

The Metaphysical Poets and the Origins of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendentalism

J. A. SOKOLOW

After lecturing throughout Illinois and Iowa, Ralph Waldo Emerson fulfilled other engagements in Washington D. C, and Maryland during the winter of 1872, In Baltimore, Walt Whitman gave him a letter from Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts inviting the Concord writer to linger in the capital and deliver further addresses.

On the morning of January 7, Sumner cajoled Emerson into visiting the black students of newly opened Howard University where he was "compelled by an artifice to speak to them."¹ Emerson, who disliked extemporaneous speaking, hastily produced some sheets from his lecture on books and in a rambling talk asked his audience if they had read the "divine songs of George Herbert," He "was a person of singular elevation of mind" and Emerson recommended that "every young man and every young woman who wishes inspiration from books" should use for "their Sunday reading and their Monday reading the little volume of George Herbert's poems." Emerson wondered whether these verses were in the university library and promised to give the students an edition of Herbert's poems if none was available. It was the "best

religious English book" Emerson could recall, for nobody had spoken such pure and sweet religious sentiments as the rector of Bemerton. Emerson concluded his short presentaion by discussing Skakespeare and Goethe, but he reminded his audience that Herbert's age was the greatest in English literary and intellectual history; only Periclean Athens could rival the era of Elizabeth and James.²

Although Emerson considered his speech quite poor, it was widely covered in the press and soon he began receiving congratulatory letters on the fine advice he had given the eager students. After returning to Boston, Emerson was surprised and delighted to hear from a bookseller that "There isn't a Herbert to be had, sir. Since your speech was published there has been such a demand for them that they are all sold out, and none left in Boston,"³

Emerson's lavish praise of Herbert was not just a rushed idiosyncratic judgment from America's foremost man of letters, delivered when his creative and critical powers were gradually diminishing. Throughout Emerson's life George Herbert and the metaphysical poets remained one of his standards of excellence. In 1815 young Emerson wrote his brother william about these lines from John Donne he had read in Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*:

Here lies a she-son and a he-moon there
She gives the best light to his sphere
Or each is both and all and so
They unto one another nothing owe

while Johnson severely criticized them, Emerson boldly disagreed, arguing that "This is old fashioned Poetry—I should like to see the Poem it was taken from."⁴ In his diaries Emerson mentioned the works of John Donne, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, Richard Carew, and Henry Vaughan 115 times in entries ranging from short pithy statements to detailed, lengthy analyses of their style and thought; many of these entries became important sections of his essays.⁵ And when the aging Emerson collected his favorite poems in *Parnassus* (1874), there was the disproportionate selection of 36 poems from the metaphysical school, including sixteen of Herbert's verses.

The influence of the metaphysical poets goes far beyond identifying "echoes" of their writing in Emerson's work, as Norman A. Britten and J. Russell Roberts did decades ago in their pioneering studies.⁶ Emerson's deepest interest in the school coincided with the formulation of his transcendental doctrines and the creation of a vocation that would satisfy his profoundest spiritual and

literary aspirations. During the late 1820s and the 1830s, Emerson studied the metaphysicals deeply and carefully as he moved from Unitarianism to transcendentalism. Most of Emerson's references to the metaphysical school in his diaries, lectures, and essays occur while he was developing the philosophical doctrines that would make him a romantic sage in antebellum America. Emerson's transcendentalism and career as a writer derived from his own experiences and psychological needs, the decay of Puritanism and the disputes raging within Unitarianism, European romanticism, Neoplatonic idealism, oriental mysticism, and from a diluted form of Kant's philosophy as interpreted by Coleridge, Carlyle, and certain continental philosophers, Emerson's romanticism was also powerfully affected by his own very personal reading of the metaphysical poets. They helped him develop his transcendentalism by assisting in the creation of his mature conceptions about nature, the divine, and the analogical relationship between man and the cosmos.

