letters will only arise “when the country is ready to afford them honour and reward.”

One way to gather insight into the interests of Harvard’s professoriate is to consider a selected list of Harvard commencement and exhibition works from 1800 to 1834, one that Kenneth Cameron organized around the themes of “the Orient” and “Climate.”²¹ The popularity of these themes reveals a percolating curiosity about the manners, religion, and climate of Asia and the Middle East, an interest that turned on the question of empire, or

²¹ Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Emerson’s “Indian Superstition” with Studies in His Poetry, Bibliography, and Early Orientalism* (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1977).

better, on empires: not only the Western European powers who ranged into the Orient to extend their territories (preeminently Great Britain, but also France, whose armies Napoleon had launched into North Africa at the end of the eighteenth century), but also the latent empire of the United States. The Neo-Classical belief in the determinative power of climate, which adds a latitudinal dimension to the logic of "Improvement," derives mainly from the philosophy of John Locke. Locke argued that each human being was born a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which sensual experience could make its indelible mark, and as a consequence, differences in culture could be accounted for by variations in climate (a view also put forward in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*).

The following are the titles and dates of delivery of the commencement and exhibition works (Cameron, *Indian Superstition* 67-69):

"The Natural Advantages of Asia, Africa, Europe, and America" (July 16, 1800); "Character of Mahomet, considered as an Enthusiast, an Imposter, or an Union of Both" (April 30, 1811); "On the Power of the Oriental, Gothic, and Classical Superstition to affect the Imagination and Feelings" (August 30, 1815); "On Superstition and Skepticism" (August 30, 1815); "Whether the Prevalence of Despotism in Asia be occasioned principally by Physical Causes" (August 28, 1816); "On the Indian Astronomy," (August 28, 1817); "The poetry of the Oriental Nation," (October 28, 1817); "On the Use of Heathen Mythology in Modern Poetry"

(August 26, 1818); “Mohamet and Alcanor” (October 20, 1818); “The Genii of the Four Continents” (August 19, 1819); “On the Characteristicks of Man and Government, as found in the Savage, Pastoral, Agricultural, and Commercial State” (August 25, 1819); “Indian Superstition—A Poem” (April 24, 1821); “On the Relative Physical Advantages of the Eastern and Western Continents” (August 29, 1821); “On Popular Superstitions” (August 29, 1821); “The Institutions of the East Indians” (August 22, 1822); “The Ruins of Thebes, Babylon, Persepolis, and Palmyra” (August 27, 1823); “Do Savage Nations possess a full Right of the Soil” (August 31, 1825); “Ruins of the East—A Poem” (August 31, 1825); “The Polar Regions, South American, Central Africa, and India, as affording Objects of Curiosity and Interest” (August 30, 1826); “Prospects of Christianity in India” (August 30, 1826); “The Moral and Intellectual Qualities of Dr. Johnson, Burke, and Sir William Jones” (October 17, 1826); “Ancient Ethical Systems as connected with Modern Moral Researches” (July 16, 1827); “The Jewish, Christian, and Mahometan Religions under the Allegory of the Three Rings (from Lessing’s *Nathan*” (October 20, 1829); “The Roman Ceremonies, the System of the Druids, the Religion of the Hindoos, and the Superstition of the American Indians” (August 25, 1830); “Influence of Superstition on Science and Literature” (August 29, 1832); “Superstition” (August 27, 1834).

Graduation ceremonies are designed for audiences that are larger than the students and faculty of a given school, and so they can suggest how a college or university wants to be perceived, if

not admired, by members of the local community, other institutions of learning, and also benefactors. What this list shows is that for over three decades Harvard University regularly decided that during public ceremonies, where education was less pursued than celebrated, it should exhibit an interest in the non-Western world, an interest bound up with the effects of climate on character—religious, national—and the implications of irrational “superstition.” In a sense, these ceremonial pieces help us to see what Harvard thought that learnedness entailed. When Emerson decided to deliver a poem in 1821 on the topic of “Indian Superstition” (an exhibition that is included on the list of themes), we can see how he was tackling one of the major preoccupations of New England’s intellectual culture, as well as trying to find his own voice within that culture.

V. “Indian Superstition and the Genius of India

In the spring of 1821—and only after a handful of other graduating seniors declined the offer—the faculty at Harvard asked Emerson to deliver the class poem on April 14. Emerson’s theme was supposed to be “the influence of weather & skies on the mind,” and by the middle of February, he was able to offer a relatively specific proposal for his faculty supervisor. As Emerson noted in his journal, he would discourse on the “poor inhabits of Indostan” who were “distressed & degraded by the horrors of a flimsy & cruel Superstition.” He would argue that their dark “misery” was profoundly different from the “rejoicing nations of Europe & America” because “a flaming sky boils their blood & blackens their

skin & maddens” and coarsens their “nature.” On “dull” days, the Indian “nature” would respond by becoming depressed, and on “glorious” days, exhilarated (*JMV* 1:49-50).

Emerson entitled his class poem “Indian Superstition,” a phrase that appears earlier in his juvenilia in “Dissertation on the Character of Socrates,” a prose-work Emerson submitted for the Bowdoin Prize at Harvard in 1820. In what might now seem a familiar thesis, Emerson sought in “Socrates” to expound on the assertion that

the giant strength of modern improvement is more indebted to the early wisdom of Thales and Socrates and Plato than is generally allowed, or perhaps than modern philosophers have been well aware (*Cameron, Firstlings*, 23).

The progress of “improvement” stalled when the Sophists of Periclean Athens were tempted to replace the “rigidity of their morals” for a “*perfumed* morality” (the emphasis belongs to Emerson) and lead the “credulous populace” into “abominable excesses” and “debauching virtue.” The origins of this shift lie in the “contaminating vices” of “Asiatic luxury,” the “sumptuous heritage of [the] Persian War.” Emerson plays on this disparaging use of “Asiatic luxury” as he militates against, of all things, “the soul of the poet”—a “soul” that, in contrast with Socratic practicality, luxuriates in

golden dreams,—airy nothings, bright personifications of glory and joy and evil—and we imagine him [the poet] sitting

apart, like Brahma, moulding magnificent forms, clothing them with beauty and grandeur (Cameron, *Firstlings* 25)

The poetic soul sit aloofly apart “like Brahma,” consumed with his “airy nothings,” a pastime that seems perilously vacuous in Emerson’s treatment. Socrates, in comparison, is not susceptible to such hazy distraction, but Emerson is careful to stipulate that he does not punish himself, either. Although Socrates may adopt “harsh discipline” to “subdue his corporeal wants,” he never falls into the “excess of Indian superstition which worships God by outraging nature.” This charge—worshipping God by outraging nature—originates in a choleric essay-review “British Monachism” by Robert Southey in the *Edinburgh Review*.²² In the essay, Robert Southey railed against “the most disgusting actions of insane and groveling superstition” undertaken by Egyptian Christians and the “Yogues of Hindostan,” whose monastic penances—crawling like beasts on all fours, stewing in scalding water, while otherwise refusing to clean themselves—become a kind of lunacy, “a zealous “worshipping [of] God” that also “[outraged] Nature.”

Emerson’s “Indian Superstition” is a 156-line poem that he composed for declamation at a graduation event, and one can detect the strain of two contrary impulses in his approach. First, there is the urge to entertain an audience with apocalyptic imagery of the exotic Orient, and second, the desire to evince a learned

²² Robert Southey, “British Monachism,” *Quarterly Review* 22.43 (July 1819), 59-102.

familiarity with Spenser, Milton, Shakespeare, and Pope, as well as other poems that took up the Oriental theme, Robert Southey's "The Curse of Kehama" and Charles Grant's "Restoration of Learning." It is hard to find defenders of "Indian Superstition," and Sherman Paul's assessment is fairly typical: it is apprentice-work with "no literary merit" and does not "compel interest as a poem."²³ But despite its strange rhythms and turgid lines, "Indian Superstition" shows Emerson to be both indebted to the British examples that preceded his own attempt at the Oriental theme and committed to forging a new and self-consciously "American" direction.

Emerson opens the poem with a tantalizing vision of fairies sitting on "golden clouds, sailing the "summer gale," happily sounding their "lutes" in twilight adoration of their unnamed king, a troupe of whimsical sylphs that could just as easily alight on the feathery clouds of a Pope satire.

Cushioned on golden clouds, there are, who sail,
And clad in splendor, ride the summer gale,
Who sweep the atmosphere on painted wing,
Swell their rich music, & adore their king;
Whose silver lutes at somber twilight play
A soft farewell to all the pride of day (1-6).

But as Emerson quickly makes clear, "Indian Superstition" will require "sterner Spirits" than frolicking fairies, and he foregoes cushioned clouds for a "cavern low" that keeps the "book of

²³ Paul, 282-283.

Prospero.” If we recall the trajectory of Prospero’s career in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, from cosmic sorcerer to—at the play’s end, after he drowns his books—his restoration as the Duke of Milan, we can see why Prospero provides an apt figure for a poem that will exhort fallen India to cast away its superstitions and resume its rightful place among the world’s great nations. The Prospero allusion also offers an overarching structure to the poem by bracketing it with references to Italian politics: at the poem’s end, Emerson appends a reference, somewhat abruptly, to uprisings on the “Italian shore” that helped to overthrow totalitarianism in 1815 (Cameron, *Firstlings* 71, note 155). Finally, Prospero’s books provides Emerson the poet with a vehicle to travel “Far oer the East where boundless Ocean smiles” to the “thousand isles” where “Dishonored India clanks her sullen chain.” This conceit not only marks the ensuing verses as the offspring of “magical” romance (if this poem scandalizes you, blame that magician Prospero), but also acknowledges the textual reality the poet’s travels to “India” only come by way of transporting books from England.

Once Prospero’s books convey the poet to India, Emerson discovers a Brueghelian mess, and he catalogs the misery of the Indian people in clamorous detail. The once-honorable “India” “wails her desolation to the main,” as the poem turns to the degraded, overrun seat of political power:

To her dark land the banded fiends resort
And Superstition crowds his haggard court.

The bloated monster gluts his hellish brood,
Gorging his banquet with the people's blood.
Loud on the wind the shrieks of anguish rang,
From victims writhing [sic] to his lion fang (15-20).

"Superstition" and its "hellish brood" gorge themselves with "people's blood" as "shrieks of anguish" ring through the air. Malevolent personifications—Rapine, Despair, Horror—howl, cry, and prowl their way through the poem. Emerson even includes the requisite section on the now-debunked myth of Juggernaut, the enormous cart that frenzied devotees of Krishna supposedly threw themselves under (i.e., "Oer man the car of fiends tremendous rolled," etc.). However, amid the tumult of words and images ("In the fierce ardor of the noon-tide sun/Drink in the blast, for patient penance done," etc.), Emerson avoids declarations of Western religious or racial superiority. Instead, Emerson condemns the "Superstition" of India for social and political reasons, addressing it with the aggrieved pride of a champion of Democracy. Indian superstition, for instance, fails the Indian Everyman who helplessly "stands in Ganges' holy bowers" in "wild worship to mysterious powers," and it punishes the least powerful Indians of the lowest caste who dare to improve their standing (a point Emerson underscores in a footnote to the poem). This spirit of political protest—as opposed to racial or religious condescension—is highlighted when we compare "Indian Superstition" to one of its British antecedents, Charles Grant's "Restoration of Learning in the East."

Charles Grant's poem, which was published in the United States in 1807, had won a prize offered by Reverend Claudius Buchanan in 1804. Grant the poet was the son of Charles Grant, a former chairman of the British East India Company, a member of Parliament, and a strident advocate for Christianizing India (Charles Grant the poet would, too, ascend to prominent positions in the British government, and his brother, Sir Robert Grant, was also the Governor of Bombay).²⁴ Reverend Buchanan was the Vice Provost of the College of Fort William in Bengal, and he put up two hundred and ten pounds in prize money for virtuosic literary performances in poetry and prose, in English, Greek, and Latin.²⁵ All of the awards aspired, more or less, to the same end: to offer ideas on "the best Means of civilizing the Subjects of the British Empire in India; and of diffusing the Light of the Christian Religion throughout the Eastern world" (Grant 3). Grant's poem is built on a tripartite argument that follows a popular narrative about the debased grandeur of India needing the revitalizing power of the West. In part one, Grant placed "Hindoo literature" in the context of "the latter part of the last century," describing how Indian letters reached its lowest point during the invasion of Nadar Shah (the "Alexander of Persia," who plundered India after overthrowing the

²⁴ See "Grant, (Charles)," *Universal Pronouncing Dictionary of Biography and Mythology*, Vol. 1, ed. Joseph Thomas (Philadelphia and London: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1930), p. 1157.

²⁵ Charles Grant, *Restoration of Learning in the East; Which Obtained Mr. Buchanan's Prize* (Salem, MA: Cushing & Appleton, 1807), p. 3-4.

Mughals). In part two, Grant focused on periods of poetic and philosophic brilliance in India's past (e.g. in the fourth century when the poet Calidasa was alive), conveying the reader back to an era when India was presided over by native kings. In part three, Grant departed from his praise of native Indian literature and governance, refusing, quite simply, the idea of returning India to Indians. Instead, he called for the "revival of learning on the banks of the Ganges under the auspices of the English, and particularly the Asiatic society," as well as the Indian embrace of "the arts, the sciences, and the religion of Great Britain, throughout the East" (Grant, 4). In this section from the third "argument" of Grant's "Restoration," we encounter a poet who is fairly intoxicated with the potency of British power:

BRITAIN, thy voice can bid the dawn ascend,
On thee alone the eyes of ASIA bend.
High Arbitress! to thee her hopes are given,
Sole pledge of bliss, and delegate of Heaven;
In thy dread mantle all her fates repose,
Or bright with blessings, or o'ercast with woes;
And future ages shall the mandate keep,
Smile at thy touch, or at thy bidding weep
Oh! To thy godlike destiny arise!

Awake and meet the purpose of the skies! (34).

One can see how Britain's "voice can bid the dawn ascend"—how it *must* make the sun rise—because a vanquished Asia can barely raise its eyes. What other hope does Asia have if not for Britain,

the “pledge of bliss” and “delegate of Heaven”? The more obsequious the Indian nation, the greater the glory for the “High Arbitress” of the Island Nation, and the stronger the justification for colonial intervention: without rejuvenating England, India would perish.

Not so with Emerson. To be sure, midway through Emerson’s “Indian Superstition,” we find “India’s giant genius. . . [s]tretched in dark slumber oer Oblivion’s lake,” unable to rouse itself from its gloomy torpor (81-82). But as a solution, Emerson does not offer the resuscitating power of American learning, much less some kind of “godlike” intervention; America’s success does not depend on the abjection of India. Instead, Emerson proffers the inspiration of glorious example, the triumph of Columbia in the tyranny-shattering American Revolution and War of 1812.

“What choral burst awakes the startled deep?” Emerson asks to open the poem’s final section. “What visions strike Oblivion’s iron sleep?” (121). In response, the clouds suddenly part to reveal “angel forms to men below,” the “maids of empire come, whose awful sway/The prostrate nations of the world obey” (126). What these inexorable “maids of empire” usher in for “prostrate” India to behold, however, are not visions of a crucified God or the institutions of Western progress. Instead, it is Columbia who eagerly wishes to recognize India with a convivial greeting:

First in that throng—gathering her Eagle’s food,
Land of our pride! The guardian angel stood;
Flushed from her strife in Freedom’s conquering cause,

She holds the charter of sword-sanctioned laws;
Fair as the dayspring, clad in burnished mail,
Queen of the East! she hastes to bid thee hail (135-140).

Columbia is a “guardian angel” of “laws” instead of a conquering angel for the “Queen of the East,” an angel that “hastes to bid thee hail” instead of dictating the terms of civilization. “No Indra thunders in Columbia’s sky,” Emerson sings, “No man-almighty grasps at destiny,” a reference to the “almighty” Indian Rajah or monarch. “Fair Freedom” does not emanate from the godhead or the king, but rather “starts, amid the huts of men,” as it should in a democracy.

Wide through the nation is her watchword known,
Her spear uplifted, and her bugle blown,
That sound went out with power across the globe
To rend the idol and the royal robe;
India hath caught it, where her ample moon,
Rose to the music of the loud monsoon;
Its latest echo woke the Italian shore,--

It shall not sleep till Time shall be no more. (149-156)

The force of American freedom rends both “the idol” of debilitating religious beliefs and “the royal robe” of Indian and British monarchy. It does not exert itself through military force or civilizing institutions, but in the power of revolutionary rhetoric and successful example. Emerson’s “Indian Superstition” might be naively triumphant about the virtues of American nationalism and crudely ignorant about the actual plight of everyday Indians.

However, it does not endorse British colonial apologies or a British-style solution—Western colonization—to India's problems. Taking the "fifth" act of American independence as a model, the poem presents the new possibility of self-determination to the Orient, and Emerson, as a patriotic poet, is glad to trumpet that idea to the world.

Chapter 3

Fairyland and the Intervals of Darkness: Turning East from Emerson's Early Journals to "American Scholar"

I. Witches, Supromines, and the Giant Californ: Creative Orientalism in Emerson's Journals

In "Indian Superstition," Emerson endorses the political goal of republicanism for the people of India, and while doing so, he avoids the all-too-familiar commonplaces about how the West will revitalize the East through the expansion of Western colonies. Indeed, to Emerson's mind, the ascendancy of the US empire, which I discussed in the previous chapter, does not entail either subjugating or extending sovereignty over foreign nations, particularly in the Orient. Emerson urges the people of India to throw off British tyranny and embrace self-rule—essentially, to revitalize themselves—just like the United States: to be an empire does not include colonization of the Orient, one of the "improvements" of a US empire over the British.

The poetic mode of "Indian Superstition," however, is still one of exoticism. Emerson seems to play the age-old trick of denouncing the immorality of a subject while simultaneously relishing its shocking description. In fact, if we examine his writings from the late-1810s and early 1820s, we see that Emerson tends to rebuke superstition in his public pieces (e.g. the dissertation on Socrates, the class poem). However, as this chapter will

demonstrate, Emerson embraces superstition in his private writings, projecting one literary image to his mentors and classmates, and testing out another in the guarded pages of his commonplace book.

In part, I think, this rift shows Emerson's ambivalence towards what he associated with superstition and the Orient: creative originality, the feminine, the unknown. Emerson shielded his inner life from the inspecting eyes of his peers and professors, an early expression of the—decidedly Emersonian—need to withdraw from the community to discover oneself in solitude. The pages of the private journals provided that sheltering opportunity for Emerson, and perhaps as a consequence, he writes with voracious good-humor about superstition and Orientalism. Indeed, in the entries of the early 1820s, he gleefully explores the utility of “superstition”—in the etymological sense of “standing beyond,” in his tongue-in-cheek evocations of a Shakespearean “Fairyland”—as he tries to stoke his imagination to produce literary works of greatness and originality. Not only do these excursions into the unknown help Emerson to work out where he fits in the world, but they also launch him into strange and original formulations that shape the evolution of his thinking for decades to come.

Emerson opens his journal on January 25, at the age of sixteen, energetically laying out his ambitions for his new literary enterprise. He declares that the unfilled pages will soon comprise “a record of new thoughts (when they occur),” provide a handy receptacle for “all the old ideas that partial but peculiar peepings at

antiquity can furnish or furbish,” and fulfill “all the various purposes & utility real or imaginary” that are usually included when we refer to a “Common Place book” (*JMN* 1:3-4). Emerson decides to affix the grandly aspiring title “The Wide World” to this journal, but the “Wide World” that Emerson creates in his journal is anything but a realm of common places. Not only does it encompass meditations on the “whole interminable Universe,” which would seem to be a large enough venue for the activities of his mind, but it also contains fanciful excursions to “Fairyland” where he finds witches to function as illicit muses.

