

Emerson's Ladder of Ascent: Modernity and the Platonic Tradition

John Michael Corrigan
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

From its inception, scholarship has acknowledged the Platonic and Neoplatonic delineations of Ralph Waldo Emerson's thought,¹ although recent critics tend to see his essays less as coherent philosophy and more as a creative exercise which makes his readers "feel delight with him in the spectacle of contrariety."² Sharon Cameron argues, for instance, that Emerson primarily espoused transcendent views for the rhetorical purposes of ravishing his listeners so as to affect a climactic flourish on Idealist peaks.³ In another vein, Barbara Packer explains Emerson's attachment to the Western idealist tradition as emotional dependency—he needed a panacea for grief, a soothing spell for melancholy: "Idealism as a doctrine was more than philosophically important for Emerson; it was emotionally important as well."⁴ For Packer, Emerson found reassurance in Idealism and developed, as a result, a voracious

1. Early- to mid-20th-century criticism tended to explore Emerson's acceptance of many Platonic and Neoplatonic teachings, particularly through the well-known Cambridge Platonist, Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688). See, for instance, John S. Harrison, *The Teachers of Emerson* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910); V. Hopkins, "Emerson and Cudworth: Plastic Nature and Transcendental Art," *American Literature* 23, no. 1 (March 1951): 80–98; Stanley Brodwin, "Emerson's Version of Plotinus: The Flight to Beauty," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 35, 3 (July 1974): 465–83; and Robert Richardson Jr., *The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: California U Press, 1995), 345–48.

2. George Kateb, "Self-Reliance and the Life of the Mind," *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 178.

3. Sharon Cameron, "The Way of Life by Abandonment: Emerson's Impersonal," *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007). For Cameron, the trope of the ever-moving soul creates an intentional lack of balance, preparing readers for "that influx of the Divine mind into our mind," which Emerson characterizes "consistently as 'enthusiasm,' 'ecstasy,' 'trance,' or 'inspiration,' and 'in the case of remarkable persons like Socrates, Plotinus, George Fox, and Behmen,'" he employs "ravishment," which is precisely what his "essays attempt to dramatize" (150).

4. Barbara Packer, "The Curse of Kehama," *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 74.

appetite for Idealist thinkers to keep the darkness of his moods at bay.⁵ In general, contemporary scholarship has assumed that Emerson does not accept any pre-established philosophical position; he exercises a type of radical, individualistic freedom by taking various views in hand and escaping them. In the words of Harold Bloom, Emerson is consistent only in one venture: he takes “the risk of exalting transition for its own sake.”⁶

What has been overlooked in these various pictures of the Concord mystic is the coherence with which Emerson adopts and revitalizes some of the main precepts of Platonism and Neoplatonism. Much like G.W.F. Hegel, Emerson reformulated the metaphysics of the past into an ethos of self-consciousness: the attempt of the individual to think through the historical sequence of which he or she is a part and to realize, in such emergent, evolving self-knowledge, that the divisions of the self give way to a greater abundance and unity in consciousness. Yet, there is another vital side to Emerson’s thought that has been overlooked. This side both adopts, in the terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hegel’s inverted world” that “reinstat[es] the Greek logos on the new foundation of modern, self-knowing spirit”⁷ and, at the same time, embraces both Plato’s Forms and the modern question of self-consciousness without privileging one formulation over the other, or giving one side the status of express origin. Nowhere is this approach more evident than in Emerson’s reinterpretation of Plato’s ladder of ascent from the *Symposium*. Like Plato, Emerson emphasizes the lover’s ascent as a sequential pattern that utilizes the activity of the mind to transform the merely human into a far greater ability to “span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return, and reconcile their opposition.”⁸ However, Emerson also augments the Platonic vision of love to underscore the universe’s volatile play between the evolution of beings on the ladder of nature and the Good

5. Ibid. “No wonder Emerson seized eagerly upon every philosopher whose system tended toward idealism of one kind or another: Plato, Plotinus, Berkeley, Kant, Fichte, Schelling” (74).

6. Harold Bloom, *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 5.

7. Hans Georg-Gadamer, “The Idea of Hegel’s Logic,” in *Hegel’s Dialectic: Five Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale U Press, 1976). Gadamer describes Hegel’s position further in the context of his whole system as developed in *The Science of Logic*, arguing that Hegel did not reject the Platonic tradition; rather, he “achieves his objective of reinstating the Greek logos on the new foundation of modern, self-knowing spirit” and, thereby, incorporates the “logos-nous metaphysics of the Platonic and Aristotelian tradition, which predates the whole question of self-consciousness” (78) into his dialectic.

8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller et al., 6 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1971–2003). In accordance with scholarly convention, further reference to these volumes will be *W* 6, 1—*W* for *Collected Works*, 6 for volume number followed by page number.

that is wholly beyond being—two distinct patterns, one ontological and the other metaphysical which intertwine to give a greater vision of a universe in which soul and matter perpetually respond to each other's order without one tyrannizing the other.