Emerson's high evaluation of these poets was conditioned by his concept of the poet as a representative man; this belief in turn led him to exalt Donne, Marvell, and especially Herbert because they approached his model of the ideal poet. The poet, according to Emerson, created the lasting verses of his nation by memorializing great men and ideas. Poets also revealed the organic unity of God, man, and nature, and, in Neoplatonic terms, they were "liberating Gods" who freed men from quotidian reality to allow them glimpses of higher spiritual realms.⁷ Emerson, like Friedrich Schiller, distinguished between "poets by education and practice" and "poets by nature" who wrote through inspiration.⁸ The poet by nature united intuition, inspiration, and imagination to express "a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what one sees."⁹ These "poets by nature," Emerson argued, abounded in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which he considered the greatest age of English literature :

It seems to me that every library should respect the culture of a scholar & a poet. Let it not then want those books in which the English language has its teeth & bones & muscles largest and strongest namely all the eminent books from the accession of Elizabeth to the death of Charles II ¹⁰

To Emerson, the age of the metaphysicals had "such richness of genius because for a short period two antithetical modes of thought—utility and idealism—were fused into the spheres of poetry and philosophy. This was the moment in history when, with its "feet still planted on the immense forces of night," the English Conversed "with solar & steller creation." The period was a flowering, the

moment of perfect health when the spiritual and physical realms synthesized. What had come before was a primitive vigor. What came afterwards was effete and barren. The interval was holy ground when "the perceptive powers reach with delight their greatest strength."¹¹ Emerson repeatedly expressed amazement at the dramatic appearance of so many fine writers: "No brain has dallied with finer imaginings than Shakspeare No richer thoughted man than Bacon, no holier than Milton or Herbert."¹² Unfortunately, Emerson lamented, it would probably be impossible for any future age to vie with the etherial poetry of the Metaphysicals and their contemporaries.

Homer & Virgil & Dante & Tasso & Bryon & Wordsworth have powerful genius whose amplest claims I cheerfully acknowledge. But 'tis a pale ineffectual fire when their shines I have for them an affectionate admiration I have for nothing else. They set me on speculations. They move mywonder at my self. They suggest the great endowments of the spiritual man. They open glimpses of the heaven that is in the intellect [T]he heat will never reach again that Hesperian garden in which alone these apricots & pomegranates grew.¹³ After the Civil war, Emerson believed, English thought became timid, narrow, and fearful of idealism. Only Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle were exceptions to the dreary modern period that began with John Locke,

Emerson's admiration for the metaphysical poets was mediated through his study of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Emerson first read Coleridge's poetry in 1821; by the early 1830's the Englishman was perhaps the single most important influence on his literary life.¹⁴ While the principal idea Emerson derived from Coleridge was the Kantian distinction between transcendental Reason and empirical Understanding, Coleridge's lengthy analyses of the metaphysical school deepened Emerson's own perception of these writers. The English romantic argued that metaphysical literature was characterized by sound thought and great style. Next to Milton, Coleridge believed Herbert was the greatest seventeenth English poet. In general, Coleridge admired the metaphysicals because he felt their literature had evolved by an inner organic principle.¹⁵

When Coleridge described the creation of poetry in that famous account of the Imagination which foundation for romantic and modern literary criticism, he used a poem from Emerson's favorite era of English literature to describe a process Emerson thought crucial to great poetry and especially to the metaphysical poets: The poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other,

according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magic power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the representative 16

Emerson carefully studied Coleridge's works, copied quotations from the metaphysical poets out of the Englishman's books, and eventually concluded there were even similarities between Herbert and Coleridge because they each spoke "*ab intra*" instead of "*ab extra*." Both men personified "essential distinction of genius [T]hey are an emanation of that very thing or reality they tell of, & not merely an echo or picture of it!"¹⁷ Coleridge's convincing account of the metaphysicals' organic principles and lofty philosophy reinforced their growing influence on Emerson.