“O ye witches assist me,” incants the young Waldo. He beseeches them to “enliven or horrify some midnight lucubration or dream (whichever may be found most convenient) to supply this reservoir when other resources fail” (*JMN* 1:4). His playful solicitation has a revealing twist: Emerson does not simply call on witches to refill his creative well when it goes dry, he specifically entreats the bad witches. “Pardon me Fairy Land,” apologizes Emerson to the hapless array of gnomes, elves, sylphs, and even “Queen Mab” the presiding fairy of Mercutio’s speech in *Romeo and Juliet*. “[P]ardon me for presenting my first petition to your enemies,” he repeats, “but there is probably one in the chamber who maliciously influenced me to write what is irrevocable” (4). Emerson also calls on the elemental “Spirits” of “Earth, Air, Fire, Water” to “hallow, hallow this devoted paper” (4), a flourish that completes the ragtag group whose ranks, notably, do not include the Greek Muses.

Judging by Emerson's early journals and theme books, his primary vocational aspiration is to be a writer, whether as a poet, an essayist, or both. Emerson clearly relished the role of the critical essayist as he found them in publications such as "the Rambler & books of that description." In a June 1820 entry in his companion notebook to "Wide World," his "College Theme Book," Emerson bemoaned the absence of "works of taste" (*JMV* 1:172) that could showcase "moral & learned & argumentative writers, minds of a firmer make," who could be "built up to persuade & convince the stubborn, employing themselves in encountering prejudices & detecting frauds, in checking & chastising profane abuse, & subjecting to controul [sp] those fiery passions which corrode & fret the soul" (172). "Such works are rare in our American literature," he says, foreshadowing strident criticisms of American literature to come, "& we all feel the deficiency & the want of them is the reproach under which we have long impatiently labored" (172). Taking matters into his own hand, Emerson decides to replace the "transient pleasure" of the "ephemeral" American "sketch-book" with his own version of *The Rambler: The Idol*. In the first installment, in March 1821, Emerson boasted his "whims" would "be insignificant to none" because he was "[d]isguised [. . .] in the licensed garb of the anonymous." He could speak hard, profound truths because he cared "not a whortleberry for opinion" (176). Emerson also dreamed of being an eminent poet, and stray bits of poetry are to be found as he scribbled his thoughts on various subjects. He was fastidious and flamboyant

and concerned about the role of the muses in inspiration, and he collected delectable words and phrases that he wanted to work into his writing. On a list of “phrases poetical,” we find “spikenard,” “sycophant smile,” “till its dye was doubled on the crimson cross” and others, along with—of course—“whortleberry” (233).

Emerson’s absorbing interest in the kaleidoscopic aspects of literary life is bound up with his appetite for the fantastical. Indeed, in the opening entry of his *College Theme* book, Emerson excoriates William Wordsworth for not being fantastical enough. “I have thirsted to abuse the poetical character of Mr Wordsworth,” he warns, and he does not waste the chance. Wordsworth writes “the poetry of pigmies,” and it “belittles the mind that is accustomed to the manly march of other muses”; Wordsworth is the “poet of pismires,” whose “inspirations are spent light.” Size and scope are not the only problems for the Lake Poet; a strict adherence to conventional ideas about nature defeats him, too. “It is one of the greatest mistakes in the world,” Emerson lectures, “to suppose that that much abused virtue of nature in poetry consists in mere fidelity of representation” (162). This kind of didacticism comes easily to young Emerson, as he chastises fellow poets for not adhering to literary and moral standards that are at once grand and exacting. When it came to his own creative writing, Emerson needs the thrilling lash of the incredible to reach his own high standards. As he confesses in a fit of dejection, “I find myself often idle, vagrant, stupid & hollow.” While others “around me are industrious & will be great, I am indolent & shall be insignificant. Avert it heaven! Avert

it virtue! I need excitement” (39). This final call—“I need excitement”—rates, I think, somewhere between a desperate plea and a guilty confession. Emerson wants greatness, but he cannot come about it through conventional means; he needs an exterior rush of “excitement” to sweep him into sublimity.

In *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Robert D. Richardson argues that the fancifulness of Emerson’s journals is an implicit commentary on the staidness of his academic exercise.²⁶ In Emerson’s college classes, rote memorization might be the coin of the realm, but in the journals, Emerson could explore “a marked and steady interest in imagination, in fairyland, in legend, folktale, fiction, and poetry.” On January 26, 1820, Emerson writes about a new class of beings called the “Supromines,” and in Richardson’s judgment, the entry offers “the strongest possible contrast to the rationalist curriculum” at Cambridge in the 1820s (11). The entry begins as Emerson expounds on an idea that struck him while reading the writing of Edward Search, the pen name of the English philosopher Abraham Tucker. Emerson had presumably been studying Abraham Tucker’s *The Light of Nature Pursued*, an eight-volume work that explored “whether Reason alone be sufficient to direct us in all parts of our conduct, or whether Revelation and Supernatural aids be necessary” (11)—an appropriate question for a writer interested in superstition and the “wide world.” In the entry, Emerson begins to wonder if “sentient beings” (*JMV* 1:4) who are either unperceived or invisible to humans might nonetheless inhabit

²⁶ Richardson, 11.

the earth. With a mixture of earnestness and abandon, Emerson excitedly allowed his imagination to take flight:

Perhaps the /center/interior/ of the earth, the bottomless depths & the upper paths of Ocean, the lands circumjacent to the poles, the high rock & clefts of the rock are peopled by higher beings than ourselves;—animals cast in more refined mould; not subject to the inconveniencies, woes &c of our species to whom as to us this world appears made only for them & to [sic] among whom our very honest & honorable species are classed only as the highest order of brutes— (4).

Emerson gives this fantastical class of creatures “the name of Supromine,” perhaps because they are “above” (from the Latin “supro”) the writer’s own species (i.e. above mine, etc.). Since they are the products of his “Imagination,” Emerson can freely speculate about a different order of beings who are, by analogy, even greater than the Supromines (4-5). As his thoughts gather momentum, Emerson wonders what would happen if these new creatures—the Super-Supromines?—were then to be exceeded by yet another class of beings

& another till for aught I know she [i.e., Imagination] may make this world one of the Mansions of heaven & in parts of it through in & around yet thoroughly unknown to us the seraphim & cherubim may live & enjoy (5).

When Emerson arrives at the frantic conclusion of his reverie, he cuffs himself for pursuing this tangent “in such a remorseless manner as to render dull & flat an idea originally plump, round, &

shining” (5). From inspiration to deflation, we see the brief and brilliant trajectory of an original thought that flies too close to the inner censor. We also see evidence of the conscientious student who will pursue a logical exercise with unflagging diligence, and a solemn believer who is obsessed with moral hierarchies and comforted by orthodox conclusions: what begins with imaginative creatures ends with the orders of angels. Indeed, it seems to be a version of the moral progression of “improvement,” except instead of empires, he “improves” fanciful beings.

In his dedication to the sixth volume of “Wide World,” Emerson writes floridly about a Supromine-type creature, and as it extends the original idea of the Supromine—a superior being, or class of beings, that seems to be from another world, but that is actually from undiscovered realms of *this* world—it also reveals how “Superstition” and “Orientalism” were combining in Emerson’s mind. In the dedication, the superior being is a “Giant” who dwelled upon the “South Mountain Chimbarozo” (153). This “Giant”—whom Emerson also calls the “Giant Californ”—was the son of “Nature” who, for two centuries, ranged in faraway lands when “America was yet a secret in the heart of time” to the “inhabitants of Europe.” Apart from bringing “peace and justice,” and battling the “Mammoths,” the giant also performed a daily religious ritual. When atop the summit of Chimbarozo, the giant would plunge into an opening named “The Golden Lips,” a tunnel-like hole that “admitted downwards into the centre of the mountain which was a vast and spacious temple,” where “all of its walls and

ceilings [glowed] with pure gold.” At midday, when the sun was perpendicular to the hole, it would “[pour] its full effulgence upon the mirror floor,” and “its reflected beams” would blaze throughout the room “with a luster which eclipsed the elder glory of the temple of Solomon.” In the center of this dazzling palace, the “Giant Californ” would perform an “incommunicable rite,” just as the sun, reaching its meridian, would illumine the following inscription on the wall: “A thousand years, A thousand years, and the Hand shall come, and shall tear the Veil for all.” In Emerson’s telling, it has been two thousand years since the giant performed his ritual. In the interim, “the mighty progress of improvement & civilization have been forming the force which shall reveal Nature to Man.” With this prologue dramatically set in place, Emerson dedicates the newest addition to his journal to the disclosure of this revelation: “To roll about the outskirts of this Mystery and ascertain and describe its pleasing wonders—be this the journey of my Wideworld. The *Hand* shall come;—I traced its outline in the mists of the morning” (153).

It is a dazzling piece of apocalyptic writing (as in “to uncover, reveal”), a millennial vision that the “mighty progress of improvement & civilization” has finally made the revelation of “Nature to Man” possible in the Americas. Emerson’s “Giant Californ,” like the Supromines, are not inferior to Emerson but superior. They provoke in Emerson a kind of “excitement” about what lay just out of reach—in time, in space—beyond the current state of knowledge. The Supromines are thus “superstitious” in the

etymological sense of “that which stands apart,” a mythical embodiment of possibility.

I will return shortly to the relation of “the Veil” and natural revelation to Emerson’s Orientalism. For now, I would like to turn to another feature in the early journals: how we find Emerson formulating his thoughts around cleavages, paradoxes, binaries, with an uncanny regularity, and how this preoccupation relates to the “mysterious East.”

II. Compensation

As I’ve mentioned earlier, it is a critical commonplace that Emerson’s early contacts with the East did not significantly shape his intellectual development. But this review overlooks Emerson’s response to a Harvard lecture that addressed the divide between ancient Greece and Egypt, between the knowable and unknowable, a response that forms the basis for his concept of Compensation, one of the self-avowed “laws” of his life’s work. To show how this response took shape, it is necessary to delve into two journal entries from April 1820, which are bound by subject matter and separated by less than a week (*JMV* 1:12).

Emerson makes the first entry on April 4 in a mood of creative expectation. As Emerson explains, he “ought to have this evening a flow of thought rich, abundant, & deep” because he had enjoyed a day’s worth of auspicious opportunities for self-reflection. For instance, he had “read profitably” in the *Quarterly Review*, a literary and political periodical published in London, and he had listened to an introductory lecture given by Dr. John C. Warren,

M.D., a professor of anatomy and surgery at Harvard (12). But it was a second lecture that promised to elicit a copious “flow” of his own thoughts: a learned talk on ancient Greece given by Harvard’s Eliot Professor of Greek Literature, Edward Everett. In an exercise that is part schoolboy diligence and part intellectual hero-worship, Emerson records in his journal “a very concise abstract” of the “ideas” he “promiscuously received” from Everett’s lecture (13-14).

If we can judge by Emerson’s “abstract,” which is not quite so “concise” at almost 50 lines, Everett organized his talk around an age-old question, which the student dutifully recorded, that had been taken up by figures such as Quintilian, Horace, Cicero, Fontenelle, Racine, Bacon, Locke, Shakespeare, and Swift, concerning the relative merits of the ancients and the moderns. In Professor Everett’s case, the question takes this form: how does one assess the excellence of Greek literature in relation to the literature it inspired? Everett argues that the Greek writers are superior to those who came after because the “moderns’ best efforts have only imitated [Greek models],” while the Greeks, by the simple fact of coming first, had only themselves to draw on. As he defends the preeminence of Greek literature, Everett takes up a needling evidentiary and epistemological problem. What about literature that might have preceded the Greeks but that failed to survive into the modern age? Everett acknowledges that not all literature, Greek or otherwise ancient, has survived to be evaluated, and therefore, any judgment about literature in general can only be incomplete. Everett dispenses with this dilemma,

however, with a rather daunting assertion: “What was worth knowing was transmitted to posterity”—as Emerson reports in his summary—“The rest is buried in deserved forgetfulness.” Here is how Emerson recounts this part of Everett’s lecture in his journal:

Though the literature of Greece gives us sufficient information with regard to later periods of their commonwealth as we go back before the light of tradition comes in the veil drops. “All tends to the mysterious east.” From the time of the first dispersion of the human family to the time of Grecian rise every thing in the history of man is obscure & we think ourselves sufficiently fortunate “if we can write in broad lines the fate of a dynasty” tho we know nothing of the individuals who composed it. The cause is the inefficiency & uncertainty of tradition in those early & ignorant times when the whole history of a tribe was lodged in the head of its patriarch & in his death their history was lost. But even after the invention of letters much[,] very much[,] has <escaped> never reached us. This we need not regret. What was worth knowing was transmitted to posterity, the rest buried in deserved forgetfulness. Every thing was handed down which ought to be handed down (*JMV* 1:12).

It will become important to distinguish between different voices in these entries, whether that of the original speaker or writer, or merely the transcriber, so the first point to notice involves the somewhat tedious matter of punctuation. As we can see, Emerson’s summary of Everett’s argument indicates that there are

two direct quotations. The first quotation, which is invariably cited in studies of Emerson's Orientalism, is not simple to parse when examined closely in its context—"All tends to the mysterious east." The reason for the difficulty is that the quote seems to work against Everett's argument. Everett concedes that oral traditions where the "whole history of a tribe was lodged in the head of its patriarch" died with their patriarchs, and "even after the invention of letters much, very much, has [. . .] never reached us." But even though the record is incomplete, Everett insists that "Every thing was handed down which ought to be handed down." However, if Everett truly believes that we shouldn't be distracted from what does exist by what no longer exists—what has been lost in the darkness before "the light of tradition," what is lost to human history on the far side of "the veil"—then how do we understand the gnomic maxim "All tends to the mysterious east"? What does it mean that "All" still tends towards the vanishing point of these missing literatures? (12).

It would seem that "All tends to the mysterious east" either answers a question or completes a statement about origins. For example, 'When we look to the origins of Greek culture, all tends to the mysterious east.' Or, 'As we ask where does history effectively begin, all tends to the mysterious east.' The "East" then becomes the "darkness" that makes the "light of tradition" meaningful; it marks a fundamental historical and epistemological contrast, the point where the present becomes "the present" in relation to the lost, where the known becomes "known" in relation to the unknown.

Emerson shows that he is still intrigued by the idea of contrast, making good on his own prediction that he would experience a “flow” of rich thoughts, when he follows with, “Greece is the land of contrast. A principle of contrast runs through all that we know of it. Drama, Manners, Climate, Houses, Women—everything.”

Whether we can grasp the full importance of this observation or not (it is a generalization boldly asserted without evidence), we can safely attribute this observation to Emerson himself, since Emerson does not use quotation marks around these remarks, and because he makes a point to say that everything “above” this entry “is a very concise abstract of Prof. E’s lecture as far as the Eulogy” (thus everything “below” this entry, presumably, belongs to him).

I underscore the fact that Emerson is probably noting his own observation about “Greece” as a “land of contrast” because of the varied and multiple contrasts that Emerson draws in the next entry in the journal on April 10. “I here make a resolution,” Emerson announces, “to make myself acquainted with the Greek language & antiquities & history with long & serious attention & study” (*JMV* 1:14). Emerson decides to devote himself to “the *down-putting* of sentences quoted or original which regard Greece” because there is a “fascination which the elegance & genius of the ancients has thrown over [their] productions.” Emerson has gamely decided to emulate Everett’s scholarly passions, pledging to study the “productions” of ancient Greece. However, there is a key difference between Emerson and Everett; unlike Everett, Emerson cannot easily shake the attraction of the “other” ancient productions

that are lost forever to history. After writing about the “elegance & genius of the ancients,” Emerson switches, rather capriciously, to shorthand:

& wh rndrs mdrn lbrs cntmptbl .n cmprsn. I mst rd Hrdts & Arstphns & ll Grk Trgdns snr or ltr. Wld tht sm ricks of Egptn ltrtr rmnd I wld prse thm wth .rdr & strnge .ntrst! Bt nthng .s lft .s bt . fw prd smbls .f dprtd grndr. It ws rmrkd in th Qrtl Rvw tht .s you g. wst sprsttn grws mr fntckl & inhm; i.e. Hndstn .s mr crl .n hr crmns & [“pnhts” or “pnhcs”] thn Egpt, & Egpt thn Erp.

[and which renders modern libraries contemptible by comparison. I must read Herodotus and Aristophanes and all Greek Tragedies sooner or later. Would that some relics of Egyptian literature remained. I would pursue them with ardor and strange interest! But nothing is left to us but a few proud symbols of departed grandeur. It was remarked in the *Quarterly Review* that as you go west superstition grows more fanatickal and inhuman; i.e. Hindustan is more cruel in her ceremonies and [punishments] than Egypt, and Egypt than Europe] (14).

There are no vowels in Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Emerson prunes the vowels from his own shorthand—which is to suggest:

Emerson’s shorthand is probably his own attempt to mimic Egyptian hieroglyph. “Egyptian literature” might be absent from the cultural inheritance that we find in our “modern libraries”

(libraries that are otherwise filled with literature inferior to that of the ancients), but that clearly does not keep young writers from fashioning hieroglyphs of their own. Emerson also produces a contrast of his own: regular and easily legible script, as opposed to a riddling hieroglyph (a shorthand that also recalls the impulse that turned “Aunt Mary” into “Tnamurya”).

This example of “contrast” can be added to what is already a quietly growing list. All of these instances of “contrast” emanate from Everett’s “mysterious” lecture: the ancient and modern, known and unknown, Greek and Egyptian, West and East, straightforward and encoded, etc. A stream of opposites is ‘flowing’ from Emerson, who seems to revel in the swooning effect of revolving from one polarity to another, happily departing in tone from the seriousness of Everett’s learned disquisition (e.g. he ends his shorthand passage by writing, “But .t .ll .vnts ths stngrphy .s msrbl.”—“But at all events, this stenography is miserable”), and departing in emphasis by openly pining for—and supplying for himself—“relics of Egyptian literature” that no longer remain. In the end, Emerson contents himself with an observation from the *Quarterly Review*—which we may remember, he also read on April 4—that expresses the “improvement” *telos* of the progress of Empire, with “Hindustan” exhibiting more cruelty in ceremonies and punishments than Egypt, and with Egypt showing itself, in turn, “more cruel than Europe.” We might wince at the insistence on “Eastern cruelties,” especially since this prejudice provided ideological cover for Western cruelties, as Europeans enacted their

nefarious designs on the lands and resources of Asia and the Middle East. But even if we reject these misconceptions, we need not dismiss the indelible effect that Everett's lecture had on Emerson's thinking, bringing into new coherence a law that was previously only a vague intuition: Compensation

Compensation—or Contrast, Reciprocity, Repairs, Off-sets, as it shifts guises in Emerson's writing—can be found throughout Emerson's journals, published essays, and correspondence. As Henry Pommer points out, "Nowhere [does] Emerson state the matter with methodical precision,"²⁷ although we might understand it as a theory of universal retribution, one premised on a notion of moral completeness: for each positive action there is a just recompense, for each exertion there is a hard-earned reward. As Emerson describes it in the essay "Compensation," an often-criticized piece that he included in *Essays* in 1841, every "excess causes a defect; every defect an excess," every "sweet hath its sour; every evil its good," and every "faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse."²⁸ Emerson claims that he wanted "to write a discourse on Compensation" ever since he was a boy, when he began to recognize how ordinary people seemed to know "more than the preachers taught" about the endless circularity of cause and effect (54). The everyday "documents" from which the doctrine of Compensation could be inferred were ubiquitous, and when Emerson catalogs them, he

²⁷ Pommer, 248-253.