This double pattern, in fact, is not limited to any one period of Emerson's thought. From his earliest lectures to his mature writings, Emerson consistently organizes the oscillating character of the universe as a dialectical structure that aspires toward an ever-greater interconnection and synthesis. Even in his initial successful period as a lecturer and essayist, when he expresses a metaphysical extravagance that became less emphatic, although always prevalent, in his writing after the 1840s, his focus upon the first stirrings of consciousness in nature and the structure that they eventually take reveal his predilection for situating some of the main precepts of Platonic philosophy in a new light. "Love" from his *First Series of Essays* (1841) exemplifies this tendency most clearly. Emerson accepts the final goal of Platonic ascent, which has influenced a great deal of metaphysical writing throughout history,⁹ as it is drawn by Diotima and repeated by Socrates, a vision of the eternal, unmixed with "anything that is of the flesh" and unchanging:

Nor will this vision of beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is—but subsisting in itself and by itself in an eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it ...¹⁰

At the same time, Emerson recasts Socrates-Diotima's concluding arguments in an attempt to answer the question of being and its subsequent development—and he explicitly resituates the conception of metaphysical Forms¹¹ alongside consciousness as a wholly emergent web of relations "so beautiful and attractive" that they "must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on for ever."¹² Emerson's adaptation of the

9. For a recent influential treatment of many figures in this tradition from Plato to Whitman, Proust and Joyce, see Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 2001).

10. *Symposium*, 211a5–b in *The Collected Works of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Michael Joyce (New York: Pantheon, 1966).

11. The interpretation of Plato's theory of Forms is a vexed question since elements of the "theory" are only proposed in different dialogues (and never by Plato directly), and in the only dialogue in which it comes up in an extended discussion between Zeno, Parmenides and Socrates (*Parmenides*), it is rigorously subjected to most of the major criticisms later leveled against it (for instance, by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics*). In other words, Plato appears to deconstruct his own theory in the dialogues.

12. *W* 2, 110.

Platonic system of ascent into an open-ended, perpetual progression is one of the best examples of how Platonism came to be incorporated within a transcendentalist ethos: Emerson reinterprets the older, transcendent model in such a manner that soul runs the whole gamut of the cosmic order from matter to transcendent Form in each step it takes in its journey, without ever abandoning the material world.

Emerson's faithful adaptation of Plato's ladder thus possesses an intricate alteration in its curious insistence that every step of the journey is a continuous, but never accomplished process of separating the eternal from the world's taint. In this regard, the contrast between the two ascents is both striking and highly subtle:

Plato:

Next he will grasp that the beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul, so that wherever he meets with spiritual loveliness ... he will find it beautiful enough to fall in love with and cherish [...] And from this he will be led to contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions [...] And next his attention should be diverted from the institutions to the sciences, so he may know the beauty of every kind of knowledge. [...] Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous revelation that has been the very soul of beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes, nor goes ...¹³

Emerson:

And, beholding in many souls the traits of divine beauty, and separating in each soul that which is divine from the taint which it has contracted in the world, the lover ascends to the highest beauty, to the love and knowledge of the Divinity, by steps on this ladder of created souls.¹⁴

Emerson's lover looks upon the beings of nature and sees the divine and earthly together; he then begins to separate soul and matter from each other so that he can eventually transcend to the highest beauty, but each step of his ascending ladder involves both soul and matter so that the lover's task lies not simply in separating soul from matter, but in "beholding" their reunion on a higher rung of the ladder. On his ascent to the highest beauty, the lover, therefore, never abandons the material, although he perpetually purifies the soul "from the taint it has contracted in the world," and his very activity through the rungs of the ladder restlessly engages in a soul/body dichotomy, a process of repeated ensoulment and transcendence that never ends and from which the lover never escapes.

13. *Symposium*, 210c7–211a.

14. *W*2, 106.

While employing Plato's ladder of ascent as a prototype that articulates the upward course of the individual's eternal progress, Emerson succeeds in unsettling any easy grasp of his subject matter: the love that he expounds is not simply Platonic; nor, strictly speaking, is Plato the exclusive teacher of love's ascent. As Emerson observes, "the truly wise [have] told us of love in all ages. The doctrine is not old, nor is it new. If Plato, Plutarch and Apuleius taught it, so have Petrarch, Angelo, and Milton."¹⁵ Already in this remark, Emerson's description possesses a carefully balanced complexity which can easily be missed. By rejecting established or newly invented truth in Plato and his successors, Emerson implicitly illustrates that the lover's divine ascent "on this ladder of created souls"¹⁶ cannot rest upon any steady foundations expressed by one thinker of the past; it must instead partake in an evolutionary process in which each thinker has had a significant part, which will nevertheless be subjected to augmentation and change. In so arguing, Emerson actually believes that he is closest to the spirit of Platonism. Clarifying his position nine years later in *Representative Men* (1850), he claims that Plato's unrivalled position as the founder of intellectual thought springs precisely from the power of never resting upon any static foundation, but always seeking a dynamic openness to self-generating and unsettled expansion:¹⁷

