

# METAMORPHOSIS IN ART AND NATURE: EMERSONIAN POETRY

**Nicholas Guardiano**

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Winner of the Hubert Alexander Memorial Award

In his essay “Nature” (*Essays: Second Series*) Emerson recites the philosophical distinction between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*, that is, between nature passive and nature active. The former consists in the collection of determined natural objects or “forms”; the latter, in the indeterminacy of the collection as a becoming or under-going phenomenon, nature naturing its natured products. Taking up the latter in his essay, Emerson names *natura naturans* as “the Efficient Nature ... the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes, (as the ancient represented nature by Proteus, a shepherd,) and in undescribable variety” (E&L 546).<sup>1</sup> Defining *natura naturans* as an underlying causal or creative principle is, indeed, to conceive nature as *the Cause*, the supreme cause of “all forms”—thus having the metaphysical status of the Platonic Good that creates all being but is not itself a being.<sup>2</sup> Its existential status is that which gives or *is* life. Furthermore, the association with Proteus—the shape-shifter—and (in the following sentence) with the variety of organic “transformations” (E&L 546) from the lowest life forms (lichen and trilobite) to the highest (mankind and Plato) specifies the particular method of the causal principle as metamorphic, because change occurs by a continuous process of transformations and involves the generation of novel forms. That is, nature modifies and reconstitutes the “but one stuff” (E&L 547) of matter to generate the endless variety of things. In the conclusions of science and through our own observations we can discern this method of life in the dissolution and reconstitution of organic and inorganic form. The caterpillar denies its form to awaken a butterfly; animals and micro-organisms feed on each other as necessary sustenance; the corpse rots in the grave nourishing the soil; and surface moisture transforms from dew, to cloud, to thunderclap.

Human creative processes are no exception to *natura naturans*; both the practical and the fine arts are governed by nature’s laws of transformation. Emerson believed in the continuity or connaturality between art and nature. His philosophy makes use of

a set of naturalist principles as a basis for identifying connatural aesthetic principles. Across a range of his writings he sketched this correspondence under both the aspect of activity and passivity, thus showing the organic nature of the artistic process together with that of the work of art.<sup>3</sup> Much can be said on the connaturality between the *works* of wild nature (*natura naturata*) and art (such as how and what in the former serve as the resource and material for artistic representation); however, my task in this paper is centered on exploring artistic *poiesis*, the creative process, or the “method”<sup>4</sup> (rather than the product) of art, and its connaturality with nature qua *naturans*.<sup>5</sup> The discussion focuses on, in particular, the method of the art of literature, and my primary theoretical goal is to submit a conception of literature as a dissolving and transformative process that unfixes and reconstitutes language creating new imaginative symbolics. Along the way I make use of Stanley Cavell’s commentary on Emerson, and Wallace Stevens’ poetry and poetics, which carry the Emersonian tradition into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### I. METAMORPHIC ART

Much of Emerson’s philosophy of literature is articulated in terms of his philosophy of “poetry,” which largely appears in “The Poet” alongside his metamorphic aesthetics. In the essay we find a conception of the naturalness (*vis naturans*) of the artistic imagination in literature, as a fluid entity and engine for metamorphosis. Emerson defines the imagination in the context of drawing a distinction between the poet and the mystic:

[T]he quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. The poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought. Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead. Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one. The morning-redness happens to be the favorite meteor to the eyes of Jacob Behmen, and comes to stand to him for truth and faith; and he believes should stand for the same realities to every reader. But the first reader prefers as naturally the symbol of a mother and child, or a gardener and his bulb, or a jeweler polishing a gem. (E&L 463)

The connaturality of the artistic imagination with nature lies in its capacity to flow.<sup>6</sup> I see this activity manifested in the figurative prose of literature where language and its symbols are unfixated and reconstituted by the creative freedom of the artist. In other words, the Emersonian artist modifies and infuses symbols with his own thoughts making use of them to his own original ends, and in so doing recognizes that the symbol is to *express* rather than *possess* meaning (“sense”); the mystic permanently fixes the symbol to a single meaning thereby turning the symbol into a sacred icon, an idol.

The “religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and, at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language” (E&L 464)—an excess of language at the expense of imagination. The mystic is a zealot who by taking symbols as dogmatic emblems commits them to death—nailing Jesus and the imagination to the beams of the cross in one swing of the hammer. The artist, on the contrary, breathes life into symbols, the artistic medium. She does not rest in the past meaning of jaded symbols. The metamorphic method of dissolving old structures and transforming the material into new structures is the life-giving principle of both nature and art—each a mode of life subsuming the two movements of birth *and* death (transforming *and* dissolving).