²⁸ Emerson, *Essays: First and Second Series*, 53-72.

invites a parallel with Whitman's ecstatic celebration of quotidian life in a democracy. They are "the tools in our hands, the bread in our basket, the transactions of the street, the farm, and the dwelling-house, greetings, relations, debits and credits, the influence of character, the nature and endowment of all men" (55).

Of course, it is impossible to know when Emerson first "wished to write a discourse on Compensation." But we can chart the changes in his journal writing in the months after April 1820, as Emerson's thoughts veer towards examples of loss and restoration, of one part of a binary inexorably replacing another, of the relationship between doubleness and singleness. For instance, on June 19, Emerson jots down his wondering impressions of a sublime skyscape, where the "magnificent masses of vapour which load our horizon" break away to reveal "fields of blue atmosphere." The shift puts Emerson in mind of the "eternal analogy" that exists between the "external changes of nature & scenes" and the "good & ill that chequer human life":

Joy cometh but is speedily supplanted by grief & we look at the approach of transient adversities like the mists of the morning fearful & many but the fairies are in them & *White Ladies* beckoning (19).

Extending his comments on the alternation of "Joy" and "grief," Emerson winds a snippet of scripture—"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning," says Psalm 30:5—around pagan figures of "fairies" and "*White Ladies*" (the latter perhaps an allusion to the ghost of a forlorn mother who haunted the

Rochester area in New York in search of her lost daughter).²⁹ On August 8, he praises Lord Francis Bacon as a “wonderful writer,” selecting as evidence—at random, he says—a sentence from *Novum Organum* in which Bacon describes “bodies” that are “composed of two different species of things.” According to Bacon’s explanation of these creatures that contain doubleness in a single body, they are examples of the “heteroclite kind”; they “excellently indicate the composition & structure of things” and “suggest the causes” for the sheer “number of ordinary species in the universe,” helping to “lead the understanding from that which is, to that which may be” (21). As Emerson notes two days later, Lord Bacon also remarks that the “opposite shores of S. America & Africa correspond—bay to cape—gulf to coast,” which “could not be without a cause” (24). Even the ragged edges of continents, whose coastlines are separated by a vast ocean, reflect the workings of the Law of Compensation. What now appears as two different land masses were once a unified whole.

On January 12, 1822, when Emerson decides to formulate the “cause” for these kinds of correspondences in an actual law, he calls it “Contrast.” (Acknowledging that he mistrusts his “ability to shine upon this topic in theme, *poem*, or *review*,” Emerson is left “to confide in the silent sheets of my book” (59-60)—yet another topic for the privacy of the journals.) Emerson’s first formal attempt

²⁹ S.E. Schlosser, *Spooky New York: Tales of Haunting, Strange Happenings, and Other Local Lore* (Guilford, Conn: Globe Pequot, 2005), 2-10.

at describing the law is clear and forthright, and it draws on an anecdote from Arabia:

Contrast is a law which seems to exist not only in the human mind with regard to the objects of imagination as an associating principle but also to obtain in the course of providence & the laws which regulate the World. When the day grows very bright and the atmosphere burns with unusual splendor, the mind reverts to the storm which will cloud, or the night which will speedily blacken it. Before the time of Mohamet and the comparative civilization of the deserts the merciless Arab celebrated a <day> feast of peace annually of seven days in which the deadliest enemy & the longest feud were forgotten & reconciled in a religious harmony & joy until the Close of the period. –And were the Arab tenfold more keen & terrible in his vengeance and his selfishness more sordid & savage than it is now, we feel sure, that the feast should be longer & the friendship closer (60).

In his exposition of this universal law, Emerson does not seek evidence from the familiar practices of European civic culture, but the edges of “Oriental” history, in the “comparative civilization” of Arabia before the arrival of Mohamet. After all, if a law will be true for the “merciless Arab,” then it surely must be true everywhere. Emerson even stipulates that the annual seven-day “feast of peace” would still hold if the Arab were “tenfold more keen & terrible in his vengeance” and “more sordid & savage” in “his

selfishness,” provided that the feast were “longer,” which in turn, would result in an even “closer” bond between the former enemies. In the coming months, as Emerson fills page after page with thoughts about how and where “Contrast” operates, he returns to the “mysterious East” for illustration. For instance, in a meditation on the “remarkable [. . .] darkness of the Middle Ages,” (65) in January 21 1821, Emerson asks:

Whether the sudden development of the mind in Arabia and the <un>irresistible force with which the religion of Mahomet was carried from the banks of Euphrates to the banks of the Guadalquivir had any other connection with the deep sleep under which Europe was laid than the unknown laws <of Contrast> which take place to keep the level in human affairs, there is no reason to suppose. There was no union of commerce or interest, no alliance, no emigration which could serve to point out any relations between the fall of Rome, and the empire of the Saracens. Indeed the known causes of that prosperity are adequate to the end and entirely independent of any other power (68).

There are other explanations for the concomitant “fall of Rome” and the rise of “the empire of the Saracens,” not the least being that whenever you compare two events, you are already disposed to find some kind of connection. But despite the dubiousness of his evidentiary procedure, Emerson is able to account for phenomena—or better, he wants to account for phenomena—that lie on either side of the divide between Occident and Orient.

Contrast is not a law that operates only in the West or the East, but rather that encompasses the West and East in its endless revolutions.

III. Orientalism and the Merits of Creative Imagination

When scholars look to Emerson's early writings for "Oriental influences," they invariably tally the references he makes to non-Western texts, a commonsensical approach to determining how foreign ideas, concepts, or phrases work their way into a writer's imagination. As we have seen, the result is a consensus that Asian and Middle Eastern literatures did not exert a significant influence on Emerson's literary and intellectual development from the late-1810s to the middle 1840s. But Emerson gives us good reason to supplement this concept of "positive" influences, which are easily marked and quantified, with one that takes into account the conjuring power of obscurity—even nothingness, as it were—to stimulate creative production.

To illustrate what I mean, we might look at a lengthy letter that Emerson composed to his Aunt Mary Moody on June 10, 1822. Emerson responds in his letter to his Aunt's worries over two lapses in her nephew's energies: his flagging enthusiasm for a career in the pulpit and the waning power, a year after his graduation from Harvard, of his poetic inspiration. Mary Moody, who earlier, and anxiously, had asked to read through Ralph Waldo's private journals was troubled by her nephew's desire to scuttle his plans for the ministry. She also feared that he had become merely "the nursling of surrounding circumstances," that

he would substitute a “deceitful good” for one that was “real.” As a tonic for these miasmic thoughts, she advised that he adjourn from Boston and retire to seclusion in the country.

In his June 10 letter, Emerson reports that he and his brother William had just returned from a week-long stay at a farmhouse in Northborough, about thirty-five miles west of Boston. He tells his aunt, gently but chidingly, that he still believes “Cambridge would be a better place to study than the woodlands,” but he admits that he “understood a little of that *intoxication*, which [she] spoke of,” a “soft animal luxury” that he found enjoyable, but not inspirational. “[N]ot once, during our stay” did he feel moved to “rattle out the battles of my thoughts,” he says, quoting a line from Ben Johnson (*L* 1: 115). Emerson also reproaches his aunt for failing to know that a Samuel Johnson poem that she had mentioned was “professedly an Imitation of the 10th Satire of Juvenal,” instead of an original (i.e. “The Vanity of Human Wishes in Imitation of the Tenth Satire of Juvenal,” 1749). Emerson uses the opportunity to defend the value of imitations, saying that recognizing Johnson’s source might diminish his aunt’s “respect of idolatry of the poet, considered personally,” but imitation also “submits the faults of one poet, to the revisions of another, whom, the distance of centuries makes an impartial critic” (1:116). This practice spares the common reader the “difficulty of obtaining, or the mortification of wanting, the original,” and it provides the “classical reader” with a “double pleasure,” first, of the pleasing “sentiments” that animate the poem, and second, of the “sheer skill & wit displayed”—a result

of a “lucky exactness”—“in the application of the old to the new” (1:116).

To see Emerson admit his immunity to the stirrings of the natural world and to champion imitation is to recognize the defining concerns of his later philosophy without its defining characteristics—a reminder that Emerson’s development consists of reversals as well as extensions of his earlier sense of the world. One judgment Emerson makes about “Eastern antiquities” belongs to the latter category, helping to explain why there are not more non-Western citations in his work until 1845. “I am curious to read your Hindu mythologies,” Emerson announces to his aunt. “One is apt to lament over indolence and ignorance,” he says judiciously, “when we read” that “all the books of knowledge, and all the wisdom of Europe twice told, lie hidden in the treasures of the Bramins & the volumes of Zoroaster” (*L* 1:116-117).

Two years after he records his response to Everett’s lecture, Emerson continues to ponder how extant Western wisdom is lost Eastern wisdom. Where we might think that would be the end of what nephew has to say to aunt on a topic he admits to know nothing about, the young Emerson reports a zeal within his lament, a source of light within ignorance. Even though “the wisdom of Europe twice told” may be harbored in Hindu and Zoroastrian texts that he cannot read, they serve a valuable—perhaps even more valuable—purpose for him, in his ignorance:

When I lie dreaming on the possible contents of pages, as dark to me as the characters on the Seal of Solomon, I

console myself with calling it learning's El Dorado. Every man has a Fairy land just beyond the compass of his horizon; the natural philosopher yearned after his Stone; the moral philosopher for his Utopia; the merchant for some South Sea speculation; the mechanic for perpetual motion; the poet for – all unearthly things; and it is very natural that literature at large, should look for some fanciful stores of mind which surpassed example and possibility (1:117).

Emerson goes on to express his “high reverence for what has actually been discovered” (as we might expect from a former student of Edward Everett), and he also wonders at the “gigantic advances” in “civilization & science” that would have resulted if the “two sundered hemispheres” of East and West could have combined their efforts, instead of working “separately & independently” (117).

But despite Emerson's “reverence” for Eastern literatures that have “actually been discovered” and his polite curiosity about his aunt's “Hindu mythologies,” his creative interest lies in the beguiling power of what remains unknown, the obscured texts that elicit dreams about “the possible contents of pages, as dark to me as the characters on the Seal of Solomon.” These shrouded pages are “learning's El Dorado,” the “Fairy land just beyond the compass of [the] horizon” that drives the progress of the imagination. We have already seen the power of “El Dorado” at work in Emerson's mythical tale of the “Giant Californ.” “El Dorado” is Spanish for “the golden one,” and as Emerson envisions the Giant Californ leaping

into the “Golden Lips” (i.e., the entryway at the top of the South Mountain Chimbarozo) and performing a secret ritual in a hidden palace “with a luster which eclipsed the elder glory of the temple of Solomon,” he recasts the El Dorado myth, with the hidden script illuminated by the midday sun—“A thousand years, A thousand years, and the Hand shall come, and shall tear the Veil for all”—serving as the “characters on the Seal of Solomon” set ablaze (*JMN* 1:153). This is a form of creative interpolation that is not strictly based on *creatio ex nihilo* or the imitations of Johnson or Juvenal, but on something in between. Power—and delight—emanate from Emerson, who lies “dreaming of the possible content of pages as dark. . .as characters on the Seal of Solomon,” and it is Emerson who audaciously reworks the grammar of myths taken from sources as diverse as the Old Testament and the tales of gold-seeking European plunderers of the New World. But it is the ‘darkened characters’ concealed from Emerson’s view that elicit the dream, the necessary provocation to a creative enterprise that is part recovery, part discovery.

Later that year, in October 1822, Emerson provides another illustration of the evocative role of the ‘darkened’ East in his “Preface to Travels in the Land of Not” (*JMN* 2:31) The “Land of Not” is a puckish pun on “The Land of Nod,” the wilderness where Cain flees after slaying his brother Abel. “And Cain went out from the presence of the LORD,” recounts the book of Genesis, “and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden” (*Genesis* 4:16). The tongue-in-cheek preface is the work of a writer in playful exile from

Judeo-Christian scripture, who roams the lands—farther east—of the original site of creation of the Hebrew Bible. The book itself (which never materializes; Emerson only writes the preface) is meant to parody apocryphal travel narratives, both of the Orient and the United States; the irony turns, somewhat bumpily, on the idea that “Land of Not” is a place that cannot actually be visited, because it exists solely in the realm of the imagination. We should note that the double meaning of “The Land of Not” also gestures to Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), a work that Emerson checked out from a local library just a few months earlier that year. “Utopia,” a neologism that Sir Thomas More coined from the Greek, means both “nowhere” and “good place” (Marius 154).

To be sure, in the preface, Emerson insists that he has long resided “in the country he describes” and he is “familiar” with “its customs & the tone of feeling prevalent there.” He will not bother with refined descriptions of “a subtle & delicate nature such as might elude the examination and analysis of an ordinary traveler,” but he will gladly describe manners and customs that are “enormous and gross to the last degree”—a winking clue that Emerson is talking, once again, about some parcel of the sensational, oversized terrain of Fairy Land. Although Emerson’s account will be the “thousandth” from Not, readers who expect the thrill of novelty will still be satisfied, since “such <are> [. . .] the inexhaustible store of its manners” that no one will find “an individual fact, in my whole Journal, which they have met with before” (*JMN* 2:31). Emerson also avers that “the best book of

travels in that Country” he has ever read is “The Arabian Night’s Entertainment,” and, in fact, the “Land of Not” should be judged as “the supplement to that of my Arabian Friend” (2:32). Not only does this endorsement suggest why Emerson’s “Journal” is the thousandth tale, a millenary number that recalls the alternate title to *The Arabian Nights Entertainment—One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*—but it also aligns the “Land of Not” with the tenth-century collection of incredible Persian, Indian, and Arabia fables, including Aladdin, Sinbad, and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.

“It is now nineteen years since I left the land of Not,” says Emerson, which is probably another veiled joke: in 1822, nineteen was exactly his age, so he left the “land of Not” when he was no longer “not” anywhere. Casting about, it would seem, for other uses of the “not” pun, Emerson reflects that there is “more crime, misery, and vexation” every year in every country not “Not” than “Not [experiences] in the lapse of many centur<y>ies,” a comment that lies suspended between a “logical” joke (i.e. life will always be less dangerous in a land that does not exist) and a gesture towards the Enlightenment practice of positing an exotic locale as superior to the one shared by the audience, a form of social critique that would highlight vices of the audience’s nation that might otherwise remain invisible. (He also says we do not hear more often from people from the Land of Not because of a “rigorous Alien act which ordains that no man who leaves the limits of the country shall ever be permitted to set foot within it again,” a sacrifice few would want

to make.) Before he leaves his “book in the hands of the public,” Emerson shares a final observation about fellow travelers in “Not”:

I said just now that this was the thousandth volume which has been offered upon the subject; and this is true; but a deception has been <practiced> put upon society and <Under> the books which have been published under a thousand imposing names were in fact nothing more than merely travels in Not. This imposition has been detected in many instances as in an Octavo called Fearing’s Travels in America; in some Folios, called Kant’s Philosophy; and in many others of various sizes and various ornamental names but there are innumerable others still in circulation which have never been detected (2:32).

When Emerson cites the “Folios” of “Kant’s Philosophy” in his preface, he adds idealist philosophers to the list of fabulists and fabricators who travel to the “Land of Not” (Henry Bradshaw Fearon’s *Sketches of America*, which is probably the real-life antecedent to Emerson’s “Fearing” reference, was attacked in 1820 in *The Edinburgh Review* and *The Quarterly Review* as a calumnious travel narrative whose exaggerations revealed more about the prejudices of the writer than about the lands he visited). Emerson seeks credit for openly admitting what Fearing, Kant and “innumerable others” will not: that they pass off reports from a world of fantasy and speculation as empirical truth. Although he is more facetious than censorious about the “deception” of these writers, Emerson clearly understands himself to be trading in myth-

making, invention, conjecture, fantasy, and other “manners and customs” from the Land of Not. Even though he closely associates this legendary land with the Orient (i.e. it is east of Eden, it is the land recounted in *The Arabian Nights Entertainment*, etc.), there is no reason to believe he doubts the actual existence of India, Persia, or Arabia, with their own cultures, histories, and governments. Indeed, there is ample evidence in Emerson’s private writings that he kept tabs on the flow of information, from the anecdotal to the journalistic, about “real” Anglo-American travel to India, China, and the Middle East, even if the reportage skews towards the spectacular and judgmental³⁰ (with a special animus reserved for the frustrating withdrawal of the Chinese government from contemporary affairs).

A useful context for understanding the implications of “Not” is Emerson’s interest in German philosophy and the “Folios” of Kant’s Philosophy. As the editors of Emerson’s journals and notebooks point out, Emerson’s information about Immanuel Kant most likely came by way of Madame de Stael’s *Germany*, a book that he began to read—sometimes in French, more often in English—beginning in 1822 (*JMN* 2: 357, note 7).³¹ In her discussion of the

³⁰ For example, Emerson recounts the tale of a Salem-based trader who tricked his East Indian counterparts into accepting his foot as a measurement of a pound, and thereby yielded enormous profits for his goods. Or on page 379 of Journal II, where Emerson vents about the uselessness of the Chinese empire to the progress of the world.

³¹ De Stael was a favorite of Emerson’s Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, and as Robert Richardson argues, the two women would

German philosophical interest in the Orient, de Stael reinforces a distinction between the knowledge that comes through the senses (as emphasized by Locke and the Sensationalist philosophers) and what is born through the mind and imagination, the provenance of the idealists. "The Orientalists have at all time been idealists," she writes.

The learned of England, who have travelled into India, have made deep researches about Asia; and Germans who have not had opportunities, like the princes of the Ocean, to inform themselves with their own eyes, have, by dint of study alone, arrived at very interesting discoveries on the religion, the literature, the languages, of the Asiatic nations; they have been led to think, from many indications, that supernatural light once shone upon the people of those countries, and the traces of it still remain indelible (*Germany* 199).

Unlike the sea-faring British colonizers, who have "[informed] themselves with their own eyes" about Asian cultures, the Germans have made their discoveries "by dint of study alone,"

seem to have a lot in common. Both were "self-reliant, heroic women of letters" (along with the heroine of de Stael's novel *Corinne*), and much like Mary Moody, de Stael transformed a strict Calvinist upbringing into a "passionate interest in religious feeling," dedicating the last three chapters of *Germany* to the praise of enthusiasm. Also like Mary Moody, de Stael was more interested in religious experience than orthodoxy, ritual, theology, or history, and she gave lyrical expression to "the feeling of the infinite," one that "consists in the absence of limits," although she emphasized that "the feeling of the infinite, such as the imagination and the heart experience, is positive and creative" (Richardson, 52-54).

concluding that a “supernatural light once” made an “indelible” mark on the people of Asia. Emerson does not “study” Asian texts as British researchers do or as German scholars do, as his letter to Mary Moody explains; he holds them at a distance, wondering at the tension their unread pages creates in his mind. But the German Romantic belief that a “supernatural light” passed indelibly through the “Asiatic nations” in a time before the emergence of language, a divine “revelation” that is neither disclosed nor elucidated by travelling to the countries of Asia³² is a key idea about the “mysterious east” that Emerson will take from this period of his post-collegiate life.