The Concord writer also exalted the metaphysical poets because they represented the Platonic influence that was the glory of Elizabethan literature. Emerson's Platonism was a creative combination of fact and fancy, the result of his early and detailed reading of Plato in the original Greek at Harvard, his study of Thomas Taylor's questionable commentaries and translations of Plato and Plotinus, and his interest in minor Neoplatonists such as Proclus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus.¹⁸ He characteristically broadened his definition of Platonism to include everybody who believed in the correspondence between the worlds of matter and spirit. The Platonic mind loved analogy: "Man is an analogist. He cannot help seeing everything under its relations to all other things & to himself."¹⁹ For Emerson, Plato was the source of philosophical unity from which all subsequent thought flowed, and all individuals who thirsted after an organic, idealist perception of the universe were Platonists. A sense of unity and the instinct to see resemblances separated the Platonists from materialists such as Locke who were always discrediting analogical thinking and instead required "heaps of facts."²⁰

Emerson mourned the declension that had taken place in English literature since the age of the metaphysicals: "the judgments are all dated from London, & that expansive element which creates literature is steadily denied. Plato is resisted & Jordano Bruno, Behem, Swedenborg, Donne."²¹ Metaphysical literature was a rare instance when Saxon practicality and Platonic idealism were combined in the sermons of Donne and the poetry of Donne, Marvell, and Herbert. Emerson's

study of Coleridge, Plato, and the Neoplatonists helped him transform the metaphysical poets into a school of protoromantics who presciently anticipated his own literary and spiritual values.

Although Emerson praised the metaphysical poets excessively throughout his journals and published essays, his reading of them was actually quite discerning and selective. Emerson never really became interested in Cowley, Crashaw, Carew, or Vaughan. During the 1820s he quoted in his journals a number of Cowley's poems and essays but he used him sparingly in his early lectures and made only one extended comment about the English poet during his entire career.²² Crashaw received a more cursory treatment, being mentioned four times in Emerson's diaries and once in a lecture on English literature. He was "a worse sort of Cowley," Emerson laconically noted.²³ He almost completely ignored Carew, who merited one brief entry in his journal.²⁴ Vaughan first came to Emerson's attention in the late 1840s. Despite the praise of his friend William Ellery Channing, Emerson continued to slight Vaughan in his public readings of seventeenth century poets and believed "it was wrong to match him with Herbert, who always gains by long acquaintance."²⁵ Cowley, Crashaw, Carew, and Vaughan did not meet Emerson's definition of a poet as a man who had "the largest power to receive and to impart" the "eternal trinity of truth, Goodness, and Beauty."²⁶ They possessed neither the Saxon vigor nor the "Oriental soaring" which characterized the greatest literature of the seventeenth century.²⁷

Emerson considered Andrew Marvell a lesser poet than Donne and Herbert, but he admired his "ethereal poetry" and wondered whether an accurate portrait of him would ever be written.²⁸ The lyricists Marvell and Herbert were examples of the true poetry mankind craved, that "Moral poem of which Jesus chanted to the Ages."²⁹ For Emerson, Marvell ranked just below Herbert and Milton as one of the creators of the Elizabethan age's great language and religious poetry.

Critics from Emerson's perceptive contemporary Oliver Wendell Holmes to Pierre Legouis have recognized that Emerson used Marvell in his essays and poetry.³⁰ Marvell's four beat line and tetrameter couplets may have influenced Emerson's own poems. There are also indications that Emerson appropriated some of Marvell's poems for his own verse. In "Manners," Emerson wrote

He looketh seldom in their face,
His eyes explore the ground,—
The green grass is a looking-glass
Whereupon their traits are found.³¹

There are two Marvellian sources for this section. One is from "The Mower's Song":

My mind was once the true survey
Of all these Meadows fresh and gay;
And in the greenness of the Grass
Did see its Hopes as in a glass

The other source comes from "Upon Appleton House." In speaking of the cattle, Marvell explains,

They seem within the polisht Grass
A landskip drawn in Looking-Glass.³²

Emerson's "Woodnotes II" bears a strong resemblance to "Upon Appleton House." Emerson develops the portrait of Marvell's "easy philosopher" who confers among the birds and trees, enlarging upon the conception of nature as an oracle and font of knowledge beginning with the stanzas "Heed the old oracles" and "Once again the pine-tree sung :—." These verses closely resemble Marvell's stanzas LXXII and LXXIII.³³ Some nineteenth century critics such as Wordsworth and Landor admired Marvell as the political and religious controversialist of the Restoration. But Emerson perceived Marvell as a nature poet and an interesting forerunner of the romantic movement, and his passionate, witty, elegant lyrics attracted Emerson. Despite these attributes, however, Emerson considered Marvell a less accomplished poet than his favorites Donne and Herbert.