Plato's fame does not stand on a syllogism, or on any masterpieces of the Socratic reasoning or on any thesis, as, for example, the immortality of the soul. He is more than an expert, or a schoolman, or a geometer or the prophet of a particular message. He represents the privilege of the intellect, the power, namely of carrying up every fact to successive platforms, and so disclosing in every fact a germ of expansion.¹⁸

Emerson's Plato is a type of looking glass, providing a context for Emerson's own impulses and desires. Accordingly, for Emerson, Plato can be neither

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Some critics see Plato's philosophy as one which Emerson would largely overcome (See Gustaaf Van Cromphout, *Emerson's Modernity and the Example of Goethe* [Columbia: Missouri U Press, 1990]). Others from the 90s onward, however, stress the vital importance of Platonic thought to Emerson's thinking. Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: Chicago U Press, 1990), particularly uses Plato as a vital precursor to Emerson's thinking. More recently, Laura Dassow Walls, *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell U Press, 2003), notes Emerson's life-long admiration of Plato. In what is usually considered the most definitive biography of Emerson, Richardson (1995) contends that "Emerson's interest in Plato would become a major preoccupation" (65) throughout his lifetime. Although Emerson could read Greek, he worked largely with translations, and Richardson describes the "seven discernable stages" by which Emerson acquainted himself with Plato (65–66).

18. *W* 4, 46.

a systematizer, nor a doctrinaire;¹⁹ he is the first advocate of an expansive cognitive undertaking, which transmits “a germ of expansion” so that the historical series of being can be perceived not as a static order, but as a philosophical approach that questions, transforms and revolutionizes each step that came before it.²⁰

In “Love,” therefore, Emerson affirms what he perceives to be essential to Platonism by arguing that the spirit of the intellectual process always “awaits a truer unfolding.”²¹ In doing so, he recasts Plato’s ascending order from the individual to the divine and presents it instead as a powerful impulse that continuously reestablishes itself on a never-ending “ladder of created souls.”²² On every rung of experience, spirit and being’s perpetual embrace postulates a dialectic which can only be viewed as unsettled, and the lover’s progress, whatever its subtlety, underscores a singular feature of Emerson’s work: at every point of his argument, metempsychosis remains a decisive, foundational principle of the soul moving through the body to a new ensoulment in history.²³ Since the soul never fully cleanses itself of the material world, soul’s liberation from matter comprises a simultaneous reintegration

19. See, for instance, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). Emerson’s argument is strikingly proleptic of Whitehead’s judgment not that all subsequent thought is footnotes to Plato, but rather that “Plato’s personal endowments, his wide opportunities for experience [...], his inheritance of an intellectual tradition not yet stiffened by excessive systematization, have made his writing an inexhaustible mine of suggestion” (*Process and Reality*, New York: Macmillan, 63). See also Kevin Corrigan and John D. Turner, *Platonisms: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 4–5.

20. One might argue that this is an essential, if often or mostly overlooked, feature of Platonism itself, i.e., its capacity for eternal “well-meaning” refutation built into dialectic. See, for example, Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 342e–343c.

21. *W* 2, 106.

22. Yet, at the same time, he manages to be true to the Platonic spirit in so far as the “ladder of created souls” (which is not in Plato) reflects the reflexive aspect of each step in Plato, that is, *logos* and the nurturing of *logos* between two human beings. See *Symposium*, 210 a 7–8, c 1–2; etc. and so on for each step.

23. In the leading essay, “History,” of Emerson’s *First Series of Essays* (1841), Emerson introduces the idea of historical series, whether the rungs of a ladder or the steps of a stairway, in relation to metempsychosis. He argues that the historical order does not lie outside the mind; rather, in order to realize itself, the mind must retrace the whole chronology of history and learn history’s lesson for itself: “We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience, and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words, there is properly no History; only Biography. *Every mind must know the whole lesson for itself—must go over the whole ground. What it does not see, what it does not live, it will not know*” (*W* 2, 6; emphasis added). In this sense, the man of genius is able to watch the “monad through all his masks as he performs the *metempsychosis of nature*. Genius detects through the fly, through the caterpillar, through the grub, through the egg, the constant individual; through countless individuals the fixed species; through many species the genus; through all the genera the steadfast type; through all the kingdoms of organized life the eternal unity” (*W* 2, 8; emphasis added).

in matter, whereby the soul realizes its previous material manifestations in a new, higher pattern. Its purification and "attempt to attain [its] own perfection,"²⁴ as Emerson argues in "Love," form a circular, self-reflexive pattern.²⁵ The activity of consciousness, therefore, becomes paramount in this process of ascent; soul and body, consciousness and its object, artist and artwork—all establish themselves in their very reciprocity or active interrelation.