IV. Conclusion: The “American Scholar” Address

As a way of concluding this chapter, I want to show how the strands of Emerson’s early Orientalism come together in his “American Scholar” address at Harvard University in 1837. To fully grasp Emerson’s use of the “orient” in the “American Scholar,” we need to focus on the cluster of meanings that Emerson came to explore from the early 1820s to the late 1830s, meanings that seem to put in practice a distinction—what he described in 1831 as

³² As de Stael summarizes Frederick Schlegel’s linguistic and philosophical research on Indian culture, she reports that “a primitive people inhabited some parts of the world, and particularly Asia, at a period anterior to all the documents of history.” According to de Stael, it is hard to “conceive by what graduation it would be possible, from the cry of the savage, to arrive at the perfection of the Greek language,” especially since “savages” rely on “neighboring nations” to teach them what they are “ignorant of.” So what else could explain the formation of the language except for a “revelation”?

“by far the most important intellectual distinction”—that he attributed to the German thinker Schelling: that “some minds think about things; others think the things themselves” (*JMN* 3:298).

To ‘think the Orient’ is in part to think the meanings that are encoded within the word itself: the suggestive Latin *oriens* signifying “the eastern part of the world, the part of the sky in which the sun rises, the east, the rising sun, daybreak, dawn.”³³ In August 1835, two years before his “American Scholar” address, Emerson approvingly noted in his journal the title page of the German-Christian mystic Jakob Boehme’s *Aurora*. “Aurora,” Emerson transcribes into his reading notes, “i.e. the Dayspring or dawning of the day in the Orient or Morning Redness in the rising of the sun i e the root or mother of Philosophy, Astrology, & Theology” (5:75). In the same semantic vein, in a journal entry from June 1835, Emerson also used “east” as a verb to denote the act of intellectual renewal, a neologism likely inspired by Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s recounting of “that preparatory process, which the French language so happily express by *s’orienter*, i.e. to find out the east for one’s self” (5:38, note 111). Emerson writes:

What a benefit if a rule could be given whereby the mind could at any moment *east* itself & find the sun. But long after we have thought we were recovered & sane, light breaks in upon us for a moment & we find we have yet had no sane moment. Another morn rises on mid noon (*JMN* 5:38).

³³ See again, “Orient.”

The “Orient” or “East” is thus both a revelatory light (“Morning Redness in the rising of the sun”) and a quasi-mystical basis for human enquiries into knowledge, the heavens, and god (“the root or mother of Philosophy, Astrology, & Theology”). Emerson endorses these idealized meanings of the “orient” when he figures ‘to east’ as an epiphanic turn to the primal origins of truth. This act extends beyond the experience of the literal dawn, determined by the natural movement of the earth and sun, to include the metaphorical ‘mornings’ that can ‘rise on mid-noons,’ too, a dawning of light that reveals “sane” perspectives to be only ‘insanity’ in a darkened disguise. Emerson continues to explore the possible virtues of this ‘eastern’ thinking:

The truest state of mind, rested in, becomes false. Thought is the manna which cannot be stored. It will be sour if kept, & tomorrow must be gathered anew. Perpetually must we East ourselves, or we get into irrecoverable error, or starting from the plainest truth & keeping as we think the straightest road of logic. . . .Not in his goals but in his transition man is great (5:38).

We can see a characteristically Emersonian vision arising in this passage, one that is described in a familiarly Emersonian tone of rallying urgency. Even the “truest state of mind” cannot be rested in without growing false, just as the truest thoughts will grow stale unless “gathered anew” each day. We must be prepared to “Perpetually [. . .] East ourselves” or else we run the risk of falling like apostates “into irrecoverable error.” If we proceed like the strict

empiricists from “the plainest truth” down the “straightest road of logic,” we fall into a lockstep heading into the darkness. Greatness does not accrue to the person who maintains fidelity to the achievement of certain “goals” but rather to the person—able to risk comfort, capable of defying logic—whose journey is a constant “transition” towards the ever-breaking dawn.

In his “American Scholar” address, delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in August 1837, Emerson brings this idea of the “orient”—luminous, active—into alignment with the non-Western “Orient.” Emerson’s first gestures to the “East” as he urges his audience not to treat book-reading as a form of hero-worship. To Emerson’s mind, the learned classes of New England suffer from a kind of bibliomania, one that errantly favors the stifling library over the fields and woods. This empty book love leaves the scholar emulating the passive “bookworm” instead of “Man Thinking”—the embodiment of “thinking” as a form of original, creative activity (*American Scholar* 38). Instead of idolizing books, Emerson argues, the scholar should read them only during his “idle times.” After all, if he “can read God directly” in nature’s “inexplicable continuity,” then “the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (41). However, when inspiration flags and a shadowy anxiety descends, books are indispensable guides. As Emerson explains:

when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must,
when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining, we
repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide

our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. We hear, that we may speak. The Arabian proverb says, “A fig tree, looking on a fig tree, becometh fruitful.” (41)

In this passage, Emerson directs our attention to several easterly points. There is the compass direction where the sun rises in the morning (“dawn”) that serves as a trope of original inspiration. There is also the Near-Eastern Orient in his citation of the Arabian proverb about how a fig tree (which Emerson probably means to align with the sacred fig tree known as the Banyan tree) bursts into bloom by simply “looking on” another. Emerson wraps this allusion in cadenced phrases that echo with Biblical overtones, a bundling of discourses that not only raises the status of an Arabian proverb, but also diminishes the power of Biblical authority.

In the circular pattern of the “American Scholar” address, Emerson returns to the connection between books and the East or “Orient” a few paragraphs later. “I would not be hurried by any love of system, by any exaggeration of instincts, to underrate the Book,” he says temperately, but the scholar “needs a strong head to bear that diet” (42). Emerson calls for a “creative” hermeneutics to upend the soft tyranny of the printed word, one dominated by Western luminaries like Plato, Cicero, Locke, Bacon, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Dryden—all names, and all men, that appear in the address. Indeed, unlike those who would treat reading as a form of quiescence, Emerson insists, “[o]ne must be an inventor to read well” (42). He then cites another “Eastern” adage that a present-day reader will probably notice for its colonial connotations:

As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion.

Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. (42)

Emerson creatively adapts this maxim about Indian wealth from an exchange that James Boswell recounts in *The Life of Johnson*.

In a conversation about travel writing, Samuel Johnson says that "books of travels will be good in proportion to what a man has previously in his mind," and not necessarily in proportion to what a traveler encounters in a foreign land. The successful travel writer must provide his own "knowledge" about "what to observe," and his own "power of contrasting one mode of life to another" (953).

Johnson cites a Spanish proverb to illustrate his point: "He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry the wealth of the Indies with him." The ever-attentive Boswell is careful to clarify Johnson's point. "The proverb, I supposed, Sir, means, he must carry a large stock with him to trade with," he says, and Johnson agrees (953). In order to gain something novel from a trip to a strange land, you have to bring to bear your own resources of receptivity and imaginative powers of grasping the world—the "stock" that allows you to trade for the riches of experience.

Emerson's use of this proverb allows us to make two important points about his Orientalism before 1844. First, for the

American scholar in 1837, when all the noteworthy books still originated in foreign lands, reading was, in some sense, a form of foreign travel (which is also a reason, of course, why the natural world plays such an important role in New England literary nationalism). The ability to “east” oneself is a way to satisfy a free-ranging literary curiosity without losing an already precarious sense of native orientation—an orientation that could drift further eastward to Great Britain, even, as we have seen, for Emerson himself. Second, Emerson’s use of this proverb is another reminder that it was truly the literary “wealth of the Indies,” and not the “literal” wealth that had value. This is an important matter in the Age of Imperialism: Emerson does not advise the American scholar to abandon the library to cross the seas and literally extract riches from the Indies, an enterprise that men across the Atlantic at the British Cambridge were often called to do as colonial bureaucrats. It bears noting that Emerson actually had a firm “understanding” of what the riches of the Indies totaled, or at least what they were estimated at a decade earlier, since we find this slightly bizarre synopsis of the West Indian colonial economy in his journal from 1826, taken from an October 1825 edition of the *Quarterly Review*:

The capital invested in our [i.e., Britain’s] W. Indian Colonies is said to amount to 128 millions; and it will appear upon a calculation made from the Custom house returns, that they take a twelfth part in value of the whole of our exports, & transmit to us nearly a fourth part in value of the whole of our

imports; &, further, that that branch both of our exports and imports considerably exceeds in value the united amount of all that we send to or receive from the E. Indies, the Indian archipelago, China, & New Holland. (3:335)

Although we have grown accustomed to read “Orientalism” as a literary counterpart of colonialism, Emerson provides us with another choice: Orientalism as an *alternative* to colonialism. Indeed, with the “creative reading” that Emerson proposes, where the “sense” of any given “author” can be “as broad as the world” (*American Scholar* 42), the American scholar derives no benefit from an Indian colony. This view is in keeping with Emerson’s vision, from the early 1820s, about the American relationship to the Orient: unlike the Western European counterparts, the American scholar does not need an “Orientalism” based on imperial expansion, technocrat administrators, and a scholarly apparatus that pulls books from ransacked temples. Instead, as Emerson elaborates, the American scholar should aspire to an Orientalism where sentences are found to be “doubly significant.” His orientation should be one that mines this interpretive “wealth of the Indies” without ever setting foot outside of New England, and yet that can discover fresh readings that are as expansive as the Orient and the Occident, which is to say, “as broad as the world.”

Chapter 4

Henry D. Thoreau and the Patterns, Conceptions, and Perceptions of the Early Journals

The sublime sentences of Menu carry us back to a time—when purification—and sacrifice—and self devotion—had a place in the faith of men, and were not as now a superstition - - They contain a subtle and refined philosophy also—such as in these times is not accompanied with so lofty and pure a devotion.

September 2, 1841, Henry D. Thoreau, *Journals*

I. A New Approach to Thoreau's Early Orientalism

In his journals in May 1841, Henry David Thoreau began to write with rhapsodic intensity about “a new book of heroes” known as *The Laws of Menu*—or by its title in the translation from Sanskrit to English, *Institutes of Hindu Law: or the Ordinances of Menu, According to the Gloss of Colluca*. By all accounts then available to Thoreau, *The Laws of Menu* was actually not “new” but old, even primeval. Sir William Jones, the book’s translator, calculated that the ancient Hindu text—a collection of ordinances and laws in the *Dharmasastra* tradition—was “older than the five books of Moses,” predating the arrival of Jesus Christ by over twelve centuries (*Menu*, xi).³⁴ *The Laws of Menu* was hardly “new” to Thoreau the

³⁴ William Jones, trans., *Institutes of Hindu Law; or, the ordinances of Menu, according to the gloss of Culluca* (London, 1825). Hereafter I will refer to this text as *Menu* or *The Laws of Menu*.

avid reader, either. As his private journals attest, he had begun to read searchingly in its pages over a year before, when he first borrowed it from his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson. One thing that was “new” in 1841, however, was Thoreau’s unusual—and at first glance, slightly bizarre—idea about how to evaluate books. “Books are to be attended to as new sounds merely,” he proclaimed in his journal on May 23.³⁵ Most books, Thoreau noted with satisfaction, would endure a “sore trial if the reader should assume the attitude of a listener” and appraise them as if they were “but a new note in the forest.” Using this sylvan test of audibility, Thoreau described how *The Laws of Menu* had come to him “like the note of the chewink from over the fen—only over a deeper and wider fen.” He wrote of putting his “ear close” to its pages to “hear the sough of this book” so he could “know if any inspiration yet haunted it.” On May 31, Thoreau took his theory of reading to a new level by focusing “merely” on the “volume of sound” of the book’s title:

That title—The Laws of Menu—with the Gloss of Culucca—comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindostan, and when my eye rests on yonder birches—or the sun in the water—or the shadows of the trees—it seems to signify the laws of them all.

³⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, in *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton, 1981-1984) 1:310. Hereafter referred to as *Writings*.

They are the laws of you and me—a fragrance wafted down from those old times—and no more to be refuted than the wind (1:311).

The title of this Hindu scripture “swept unobstructed” from the Ganges Plain of North India to the small village of Concord, Massachusetts, as if neither seven thousand nautical miles, from Boston to Calcutta, nor three thousand years stood in its path. Moreover, the title seemed “to signify the laws” of Thoreau’s surroundings in the backwoods of Concord, Massachusetts: the branches thrown against the sky, the sun reflecting in the water, the shadows of the trees. But what did it mean that the title, by itself, could redound to a town in New England? Or that it could “signify” the laws of everything Thoreau saw around him? And why was Thoreau conjuring new ways of reading books, particularly non-Western books, in 1841, anyway?

To pursue these questions is to venture into an unexplored realm of Thoreau’s engagements with the East. In this chapter, I will offer an approach to Thoreau’s Orientalism that focuses on the journals from 1837 to 1841. Thoreau’s private writings from this period—which are often beguilingly cryptic, self-deprecating, and highly inventive—are usually neglected in scholarly studies, and I hope to show in a series of close textual analyses that they are deserving of critical attention in their own right. In using the term “Orientalism,” I assume a broad definition that is appropriate to Thoreau’s own polyvalent grasp of the “Orient,” including the use of literary tropes, geographical and directional allusions (i.e. “the

Eastern world”), as well as references to non-Western literatures and cultures. Unlike the usual studies of Transcendental Orientalism, my purpose is neither to track ideas and concepts from their non-Western source through the early journals nor to draw connections between Thoreau’s journaling and European colonialism, although I will address both of these issues in the following pages. Instead, I will focus on the distinctive features and dynamics of Thoreau’s early Orientalism, in part, because of the singular way that Thoreau himself approaches the subject. In the journals from 1837 to 1841, the Orient is less an exotic land to be represented—in the stereotyped description of a spiraling minaret, for example, or breezy cinnamon grove—than an obscure memory to be suddenly recovered or sensory experience to be seized, often through feats of reception that are seemingly miraculous. As a result, charting Thoreau’s writing about Eastern experiences from 1837 to 1841 is not the same as writing about the Orientalism of a professional scholar or an adventure-seeking traveler, where accurate representation—of the precepts of classical Hinduism, for example, or South Asian customs and geographies—is a pressing criterion. Instead, Thoreau’s early Orientalism is largely a record of reception, an idiosyncratic and impressionistic form of journaling that self-consciously traces the blurred edges of what it is possible to remember, imagine, and express.

In the following two chapters, I will explore the unlikely patterns and experiments in cognition as well as in composition of Thoreau’s Orientalism. My aim is to disclose new information

about Thoreau's "Orient" while also piercing the critical haziness that surrounds this formative period in Thoreau's journals. For Thoreau the young thinker and writer, the years after his graduation from Harvard in 1837 were a time of new beginnings. As Thoreau starts his lifelong process of journaling, he begins to write at length about his vocational concerns, to ruminate intensively on the natural world, and to otherwise meditate on the nature of time, textuality, and consciousness—all topics, as I shall show, that are related to Thoreau's emergent interest in the East. As I shall show, Thoreau's Orientalism and his early journals are inseparable and mutually illuminating, and to delve into one is necessarily to learn more about the other.

To pursue my argument in this chapter, I will begin by discussing how critics often view Thoreau's interest in Eastern matters during these years. I will show how Thoreau does not simply repeat Western European stereotypes about India and the Orient in his early writings, despite scholarly claims to the contrary. Indeed, I argue that Thoreau's early Orientalism should not be conflated with the Orientalism of European apologists for colonialism, which is one reason why a new critical approach is necessary. In the next section, I will discuss some of the salient formal features of Thoreau's early journaling, for example, how it proceeds less as a linear record than a periodic or circular one. It is therefore possible to discern sub-groups of entries that are separated by chronology but related in various lexical, imagistic, or cognitive patterns, such as in Thoreau's constant interest in looking

up at the “atmosphere” of the horizon. As I will argue, these recursive patterns evince Thoreau’s desire to “reorient” himself repeatedly around particular phenomena in the hopes of seizing a bolt of unexpected insight. These patterns also reveal one of the central activities of Thoreau’s Orientalism: to achieve a paradoxical perspective from which he could simultaneously see a thing and its opposite. This chapter will focus on the formal features of early journals, in part, to emphasize the organicism of Thoreau’s Orientalism, which is to say, how so much of it arises out of the habitual act of Thoreau’s speculative digressions about his own private—and often obscure—imaginings of the East.

II. The Critical Reception of Thoreau’s Early Orientalism and Journals

Scholars have long recognized the singularity of Thoreau’s “new” encounter with *The Laws of Menu* in 1841, which I cited at the opening of this chapter. Indeed, it is one of the few examples of Thoreau’s early Orientalism that critics have written about. We find citations of the “unobstructed sound” entry in articles dating from 1954 (when Winfield E. Nagley cites the passage as a way of illustrating the level of Thoreau’s excitement about Indian philosophy in the summer of 1841³⁶) to 2007 (when David Scott

³⁶ Winfield E. Nagley, “Thoreau on Attachment, Detachment, and Non-Attachment,” *Philosophy East and West*, 3:4 (Jan., 1954): 307-20. Nagley argues that Thoreau’s interest in Indian philosophy is part of his longstanding attempt to find an alternative to the “commercial spirit” in modern America, dating back to Thoreau’s brief talk on an assigned topic—“The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times, Considered in Its Influence on the Moral Character of a

provides an overview that references the journal entries from 1841 to show the dichotomy of “interior depths” and “exterior” motifs of the natural world that Thoreau invokes in his descriptions of *Menu*³⁷). Alan Hodder, however, has written the most probing analysis of this cross-cultural encounter, describing the underlying religio-philosophical ideas that might have impelled Thoreau to engage with *Menu* in an article from 1993 (Hodder, “Ex Oriente Lux” 403-38). Hodder is also important to this study because of the position he takes on Thoreau’s early Orientalism: Hodder repudiates Thoreau’s references to India in his early journals, as well as his “appreciation of [Oriental] literature” in general from 1837 to 1841. Hodder asserts that Thoreau’s journaling was “clearly preconditioned by the various romantic Orientalist platitudes that he and his friends more or less uncritically absorbed,” which allows Hodder to set up a dichotomy between the pre- and post-1841 journals. The former are “conventionally derogatory” of all things not Western, and the latter show promise as genuine attempts at comparative religion (203).

Hodder is correct that Thoreau, like all the New England Transcendentalists, drew from the canon of texts translated by European Orientalists as part of the British and French imperial expansion into Asia and the Middle East. However, to say that

Nation”—during Harvard commencement exercises on August 30, 1837.

³⁷ David Scott, “Rewalking Thoreau and Asia: ‘Light from the East’ for ‘A Very Yankee Sort Of Oriental,’” *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 57, Number 1 (Jan. 2007), 14-39.

Thoreau “uncritically” absorbs the “romantic Orientalist platitudes” is to neglect one of the most conspicuous attributes of the early journals: Thoreau’s intensive questioning of received wisdom. Thoreau constantly sifts through, tests, and—often with a jolt of waggish irony—reframes the hackneyed phrases, ideas, and beliefs that circulate through greater New England culture, sometimes rejecting a time-honored truism, at other times, seizing an unlikely insight from the clutches of banality.

To illustrate how discerning Thoreau could be about Orientalist cant, we can examine an entry from August 17, 1840. On that day, Thoreau copied into his journal an anecdote from Thomas Macaulay’s “Lord Clive,” an essay published in the *Edinburgh Review* earlier that year.³⁸ Lord Clive, often known as “Clive of India,” was an indispensable figure in the rise of the British Empire in India. In 1751, Clive led over three-hundred troops—one hundred and twenty British, two hundred “Sepoy,” native Indians serving under British command—as they fended off ten thousand French and Indian soldiers in the crumbling city of Arcot.³⁹ As supplies in the besieged fort dwindled, the Sepoys approached Clive about their rations. The following is what—and only what—Thoreau quotes from Macaulay’s account:

³⁸ Thomas Macaulay, “Lord Clive,” *Edinburgh Review* (January 1840): 165-199.