Emerson admired Donne and Herbert more than the other metaphysicals because although he considered them widely different in temperament and outlook, they resembled each other in that both writers practiced religious meditation and wrote pious literature. Emerson's original interpretation of these two poets was remarkably similar to Louis L. Martz's influential argument about seventeenth century meditative poetry. According to Martz, meditative verse developed out of the religious controversies surrounding the Protestant and Counter reformations. Just as formal meditation during this period fell into three distinguishable portions corresponding to the acts of memory, understanding, and will, so meditative poetry developed out of composition, analysis, and colloquy. For the meditative writers, poetry, which involved the deliberate fusion of thought, led to a more sophisticated comprehension of man and his relationship to nature and God. Martz concluded that English poets such as Donne and Herbert used meditative poetry as an exercise for the conduct of the good life and as an indispensable preparation for the achievement of higher spiritual experiences.³⁴ Emerson similarly interpreted Donne and Herbert as meditative poets and he believed there was a parallel

between their search for the presence of God and his own quest for transcendental truth.

Emerson argued in his lecture "Ethical Writers" (1836) that during the Elizabethan age the "fragrant piety of so great a number of English devotional writers" was caused by their study of Plato and by the religious tendencies of the age. The moral revolution first occurring in Germany, Switzerland, and France crossed the channel during the reign of Henry VIII and finally culminated in civil war a century later. Quoting from Coleridge's *The Statesman's Manual* and *The Friend*, Emerson told his audience that as a result of this moral fervor religious questions dominated the era. The popular sermons of Jeremy Taylor and John Donne were witty and erudite examples of the religious learning and education that produced so many fertile minds of the era. "All these were men of a philosophical mind who had an insight into the moral laws of man's nature from which the thoughtful and serious draw comfort and courage at this hour."³⁵

Emerson considered Donne a person whose timeless "gift of a spiritual nature" ranked him with Plato, Paul, and St. Augustine as one of the most inspiring writers in western civilization.³⁶ The Concord philosopher studied Donne's sermons carefully and concluded that they were a living form to him because the "true work of genius" proceeded "out of the wants & deeds of the age as well as the writer."³⁷ Pale, contemporary Christian sermons, Emerson noted sadly, were truly wanting in ethical and religious advice compared to the seventeenth century divines. Donne's poetry also towered above the shallow writing appearing in respectable journals on both sides of the Atlantic. In the beautiful and exalted poetry of Donne, Emerson concluded, "religion & mirth" stood together, and "like the words of great men, without cant,"³⁸

Emerson studied Donne's sermons in the early 1830s, heartily recommended him to his audiences,³⁹ and claimed that Donne was an important influence on his own work :

Here are things just hinted which not one reader in a hundred would take, but which lie so near to the favorite walks of my imagination and to the facts of my experience that I read them with a surprise & delight as if I were finding very good things in a forgotten manuscript of my own.⁴⁰

Although Emerson believed that Donne's philosophical arguments sometimes obscured the "beautiful forms & colors of things"⁴¹ poets should write, he considered Donne an out-standing representative of seventeenth century mystic and Neoplatonic poetry. Speaking of Donne's "The Ecstasy," for example, Emerson

was amazed "by the fortitude or self reliance it discovers in the man who dared thus firmly to trust his rare perception, as to write it elaborately out."⁴² Donne was one of Emerson's liberating Gods, a bard whose "analogy-loving" soul produced "guidance & consolation" which was still glowing and effective.⁴³

Emerson believed Herbert a greater religious poet than Donne because he was a "striking example of the power of exalted thought to melt and bend language to its fit expression."⁴⁴ His poetry was the breathing of a devout soul who had a poet's eye and a saint's affections. Emerson compared Herbert to Plato, Paul, Luther, and Thomas A Kempis because he was one of the most religious and poetic individuals who ever wrote about the deity. Herbert represented a "beautiful mean equidistant from the hard sour iron Puritan on one side, & the empty negation of the Unitarian on the other."⁴⁵ Most importantly, Herbert awakened the sentiment of piety in Emerson.