Emerson argues further that this dialectical relationship with its intrinsic evolutionary character is a conflictual relationship, which oscillates between the primacy of a metaphysical system and the ontological status of material reality: between 1) the divine which is untainted of materiality and "foresees and prepares" its development "from the first wholly above [...] consciousness" and 2) the perfect equality of soul and matter so that the "soul is wholly embodied, and the body is wholly ensouled" (*W* 2, 107). In his essay "The Poet" (1844), published three years after "Love," Emerson names these two opposing patterns *the orders of time and genesis*, arguing throughout for two conflicting positions at once: first, the equality of soul and body and, second, the soul's power over the body: "The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form."²⁶ Emerson contends, therefore, that immaterial thought and material form can be understood in two ways, foregrounding two separate, yet interdependent models that operate as part of a dialectic of creation and time. Emerson's emphasis upon equality in the order of time presents the budding Romantic fascination with the prospect of new creation and its achievement of unity and bears some relation to Immanuel Kant's "Copernican Revolution," in which time and space are the *a priori*, inner and outer forms of intuition or

24. *W* 2, 110.

25. Emerson's argument here is almost identical to certain passages in Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Mineola: Dover, 2004). For instance, for Hegel, the circular, chiasmic pattern—"while death is the issue of life, life is also the issue of death"—is the "grand conception" that the "Oriental philosophers attained" and which "is evolved [...] in the idea of *Metempsychosis* [...] in its relation to individual existence" (*PH*, 73). Using the analogy of the Phoenix to illustrate this grand conception, Hegel argues that Spirit's metempsychotic vitality depends upon consuming itself and using its materials to exalt itself eternally into a new form: "a myth more generally known, is that of the Phoenix as a type of Life of Nature; eternally preparing for itself its funeral pile, and consuming itself upon it; but so that from its ashes is produced the new, renovated, fresh life. [...] Spirit—consuming the envelope of its existence—does not merely pass into another envelope, nor rise rejuvenescent from the ashes of its previous form; it comes forth exalted, glorified, a purer spirit. It certainly makes war upon itself—consumes its own existence; but in this very destruction it works up that existence into a new form, and each successive phase becomes in its turn a material, working on which it exalts itself to a new grade" (73).

26. *W* 3, 7. Cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 26d; 27b; 53d–54d; Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 645a23–36; 641b31–32.

grounds for consciousness: "Time and space [...] are two sources of cognition."²⁷ In short, creation cannot be understood outside of consciousness. As Kant argues in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781–87), since "the concept of change requires the perception of some existent [being] and of the succession of its determinations; hence it acquires experience,"²⁸ creation in some sense depends upon the experience and perception of being. By contrast with the above transcendental conception of consciousness in time and space, the soul's priority over matter in the order of genesis in Emerson's writing operates according to traditional Platonism: the material object is derivative, bearing a mimetic relation to its ideal Form²⁹ since the universe is an externalization of a perfect spiritual Form.

Thus, Emerson extols transcendental consciousness while never purging or rejecting the Platonic vision of undiluted Forms, which he characterizes in "Love" as the mind's "overarching vault, bright with galaxies of immutable lights,"³⁰ which exists "wholly above" ontological consciousness. Yet he argues that different values come to precedence at different times in the dialectic, and these values underscore the fact that two seemingly incongruent systems are at play in "Love." On the one hand, the metaphysical Form has precedence during creation; it "foresees and prepares" the "purification of the intellect and the heart"³¹ and, thereby, externalizes itself like a "celestial rapture falling out of heaven"³² creating the world of time in its activity. This process of creation is essentially mimetic, generating itself from above and running its course into a downward sequence and thus exemplifying "the downward tendency and proneness of things."³³ On the other hand, after creation has taken place, the human individual, existing now in the mimetic wake of creation, remembers the "perfect beatitude" (*W* 2, 108) and becomes dissatisfied with his or her present state.³⁴ Here, in the world of time, the individual must combat the

27. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 92: B 55.

28. *Ibid.*, 94: B 58.

29. See, for example, Plotinus, *Ennead*, III, 9, 3, for the priority of soul to its "image."

30. *W* 2, 110.

31. *W* 2, 109.

32. *W* 2, 102.

33. *W* 1, 216.

34. This notion of dissatisfaction has been most influentially treated by Stanley Cavell who stresses Emerson's writing/thinking as a process of aversion—turning away from in order to turn back to, conversion or transformation. In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990), Cavell expresses it in this way: "Emersonian Perfectionism requires that we become ashamed in a particular way of ourselves, of our present stance, and that the Emersonian Nietzsche requires, as a sign of consecration to the next self, that we hate ourselves [...] So that the mission of Perfectionism generally, in a world of false (and false calls for) democracy, is the discovery of the possibility of democracy, which to exist has recurrently to be (re)discovered" (16–17).

downward propensity of mimesis, coming to abide by another value, the equality between soul and matter—and learning to marry and separate soul and matter on every rung of the ladder of experience and thereby to ascend through the material series by knitting together a fitter union of consciousness. As Emerson writes three years later in “Experience,” “[m]arriage, in what is called the spiritual world, is impossible, because of the inequality between every subject and object.”³⁵ In the created world, however, equality operates as the dominant value, so marriage and procreation are again possible—and this play of equals gradually allows an ontological ascension back toward the Form that generated the temporal world.