³⁹ These numbers come from Thoreau’s introduction of the quote, but other reports have the numbers of Clive’s troops slightly higher.

The Sepoys came to Clive—not to complain of their scanty fare, but to propose that all the grain should be given to the Europeans, who required more nourishment than the natives of Asia. The thin gruel, they said, which was strained away from the rice, would suffice for themselves (*Writings* 1:173).

In the *Edinburgh* essay, Macaulay completes the story with a flourish of colonial pride. “History contains no more touching instance of military fidelity,” he writes exultantly about Clive, “or of the influence of a commanding mind.” In his own transcription, however, Thoreau omits the “touching” paeon to Clive’s benign “influence.” As a result, he casually inverts Macaulay’s moral; the Sepoy ability to restrain their appetite, and not Clive’s martial charisma, sets the standard for soldierly grit. Not only does Thoreau use Thomas Macaulay’s anecdote from “Lord Clive” without endorsing its jingoism, but he reverses the hierarchy it implies. The native Indians, and not the Europeans, are models of masculine rectitude. The ability to get by with less, and not the ability to seize and hold more territory, or to command self-sacrifice from one’s troops, is the true test of strength.⁴⁰

In the discriminating way that Thoreau quotes from Macaulay, he offers a silent commentary on Macaulay’s chauvinism; tales of colonial grandeur are not what draw Thoreau

⁴⁰ In the rest of the August 17 entry, Thoreau ponders the value of *The Laws of Menu*. This juxtaposition—Sepoy self-denial, reflections about *The Laws of Menu*—suggests Thoreau connected the Sepoy’s behavior to a form of religious asceticism, instead of “fidelity” to colonial authority.

to reports from India, so he simply disregards that emphasis. Thoreau's selective appropriation of Macaulay's anecdote casts doubt, I think, on Hodder's charge that Thoreau "uncritically" rehashes the usual racist and self-aggrandizing ideas about the Orient that could circulate among Anglo-American writers. Thoreau might not exemplify what present-day scholars would consider the most enlightened viewpoint on South Asian cultures, but we must be careful not to equate him with the most benighted, either.

Hodder is also noteworthy because of the standard that he uses to evaluate Thoreau's Orientalism. Namely, he seems to operate from the assumption that Thoreau's writing about texts like *The Laws of Menu* are most profitably judged according to its fidelity to the precepts of classical Hinduism. Thoreau studied at Harvard College from 1833 to 1837. However, he received no formal training in Eastern literatures or religions, and his readings of works like *Menu* are not scholarly and systematic. As we saw earlier, Thoreau can spend a great deal of energy praising the voluminous title of *The Laws of Menu*—a sign that his interests do not lie, at least primarily, in the meticulous study of its doctrinal assertions. When Thoreau diverges from the presumed academic ideal of a mid-nineteenth century Indologist—whether writing with unapologetic bravado about *Menu* or caustic irony about religious excess, including both Western and Eastern traditions—Hodder tends to repudiate the result as so much Romantic primitivism or Orientalist stereotyping. It is as if a cross-cultural exchange in mid-

nineteenth century Concord can only be redeemed if it anticipates a modern-day specialist's view of non-Western cultures. Given that Thoreau does not purport to offer a scholarly account of the "true" Orient, or even to speak on behalf of the South Asian subaltern, why should we insist on proscriptive readings of his writings about the East? Would there be any benefit to holding Thoreau to a similar standard of exegetical propriety when writing about the Judeo-Christian holy books, or the religions of classical Rome and Greece?

In this chapter, I offer not only an analysis of Thoreau's Orientalism, but also the journals in which its examples appear. So apart from noting my disagreement with how Thoreau's early Orientalism has been approached, I will also talk about the longstanding bias against the early journals. These private writings, which roughly span from 1837 to 1844 (in this study, I will mostly focus on the years 1837 to 1841), are often treated as a disjointed archive of random, unfinished thoughts, a collection of draft-writings—without the depth and originality to command scholarly attention on their own—that Thoreau only completed when he decided to incorporate versions of them into the books published during his lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) and *Walden* (1854). Instead of the early journals, scholars have generally been drawn to the "mature" phase of Thoreau's journals, a period that is widely believed to begin after May 1850. Perry Miller introduced this categorization in his study of Thoreau's "lost" journals from 1840-1841, and he

believed this later stage of journaling was brought on by the dire critical and commercial reception of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. In Miller's view, which has been seconded by scholars like H. Daniel Peck, it was not until 1850 that Thoreau decided to treat his journals as a free-standing literary enterprise, instead of a treasure trove to be rummaged through for ideas. According to this reading, few readers seemed interested in Thoreau's publishable work anyway, so instead of using the journals as a staging-ground for potential pieces, Thoreau decided to treat the journal itself as the potential masterwork—even if he knew it would not find a wide readership until after his death (Perry Miller 31).

III. Thoreau's Early Journals – Patterns, Conceptions, and Perceptions

Despite the fact that scholars usually avoid Thoreau's journals from 1837 to 1841, I will show that they are often ingeniously composed and offer compelling insights into Thoreau's literary and intellectual development. I will examine specific examples of Thoreau's Orientalism shortly. However, in this section, it is important to discuss key features of Thoreau's journals in general, since the way that Thoreau composed the journals is inseparable from the disposition of his Orientalism. I will discuss the ideas behind Transcendental journaling, for instance, how it was intended to capture the act of thinking and not simply summarize a new thought. I will also underscore how Thoreau's early journals are fundamentally oriented towards solitude and the

recovery of the past. This interest in recovering the past creates the cyclical dynamic at the root of Thoreau's interest in the East. I will also discuss how Thoreau transcribed four year's worth of journals, from October 1837 to January 1841, sometime in 1841, a large-scale version of Thoreau's habit of revisiting previous entries as a means to suggest new directions in his writing.

"For a young intellectual with literary aspirations who had been converted to the 'new views' of Transcendentalism," Robert Sattlemeyer points out, "keeping a journal was an inevitable first step toward a career in letters" (*Writings* 1:593). Emerson and his fellow-travelers in Concord were hardly ground-breaking in their reliance on journals to provide a venue for personal reflection. Rigorous self-examination—not to mention the habit of self-expression about spiritual and moral matters—was still a veritable birthright in mid-century New England, a vestige of the soul-searching Calvinism of the Puritan divines. The list of non-Transcendentalists known by Thoreau who kept journals, diaries, or daybooks would include some of his classmates at Harvard and his sister Sophia and brother John, as well as his fellow townspeople. Before Thoreau began to keep a proper journal in 1837, he maintained a college commonplace book entitled "Miscellaneous Extracts" and an "Index rerum" that included an alphabetic list of his previous reading, as well as a roster of books that he wanted eventually to read (593). When he was a sophomore in college, Thoreau was presciently assigned a theme on "keeping a private journal," and he argued that the practice of

writing every day would let him “[settle] accounts with his mind” and allow him to “turn over a new leaf, having carefully perused the last one” (594).

For the Transcendentalists, “private” journals could be exchanged as a way of continuing the flow of spontaneous insights that drove their free-flowing conversations. Indeed, in their hierarchy of literary genres, the journals enjoyed pride of place because they could preserve the moment when a new idea or association broke into consciousness, a record not only of thoughts but also of thinking. With this emphasis on, if not enshrinement of, the instant of inspiration, it can be easy to forget that Thoreau undertook a painstaking transcription of his early journals sometime in 1841. Thoreau copied all of his surviving journal entries into fresh notebooks—which is to say, Thoreau’s extant journals from October 1837 to January 1841 passed twice from his pen, first, in more or less spontaneous composition, and then, as it were, in studied re-composition. Previously, these writings had been physically contained in two journal volumes. First, there was what Thoreau described as the “big Red Journal,” or “Journal of 546ps,” which ran from October 1837 to June 1840. Second, there was the “Journal of 396ps” that covered June 1840 to January 1841. For both volumes, only scattered pages and incomplete indexes remain. When the editors of the Princeton Journals compared these indexes with the surviving journals, they concluded that Thoreau did not significantly alter the nature of the material. However, it is impossible to know what Thoreau might

have pruned, compressed, or added to his journals as he copied them, or if he made any changes at all.

On the frontispiece of the surviving journal, Thoreau penned his signature and the inscription, "Gleanings Or What Time Has Not Reaped Of My Journal." Perry Miller adduces the line as evidence that Thoreau preserved only a fraction of his original writings, culling "Gleanings" from a larger trove that he then abandoned, but we have reason to question Miller's claim. First, to "glean" is to collect with care and labor, an activity that focuses on heedful selection, instead of excision or even revision. Second, to "glean" is to gather what remains from the reaping of grain. If we think of "time" as a reaper—as it would seem that Thoreau does—then Thoreau is left as the gatherer who, piece by piece, 'gleans' from what time leaves behind. In this sense, the "Gleanings" have an indelible temporal connotation. They are moments that have been seized, kept, and scrupulously preserved, a view of journal writing that is in keeping with Thoreau's interest in the eroding, and elevating, effects of time.

Thoreau's massive transcription in 1841, which involved almost one-thousand journal pages, is also emblematic of a cyclical rhythm in his writing in which acts of discovery were invariably shaded by acts of recovery. Thoreau's reproduction of his journal allowed him to enact on a sweeping scale what he regularly did on a smaller one: revisit earlier entries, ponder their significance, and allow them to suggest fresh, if also seemingly improbable, points of departure. This encircling approach to

previous entries, where meanings could be reconsidered within widening contexts, helps to explain prominent traits of Thoreau's early journals: his penchant for punning and etymological musings, for craftily pointing out structural ironies (i.e. finding contradictions within a unity) and discerning patterns and analogies (i.e. similarities amidst difference) in unlikely places. More than simply a preference, this journaling process became a kind of ethic or "discipline" of journaling for Thoreau, a way for him to conscientiously turn over a new leaf, as he predicted as a sophomore.

The journal itself opens in October 1837 with three literary epigraphs that celebrate solitude and soul-searching. The first, and most lengthy, is taken from George Herbert's "The Church Porch" (1633) ("By all means use sometimes to be alone,/Salute thyself. See what thy soul doth wear"). The second is from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) ("Friends and companions, get you gone!/ 'Tis my desire to be alone"), and the third, Andrew Marvell's "The Garden" (1681) ("Two Paradises are in one ["twere in one" in the original]/To live in Paradise alone"). The impetus for starting the journal, however, seems to have come from a contemporary voice, if not quite a peer: Ralph Emerson, who had delivered his "American Scholar" address to Thoreau's graduating class at Harvard a few months earlier.

In the journal's opening entry, dated October 22, 1837, Thoreau transcribes a few inquiries presumably posed by Emerson: "What are you doing now," he asked, "Do you keep a

journal?’—So I make my first entry to-day.”⁴¹ Thoreau organizes these early entries under synoptic headings such as “Solitude,” “The Mould our Deeds Leave,” “Spring,” and “How Man Grows.” In “Solitude,” Thoreau describes a sense of temporal dislocation that is a part of his search for privacy. “To be alone,” he avers, “I find it necessary to escape the present—I avoid myself.” Thoreau will occasionally invoke the figure of a split self, often with one “self” estranged from the other because of a failure of authenticity. In “Solitude,” the self that Thoreau must “avoid” seems to be a social self, one that is crowded out by another person, perhaps Emerson again. Thoreau wonders, “How can I be alone in the Roman emperor’s chamber of mirrors” where everything, it would seem, reflects the image of the sovereign? To be alone, Thoreau “[seeks] a garret,” a place of studied decrepitude—the “spiders must not be disturbed,” he specifies, “nor the floor swept, nor the lumber

⁴¹ It is one of only two contemporaneous “voices” that Thoreau transcribes into the pages of his journal. The other voice belongs to Dr. Ware Jr., whom Thoreau quotes from a speech delivered at the meeting house on November 4, 1840. “There are these three—Sympathy—Faith—Patience,” Ware enumerates. But as he tries to explain which is “the greatest of these”—in the ministerial style, following the example of the disciple Paul—Ware suddenly finds himself at a loss for words. After a quiet moment, Ware sighs, “Which is it, I do’nt know. Pray take them all brethren, and God help you.” Thoreau records Ware’s disarming hesitation during a stretch of his journals when he pondered the value of silence, those forgotten moments when the “pressure of a hundred atmospheres” can quietly build to finally emit “one jet of eloquence.”

arranged.” A “garret” is a place of seclusion, but it can also be a watchtower, and in many ways, the journal functions as both. Like the physical spaces that Thoreau sought to “garret” (e.g. in his makeshift study in Emerson’s barn in Concord), the journal is a place where he can withdraw to regain a sense of creative and spiritual self-possession. The journal is also an observatory, a remote, elevated perspective that could afford Thoreau far-ranging vistas beyond the myopic views of the present. As we shall see, Thoreau’s interest in the East is driven by a similar desire to assume a vertically heightened—and not just a horizontal—perspective on New England life.

Thoreau says, “I find it necessary to escape the present—I avoid myself.” And if we think of the “present” as the social-cultural context of New England in the late-1830s, we find evidence of his “escape” in the lack of contemporary citations in his journals. Any word that might date the journal is shorn away; he does not quote from newspapers, sermons, speeches, or even conversations about everyday life. There are contemporaneous shifts in the northeastern economy that would seem to bear on Thoreau’s later concerns. For instance, by 1836, there were twenty major mills in Lowell employing roughly 7,000 workers, mostly women. Lowell became the first large-scale manufacturing town in the United States, and it was only twenty miles from Concord. But details about this “Cradle of the American Industrial Revolution”—or even the financial Panic of 1837—do not make it into the journal. Instead, Thoreau’s views of the present are largely to be judged, by

way of implicit contrast, through his keen nostalgia for the past, a time—the past—that can be as vaguely defined as it as intensely cherished.

To illustrate what I mean, I will examine an entry entitled “The Arrowhead” from October 29, 1837. Thoreau describes a late-afternoon stroll he and his brother John took with their “heads full of the past and its remains.” As the brothers inspect the headwaters of the Swampland brook, Thoreau assumes the persona of a woodland guide who vividly recalls the life of Tahatawan, a dead tribal leader of the Nawshawtuct. “How often have [the Nawshawtuct tribe] stood on this very spot,” Thoreau intones

at this very hour, when the sun was sinking behind yonder woods, and gilding with his last rays the waters of the Musketaquid, and pondered the day’s success and the morrow’s prospects, or communed with the spirits of their fathers gone before them, to the land of shades! (*Writings* 1:9)

To bring his grandiloquent description to a climax, Thoreau points to where Tahatawan once stood—at least, in this high-flown recounting—and then exclaims that “there. . .is Tahatawan’s arrowhead.” Gamely, the brothers scramble to where Thoreau had pointed, and “to carry out the joke,” Thoreau grabs the first stone in his reach, a gesture meant to bring his fanciful tale to a farcical conclusion. What begins in irony, however, ends with breathless surprise. Thoreau finds that he has not randomly grabbed a stone,

but seized “a most perfect arrowhead, as sharp as if just from the hands of the Indian fabricator!!! [sic]” (*Writings* 9). The action is fortuitous, to say the least. But Thoreau also learns a significant lesson: that imagination is not inimical, but instrumental to the recovery of historical reality. Just as the bygone Indian tribe “stood at this very spot, at this very hour,” so could Thoreau take in, as they did “the sun sinking behind yonder woods.” And just as his imagination could recover the vision of the Nawshastuct tribe, so could his hand discover a real arrowhead as “sharp” as if it had just been made. If he could discover the arrowhead of the Nawshawtuct while playacting the role of a tour-guide, then what kind of “reality” could he conjure in a reverie about the remote reaches of the non-Western world?

Related to Thoreau’s desire to recover the experience of the past is the cyclical impulse that emerges in the first months of the journal, evolving from a theory of death and renewal that Thoreau sets out in an entry entitled “The Mould our Deeds Leave.” The title of the entry puns on a few phrases. There is the decaying “mould” that dead leaves “leave,” the “mold,” or lasting shape, that “our deeds leave,” and the “deeds” that “mold” who we are. Taking note, perhaps, of the dying leaves of autumn, Thoreau observes, “Every part of nature teaches that the passing away of one life is the making room for another” (*Writings* 5). The lesson that nature teaches him, however, is not simply that life sprouts amidst the decayed mould of the dead. Instead, Thoreau seizes on the notion that the potency of what springs anew is determined by the

strength of what lived before. “The oak dies down to the ground,” he reasons, “leaving within its rind a rich virgin mould,” one that, in turn, will “impart vigorous life to an infant forest.” The “pine,” in contrast, only “leaves a sandy and sterile soil.” In fact, the “harder woods,” like the oak—and unlike the pine—always leave “a strong and fruitful mould.” Thoreau ventures an analogy with his own development, completing what will become a near-ritualistic pattern in the journal: the description of a natural “fact,” a sifting reflection of its meaning, and then an exposition of its implications:

So this constant abrasion and decay makes the soil of my future growth. As I live now so shall I reap. If I grow pines and birches, my virgin mould will not sustain the oak, but pines and birches, or, perchance, weeds and brambles, will constitute my second growth (*Writings* 5).

Thoreau’s outlook is here, as elsewhere, aspirational. He reminds himself that he should try to live a sturdy life of oak, even if—especially if—that life only serves as the “virgin mould” of yet another stage of growth. “As I live now,” he says, “so shall I reap.” Tomorrow finds its substance and spirit in the decayed rind of today, just as Thoreau’s creative vision will take root in the nourishing soil of *Menu*.

On November 12 and 13, 1837, we see how this “natural” lesson, an ethic of cyclical return, of old journal “leaves” becoming the “virgin mould” for the new, becomes a method of composition. Indeed, the stark titles for these entries—“Discipline” and “Truth”—

could be subheadings for Thoreau's journal at large.⁴² In "Discipline," Thoreau admits that he lacks the "discernment to distinguish the whole lesson of to-day" (*Writings* 1:11). The reason would seem to be as practical as it is philosophical; he simply cannot apprehend the full significance of a given day while he is still living it. However, the lesson of the day "is not lost, it will come to [him] at last"—"at last," because the journal, if properly used, enables him to return to whatever was most salient about any given day. "My desire," he writes in a revelatory flourish, "is to know *what* I have lived, that I may know *how* to live henceforth" (*Writings* 1:11). The emphatic "what" and "how" offer a condensed explanation of his emergent vision of how to proceed with his journal. Journaling will be a "discipline"—to restate the title of the entry—in which Thoreau diligently writes to establish "*what*" he lived in any given day, and then attentively reads to discover "*how*" to live better in the future. Thoreau's attitude toward each day is moralistic; "days" contain occluded lessons, and these are to be mined for ethical instruction: *how* to live better. On November 13, Thoreau restates this idea more abstractly in "Truth." "Truth is ever returning into herself," he explains, "I glimpse one feature to-day—another to-morrow—and the next day they are blended" (*Writings* 1:11). In this formulation, "Truth" is less a dogma or set of facts than a revolving circuit; it is gradually revealed, parceled out in daily increments, taken in separate glimpses that ultimately join

⁴² And, indeed, they are just two of the chapter headings that Emerson uses in his 1836 book *Nature*.

together. In these pages, thinking is not isolated but cumulative, and ideas are tested repeatedly to see what they might yield when encountered in new circumstances.