In this age we are learning to look as on chivalry at the sweetness of the ancient piety which makes the genius of ... Herbert It is the spirit of David & of Paul. Who shall restore to use the odoriferous Sabbeths which the sweet spirit bestowed on human life, & which made the earth & the humble roof a sanctity ?⁴⁵

He claimed that Herbert's *The Temple* seemed written for the devotion of angels, and Emerson was happy that this book was popular throughout the seventeenth century and was becoming better known in Victorian England and America.⁴⁷

The debate over the origins of Emerson's poem "Grace" is an excellent example both of Herbert's impact on him and the difficulty in separating the influence of the metaphysicals from other seventeenth century poets, Coleridge's literary criticism, and the romantic movement. Before the *Memoir of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* was published in 1852, coeditor William Henry Channing had inserted "Grace" as a chapter heading and mistakenly attributed it to Herbert. The poem originally had been published in an 1842 issue of the transcendental quarterly *The Dial* :

How much, Preventing God ! how much I owe
To the defences than hast round me set :
Example, custom, fear occasion slow. —
These scorned bondsmen were my parapet.
I dare not peep over this parapet
To gauge with glance the roaring gulf below,
The depths of sin to which I descended,
Had not these against myself defended.⁴⁸

Emerson discovered the error and wrote Channing that "For your mottoes to your chapter, I saw that the first had the infinite honor done it of being quoted to Herbert ! The verses are mine so I strike them out."⁴⁹ Channing's confusion has been shared by other scholars. Clarence Paul Hotsen first argued that the poem was inspired by the Swedenborgian New Englander, Sampson Reed. G. R. Elliott next challenged Hotsen and suggested the form and imagery of "Grace" were in the Miltonic or at least the seventeenth century style. Subsequently, Norman A. Britten demonstrated the apparent similarity between Emerson's poem and Herbert's "Sinne (I)" :⁵⁰

Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round !
 Parents first season us : then Schoolmasters
 Deliver us to laws ; they send us bound
 To rules of reason, holy messengers,
 Pulpits and Sundayes, sorrow dogging sinne,
 Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,
 Fine nets and stratagemes to catch us in,
 Bibles laid open, millions of surprises

* * *

Blessings beforehand, types of gratefulnesse,
 The sound of glorie ringing in our eares :
 Without our shame; within, our conscience;
 Angels and grace. eternall hopes and fears.
 Yet all these fences and their whole aray
 One cunning bosome-sinne blows quite away.⁵¹

Modern Emerson scholarship had returned to Channing's insightful attribution.

The connection between the two poems, however, is considerably more complex' Emerson, as John C. Broderick has discovered,⁵² probably first read Herbert's poem in Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* where the author retitled the metaphysical poem "Graces vouchsafed in a Christian Land." Although the arguments in the two poems represent the differences between Herbert's piety and Emerson's romanticism, the theme, imagery, title, and style connect "Grace" and "Graces vouchsafed in a Christian Land." Emerson's poem seems to conflict with his doctrine of self-reliance, but if "Sinne (I)" became the source of "Grace," Emerson modified Herbert's devout poem about the power of sin into a characteristically optimistic verse defending the efficacy of God's "defences." Again, in a

typical transmutation, Emerson's knowledge of the metaphysical poets was mediated through Coleridge's romanticism.