If we analyze the operation of metamorphosis, in general, we learn that it is the transformation from one form to another of an abiding given material. As such, it is a process that implies an inherent limit to the originality of creation, for the process is a *function* of its material, of the *nature* of its material, whatever that may be. In the domain of wild nature, matter and energy—the medium from which nature molds all her forms—set pre-determined boundaries on what can and cannot be created. When the chemist, in her lab, synthesizes the nucleus of a nonnaturally occurring element, it instantly disintegrates. Light sets the universal speed limit. And even the great cosmic builder, a stellar nucleus, with all its uncanny power, is susceptible to collapse due to the infinite restriction of gravity.

In the domain of the art of literature, it is the linguistic medium that delineates creativity. Cavell says that we “inherit” or are born into language, that it is already there in the world as a “form of life” in which we all share. He applies this sense of language to the artistic act of writing in his lecture, “The Philosopher in American Life,” where he suggests that “writing is a variation of reading, since to write is to cast words together that you did not make, so as to give or take readings.”<sup>7</sup> For Cavell, a “reading” or (as he also says) an “account” is an interpretation making some definite judgment or valuation. The act of writing, of setting down or committing one’s thoughts, occurs by making use of language as a *pre-existing* literary material. Cavellian writing, thus, is defined the same transformative method of metamorphic art. Writing is a “casting,” not pure making, of a found and established linguistic world. The idea of casting found literary elements is also stated by Emerson in “Shakspeare; or, the Poet.” Cavell’s sense of the writer I think is correct, just late to the scene (re-)iterating Emerson’s insight dressed up in the wardrobe of late Wittgenstein.<sup>8</sup>

In taking up Emerson’s essay “Shakspeare” one might expect him to laud his favorite poet—whom he claimed wiser than even Plato!—as a genius whose originality is qualitatively distinct from other persons. This is not the case. For, Emerson opens: “Great men are more distinguished by range and extent, than by originality. If we require the originality which consists in weaving, like a spider, their web from their own bowels; in finding clay, and making bricks, and building the house; no great men are original” (E&L 710). One of his primary intentions in the essay is to suggest that *all* poets—even those we recognize as great original geniuses—make use of found literary materials that pre-date the artist: “Every master has found his materials collected” (E&L 711). To drive home his point, Emerson cites the research of Edmond Malone (an Irish editor of Shakespeare) who concludes that only a fraction of the total of Shakespeare’s lines are original, the remainder all taken from past authors. The poet

or writer does not create works *ex nihilo*, purely from his “own bowels,” but, rather, is said to create (or cast) from some pre-established literary material.

The constitution of this *materia poetica* can be specified with greater detail. Cavell above identifies the medium with “language” and “words.” Writers use words—sure—but there is a complexity to the writer’s linguistic material that can be overlooked here. Emerson himself, in “Shakspeare,” associates the material with the literary tradition (the antecedent works of other authors), as well as with the historicity and myths found in the collective consciousness. Wallace Stevens, in a parallel passage on the nature of the poet, writes:

It is the gibberish of the vulgate that he [the poet] seeks.  
He tries by a peculiar speech to speak

The peculiar potency of the general,  
To compound the imagination’s Latin with  
The lingua franca et jocundissima.<sup>9</sup>

The poet must apply and express his inner imaginative thoughts to and through the lingua franca, which is the medium that the writer and reader share in common. I take it to consist in the knowledge of such things as the definitions of words, common and notable works of literature, world history, myths, current events, etc. The lingua franca as a shared common background enables the poetic imagination to bring off “sudden rightnesses” (CP 240) in the readership, rather than generate works that fail to affect the universal human sentiment, such as works of personal fancy or works that are overly abstruse, esoteric, or abstract. We can here think of the legacy of Dante (a great poet for Emerson) who utilized the Italian vernacular, Christian symbols, and Florentine politics to express his highly imaginative creations in his *Comedy*.