IV. Thoreau's Early Journals – Structure and Purpose

After examining Thoreau's early journals for a better understanding of their meaning and purpose for Thoreau, I will focus on how this cyclical pattern of truth-seeking includes his use of previous journal entries as a template or guide for subsequent writing. Throughout Thoreau's early journals, we can observe pairs and clusters of journal entries that share a number of features—thematic, rhetorical, imagistic—even though they are not strictly related by chronology. One such pattern, which surfaces in Thoreau's *Orientalism*, revolves around the tension between earthbound-language and sky-bound thought. To make my point, I will cite only three journals entries from the first year of Thoreau's journal: "The Fog" from October 27, 1837; "Thoughts" from November 26, 1837; and "Thought" from December 12, 1837. In these entries, which span less than two months, we can see Thoreau trying to understand why philosophical inspiration does not necessarily result in literary expression. By themselves, these entries mark spontaneous, and rough and uneven, forays into the blankness of the journal page. As a group, however, they reveal an irregular but discernable pattern that will become a recurring feature of Thoreau's *Orientalism*: a scan of the sky or horizon when the writer is preoccupied with a thought about the East, particularly as it involves seeking a perspective that lies beyond the

circumference of the “common sense”—pragmatic, interested in day-to-day necessities—so “common” in New England.

In the entry entitled “The Fog,” Thoreau begins by noting how far he can see in the distance after a storm. In keeping with the pattern of description, reflection, and exposition that I described earlier, Thoreau offers an allegorical interpretation of his mist-shrouded view. “The prospect is limited to Nobscot and Anursnack,” he reports:

The trees stand with boughs downcast like pilgrims beaten by a storm, and the whole landscape wears a somber aspect.

So when thick vapors cloud the soul, it strives in vain to escape from its humble working day valley, and pierce the dense fog which shuts out from view the blue peaks in its horizon, but must be content to scan its near and homely hills (*Writings* 1:8).

One on level, Thoreau’s “prospect” is simply an observation of fact. From where he writes his journal, he can only see as far as Nobscot and Anursnack, a small village about twelve miles south and a hill about three miles north from the center of Concord, respectively. Thoreau then eases from a literal to a figurative description of his fog-hemmed sightlines, venturing a parallel between the dreary landscape and someone with a heavy soul. When the soul is clouded by “thick vapors,” it “strives in vain” to see beyond the limits of its “humble working day” perspective. However much the soul might want to see the blue-peaked

horizon—a marker for a broad, encompassing view of the world—it must content itself with mere “homely hills.” The soul’s prospect, it would seem, is determined by the matter-of-fact conditions of the local weather. The journal entry is a fitting expression of how the transcendent soul is grounded in organic particularity.

The next entry, “Thoughts,” provides a somewhat self-consciously literary account of how “thoughts” take shape in his mind. This entry, too, involves a scan of his surroundings. However, instead of just the problems of perception, Thoreau also takes up the difficulties of expression:

I look around for thoughts when I am overflowing myself.
While I live on, thought is still in embryo—it stirs not within me. Anon it begins to assume shape and comeliness, and I deliver it, and clothe it in its garment of language. But alas! How often when thoughts choke me do I resort to a spat on the back—or swallow a crust—or do anything but expectorate them (*Writings* 1:15).

Thoreau anatomizes his process of thinking. When he experiences a sense of superabundance (i.e. “overflowing” himself), he feels what we might call a “pregnant” readiness. He then “[looks] around for thoughts.” In the entry, he draws out the underlying trope of birthing: while he “[lives] on,” the ensuing “thought” is not so lucky, remaining in “embryo” and lying inertly inside him. This embryo finally assumes “shape and comeliness,” and Thoreau not only ‘delivers it,’ but he also “[clothes] it in its garment of language.” Thoreau puns on the phrases “bringing a child to term” and finding

“terms of expression, as he delivers the child of thought into language. He connects the creative acts of childbirth and verbal expression, using the former to underscore his difficulties with the latter. Instead of seamless delivery of thoughts, however, Thoreau either chokes on them (and it seems, claps himself on the back) or pushes them down his throat with a “swallow” of bread. Thoreau moves through a tangle of metaphors in these few sentences, but we can recognize the connection between his dilemma and rhetoric. Thinking is physically rooted in the body, like childbirth. But it is also something more than the body, and it aspires to connect with something beyond its physical limits (although Thoreau suggests that he is also capable of swallowing his thoughts to further nourish himself).

Thoreau again addresses the struggle with language in “Thought” from December 12. In this entry, however, thought tries to escape entangling words to reach the sky above. Also, Thoreau builds his thinking around passages from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*:

There are times when thought elbows her way through the underwood of words to the clear blue beyond;

‘O’er bog, or steep, through strait, rough, dense, or rare,

With head, hands, wings, or feet, pursues *her* way,
And swims, or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies;”—
But let her don her cumbersome working day garment,
and each sparkling dewdrop will seem a “slough of despond” (*Writings* 1:18).

Thoreau draws from Book Two of *Paradise Lost* when Satan scrambles through the abyss in search of Paradise. The quoted passage is part of an extended simile; Milton compares Satan to a gryphon, a mythological creature that is half-lion and half-eagle, who pursues an Arimasian who has purloined the gryphon's gold. Since the lion is the master of the land and the eagle of the air, the hybrid figure of the gryphon allows Milton to emphasize Satan's pell-mell journey through both land and sky (swims, sinks, wades, creeps, flies). Thoreau, too, seems drawn to this frenzied movement between the land and air. When "thought elbows her way through the underwood of words," she is released into a "clear blue beyond." (The gender change is not incidental, and perhaps a carry-over from the "birthing" trope from before. Thoreau changes the possessive "his" to "her" in Milton's phrase "pursues *her* way," as well.) In contrast with the entry from November 26, language is not the swaddling clothes of thought ("I deliver it, and clothe it in its garment of language," etc.). Instead, language, or at least the "working day" language of everyday speech, is an impediment. Every "sparkling dewdrop" of thought, if dressed in "her cumbersome working day garment," becomes a "slough of despond," the bog in John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" into which Christian, weighed down by a guilty conscience, miserably sinks.

To bring these journal entries together, we can recognize that they relate to one another like associative digressions more than logical extensions. In one entry, Thoreau seeks to clothe a thought in its "garment of language." In another, language is conversely a

“cumbersome working day garment” that should be avoided. Thoreau is reworking ideas about the kinetic relationship between “earthy” particularity and “heavenly” aspiration, between the physical givenness of the world, like the weather at the moment or even the material aspects of speech, and the urge to rise beyond those arbitrary limitations. This rough pattern finds its way into Thoreau’s Orientalism with uncanny regularity, usually with him looking skyward when he is absorbed in thought about the East or Orient.

To help make this connection, I also want to refer to a picture of Babylon and a meditation on spheres. In April 1839, Thoreau viewed a picture of Babylon, the mythical site of the Tower of Babel that was built to reach the heavens. For Thoreau, the most striking feature of the picture was one of contrast: “a heap of brick dust in the centre” that was surrounded by “an uninterrupted horizon bounding the desert.” Thoreau wondered if any artist would have the courage of making this contrast more profound by painting “a boundless expanse of desert, prairie, or sea—without other object than the horizon,” so that the “heavens and the earth—the first and last painting” would be all the viewer would see (*Writings* 72). A few weeks later, Thoreau began to ponder the relationship between the virtues of containing both the heavens and the earth, as it were. In an entry entitled “The Form of Strength,” Thoreau concluded that strength is not flat but spherical, with a vertical as well as a horizontal axis. As he explains:

Most things are strong in one direction; a straw longitudinally; a board in the direction of its edge; a knee transversely to its grain; but the brave man is a perfect sphere, which cannot fall on its flat side; and is equally strong every way (*Writings* 73).

The “brave man” is marked by the full realization of his strengths in every direction. What I want to draw out is how this spherical ideal becomes part of Thoreau’s consciousness about the East and West. Instead of thinking of their relationship as simply two dimensional, he begins to think of it as three dimensional, with the East usually extending into the heavens, but also, as we shall see, plunging into the furthest realms of one’s inner self. At issue is a notion about completeness: why not try to achieve a spherical consciousness, one that also takes the East and West, the sky and earth into full account?

We can recognize this idea of completeness at work when Thoreau appraises the *The Laws of Menu*, for the first time. Thoreau considers the significance of *Menu* on August 17, 1840, and he weighs the virtues of time-bound earthiness, measured by a “New England eye,” and the vaulting reaches of the sky, which he can measure on his own:

Tried by a New England eye, or the mere practical wisdom of modern times—[*the Laws of Menu with the Gloss of Culucca*] are simply the oracles of a race already in its dotage, but held up to the sky, which is the only impartial and incorruptible ideal, they are of a piece with its depth and serenity, and I am

assured that they will have a place and significance, as long as there is a sky to test them by (*Writings* 1:173-74).

Thoreau respects the keen-eyed practicality of his New England neighbors, who would dismiss *Menu* as the repository of so many antiquated oracles. And yet Thoreau seeks a different test of value than “the mere practical wisdom of modern times.” Instead of a viewpoint grounded in common sense (i.e. mere practical wisdom of modern times), Thoreau seeks an uncommon prospect that takes the sky as its standard. It is an infinite perspective that he could always descry again—spontaneously, privately—by simply lifting his head, and it brings a vertical perspective to bear on the horizontal comparisons of East and West.

As Thoreau makes explicit, his choice about how to read *Menu* is a fundamental part of his experience of it, which is to say, *how* he reads is as important as *what* he reads. To that end, the two-mindedness about *Menu* that Thoreau describes is fairly remarkable, and it sharply contradicts the idea that he was thoughtless or lazy-minded in his encounters with non-Western literature. Thoreau acknowledges, without condescension or anger, the prejudices that his neighbors would have about the text, while at the same time seeking a different perspective for himself. It shows an ability to move between two seemingly opposed cultural perspectives, exercising a judicious open-mindedness about difference that does not deny the very real difficulties posed by that difference.

I will return to *Menu* in the next section. In the conclusion to this section, however, I want to note how Thoreau frequently writes about this sky-high standard, as well as its lofty variants, in terms of “atmosphere” and “influence.” For instance, he often admires the “atmosphere” that certain books—and people—carry around themselves like an aura. In an entry entitled “Rencounter” from June 4, 1839, Thoreau describes how he unexpectedly came into “contact with a pure uncompromising spirit,” one “that is somewhere wandering in the atmosphere, but settles not positively anywhere” (74). We can recognize that this disembodied spirit, which is like the clouds of vapor that move through his sightlines, is not the same as a personality. Thoreau is captivated by the palpable moral power that it wields:

Some persons carry about them the air and conviction of virtue, though they themselves are unconscious of it—and are even backward to appreciate it in others. Such it is impossible not to love—still is their loveliness, as it were, independent of them, so that you seem not to lose it when they are absent, for when they are near it is like an invisible presence which attends you (*Writings* 74).

This nebulous “air” hovers “independent” from and “invisible” to the people who sometimes carry it, somewhat like a free-floating form of charisma. For Thoreau, it also carries with it a suasive power, one that compels a certain quality of attention. He describes it again in October 19, 1840, as he struggles to come to terms with

the aloof abstraction of a friend (who is probably Emerson). As Thoreau laments:

My friend dwells in the distant horizon as rich as an eastern city there. [. . .] But never does he fairly come to anchor in my harbor – Perhaps I afford no good anchorage. He seems to move in a burnished atmosphere, while I peer in upon him from surrounding spaces of Cimmerian darkness (*Writings* 1:191).

Thoreau's friend who dwells "in the distant horizon as rich as an eastern city" and moves in a "burnished atmosphere" would seem to carry himself with an air of sublime preoccupation. The friend may be present in body, but he is absent in mind, and Thoreau pines to share in his friend's other-worldly ruminations. In the lexicon of Thoreau's journals from the 1840s, the friend's attitude of contemplative distraction is encoded as an easterly and elevated "atmosphere" of mind.

In his citation of "Cimmerian darkness," Thoreau makes another allusion to Milton. He refers to "L'Allegro" from 1645, a poem about a cheerful, happy person, which is the counterpart to Milton's poem about a thoughtful, melancholic person, "In Penseroso." In Milton's opening lines of "L'Allegro," he casts "loathed Melancholy," which is born of "blackest midnight," into the even-darker "Cimmerian desert." Milton himself alludes to the land of the Cimmerians that he found in Book Eleven of Homer's *Odyssey*, a land so far to the West that the dawn never finds it, so it remains wrapped in the "mist and cloud" of night. To reframe

Thoreau's description, he thus observes his radiant friend from the westernmost reaches of the Western literary world—which is also the darkest and most melancholic place imaginable. Not only does Thoreau associate his friend with a kind of intellectual superiority, but also a brighter and more ebullient mood. Next, I will explore the significance of this connection in depth, as well the power of the certain “atmospherics” to compel extraordinary responses.

Chapter 5

Overlooking Our Own Depths: Thoreau at Walden Pond and the Orient Within

I cannot attach much importance to historical epochs—or
geographical boundaries—when I have my Orient and Occident in
one revolution of my body

August 14, 1840, Henry D. Thoreau, *Journals*

I. Reading the *Laws of Menu*: Sound and Cheerfulness

In this chapter, I will analyze Thoreau's early Orientalism directly. I will do so by drawing on my previous discussions of the critical treatment of Thoreau's Orientalism and his connection between an Eastern atmosphere and a certain philosophical cheerfulness, particularly as it relates to his skyward appraisals of *The Laws of Menu*. Thoreau reads this book not only for what it can tell him about classical Hinduism, but also to experiment with new kinds of reading.

What Thoreau refers to as *The Laws of Menu* is now known as *The Laws of Manu* or the *Manava Dharmasastra* (to avoid confusion with Thoreau's own citations, I will continue to refer to the text as *Menu* or *The Laws of Menu*, instead of *Manu* or *The Laws of Manu*). It is one of the most important Indian treatises on the *dharma*, which is roughly translated as law, one's rightful

duties, teaching. It was also the first of the *Dharmasastras* to be composed entirely in verse. The authorship of *Menu* is unknown, although it was probably composed, without attribution, in northern India in the first two centuries CE by a member of the educated Brahmin caste (Olivelle 37-38). Its literary richness and intellectual acuity have been praised over the centuries by writers of other *Dharmasastras* such as Brhaspati and Vatsyayana, and it has attracted nine different commentaries, which is more than any other text in the *Dharmasastra* tradition (3).

The modern significance of the *Menu* extends beyond the sphere of Indian legal literature, and indeed, beyond the boundaries of native Indian culture, since the motive behind the English-language translation is rooted in the spread of Western European colonialism during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The British government sought to administer their colonies in accordance with the traditional law of the land, even if that “tradition” no longer operated in the day-to-day lives of the colonized.⁴³ When the Governor General in India decided to base the Indian justice system on the Hindu laws derived from the *Dharmasastra*, colonial officials needed access to the original texts as soon as possible (62). In 1794, the British Orientalist, Sir William Jones, satisfied that need by translating *Menu* into English. As a consequence, *Menu* also became available to the European

⁴³ For more on this British policy, see Rocher 1969.

intelligentsia, which had developed a renewed interest in the “eastern” civilizations that preceded the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The *Laws of Menu* is a *sastra*, an erudite compendium of expert knowledge in a certain field (medicine, law, poetics, *dharma*), and not unlike the Latin encyclopedias composed in Europe during the Middle Ages, it draws on a tradition of the accumulated knowledge in its field.⁴⁴ The relationship between the scholarly codification of rules and actual cultural practices is a matter of much scholarly debate. For example, *sastras* might be said to reflect and describe existing practices, to provide an evaluation of the “worthiness” of certain cultural products for a discerning elite readership, to construct and prescribe cultural practices, or to invest a practice with authority and legitimacy (Pollock 25).

The Laws of Menu has four main sections: a section on the creation of the world, on the sources of *dharma*, on the *dharma* of the four social classes, and on the law of the *Karma*. The third section is central both in terms of length and importance and within it the two subsections that deal with the king (and statecraft and law) and the class of the Brahmin (Olivelle 7-16). It is therefore quite accurate to describe it as a prescriptive text for an ideal, organized society ruled by the king and guided by the wisdom of the Brahmins. The *Laws of Menu* claimed to have eternal authority because it was authored by the creator of the universe, who in turn, taught the treatise to his son, Menu, who in turn, taught it to his

⁴⁴ See Pollock 1989 for a discussion of “sastra.”

pupils. It obtained a higher status of authority also by departing from the traditional prose composition of *Dharmasastras*. It appears that opinions, sayings, and instructions given in verse, like *The Laws of Menu*, were viewed as having greater legitimacy and validity, and even as having divine authority (Olivelle 25-7).

When Thoreau writes about *The Laws of Menu* in May 1841, he claims that books should be “attended to as new sounds merely”—an attempt to reclaim the book for purposes that are not related to the British colonial project. Thoreau offers the unusual praise that this “new book of heroes” comes to him “like the note of the chewink from over the fen—only over a deeper and wider fen” (*Writings* 310). This description of the ‘newness’ of *Menu* is partly rooted in a pun on “sound” reading. Thoreau cagily implies, if we want to know whether a book like *The Laws of Menu* is “sound,” as in healthy or robust, why not simply treat it as “merely a sound”? And since the phenomenon of sound is *always* new—unlike books or paintings, which preserve the acts of writing and painting, sound is only operative in the moment of hearing—to “hear” a text that supposedly predates even Hebraic scripture is to register its organic aliveness now, like the murmuring wind or the call of a woodland finch. As these entries about “sound” demonstrate, Thoreau’s interest in the Orient focused less on defining what the Orient was than on determining its relevance in mid-century Concord. What kind of “sense” did one need to “hear” a text with origins so remote? And in turn, what did it say about *The Laws of*

Menu that its “sense” could register at such an extraordinary distance?

On May 31, Thoreau pens the rapturous response that I cited at the opening of the previous chapter:

That title—The Laws of Menu—with the Gloss of Culucca comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the plains of Hindostan, and when my eye rests on yonder birches—or the sun in the water—or the shadows of the trees—it seems to signify the laws of them all.

They are the laws of you and me—a fragrance wafted down from those old times—and no more to be refuted than the wind. (*Writings* 1:311)

Based on this entry, we might reach the conclusion that Thoreau believed *The Laws of Menu* are not only the laws of the natural world—of trees, the sun, water—but also the social world, of “you and me” (*Writings* 1:311). However, since Thoreau grasps the significance of these laws based only on the book’s title (“That title alone [. . .] seems to signify the laws of them all”), perhaps he also hears a deeper “sense” in “Menu” by playfully inverting its syllables: the laws of “mee-new” (i.e. “me and you”) are also the laws of “you and me.” Or perhaps the “sound” of the title provides a subtle indication of the book’s transformative power; *The Laws of Menu* holds out the promise that the text can make “me new,” a clarion call for readers in “New” England who hear the ancient scripture’s “newness” as Thoreau does. We might also consider, keeping in

mind Thoreau's preoccupation with etymologies, that the word "menu" in English derives from the Latin *minūtus*, meaning "small in size, amount, or degree" ("menu, n."). If this "minute" title is nonetheless able to convey an enormous "volume of sound," then an attentive listener can hear a fairly loud irony: the smallest laws make the largest noise. And if this minute or insignificant title somehow manages to "signify the laws of them all" (i.e. the faraway birches, the sun in the water, the shadow of the trees), then perhaps to discover *The Laws of Menu* is also to discover anew the natural world of Concord that had hitherto seemed so familiar.