Emerson, thus, preserves the metaphysical formulation that “soul makes the body,”³⁶ although he presents ontological consciousness as an alternative—and corresponding—methodology that explains how the universe produces and arranges itself. Unlike the Platonic Form, this ontological alternative grounds itself in space and time, preparing for the emergence of consciousness not as a replication of the divine mind (or something simply made by soul), but as a principle whose validity resides in the web of material relations of which it is composed. Emerson indicates that a dialectical pattern develops not simply between the lover and the divine or between body and soul, but within nature and its patterns so that a network of material relations slowly establishes interconnectivity and complexity to produce the advent of the human—and divine—mind. It is noteworthy that in his 1838 lecture, “Love,” which forms the basis for the later 1841 essay, Emerson is even more explicit in delineating how inorganic matter strives in polarity toward ennobling itself, first, in a state of pre-consciousness and, eventually, in consciousness itself:

The power of Love is indeed the great poem of nature which all brute matter does seem to predict from the affinities of chemistry—and of crystals upward. The dualism which in human nature makes sex, in inorganic matter strives and works in polarity, showing itself in elective affinities,³⁷ in explosion, in flame, in new products. In the vegetable kingdom it solemnizes in the springtime the marriage of the plants, with the splendid bridal apparel of those sons and daughters of beauty, in whose sibylline leaves we read the approach of man.³⁸

35. *W* 3, 44.

36. *W* 3, 9.

37. Cf. the title of Goethe's work, *Elective Affinities* (translation of *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*).

38. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 3 vols, ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams (Cambridge: Harvard U Press, 1959–72). In accordance with scholarly convention, further reference to these volumes will be *EL* 3, 52—*EL* for *Early Lectures*, 3 for volume number followed by page number.

The ladder of ascent—"the great poem of nature" that aspires "upward"—figures as the predominant structure upon which all material beings, even those as-yet preconscious, cling and grope, at first, blindly and, then, with greater ease, assurance, and complexity. In the above passage, the dialectical pattern expresses itself as a "dualism in organic matter [which] strives and works in polarity," already exemplifying in its dumb state the seeds of speech and poetry, presenting in all this the power of generation from below. Emerson, therefore, emphasizes the growing interconnection of material objects empowered by love, which means that matter's maturation depends not only upon its moving upwards to a higher manifestation, but upon its own internal organization—an emerging material complexity. Certainly, a spiritual subtext exists; love as an intermediate spirit serves as a type of immanent or relational principle within the material world, allowing there to be connection and mutuality, as in Plato's *Symposium*, but Emerson's depiction of this brings with it an emphasis which is new and which underscores the moral interconnection of material elements, rather than materiality's dependence upon an all controlling divine source.³⁹

In "Love," therefore, nature emerges as a distinct, yet corresponding source to the Platonic Form. The highest pattern, "the real marriage" of heaven and earth,⁴⁰ is discernable in the rudimentary dualism of nature—in her blind and dumb preparations for a more complex arrangement of signs and meaning—but nature's material awakening and subsequent order cannot be understood simply as an imprint of a higher reality or its reflection. From the perspective of consciousness in time, nature as a material source becomes the bedrock upon which the spiritual may be realized, and Emerson emphasizes the process in which material relations awake to each other and begin to form the structures that will support consciousness:

The passion operates a revolution in the youth. It quickens all things, and makes all things significant. Nature grows conscious. The bird who sung unheeded yesterday on the boughs of the tree, as the boy whistled by,—himself as gay as the bird, sings now to his heart and soul. Almost the notes are articulate. The clouds almost have faces, as he looks on them. The waving bough of the forest, the undulating grass beneath, the

39. See Robert Norton's *The Beautiful Soul* (1995), for context on the reinterpretation of love in German transcendentalism (266–82). Norton particularly explores Hegel's conception of love as an attempt "resisting Kant's rational dogmatism" on another moral ground which underscored "the potential ability of love to overcome that even wider gulf dividing individuals within a larger transpersonal community" (269–70). Emerson clearly inherits, somewhat indirectly, this particular opposition to rationalism, choosing during his essay to emphasize the moral dimensions of love not just as an educating principle, but more surely as an eventual social one that draws together particulars, whether nature, consciousness itself, individuals or souls.

40. *W* 2, 109.

peeping flowers have grown sympathetic; and almost he fears to trust them with the secret which they seem to invite.⁴¹

In the 1841 essay "Love," Emerson will slightly amend this earlier passage, retaining his insistence that "passion rebuilds the world for the youth;"⁴² in this 1838 lecture, however, he is startling in his emphasis on the qualitative change that all relations undergo. As all things approach consciousness under the influence of love's attraction, nature begins to express herself in a language almost recognizable, almost articulate; its structure yearns for a more complex arrangement, and the youth whose awakening corresponds with the stirrings of consciousness in nature begins to perceive how "the stars [are] letters, and the flowers ciphers."⁴³ Thus, one spark, one potential seed for consciousness, enters the world of material relations, and from this "wandering spark"⁴⁴ that is caught in the individual's "private bosom" proceeds another spark that lights up others around him until all affected relations share the flame of love:

For it is a fire that kindling its first embers in the narrow nook of a private bosom, caught from a wandering spark out of another private heart, does glow and enlarge until it warms and beams upon multitudes of men and women, upon the universal Heart of All, and so lights up the whole world and all nature with its generous flames.⁴⁵

The enlargement of nature corresponds to the individual's growth and expansion: he "dilates; he is twice a man; he walks with arms akimbo; he soliloquizes; he accosts the grass and the trees; he feels the blood of the violet, the clover and the lily in his veins; and he talks with the brook that wets his foot."⁴⁶ The language of nature is thereby transformed to become a new language, inclusive and expansive, arising from signs, at first without express human meaning, yet coming to possess significance in the new interconnectivity of nature itself—in the "private bosom" of the youth and the "multitudes of men and women" that comprise "the universal Heart of All."⁴⁷

41. *EL* 3, 58.

42. *W* 2, 103.

43. *W* 2, 103.

44. The Stoics called the soul "*scintilla aetheris*," a spark or smoldering ember of ether (See *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, index). Emerson transforms this image by combining it with Plato's "wandering cause," a condition of unpredictability in the *Timaeus* (see 47eff), thereby transforming both into his own complex image.

45. *EL* 3, 54.

46. *W* 2, 103.

47. For this emphasis on the stars as letters or signs of nature see Plotinus, *Ennead*, III 3, 6–7.

Emerson's emphasis on nature, so prominently displayed in "Love," is hardly characteristic of Diotima's ladder of ascent, but rather catches something of the developing interconnectivities in Plotinus' descriptions of natural development,⁴⁸ reflected much later in Goethe and Coleridge. The arising interconnectivity in nature presents itself also in the relationship between lovers, for Emerson illustrates that the duality that existed in pre-consciousness arises in the union of two individuals, as they serve to educate each other about all the different material combinations that arise in time: "as life wears on, it proves a game of permutation and combination of all possible positions of the parties, to employ all the resources of each, and acquaint each with the strength and weakness of the other."⁴⁹ For Emerson, earthly union elicits a higher relationship that is accomplished through a greater multiplicity of relations in which "all possible positions" of the parties are actualized to teach each individual that "they should represent the human race to each other."⁵⁰ Life does not simply evolve from one incarnation into another or one rung of the ladder to another; rather, in order to develop itself, life plays out numerous and various combinations—even those which seem to lead nowhere or appear wasted.

Emerson thereby recapitulates Plato's ladder of ascent in a very specific key, emphasizing a new awareness of both nature and history and the human being's place therein. The contrast between the final stages of the ascent in Plato and Emerson is striking: for Plato, the lover uses the material world as steps on which to ascend upward, but once he has contemplated each step in due order and succession, he no longer relies on the material steps that have carried him to a greater beauty that now demands his attention:

And from this he will be led to contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions. And when he discovers how nearly every kind of beauty is akin to every other he will conclude that beauty of the body is not, after all, of so great a moment. And next his attention will be diverted to knowledge. [...] And, turning his eyes towards the open sea of beauty, he will find in such contemplation the seed of the most fruitful discourse ...⁵¹

Emerson, however, is much more explicit in describing how, at each moment, the lover's movement upward necessarily presupposes a turning around toward matter, for every step toward a higher reality also entails a reintegration of every step that came before, a marriage of properties that were once unequal outside of time. In contrast to Plato's depiction of the

48. See especially *Enneads*, III 8; V 8; III 3, 7, 9–24.

49. *W* 2, 108.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Symposium*, 210 c–e.

contemplation of beauty, the ascent in Emerson's "Love" portrays consciousness' active, backward apprehension of the series which issued it: "In looking backward, they may find that several things which were not the charm, have more reality to this groping memory than the charm itself which embalmed them."⁵² In the higher stages of love's progress, Emerson reasserts the type of metempsychotic intensity through recollection that he advocated in "History," the essay that precedes "Love" in the *First Series*. Consciousness is both awakened and ennobled by seeking to understand the "metempsychosis of nature" as it proceeds through a historical series to the present moment in being. Faithful to this insight, Emerson again observes that it is not the spark of love alone which awakens nature and human consciousness and makes them expansive; reminiscences also allow the youth to go from blind idealism to a richer conception of himself and his experience—for the youth throws his mind back into history and lives through each step until he comes to the place where there are no more steps.