Emerson's imitation of "Sinne (I)" and his use of Herbert's other meditative poems was related to the concept of the hieroglyph. Many of Emerson's contemporaries such as Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville expressed a keen interest in Egyptian hieroglyphics.⁵³ Emerson also studied them and believed they were pictures that fused the symbolic relationships between the material and the spiritual realms; they denoted a universal sign the true artist intuited by using transcendental Reason. Herbert, Emerson argued, was a great meditative poet whose elaborate analogies and typologies advanced the hieroglyphic tradition. But Emerson ignored Herbert's emblematic attempts to render his poetry both visually and intellectually; instead, Emerson concentrated on his philosophical outlook and arguments. He contended that Herbert realized "the universe is pervaded with secret analogies that tie together its remotest parts."⁵⁴ Herbert was not content "with the obvious properties of natural objects" but delighted "in discovering abstruser relations between them and the subject of his thought."⁵⁵ His symbolic analogies united man and the cosmos and illuminated their relationship.

Emerson appropriated Herbert's meditative hieroglyphics to illustrate his conviction that there was a congruity between man and nature; the metaphysical poet had read this "riddle of the world with a poet's eye."⁵⁶ In Emerson's famous essay "Nature" (1836), Herbert's poem "Man" was quoted twice to show the Platonic correspondence between man and the universe. As Martz has demonstrated, this poem was a classic example of meditative verse. In the opening stanza the faculties of memory and imagination establish the subject of the poem :

My God, I heard this day,
That none doth build a stately habitation,
But he that means to dwell therein.
What house more stately hath their been
Or can be, then is Man? to whose creation
All things are in decay.

For the next six stanzas Herbert analyzes the wonders of man and their relationship to the universal order of things. Finally, in the last three stanzas Herbert's affections kindle into wonder, love and a final colloquy where God is asked to grant his bountiful favor.⁵⁷

Herbert and his contemporaries had pictured the universe as a great chain of being which stretched from God to the meanest inanimate objects. Man was the nodal point; he had the unique function of binding together all creation by

bridging the apparent chasm between matter and spirit. Among the myriad hieroglyphic correspondences in the universe, that between man and nature was the most fruitful and exciting. In "Nature," "Man" demonstrated the "wonderful congruity which subsists between man and the world." Because man is his head and heart, he "finds something of himself in every great and small thing ... which observation or analysis lay open." The perception of this mystery, Emerson argued, inspired the muse of George Herbert. The truths of Herbert's poem explained the eternal attraction that drew men to science, but so long as the scientific method overwhelmed its ends, the "half-sight" of science would always be corrupted and partial by definition. The one-dimensional vision of science vindicated Plato's dictum, which Emerson misrepresented, that poetry came closer to vital truth than other disciplines.⁵⁸ In Emerson's aesthetic equation, Herbert and Plato had demonstrated the truths of Reason that scientific Understanding was incapable of seeing. Their analogical view of the world was a deep secret only poets and philosophers could understand.

In his "Demonology" lecture three years later, Emerson again quoted "Man" to show that the universe was pervaded by hieroglyphic analogies between man and nature.

A man reveals himself in every glance he throws, in every step and movement and rest. Every part of nature represents the whole.

Head with foot hath private amity

And both with moons and tides.

Not a mathematical axiom but is a moral rule. The jest and by-word to an intelligent ear extends its meaning to the Soul, and to all time.⁵⁹

"Spiritual Laws," the fourth essay in *Essays, First Series* (1841) made the same argument more subtly. Here Emerson attacked the traditional Puritan emphasis on the conscious will and systematized morality; instead, he exalted the hieroglyphic correspondences which frustrated the "superstitions of sense" and the "trick of the senses."⁶⁰ In opposition to the snares of Understanding, Emerson glorified subconscious "inclination" and instinct as useful tools for apprehending transcendental Reason. More mystical than the other essays, "Spiritual Laws" defended the moral laws of conscience and spirit that led perceptive individual to realize their unity with the cosmos: "All loss, all pain, is particular; the universe remains to the heart unhurt."⁶¹ Emerson ended the essay by paraphrasing a poem of Herbert's to demonstrate that every action, no matter how insignificant, was part of the divine plan and related to the deepest currents of the universe.