Along with the sound of these philosophical puns, Thoreau also hears something else that's new: the sound of cheerfulness and fecundity, and an opportunity to consider the literary-philosophical importance of different moods. In the late 1830s, Thoreau comes to champion a spirit of cheerfulness rooted in pre-Mosaic "heroic" books, an alternative to the gloomy Hebraic tradition, to which Calvinist New England was a sullen heir. Thoreau begins to think through the local implications of the *musica universalis* or "music of the spheres," in an entry entitled "Sphere Music" from August 5, 1838. We can recognize a similarity between Thoreau's description of the *Laws of Menu* and the way "true sphere music" rises, heavenward, from the plain:

Some sounds seem to reverberate along the plain, and then settle to earth again like dust; such are Noise—Discord—Jargon. But such only as spring heavenward, and I may catch from steeples and hill tops in their upward course,

which are the more refined parts of the former—are the true sphere music—pure, unmixed music—in which no wail mingles (*Writings* 1:51) .

In this meditation on sound, Thoreau rephrases what he means by “true sphere music” by saying it is “pure, unmixed music.” We can recognize here a pun at the swirling center of Thoreau’s thinking from this period. Sound, pure, unmixed—these adjectives are at the etymological root of an indispensable word for Thoreau: *sincerity*. “Sincerity” in English derives from the Latin “sincerus,” which can be glossed as “sound, pure, whole.” In Thoreau’s usage in the entry above, to be sound, pure, and unmixed (or whole) is to sincerely participate in a “true sphere music.” It is an enlivening sound in which no dreary or melancholy “wail mingles.”

Soon, Thoreau compares this “sphere music” to the religious sounds that he hears around him in New England. On August 19, he listens to the sound of the “Sabbath Bell” to hear whether it is “sincere” music or simply so much “wailing.” Thoreau’s first response to the bell is mixed; he remarks that it does not “awaken pleasing associations alone.” He concedes that the bell’s muse might be “wonderfully condescending and philanthropic,” and yet his thoughts still sour. He tries “to humor the unusually meditative mood” created by the sound, but as the bell calls parishioners to church, he can hear the noise of religious orthodoxy on the mount, “the sound of many catechisms and religious books twanging a canting peal round the world.” It is a “canting peal” of evangelizing texts that “seems to issue from some Egyptian temple, and echo

along the shore of the Nile,” a connection to Moses and the religious books of the Pentateuch. The sound “[echoes] along the shore of the Nile—right opposite to Pharaoh’s palace and Moses in the bulrushes—startling a multitude of storks and alligators basking in the sun.” This is sound as disruptive noise; the religious “atmosphere” created by the Mosaic texts riles the wildlife of the natural world. But Thoreau’s criticism is not strictly with the noisiness, as it were, of the Judeo-Christian religion, a point that he drives home with a colorful phrase. “One is sick at heart of this pagoda worship,” he mocks, “it is like the beating of gongs in a Hindoo subterranean temple” (*Writings* 1:51).

Thoreau’s florid sentence about “pagoda worship” and the “beating of gongs in a Hindoo subterranean temple” has been read by Alan Hodder as a bald-faced example of Orientalist stereotyping. To be sure, Thoreau’s tone is parodic, and parody stings. However, in the context of the entry, the point is clearly not to denigrate Hinduism but to extend Thoreau’s criticism of religion beyond its Semitic focus. Thoreau makes his criticism less parochial—and thereby more credible—by reaching across the customary East-West divide. The ironic power of the image, too, would seem to be more self-implicating than accusatory. By that I mean, Thoreau seems to prey on the comfortable piousness of New England Protestantism by blithely equating the Sabbath bell to its supposed antithesis: the pandemonium of the savage pagan. What criticism would a New Englander “hear” better than a brusque comparison to those Hindus who worship in hulking temples in the

earth's infernal regions? The image of a gonging temple is a caricature, but it is used ironically, and if anything, the parody extends to all religious forms. From the subterranean to the Sabbath bell, isn't it all so much bizarre, gong-banging ostentation— at least for a petulant critic of religion like Thoreau?

The ironic humor of “pagoda worship” is in keeping with Thoreau's larger project: to find an alternative to a guilt-ridden, garment-rending religiosity. In the journals, Thoreau replaces the cacophony of religious forms with the sounds of “larks and pewees.” There is a textual implication to this shift from noisy orthodoxies to natural sounds, just as there was when Thoreau described the discordant sound of the Sabbath bell. Continuing his criticism of the grim pallor of New England religiosity, Thoreau writes about a particularly bleak sermon in an entry entitled “Divine Service in the Academy-Hall” on August 5. Referring, we can presume, to a less-than-“divine” sermon that was delivered at Academy Hall, Thoreau muses over the darkness of the text:

In dark places and dungeons these words might perhaps strike root and grow—but utter them in the day light and their dusky hues are apparent. From this window I can compare the written with the preached word—within is weeping, and wailing, and gnashing of teeth—without, grain fields and grasshoppers, which give those the lie direct (*Writings* 1:50).

In the sermon, the Son of Man sends forth his angels to cast the sinful into a fiery furnace where they weep, wail, and gnash their teeth. And in the “dark places and dungeons,” the words of

Matthew might be expected to take “root,” which is to say, in the prisons and catacombs of early Christianity. For Thoreau, however, these somber, vindictive words are now refuted by the world outside the window, the teeming abundance of “grain fields and grasshoppers.” Thoreau finds an antidote that is derived from his apprehension of the natural world: in its saturating realness, nature does not offer stirring arguments, but a different set of conditions, a different kind of context—a different *atmosphere*, one redolent with life.

“Christianity only *hopes*,” Thoreau would continue in the summer of 1840. “It has dreamed a sad dream and does not welcome the morning with joy.” Thoreau submits Christianity to a test—of embracing the dawn—that would emerge as a durable hallmark of Thoreau’s philosophy. After all, “[s]urely joy is the condition of life,” and as evidence, Thoreau offers a panoramic catalog of the natural world. The authority of this natural text does not lie in any author, we might observe, but in the memory and imagination of the reader:

Think of the young fry that leap in ponds—the myriads of insects ushered into being of a summer’s evening—the incessant note of the hyla with which the woods ring in the spring. the *non chalance* of the butterfly carrying accident and change painted in a thousand hues upon his wings—of the brook-minnow stemming stoutly the current, the lustre of whose scales worn bright by the attrition is reflected upon the bank (*Writings* 1:167).

The leaping fry, the myriad insects, the “incessant note of the hyla,” the unconcerned flight of the butterfly, the swimming minnow—these all affirm a kind of thrumming music of “joy.” They put the lie, in their sheer variety, to dogmatism. “The infinite bustle of nature of a summer’s noon,” he wrote in April 1840,

or her infinite silence of a summer’s night—gives utterance to no dogma. They do not say to us even with a seer’s assurance, that this or that law is immutable—and so ever and only can the universe exist. But they are the indifferent occasion for all things—and the annulment of all laws (*Writings* 1:167).

The “infinite bustle of a summer’s noon” and the “infinite silence of a summer’s night” is the “annulment of all laws,” standing as the final and ever-present arbiter of religious truth.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ It bears noting that Thoreau’s private struggle with silence led him to consider “Sound and Silence” as a possible topic of exposition in December 1838. “Silence is the communing of a conscious soul with itself,” he wrote in one of many notes on the subject. “If the soul attend for a moment to its own infinity, then and there is silence. She is audible to all men—at all times—in all places—and if we will we may always hearken to her admonitions” (60). Silence, which is gendered female, is the sound of a “conscious” soul communicating with itself, a description that relies on the kind of involuted paradox that Thoreau is repeatedly drawn to in his early journals. Sound, on the other hand, could be thought of as a bubble that bursts on the surface of silence. In its cessation, it heightens and intensifies the experience of silence, thereby becoming with silence “harmony and purest melody” (61-62). The “harmony and purest melody” is the absence of the presence of sound, comparable to the “infinite expansion of our being” following a crack of thunder that “we unanimously name

Amid the carrying noises and brilliant displays of nature, Thoreau also observes how music relates to the secular classics of the West. “When I hear a strain of music from across the street,” he remarks, “I put away Homer and Shakspeare, and read them in the original.” The shift from Homer and Shakspeare to a comparison to the Hindu *Vedas* is an easy one for Thoreau, and he admits, “A strain of music reminds me of a passage of the Vedas.” These books resonate with the “sound” standard of sphere music, and when Thoreau writes about *Menu* in the passages I have cited from the summer of 1841, the natural world begins to *interpret* the works, and not only echo in harmonious accord:

The very locusts and crickets of a summer day are but later or older glosses on the Dherma Sastra of the Hindoos—a continuation of the sacred code (*Writings* 1:317).

To conclude this section, I wish to underscore that Thoreau does not rely on, much less endorse, a derogatory view of the non-

sublime.” The alternation of sound and silence—or to put it slightly differently, the “sound” of silence as it magisterially presides over the world, its reign made evident and intensified through the periodic interruption of sound—provides Thoreau with the opportunity to make a study of receptivity. But was it possible to actively write silences? “I have been breaking silence these twenty three years and have hardly made a rent in it,” Thoreau could pun, seemingly with confidence. “My friend thinks I *keep* silence who am only choked with letting it out so fast. Does he forget that new mines of secrecy are constantly opening in me?” (262). Thoreau might possess these “mines of secrecy,” just as they might “constantly opening” within him. But what about the public soundings of his own poetry and prose?

Western world in these entries, except in a parodic critique of “noisy” religious expression. Also, the particularities of non-Western religious teachings are clearly not more important than the revelatory associations that they can inspire. In his desire to resist the glum, vindictive New England religious spirit that prevailed around him, Thoreau turned for relief to non-Western literatures, seeking to expand his consciousness across conventional boundaries. Indeed, in the final entry that I cited, the “locusts and crickets” that surround Thoreau on “a summer day” add the newest gloss to the “Dherma Sastra” (i.e. *Dharmasastras*), inverting the usual order of literary business. Instead of a writer, like Thoreau, interpreting nature like a text, the singing crickets are the interpreter of Eastern scripture, continuing the “sacred code” of glossing its significance to the world. The richness and singularity of Thoreau’s thinking about mood, religious forms, the natural world, and Eastern texts like *Menu* and the “Dherma Sastra” require a different approach than one focused on the relative “correctness” of Thoreau’s readings or linked to the European colonial project.

II. The Wild Imagination and the Experience of Infinity

In this section, I want to delve even deeper into examples of Thoreau’s Orientalism from his early journals. At the foreground of this analysis are a few entries from May 1841, particularly one in which Thoreau recounts a bewildering experience at Walden Pond. I will also refer to earlier entries as well, especially those that describe feelings of timelessness or the disruption of chronological

time. In an entry from May 27, Thoreau describes how he charms a school of fish with his flute-playing and also sees the moon travelling at the bottom of the pond, an extraordinary experience that elicits a comparison between the Concord nights with the Arabian nights—an allusion to the *Arabian Nights Entertainment*, the tenth-century collection of Persian, Indian, Egyptian, and Arabian fables. I will explore what Thoreau means when he says that a “wild imagination” is required to apprehend the significance of this comparison. I will also show how Thoreau reworks the observation that “we overlook our own depths” to forge a figure for eternity, one that requires the double perspective that his grappling with the East provides.

On May 27, 1841, it will be four more years before Thoreau famously sojourns to a cabin on the north shore of Walden Pond to conduct an experiment in simple living. However, as his journals reveal, he is already testing the waters of Walden, drifting idly on its surface, and giving himself over to the vertigo of peering into its depths. In 1839, Thoreau had written lyrically about the effects of “[d]rifting in a sultry day on the sluggish waters of the pond.” In an entry aptly entitled “Drifting,” he describes a languorous scene of contentment:

I almost cease to live—and begin to be. A boat-man stretched on the deck of his craft, and dallying with the noon, would be as apt an emblem of eternity for me, as the serpent with his tail in his mouth. I am never so prone to lose my identity. I am dissolved in the haze (*Writings* 1:70).

Thoreau may be the “boat-man” who reclines on the “deck of his craft,” wasting away the noontime in the pond’s “sultry” and “sluggish” waters, or perhaps he is only a scribbling passenger who experiences a sense of ego-extinguishing timelessness. In either case, he observes that he is “never so prone to lose my identity,” with perhaps an echoing pun on “prone” (i.e. as a tendency of mind and a prostrate position on the boat-deck). It is clear that he has not lost his “identity” as a writer, either. Not only does he take pains to register this hazy experience in his journal, but he also discovers for himself an “emblem of eternity” to rival the iconic “serpent with his tail in his mouth”—a figure forged, like so much of his imagistic and lexical vocabulary, from the smithy of his own ordinary and local experience.

Thoreau would describe Walden Pond in 1845 as “the oriental asiatic valley of my world.” With its redundant modifiers—oriental *and* asiatic—the phrase calls attention to matters of mythic temporality. Walden Pond was a place that Thoreau visited at such an early age (he was five years old when he first came to the pond from Boston) that it became “one of the ancient scenes stamped on the tablets of [his] memory” (*Writings* 2: 262), a private correlate to the fabled birthplace of human civilization. Just as important, however, is the latter portion of the phrase, with its emphasis on Thoreau’s desire to possess the fullness of his own local experience: the first memories of “my world.” With this evocation of the Orient, Thoreau’s point is less to represent the Orient so much as reorient Walden; Thoreau would take the

semantic cache that has accrued to the Orient, particularly as it relates to origins, and appropriate it for one of Concord's obscure glacial ponds. The rhetoric may be bold, and perhaps even swaggering, but it is not avaricious. Why would he have an economic or colonial interest in the "real" Orient, when he already has his own "oriental asiatic valley" in his proverbial backyard?

When Thoreau describes a pervasive sense of "eternity" while floating on Walden Pond, he also refers to the circuit of his living memory coming full circle: the earliest intimations of his personal history dissolving into his apprehension of the present moment, just like a serpent with its tail in its mouth. Thoreau records a similar experience of being awash with the past in February 1840. In the entry, Thoreau watches with a slightly manic glee as the Concord River overflows its banks. Men float "in boats over their gardens and potatoe [sic] fields." Children from the village peer on "tiptoe to see whose fence will be carried away next." The rising water flushes muskrats out of their holes—muskrats that are then hunted for sport ("They are to us instead of the beaver," Thoreau shrugs). As water sweeps onto cultivated land—of small gardens, of farmland—a wind comes over the meadow "laden with a strong scent of musk." Thoreau thrills at the smell, a

racy freshness [that] advertises us of an unexplored wildness. Those back woods are not far off. I am affected by the sight of their cabins of mud and grass—raised four or five

feet, along the river, as when I read of the pyramids, or the barrows of Asia (*Writings* 1:111).

The scene is one of broken boundaries: of a river breaching its banks, of fences splashing down, of muskrats chased from their hovels. The “racy freshness” of the muskrats calls attention to an “unexplored wildness,” an odorous call to the “back woods” that lie beyond the boundaries of Concord. Thoreau moves from wild scent to primal sight, describing how the muskrat “cabins of mud and grass” ‘affect’ him “as when [he reads] of the pyramids, or the barrows of Asia.” Like so much of Thoreau’s Orientalism, this experience exists, much like the arc of an electric charge, within an exchange between textual and empirical realities, between Thoreau’s reading about the Orient and his observations of the natural world. Thoreau associates the muskrat lodges (which, we might imagine, probably appear like remote islands in the swelling waters) with the structures of Eastern entombment: Egyptian pyramids, ‘Asian’ burial mounds. We might say that association reveals an almost instinctual correlation between primitivism and the “buried” civilizations of the Orient. And yet the comparative mode is ultimately one of parody, and American pretensions to greatness are what suffer in the contrast. Instead of marvelous pyramids, Concord offers the empty lodges of water-logged muskrats. Thoreau can detect glimmers of Oriental grandeur in his local surroundings, but only on a comically reduced scale.

The “disorienting” thrill that Thoreau records in these entries makes a particularly astonishing appearance on May 27, 1841. As

Thoreau describes it, he is adrift on Walden Pond at evening-time, alone, and blithely playing the flute. It is an instrument introduced to him in childhood by his father, and if we extrapolate from Thoreau's heady thoughts about music and philosophy from later in the summer—"Unpremeditated music is the true gauge which measures the current of our thoughts" (*Writings* 1:321)—he is not simply playing the flute, but improvising on it as well, trilling melodies as they spontaneously occur to him. He writes:

I sit in my boat on walden—playing the flute this evening—and see the perch, which I seem to have charmed, hovering around me—and the moon traveling over the ribbed bottom—and feel that nothing but the wildest imagination can conceive of the manner of life we are living (*Writings* 1:311).

Like some Orpheus of New England, or aquatic Pied Piper, Thoreau 'charms' a school of perch that hover expectantly around his boat. As if that were not enough, by a nocturnal trick of perspective, the moon in the sky appears to be "traveling over the ribbed bottom" of the glacial pond; it is a silent, luminous companion to the fluttering fish. Thoreau acknowledges that a small village in Massachusetts is an unlikely place to encounter such an enchanted tableau. Indeed, in a tone that hints at his own incredulity, he avers that nothing less than the "wildest imagination can conceive of the manner of life we are living." The sheer unreality of the scene—or we might say, its sheer literariness—conjures associations with the stories that redound from faraway lands, improbable tales that dazzle with their inversions of logic

and expectation. “Nature is a wizzard” [sic], Thoreau announces, “Concord nights are stranger than the Arabian nights.”

This awestruck conclusion—“Concord nights are stranger than the Arabian nights”—turns on an oblique reference to the medieval Persian epic *Arabian Nights Entertainment*. Once again, in evoking the *Arabian Nights*, Thoreau does not so much reinscribe the exoticism of Persia as reframe the “naturalness” of Concord. Thoreau’s revelation is that one does not need to physically travel to the far side of the world to witness feats of magical strangeness. One only needs to see anew the most familiar places in one’s own world, like Walden Pond—an epiphany that primes Thoreau for more writing, since he immediately conducts a familiar scan of the horizon, just as we have seen him do a number of times in the early journals. Looking upwards and outwards, he remarks on his view of the mist-shrouded land:

We not only want elbow room, but eye room in this grey air which shrouds all the fields. Sometimes my eyes see over the county road by day light to the tops of—yonder birches on the hill—as at others by moonlight (*Writings* 1:311).

As we may recall, in the “Thought” entry from December 12, 1837, Thoreau described “times when thought elbows her way through the underwood of words to the clear blue beyond.” Here, too, he not only wants “elbow room” to send his thoughts skyward but also “eye room” so that he can see the “tops of—yonder birches on the hill.” If we recall Thoreau’s many earlier attempts to search the

horizon, we see how often he seeks to test his private inspiration, in the moment, against the veritable infinity of the sky.

But the grey air prevails, and so with nothing to descry on the darkened horizon, Thoreau draws his energies inward. Instead of an extensive meditation on Concord's strange nights, he offers an intensive, riddle-like declaration. It is a paradoxical sentence that makes grammatical but not logical sense: "Heaven lies above because the air is deep," he writes. But what is the causal relationship, if any, between "deep" air and heaven? And even if the "air [were] deep," why would heaven then "[lie] above"? To understand Thoreau's locution, we need to return to the spectacle of the moon beaming upwards from the depths of Walden Pond. When Thoreau sees the moon in the water, he could explain it empirically: "The moon in the heavens appears to be at the bottom of the pond because the water is deep enough to provide the illusion." Or in a shortened form: "The moon lies below me in my boat because the water is deep." But how does Thoreau formally convey the fascinating backwardness of the illusion? One way is to let "moon" stand as a synecdoche for "heaven" and then substitute two terms—"below" and "water"—for their complement—"above" and "air," thereby transforming "Heaven lies below because the water is deep" into "Heaven lies above because the air is deep." It is a syntactical "reflection" of the moon shining from beneath the water. On these Concord nights, nature is a veritable wizard, and only "the wildest imagination" can grasp the magical power of its topsy-turvy reality. When Thoreau attempts to express

the natural occurrence in language, this is the spell-like riddle it will articulate: Heaven lies above because the air is deep.