Considering these reflections on the metamorphic medium, we see that the writer is, in a sense, restricted, since she creates out of the cotemporaneous linguistic setting, just as metamorphic nature creates out of the “but one stuff” of matter spread throughout the wealth of co-existing natural structures. Now, I do not see this as undermining the originality of literary genius. Rather, I see it as relocating the concept of originality; it draws the boundary lines of originality’s sphere of influence elsewhere. Originality is not creation *ex nihilo*, but creation *ex aliquo*; it is modification. The writer is conditioned by, but not subordinate to, her linguistic context. The geniusness of the Emersonian poet lies in the poet’s resourcefulness: drawing upon, modifying, and composing from the lingua franca of today and not some esoteric or obscure source.<sup>10</sup>

## II. TWO EXAMPLES OF METAMORPHIC LITERATURE

Emerson’s writings themselves are exemplary of the metamorphic style that spins its own joyful imaginative creations from the lingua franca of its times. There are countless examples. Take the above quote on the mystic. There, Emerson creatively makes use of certain familiar symbols, such as the crucifixion of Jesus, alluded to in the description of the mystic who “nails a symbol to one sense” (my emphasis). The

well-known Christian image he uses to simultaneously reject the worship of Jesus as an icon, and reject the Christian fanatic (whose role is drastically reversed to *murderer* of the messiah) for stubbornly adhering to a single symbol and perhaps for even imposing it on others, other “readers” (such as Jacob Behmen, the mother, gardener, and jeweler), thereby restricting their individuality.<sup>11</sup> This is rich polemic! Emerson’s resourcefulness to express his own critical and philosophical position in such a (once) jaded symbol exhibits the transformative power of metamorphic art that reconstitutes symbols to express new imaginative insights. Likewise, an additional instance of metamorphosis is his use, in the same quote, of common and natural objects—ferries, horses, farms, houses—pervasive Emersonian symbols. These objects qua common and natural are things found in a shared human setting (especially that of nineteenth century New England); they constitute a common denominator on which the artist and audience converge, and so are an additional element of the lingua franca employed by Emerson.

Cavell, I think, is on to this style in Emerson. In his interpretations of Emerson and Thoreau he is fond of noting that they employ self-conscious metaphors and language that is itself appropriate to the subject of the discussion; the authors recognize that their “writing is meant to enact its subject.”<sup>12</sup> For example, Cavell demonstrates that in their critiques of society and economics they use economic terms or a language of economics (words such as “account” and “interest”) to convey their moral discontent with and to reject economics as an all-consuming language of life, a conduct of life that only thinks in terms of the dollar.<sup>13</sup> The same goes for Emerson’s use of the language of the crucifixion; as shown above, it is a *Christian* symbol used to precisely undermine a (corrosive) *Christian* mentality.

As a second example, I submit Stevens as a twentieth century Emersonian poet, who, in continuing the New England Romantic tradition, employs the metamorphic art to his own unique aesthetic ends. Like Emerson things in nature and from common life are pervasive symbols: summer, autumn, the rock, jar upon a hill—the list is endless. The cognitive depth that Stevens injects into such “mere,” or hyper-ordinary, things is profound. A favorite example of mine occurs in the poem “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts.” There, Stevens’ dual life as pedestrian insurance lawyer by day and superhero poet by night morphs into the image of the poem’s two characters: a fat cat “slopping its milk all day” (CP 209) and a king rabbit humped high, owning the “whole of the wideness of night” (CP 209). In the poetic reverie the floppy-eared poet and his imagination rule supreme; the light of the world is *his* “fur-light” (CP 209) where the fat cat becomes a “little green cat . . . a bug in the grass” (CP 210).

Yet, I must insist that even at this extremity—when the poet may be a “god in the house” (CP 327),<sup>14</sup> as Stevens says, and “the adamant . . . wax in his hands” (E&L 435), as Emerson proclaims—the poetic imagination, by its transformative power, does *not* slip into pure caprice or fancy. Stevens, despite all his exaltation of the imagination, recognizes this himself in his theory that the imagination is balanced by, what he calls, “reality.” Simon Critchley, in his book on Stevens, discusses just this balance and correctly explains “reality” as the domain of Stevens’ *material poetica*, which is understood as a “necessary” condition of poetic creation.<sup>15</sup> “Reality” is the mundane, which the imagination must adhere to, and also combat as its natural antagonist, in