Let the great soul incarnated in some woman's form, poor and sad and single go out to service and sweep chambers and scour floors, and its effulgent daybeams cannot be muffled or hid and all people will get mops and brooms; until, lo! suddenly the great soul has enshrined itself in some other form and done some other deed, and that is now the flower and head of all living nature.⁶²

Emerson's conclusion was based upon Herbert's poem "The Elixer," especially the verses

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see.
And what I do in any thing,
To do as it for thee :

* * *

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine :
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.⁶³

Herbert's poems in these essays and other works⁶⁴ helped Emerson reveal the pictures in facts and words and the truth behind them. For Emerson, Herbert was the seventeenth century Platonic counterpart to Coleridge who used language and thought to concept spirit and matter. Herbert embodied "what the rhetorician calls the moral sublime."⁶⁵ His religious poetry was an elaborate meditative hieroglyph that helped lead Emerson to the conclusion that man could attain flashes of insight into the deity both in man and nature.

Emerson believed his kinship with the metaphysicals was connected with their alledged freedom from classical and Petrarchan idioms and the fresh imagery they drew from nature, travel, and introspection. The Concord sage admired their symbolism, conceits, and especially their meditative analogies between a man and nature, matter and spirit, the microcosm and macrocosm, and the finite and the infinite. Both Emerson and the metaphysicals were concerned with the interpenetration between vocation and salvation. Both also believed the poet provided one mode of simultaneously representing and attempting the process of spiritual regeneration. The metaphysical poets were in the pantheon of the liberating Gods because they provided the 'lenses through which we read our own minds.'⁶⁶ Endowed with superior intellectual perception, these seers and masters of the English language became one of Emerson's models for intellectual and poetic insight.

Although Emerson believed there were great similarities between the metaphysical poets and himself, his too easy acceptance of their work concealed significant philosophical and stylistic differences. The metaphysicals placed themselves within the context of an ordered, hierarchical society and readily accepted the need for institutional mediation between God and man. They certainly would have rejected Emerson's romanticism and his belief in the futility of relying on the state, church, and society for salvation. Their poetic styles also were divergent. Early in his career Emerson admitted he was "born a poet of low class" who sang in a very husky voice resembling prose.⁶⁷ While Emerson admired the metaphysicals' poetry, with rare exceptions he could never imitate their style or arguments.

But in the same letter where he recognized his poetic inadequacies, Emerson also insisted "I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & matter, & especially of those correspondences between these & those."⁶⁸ Here is where the metaphysical poets had a crucial influence on Emerson's thought. They expanded his idealism by encouraging him to interpret the world organically and analogically. Emerson's thorough study of the metaphysical poets through the refracted lens of Plato and Coleridge's romanticism helped prepare him to proclaim the Immanence of God and the unity of all creation. These liberating Gods armed him against Puritanism, rationalism, and the "empty negation" of Unitarianism.⁶⁹ According to Emerson,

I have for them an affectionate admiration I have for nothing else. They set me on speculations. They move my wonder at myself. They open glimpses of the heaven that is in the intellect I feel the longevity of the mind; I admit the evidence of the immortality of the soul.⁷⁰

While Emerson read Coleridge and Plato, who among other writers helped make his transcendentalism explicit, the metaphysical poets led him to the same perspective.

Notes and References

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson to Lidian Emerson, January 9, 1872, in *The*

Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Ralph L. Rusk, 6 vols. (New York