In the next entry, Thoreau revisits this vocabulary of height and depth, and we see the culmination of his earlier cast of thought at Walden Pond. “We are height and depth both—a calm sea—at the foot of a promontory,” he declares. It is almost as if he is pondering the couplet of a poem, where “sea” and “promontory” finish two successive lines. “Do we not overlook our own depths?” he asks (*Writings* 1: 312). This question is borne, I think, of the wizardry of Walden Pond, and it has roots in Thoreau’s earlier thoughts about genius. In an entry from August 29, 1838 entitled “Genii,” Thoreau declared that even in “the vulgar daylight of our self conceit, good genii are still overlooking and conducting us—as the stars look down on us by day as by night” (*Writings* 1:54). These genii are like the “overlooking” spirits of classical mythology who exert their influence even when the “vulgar daylight of our self conceit” washes the sky of their distant gleaming. Genius, too, is a matter of seeing what the common sense either cannot or will not. “Common sense,” Thoreau asserts

is not so familiar with any truth but Genius will represent it in a strange light to it. Let the seer bring down his broad eye to the most stale and trivial fact—and he will make you believe it a new planet in the sky (*Writings* 1:82).

There is no truth that genius cannot estrange from the familiarity of the common sense. What marks the “Genius”—the “seer”—is not only that she deigns to inspect the most seemingly “stale and trivial

fact,” but that she can also convince you that it is as astounding as “a new planet in the sky.”

Nature is a wizard because she reveals a dazzling perspective to Thoreau where the moonlit sky reflects deepest depths of Walden. Nature is also a wizard because the spontaneous flow of Thoreau’s thoughts, as expressed in his flute-playing, mesmerizes a school of perch. In the terms of common sense, the moon lies below because the water is deep; in the estranging terms of genius, heaven lies above because the air is deep. When Thoreau asks, “Do we not overlook our own depths?” the answer is a qualified “yes.” Yes, we “overlook,” as in “neglect,” our own depths all of the time. But if we are able to be both the foot of the cliff and the promontory, to be able to see the highest illumination in the darkest bottoms, then we can embody the perspective of genius. When we peer over the side of our drifting boat and see the infinity of the sky reflected back at us, we are ourselves an emblem of eternity; we do overlook our own depths.

III. Role-Playing, the Celestial Empire, and the Strange Business of Journalizing

In this final section, I want to provide an example of how Thoreau’s early Orientalism relates to the Orientalism of his published work, specifically an allegory from the “Economy” chapter of *Walden*. I will show how this allegory about the “Celestial Empire” turns on a double allusion to the New England China trade (one of China’s appellations in the nineteenth century was the “Celestial Kingdom”) and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The

Celestial Railroad,” which itself is a rewriting of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*. The allegory takes shape around a dichotomy that Thoreau develops in his early journals between Yankee commerce and Oriental contemplation, particularly in relation to his vocational concerns: could Thoreau make a living by exploring the remote reaches of his inner self, instead of the exotic destinations of the usual Yankee merchant? I will begin by citing Thoreau’s own description of the strangeness of his journaling. I will then proceed to his playful thinking about a tortoise he read about in the *Vishnu Purana*, as well as the enormous squashes that can grow in New England, especially as they relate to Thoreau’s wondering about the many “roles” to be played in the world (a reference, too, to his reading in Shakespeare). I will then conclude with my own reading of the Celestial Empire allegory.

On January 30, 1841, Thoreau offered a candid, if also befuddled assessment, of his journaling process. “Of all the strange and unaccountable things,” he exasperates,

this journalizing is the strangest, It will allow nothing to be predicated of it; its good is not good, nor its bad bad. If I make a huge effort to expose my innermost and richest wares to light, my counter seems cluttered with the meanest homemade stuffs, but after months or years, I may discover the wealth of India, and whatever rarity is brought overland from Cathay, in that confused heap, and what perhaps seemed a festoon of dried

apple or pumpkin, will prove a string of Brazilian diamonds, or pearls from Carromandel (*Writings* 1:237).

For Thoreau, the ‘strangeness’ of the journal partly derives from his inability to know the value of any entry until “months or years” pass. It is a consequence—and cause—of his cyclical journaling process, which I have discussed earlier. Thoreau also plays with the idea that valuable ‘goods’ only come from remote places. After describing his “innermost and richest wares” as so much paltry “homemade stuffs,” he mimics the cartographic shorthand of a trader in precious goods by identifying far-flung locales—India, Brazil, Coromandel (a section of the New Zealand coast)—with rare commodities. In the early journals, the larger issue is how the conventional vocabulary of wealth fits with Thoreau’s own ideas about “richest wares” and hard-to-secure fortunes. Do his inner-depths not reach as far as Cathay? And if distance is the metric of value, what could be more exotic than what he dredges from the recesses of his being? After all, if exotic goods from Cathay were highly prized in New England, than why not the rare prose that Thoreau brought back from the antipodes of his own consciousness?

Thoreau raises these questions in relation to the competing claims of Yankee commerce and Oriental contemplation. The spirit of the former is jealously competitive, intent on exploiting resources—human, natural—for profit, and eager to join the bustle of the global economy. The latter is bemused at the thought of human progress, fascinated by the wonders of the natural world,

and keen to withdraw from the “busyness” of modern life to persevere the quiet sanctity of the soul. This might seem like a matter-of-fact dichotomy, a variation of the simplistic East-West binary of which there are many examples (e.g. the East as despotic and the West as freedom-loving, the East as sensual and the West as rational, etc.). But by using the same lexicon of maritime exploration and exchange to describe both pursuits, Thoreau is able to develop an uncannily resonant way of critiquing the profit-driven, expansionist views of mercantile New England. Instead of discarding the commonsense talk of profitable enterprises, he reworks it to his own advantage, using sharp-edged satire to pierce the unexamined precepts of the business-driven life.

“Men have been contriving new means and modes of motion,” Thoreau writes in April 1838 (*Writings* 1:42). “Steam ships have been westering during these late days and nights on the Atlantic waves,” he reports, describing the trans-oceanic voyages of state-of-the-art vessels from Europe. These ships are “the fuglers”—or leaders, from the German “fugleman”—“of a new evolution to this generation,” another manifestation of the “westering” march of progress in the mid-nineteenth century. Meanwhile, Thoreau also takes careful note of how much does not contrive to progress. “[P]lants spring silently by the brook sides” and the “grim woods wave indifferent,” he observes. Moreover, unlike the rushing clangor of steam-fired engines, the “earth emits no howl.” Amid nature’s indifference, which is at once silent and “grim,” Thoreau imagines a woodland abode: a “pot on fire

simmers and seethes”—the boiling pot, the modest equivalent to a steam-engine in this rustic scene—and “men go about their business.” Thoreau does not draw a conclusion; the entry is spare, a rough sketch. But in juxtaposing the latest “modes of motion,” which come westering from Europe, with the silently growing plants and waving woods, Thoreau contrasts the modes of “business” and “busyness.” On the one hand, steam ships make a business of cleaving the Atlantic; on the other, “men go about their business” whose use of steam has not evolved beyond the modest usage of a hearth.

Thoreau is not blind to the ubiquity of progress or the fact that steam-engines, and dreams of profit, propel many of his fellow New Englanders across the globe. On a sea-faring trip to Maine the following month, Thoreau asks, “What indeed is this earth to us of New England but a field for Yankee speculation?” The pun on “speculation” is central to the question: not only is the wide world a place where the Yankee businessman “speculates” with his capital, but it also one that he can “speculate” with his practical eye. Take, for instance, what can be espied from a whale-ship from a local port:

The nantucket whaler goes afishing round [the earth]—and so knows it, what it is—how long—how broad—and that no tortoise sustains it. -- He who has visited the confines of his real estate, looking out on all sides into space—will feel a new inducement to *be* the Lord of creation (*Writings* 1:44-45)

The whaling vessel “goes afishing round” the far reaches of the globe and learns its dimensions in strictly practical terms, “what it is—how long—how broad—and that no tortoise sustains it.” The tortoise that Thoreau mentions is an allusion to Kurma, an avatar of the god Vishnu, whom he had read about in the *Vishnu Purana*. Vishnu, one of the primary deities of Hinduism who protects and preserves the universe, once assumed the body of a tortoise, and on his back he supported a group of elephants who in turn held up the world. To Thoreau’s mind, a Yankee speculator might “spectate” for himself that the Hindu worldview has no empirical basis, the mythological tortoise nowhere to be found. But Thoreau’s purpose is not to convince the speculator of the merits of Hindu cosmology, but rather to cajole him into a new perspective. The purpose, it seems, is for the Yankee shipman to rethink what kind of myth holds up his own world. Perhaps it is the notion that the world rests on the imperative of western progress? But if instead of circling the globe, this Yankee visited the “confines of his real estate”—contracting into his “real” state, the way a tortoise does when she draws into her shell—perhaps he might feel inspired “to *be* the Lord of creation,” instead of simply profiting from it.

Thoreau provides a remarkable account of what this kind of retraction into one’s “real” state of consciousness can entail. Shutting down his senses, like a tortoise pulling its body into a shell, Thoreau is transported through an immense inner world,

taking flight as a “subjective-heavily laden thought” supported by the gravity of the spinning earth.

If with closed ears and eyes I consult consciousness for a moment—immediately are all walls and barriers dissipated—earth rolls from under me, and I float, by the impetus derived from the earth and the system—a subjective-heavily laden thought, in the midst of an unknown & infinite sea, or else heave and swell like a vast ocean of thought—without rock or headland. Where are all riddles solved, all straight lines making there their two ends to meet-eternity and space gamboling familiarly through my depths. I am from the beginning—knowing no end, no aim (*Writings* 1:50).

To revel in the creative source-point of one’s own consciousness is conceivably something that anyone can do anywhere. So what is the purpose of literally voyaging around the globe? It is a logical question, and because Thoreau’s journals are as much an arena for pursuing questions as positing answers, he engages the question at length on March 21, 1840.

The organizing conceit of the March 21 entry is drawn from Thoreau’s reading in Shakespeare, a writer whose monologues he turned to for insight into his vocational questions. What role should one perform in this world? On March 21, Thoreau expands on the monologue from “As You Like It” when Jacques proclaims that “All the world’s a stage,/And all the men and women merely players” (Act II, Scene III, lines 139-166). In the play, Jacques proceeds to examine the “seven stages of man”: infant, schoolboy, lover,

soldier, justice, pantaloons, and second childhood. In Thoreau's entry, he considers the globetrotting array of "parts" that a young New England "actor" might play. "The world is a fit theater to-day in which any part may be acted," Thoreau says expansively, tallying the global possibilities:

There is this moment proposed the choice of parts of life that men lead any where—or that imagination can paint. By another spring I may be a mail carrier in Peru—or a South African planter—or a Siberian exile—or a Greenland whaler, or a settler on the Columbia river—or a Canton merchant—or a soldier in Florida—or a mackerel fisher off Cape Sable - - or a Robinson Crusoe in the Pacific—or a silent navigator of any sea—So wide is the choice of parts—what a pity if the part of Hamlet be left out! (*Writings* 1:119)

This is the world as it might plausibly appear to a Yankee Romantic. It is a careless roll-call of what the world can offer an "actor," where the pursuit of a living correlates with some feature of popular lore. Thoreau does not name the role he is most interested in: the person who can "paint" these opportunities in colorful prose, and so we might put "writer in New England" alongside Peruvian mail-carrier, South African planter, Siberian exile. (True to his somewhat contrarian sense of completeness, Thoreau also defends the role of Hamlet, the indecisive prince for whom the turmoil of decision-making becomes the drama of his life. After all, in an accounting of world-wide opportunities,

especially one inspired by Shakespeare, why forego the choice of deferring to choose altogether?)

When Thoreau thinks about the prerogative of choosing one's role, he focuses on the advantages of global mobility. He asserts that he is "freer than any planet," because "[n]o complaint," by which he means disapproval, can overtake a person who is able to go "round the world" to flee it. He could "move away from public opinion—from government—from religion—from education—from society" so long as he could withstand the constant state of flight. Thoreau then shifts from a folkloric to a mythological view of the world, where a footloose traveler is only limited by his capacity to day-dream new itineraries for his heroic quests:

For my Bobdinag I may sail to Patagonia—for my Lilliput to Lapland. In Arabia and Persia, my day's adventures will surpass the Arabian-nights entertainments. I may be a logger on the head waters of the Penobscott, to be treated in fable hereafter as an amphibious river god—and to have as sounding a name as Triton— Carry firs from Nootka to China—and so be more renowned than Jason and his golden fleece—or go on a South Sea exploring expedition to be hereafter recounted along with the periplus of Hanno. I may be Marco Polo or Mandevill and find my Cathay beyond the Great lakes.

These are but a few of my chances (*Writings* 1:119).

Thoreau embraces the imaginative possibilities that the world presents, in part, it would seem, to try his hand at writing these

romantic inventories. But he only considers these possibilities in imagination. In fact, at the end of this entry, he quickly shifts his viewpoint once again, with tongue firmly in cheek, from the enormity of the globe to an enormous vegetable. He observes that “a man may gather his limbs within the shell of a mammoth squash” without too much trouble, fitting within a squash as easily as he might fill any number of careers around the world. In fact, if this person arranges his body correctly—putting his “back to the north eastern boundary,” Thoreau adds helpfully—then he will not be “unusually straightened after all.” By “unusually straightened,” Thoreau seems to mean that this “squashed” person should not fear that this confinement will be as painful as being “straightened” with some kind of unusual device, like a torturer’s rack. After all, in the end, it is not the pains of the body that matter but the state of the soul.

Our limbs indeed have room enough but it is our souls that rust in a corner. Let us migrate interiorly without intermission, and pitch our tent each day nearer the western horizon— The really fertile soils and luxuriant prairies on this side of the Aleghanies-- There has been no Hanno of the Affections-- Their domain is untravelled ground to the Moguls’ dominions (*Writings* 1:119).

Thoreau concludes by turning a physical figure into a metaphysical one, and he playfully suggests retracting into a shell—here the rind of a squash, earlier the carapace of a tortoise—to answer a question about the value of playing a role in the world. In this

entry, he has lavishly imagined the dramatic alternatives to interiority. And yet he settles on the value of a soulful “migration” to inner realms, the internal counterpart of the far-flung geography of anywhere.

To conclude this chapter, I want to show how these issues reappear in an allegory of *Walden* that I have not seen treated in any of the critical literature. The allegory comes in the “Economy” chapter as Thoreau explains that he has retired to Walden Pond to “transact some private business” (19). The question, of course, is what constitutes “business” for Thoreau, and the irony of this section turns on his “private” exploitation of the doubleness of the language of commerce. For readers who come with a Yankee perspective, for whom profit is derived from the material transactions with faraway places, and for whom the personal cost of this “business” is a surrendering of wholeness and peace of mind, then the allegory will read as a straightforward endorsement of their way of life. It will reflect the common sense of New England. However, for a reader who shares Thoreau’s view that our genius lies in our ability to “overlook our own depths,” then the allegory is a critique of these same commercial values.

“I have always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to every man,” Thoreau begins, assuming the paternalistic voice of an entrepreneur ready to discuss the importance of character and thrift. “If your trade is with the Celestial Empire,” he offers, “then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough.” The

“Celestial Empire” is an allusion to China, from “Tien Chao” or “Heavenly Dynasty,” which is one of the ways in which Chinese-speakers have historically referred to China.⁴⁶ Thoreau is also referring to the China Trade of New England, which counted Salem, Massachusetts, as one of its primary ports. However, Thoreau is further referring to the short-story “The Celestial Railroad,” first published in the *Democratic Review* in May 1843 and then in *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1846—roughly a decade before the publication of *Walden* in August 1854—and authored by Thoreau’s friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had worked in a Salem custom house in 1849 (Hawthorne 131).

Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad” is a mid-nineteenth-century rewriting of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), an extremely popular allegory about the travails and triumphs of an everyman character named “Christian.” (We have also seen Thoreau refer to *Pilgrim’s Progress* by way of the “slough of despond” in his “Thoughts” entry from December 12, 1837.) In Hawthorne’s version, the theme is the vitiation of Christian virtue through the corrosive effects of modern-day conveniences and moral relativity. In the short-story, the narrator dreams that he is making the same journey as Bunyan’s “Christian” from the city of Destruction to the Celestial City. However, instead of travelling on foot, the narrator is escorted by Mr. Smooth-it-away on the Celestial Railroad, and the narrator observes the harsh terrain that Christian traversed—and a pair of stolid pilgrims who march

⁴⁶ See *Walden*, 20, Note 106.

onward by their own power—from the comforts of his gliding train carriage. In the end, the narrator finds that he has been duped by Mr. Smooth-it-away and that the train has not delivered him to the salvation of the Celestial City but to eternal damnation. As he comes to this bewildering realization, the narrator suddenly awakes. The delivery of the story's moral is part of the moral itself: who will wake you, dear reader, from your smooth transport to the false heaven of modern progress?

In Thoreau's allegory, the problem is the false "progress" of Yankee commerce. Thoreau, however, does not simply reject the values of the China trade, but rather he invites his readers to peer more closely into the beguiling depths of what passes for a respectable vocation in New England. Thoreau offers an itemized description of what usually counts for "private business" when it comes to Celestial Empire. "These will be good ventures," he assures us, if we can "oversee all the details [ourselves] in person." These include:

To be at once pilot and captain, and owner and underwrite; to buy and sell and keep the accounts; to read every letter received, and write or read every letter sent; to superintend the discharge of imports night and day; to be upon many parts of the coast almost at the same time;--often the richest freight will be discharged upon a Jersey shore;--to be your own telegraph, unweariedly sweeping the horizon, speaking all passing vessels bound coastwise; to keep up a steady dispatch of commodities, for the supply of such a distant and

exorbitant market; to keep yourself informed of the state of the markets, prospects of war and peace every where, and anticipate the tendencies of trade and civilizations (18).

The list goes on, but the point can already be recognized. Thoreau is playing with the idea of a “private business.” If one person cannot “oversee all the details [themselves] in person,” then it is not truly private. He is also punning in the “busyness” of this “business,” which would require a person to perform an impossible number of tasks. The purpose of this allegory, much like Hawthorne’s, is to compel the reader to examine what is commonly valued in New England. What Thoreau offers as an alternative is his own “private business” at Walden Pond, one that he can conduct himself, and one that involves exchanges with the Celestial Empire, an allusion to the classical Confucian literature that he cites in *Walden*, but also to the infinite perspective that his “reflections” at Walden Pond allows.

Thoreau concludes the allegory by noting that Walden Pond “offers advantages” for business that “it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good port and a good foundation” (*Walden* 20). As Thoreau wrote in his journal in July 1841, “This town”—by which he meant Concord—“lies out under the sky—a port of entry and departure for souls to and from Heaven” (314). His business is that of transport, but it is the kind that one can perform, and perhaps best perform, while adrift on the waters of the local pond, while collected within the figurative space of a tortoise shell or enormous vegetable rind. It does not reject what it finds in New England, but

neither does it lie content with seeing what everyone else sees.
Concord nights are stranger than the Arabian nights, and one does
not need to travel to the opposite side of the world to discover the
Orient.

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