its struggle for aesthetic freedom, freedom to think up works of art.<sup>16</sup> Imagination, for Stevens then, does not result in fancy because of its grip on reality. His poems maintain a functional awareness by an intent to adhere to the demarcations of reality and to speak in the *lingua franca et jocundissima*.<sup>17</sup> Yet (and thus), they do not result in mere sensuality either, as Critchley may have it when he interprets the imagination as placing real things merely under “the aspect of a *felt* variation.”<sup>18</sup> Stevens’ poetry is involved in a project not of mere “metres, but [of] a metre-making argument” (E&L 450). His profound philosophy of poetry and the imagination is a case in point. It is eloquently and uniquely expressed in a concentrated minimalist poetic form that does not tangent into ornate exuberances and does not require the length and pedantry of a scholastic treatise. One aspect of Stevens’ philosophy is his sense of works of art as expressive entities for conveying ideal “sudden rightnesses,” or universal “spiritual forms” in Emerson’s terms.<sup>19</sup> Works of art are recognized as having epistemic import. They intend to capture and be true to a definite feeling, mood, or thought. Rather than merely sensual particulars (sudden-nesses, or mere “felt variations”), they are loaded with meaning and possess the ability to bring off familiar “sudden *rightnesses*” in the observer.

## II. Metaphor in Metamorphose

Besides exhibiting the active metamorphic style of nature, Emerson and Stevens’ literary works both represent the passive dimension of nature, *natura naturata*, the collection of natural forms. One sense in which Emerson conceives of the correspondence between the work of art and natural form is material.<sup>20</sup> The material form of wild nature is self-explanatory, however not so much as a form represented in literary prose. I see the materiality of literature in connection with metaphor and the figurative prose in general that distinctly characterizes literature from other more literal (or abstract) forms of written expression.

The metamorphic reconstitution of symbolic structures results in nothing other than figurative prose that makes use of similes, metaphors, and analogies. Contemporary philosophers of literature distinguish such prose as sensuous by the affect brought off in the reader. Such prose is also sensuous in a different sense: by the tangible imagery, sensuous adjectives, and material concrete things used as symbols. In the literary formulations of Emerson and Stevens I have in mind such examples as horse, farm, jar, slop, green, etc. Literature, as such, resembles our concrete experience in the world, that is, when we are not reading from a book and engaged in abstract thought. Emerson addresses such prose when he describes, in his journal, two ways of going about formulating thought into writing. He calls them “primary” and “secondary formation.”<sup>21</sup> The latter, he says, uses books as a source from which to formulate ideas, whereas about the former, he says the following: “Let a man make the woods & fields his books then at the hour of passion his thoughts will invest themselves spontaneously with natural imagery.”<sup>22</sup> In an entry approximately three months earlier he had noted the significance of primary formation: “I believe I never take a step in thought when engaged in [written] conversation without some material symbol of my proposition figuring itself incipiently at the same time.”<sup>23</sup> Figurative prose is primary because it preserves

and maintains the natural beauty of the tangible world; its source being the concrete (“woods & fields”) and not the conceptual abstractions found in books. The distinction remains undeniably relevant today where the thinker is overwhelmed by texts of secondary formation. The bare abstractions of, for example, the sciences and professional philosophy reduce the natural world to insipid and achromatic concepts—or worse—utilize the *already*-barren abstractions of specialized scholarly “literature.” The latter are doubly “secondary” since they are formulated from a second-hand source.<sup>24</sup> Now, the point I want to make here is not just that figurative prose is more affective to its audience but that it is actually more true, or at least more meaningful. I am in agreement with Emerson’s journal remark that it is as if no “step in thought” is taken without a material symbol, and, with his like remark in *Nature*—committed to print about a year after the journal entry and possibly harvested from it—that,

Wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it, is a man in alliance with truth and God.... Hence, good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is proper creation. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made. (E&L 23)

The quote sums up Emerson’s position on figurative (“picturesque”) prose, and also brings us back, full circle, to the concept that launched this section: “the Original Cause,” nature seen as supreme creative principle. I find that figurative prose is often taken to be more moving and persuasive than literal discourse, yet less cognitively sound. I reject this. Figurative prose is *closer* to life than abstract language, and hence more meaningful. Unlike the latter, it actually approximates our daily experience, because it blends the material form of the sensuous world with the present musings of the mind. As such, literature is a preservationist and natural conservationist; it preserves or maintains material form by employing it as literary symbol in an act of “proper creation.” A work of literature with its material metaphors and sensuous imagery demonstrates itself as a creative product connatural and unified with the Original Cause; it is a natural continuation of the metamorphic process, the activity of *natura naturans*.

## NOTES

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Essays & Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983); all applicable quotations of Emerson are from this edition and cited as E&L followed by page number.

2. For a reading of Emerson’s *natura naturans* complementary to mine, see Robert D. Richardson, Jr., “Emerson and Nature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: Cambridge UP, 1999); and Douglas Anderson, “Emerson’s Schellingean Natures: Origins of and Possibilities for American Environmental Thought,” *Cognitio: Revista de Filosofia* 8.1 (2007) 13-22.