Whereas Plato describes the human being's ascent as a process in which the realization that "every kind of beauty is akin to every other" is succeeded by the understanding that "beauty of the body is not, after all, of so great a moment," Emerson does not abandon the body, although he does indicate that ontological consciousness must offer itself and its interconnectivity to the metaphysical Form.⁵³ The spark of love has engendered a "rebuild[ing of] the world"⁵⁴ and, at every moment, the individual's effort to develop himself necessarily includes recollecting his whole material past. At the same time, Emerson does not reject the Platonic value of transcendence and indicates that the human being must look not only to his historically founded and evolving consciousness, but to the understanding of the soul in the future. So a new phase in consciousness' development begins, admitting the fragmentation and sorrow of a fuller experience—of losing the initial fire that pulled all these relations together—and the need of a new guide, prayer to "Eternal Power" that stands, as it were, beyond the last rung of the aspiring ladder of being:

But the lot of humanity is on these children. Danger, sorrow, and pain arrive to them, as to all. Love prays. It makes covenants with Eternal Power, in behalf of this dear mate. The union which is thus effected, and which adds a new value to every atom in nature, for it transmutes every thread throughout the whole web of relation into a golden ray, and bathes the soul in a new and sweeter element, is yet a temporary state.⁵⁵

52. W2, 102.

53. In a sense this picks up something that is often overlooked in the *Symposium* account, namely, that the ascent is an *embodied* ascent: "... if ever it is given to a man (*anthropos*-not a soul simply) to put on immortality, it shall be given to him" (212a).

54. W2, 103.

55. W2, 108.

Looking backward at all the material entities that arise in time and then run their course from the beginning of the series toward the unrealized future—from self-reflexive recollection to prayer—the lover makes a new covenant, this time not with the past, but with “Eternal Power,” transfiguring the previous material interrelations that comprise nature and emergent consciousness therein. One should also observe Emerson’s own deeply personal experience in these lines of prose. Having lost his first wife to illness in 1831, he indicates that simply educating oneself will not alleviate the burden of experience and loss; instead, he gestures toward an elusive spiritual power not yet manifest in the material chain of causes, one that will act from without on the human being and transform his or her daily rituals and activities. Instead of simply remembering the historical series that led to his present consciousness in time, the individual comes to offer up himself and those he loves to an unknown, as-yet unrealized future power that “adds a new value to every atom in nature.” As the spark of heaven fell or proceeded into being (into a temporal series), so being now converts itself and all its relations back into a “golden ray.” Thus, the material intricacies of consciousness are not enough to sustain the individual; although he has recollected all his previous incarnations—all the possible positions and combinations that arise in time—on the ladder of ascent, he comes to acknowledge an elusive power that “bathes the soul in a new and sweeter element.”

For Emerson, then, the human being’s double-orientation comes to admit the precedence of the Platonic Form as an expressly tenuous process. Not only is every new unity that arises out of consciousness’ growing interconnectivity “a temporary state,” but its achievements must all be “succeeded and supplanted.”⁵⁶ As a result, the fluctuation of opposites and the provisional precedence of each part of this dialectic—the cognitive, historical consciousness whose movement runs from the past toward the future and the inverse movement of Eternal Power bathing the embodied “soul in a new and sweeter element”—become the unsettled, focal point of “Love.” Emerson’s conclusion to this essay crystallizes two recurrent patterns foregrounded even more emphatically when love becomes transformed by experience: on the one hand, there is the more conventional description of transcendence, how at the end of his journey the human being quits the senses and learns to appeal to the divine: “There are moments when the affections rule and absorb the man, and make his happiness dependent on a person or persons, yet in health the mind is presently seen again,—its overarching vault, bright with galaxies of immutable lights.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, Emerson characteristically undercuts

56. *W*2, 108, 110.

57. *W*2, 109–10.

his own depiction of this immutable celestial world at the end of the same paragraph and close of the essay. He adjusts his earlier emphasis upon the "overarching vault" of the divine with an insistence upon further expansion, instructing his readers that this immutability and the ascent to it, "so beautiful and attractive [...], must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on for ever."⁵⁸ Emerson indicates that the ever-mounting series is composed of a double, conflictual order—two patterns, side by side, perpetually falling into each other and oscillating in their reoccurrence, even warlike in their opposition, yet pursuing a grander conception, a greater multiplicity and an expansive, uneasy unity.

Like Hegel, therefore, Emerson celebrates the perpetual reshaping of being as an essential part of understanding the universe. And he pursues this emphasis upon spiritual and material evolution throughout his career, asserting that the human being is only beginning to discover himself in his struggles on the "the ladder that leads up *to man and to God*."⁵⁹ But what is perhaps most fascinating about Emerson's ladder of ascent is his specific interpretation of the Platonic heritage. Emerson interprets Plato's Forms not simply as determinate features that shape the material universe, but more properly as vital and open-ended forces that unfix the static properties of matter. In Plato, Emerson locates his own circular and indeterminate order—and in his later years, Emerson argues that Plato's conception of spiritual or second sight is the most important method of discovery by which the human being extends his consciousness beyond its natural capacity so as to follow the arcing, rounding path of the universe: "These expansions or extensions consist in continuing the spiritual sight where the horizon falls on our natural vision, and by this secondsight discovering the long lines of law which shoot in every direction. Everywhere he stands on a path which has no end, but runs continuously round the universe."⁶⁰ Emerson thereby insists that Plato is among the first to apprehend the endless, circular structure of the universe, and he attributes to this Platonic activity a chiasmic cosmology: what "comes from God to us returns by us to God."⁶¹ In this, Emerson finds the greater Neoplatonic arc of abiding, progression and conversion as an indispensable development of his alteration of Plato's ascent, and here clearly employs the procession of intellect and the soul from the One into matter and from matter back to the One, signaling that both sides of this chiasmic figure open up into "the long lines of law which shoot in every direction" to run "continuously round the universe" and so express the unsettled figure of consciousness.