3. As Douglas Anderson explains, Emerson’s senses of nature (*natura naturans* and *natura naturata*), as well as his identification of the self with nature, have their precedence in Schell-

ing's naturalism by which Emerson and the Transcendentalists were significantly influenced (see Richardson esp. 14-7).

4. The "method of nature" (as Emerson shows and names it in his 1841 lecture under the same title) pertains to the cosmic creative process and its style, rather than to any particular occurrence or product of this process.

5. "If nature in the aspect of *natura naturata* gives the artist material, Nature as *vis naturans*—shaping power—shows him method." Vivian Hopkins, *Spires of Form: A Study of Emerson's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1951) 35.

6. This liquid language recurrently appears throughout Emerson's, as well as the other Transcendentalists', writings. Nature is often expressed as a flowing or fluid process, and, as such, connects to Emerson's adaptation of Plotinian emanation, namely of a greater cosmic field of creation that subsumes the human instances of creation. The artistic will harmonizes with the creative flux of nature, in effect identifying with the cosmic process (see, e.g., E&L 7, 18-9, 459).

7. Stanley Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life: (Toward Thoreau and Emerson)," In *Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 18.

8. It is, moreover, surprising that Cavell does not mention "Shakespeare" considering his strong interest in the playwright.

9. Wallace Stevens, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 397; henceforth CP followed by page number.

10. Richard Poirier likewise locates Emerson's sense of literary genius under the heading of modification of pre-established form; see his "The Question of Genius: The Challenge of Emerson," Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985) 167-8. The idea of the Emersonian poet as a modifier should not be over read. Original and philosophical insight about the world is just as important. Emerson's conception of poetic imagination is influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who takes "imagination" to be genuinely creative, and in contrast, "fancy" as simply aping and reconfiguring old ideas found in memory.

11. For Emerson's position on the status of Jesus, see, for example, his infamous "Divinity School Address," and Robert D. Richardson, Jr.'s comments in his *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) 288.

12. Stanley Cavell, "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant" in *Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988) 40.

13. For more on this thesis of Cavell's, see "Emerson, Coleridge, Kant," esp., 38-40; and Cavell, "The Philosopher in American Life," esp., 17-9.

14. In "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit" where the metamorphic power of the imagination is at its apex and the conception of the poet approaches the divine, the poet can now be "any stick of the mass" (CP 328), for the resourcefulness of the poet can make due with any ordinary thing igniting it ablaze with his fiery imagination to new symbolics.

15. Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 24.

16. The "real," for Stevens, appears to consist in and be divided into two classes: (1) the ordinary things of a habituated and ignored state of life; and (2) the unavoidable impassioned and intellectually violent shocks of life, such as the pressure of the wartime '40s. See Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), where Stevens presents this concrete sense of "reality."

17. On the idea of function, Emerson explicitly identifies its importance in nature and art. Functional form is one of three dimensions of natural form (*natura naturata*) on the basis of which he draws a correspondence with the work of art (see Hopkins, *Spires of Form*, 70). It cap-



tures the purposiveness, order, fitness, and efficiency of things, “the purgation of superfluities” (E&L 1106). See e.g., Emerson’s essays, “Beauty” and “Thoughts on Art.”

18. See Critchley, *Things Merely Are*, passim.

19. On Emerson’s sense of spiritual form, see Hopkins, *Spires of Form* 70. It is a natural form expressed by a work of art that produces “upon the observer an impression similar to that caused by nature’s works.” I take as an example Emerson’s presentation of the fable of the dance of fairies in “History” (see E&L 244-5).

20. The other natural forms, for Emerson, are functional and spiritual. See n. 15 and 17.

21. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge: Belknap, 1982), 145.

22. *Emerson in His Journals*.

23. *Emerson in His Journals*, 142. This entry is from August 2, 1835 and the prior one is from November 6, 1835.

24. Marcel Proust—who in his youth was greatly influenced by Emerson—brilliantly captures the regressive tiers or different levels of abstract formulation when he comments, in *The Fugitive*, on mathematics: “[T]hose letters used in algebraic formulae, where there remains none of the qualities characterized by the arithmetical numbers, which themselves already no longer encapsulated the properties of the fruit or the flowers that were being assessed” Marcel Proust, *The Fugitive, In Search of Lost Time*, trans. Peter Collier, vol 5 (London: Penguin Books, 2003) 421. The algebraist has longer been out of the “woods & fields” than the arithmetician.