58. W2, 110.

59. W4, 81; emphasis added.

60. W4, 46.

61. W4, 47.

Consequently, Emerson repeatedly attempts to plunge the various sides of Plotinian abiding, procession and conversion into existence as a volatile, yet highly coherent way of understanding the deep structure of the universe. In many of his essays, Emerson often begins by submitting the prevalent viewpoint of mid-nineteenth-century materialism to underscore the validity of the material, historical sequence. As he writes in "Fate" (1860), after he had already read Darwin's *Origin of Species* and found it quite unsurprising, "[a]ll we know of the egg, from each successive discovery, is, another vesicle; and if, after five hundred years, you get a better observer, or a better glass, he finds within the last observed another."⁶² Thus, all one arrives at is a "vesicle in new circumstances, a vesicle lodged in darkness"⁶³—a material object locked within a living and dying sequence. At the same time, the human being, Emerson insists, is more in the "order of nature" than "sack and sack, belly and members, link in a chain;" he is a "stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the Universe"⁶⁴—and he is so because another reality pierces every rung in the series: the "beatitude dips from on high down on us, and we see." Once the "the inward eye opens to the Unity in things, to the omnipresence of law,"⁶⁵ then it is able to reach upward, not simply to aspire beyond itself, but to continue the rounding arc of an unsettled and unfinished creation.

Whereas many critics contend that Emerson never attempted philosophy in any real sense and is always willing to abandon every position or influence, Emerson's reinterpretation of ancient philosophy must be seen as comprising more than just a continual deferral of meaning or perpetual transition so that no final claim can be made. Instead, Emerson offers contemporary audiences a new take on why Idealism has survived all its supposed extinctions by arguing that metaphysics cannot be excluded from the modern map of human cognition and corporeality. The human being does not brace himself upon a literal ladder of ascent—nor necessarily dive from one body into another; rather, Emerson shows that the ladder of ascent and the powers that play on it serve as a deep structure, built into humanity's very physiology, enabling self-awareness in "the eye and brain of every man:"

On one side elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-ledges, peat-bog, forest, sea and shore; and on the other part thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature,—here they are side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man.⁶⁶

62. W6, 7.

63. W6, 8.

64. W6, 12.

65. W6, 14.

66. W6, 12. Again compare Plotinus, *Ennead*, III, 3, 6, 8–17: "since the universe is a living

Here, Emerson anticipates a type of genetic code in his depiction of how the elemental order is perpetually pierced by an elusive metaphysical principle. On the one hand, the human being is encoded with the vast history of nature that props up his material consciousness in time. On the other, the human being is more than simply a rung in the natural sequence, an effect woven into and out of the series: "No statement of the Universe can have any soundness, which does not admit its ascending effort." By realizing the two orders side by side, the human being has emptied "his breast of windy conceits" to "show his lordship by manners and deeds on the scale of nature."⁶⁷ He obeys exclusively neither the metaphysics of soul nor the materialism of the body, but finds himself composed of a more precarious and open-ended pattern.

Thus, Emerson's ladder of ascent adapts the Platonic tradition much like Hegel's dialectic that reshapes and refines itself in each experience of itself. Unlike Hegel, however, Emerson does not attempt to systematize his ascending dialectic into an emergent unity. In fact, unity is not the goal of Emerson's thought at all. For him, the metaphysical is not the absolute goal of the dialectic; the mind has an express value precisely because it can unsettle the static order of matter and allow the "power to flux:"

Whilst the man is weak, the earth takes up him. He plants his brain and affections. By and by he will take up the earth, and have his gardens and vineyards in the beautiful order and productiveness of his thought. Every solid in the universe is ready to become fluid on the approach of the mind, and the power to flux it is the measure of the mind. If the wall remain adamant, it accuses the want of thought. To a subtler force, it will stream into new forms, expressive of the character of the mind.⁶⁸

In upholding the Platonic privilege of the mind, Emerson poses a direct challenge to the materialism of the nineteenth century, rebelling particularly against an atomistic vision of the world. Within and beyond the seeming solidity of matter there lies a more volatile reality where indeterminacy and flux, as trajectories of power and possibility, remain worthy expressions of that Platonic "beautiful" that will not take "the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh," remaining always on a journey toward both "man and God."

thing, one who contemplates the things that come to be in it contemplates at the same time the origins and the providence which watches over it [...] so he contemplates things which are mixed and continually go on being mixed; and he cannot distinguish providence and what is according to providence clearly on the one side, and on the other the substrate and all that it gives to what results from it. The discrimination is not for a human being [...] a god alone could have this privilege" (trans. A.H. Armstrong).

67. *W6*, 13.

68. *W6*, 23.