- and London, 1939), 6 : 195. Hereafter cited as *Letters of Emerson*.
2. *New York Tribune*, January 11, 1872, For another account, see the *Boston Evening Transcript*, January 22, 1872.
 3. *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes, 10 vols. (Boston and New York, 1903-1914), 10 : 378.
 4. Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Emerson, June 2 and 3, 1815, *Letters of Emerson*, 1 : 10.
 5. When the complete modern edition of Emerson's journals is completed, the number of entries on the Metaphysical poets will undoubtedly increase. In the Emerson and Forbes edition, for example, there are five statements by Emerson about Donne. By contrast, the definitive edition contains 28 Donne entries from 1819 to 1862.
 6. Norman A. Brittin, "Emerson and the Metaphysical Poets," *American Literature* VIII (1936), 1-21; J. Russell Roberts, "Emerson's Debt to the Seventeenth Century," *American Literature* XXI (1949), 298-300, 306-308.
 7. *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* ed Edward Waldo Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston and New York, 1903-1904; 3 : 1-42. Hereafter cited as *Complete Works*. For an excellent discussion of Emerson's concept of the poet, see John Q. Anderson, *The Liberating Gods : Emerson on Poets and Poetry* (Coral Gables, Fl., 1971).
 8. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Parnassus* (Boston, 1874), iv.
 9. *Complete Works*, 3 : 26.
 10. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and William H. Gilman, et al., 13 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), 7 : 53. Hereafter cited as *JMN*.
 11. *Complete Works*, 5 : 242-261 *JMN* 9 : 325.
 12. *JMN*, 13 : 132.
 13. *JMN*, 3 : 148.
 14. *JMN*, 1 : 282; Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading* (Raleigh, North Carolina 1941), p. 6; Walter Harding, *Emerson's Library* (Charlottesville, Virginia, 1967), p. 64; F. T. Thompson "Emerson's Indebtedness to Coleridge," *Studies in Philology* XXIII (1926), 55-76.
 15. *Coleridge on the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Roberta Florence Brinkley (Durham, North Carolina. 1955) pp. 162-205, 428-431, 533-540, 612-614, 626-629.
 16. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* 2 vols. (Oxford, 1907), 2 : 12-13.
 17. *JMN* : 7 : 157. Coleridge, according to Emerson, was 'one of those who save England from the reproach of no longer possessing in the land the

- appreciation of what highest wit the land has yielded, as, Shakspeare, Spencer, Herbert, c," See *JMN*, 14 : 12.
18. S. Brown, "Emerson's Platonism," *New England Quarterly* XVIII (1945), 325-345; John S. Harrison, *The Teachers of Emerson* (New York, 1910); Hyatt Waggoner, *Emerson as Poet* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 71-72, 110-120. See the many insightful references to Plato in Sherman Paul, *Emerson's Angle of Vision* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965); Stephen E. Whicher, *Freedom and Fate : An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia, 1953),
 19. *JMN*, 5 : 146.
 20. *Complete Work*, 5 : 239.
 21. *JMN*, 13 : 310.
 22. *JMN*, 5 : 341 - 342; Ralph Waldo Emerson, June 2 and 3, 1815, *Letters of Emerson*, 1 : 10-11 *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass. 1959-), 1 : 11, 213, 349, 353, 3 : 65. Hereafter cited as *Early Lectures*.
 23. *EL*, 1 : 355 ; *JMN* 7 : 193.
 24. *JMN*, 11 : 37.
 25. *The Commonwealth*, February 20, 1869; Ralph Waldo Emerson to Lidian Emerson, January 5, 1856, *Letters of Emerson*, 6 : 59-60.
 26. *Complete Works*, 3 : 7, 1 : 354.
 27. *ibid*, 5 : 236.
 28. *JMN*, 3 : 148, 4 : 35.
 29. *JMN*, 5 : 476.
 30. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1885), P. 338; Pierre Leogouis, *Andre Mareuil; poete, puritain, patriote* (New York, 1965), p. 441. For references to Marvell in Emerson's works, see *EL* 1 : 99, 213; *Complete Works*, 7 : 207, 411.
 31. *Complete Works*, 9 : 276-277.
 32. *The Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell*, ed. H.M. Margoliouth, 2 vols. (Oxford; 1927), 1 : 45, 73.
 33. *Complete Works*, 9 : 51-54; Margoliouth, *Poems and Letters of Marvell*, 1 : 76-77.
 34. Louis L. Martz, *The poetry of Meditation : A Study in English Religious Literature* (New Haven and London, 1954).
 35. *EL*, 1 : 360-362.
 36. *EL*, 3 : 208.
 37. *JMN*, 5 : 148.
 38. *JMN* 5 : 342.
 39. Harding, *Emerson's Library*, pp. 82, 165; Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, p. 17; *JMN*, 3 : 188-181, 346-347; *Early Lectures*, 1 : 361-362, 2 : 179, 3 : 57, 64, 110, 208; *Complete Works*, 7 : 207, 411.
 40. *JMN*, 4 : 341-342.
 41. *ibid* 5 : 342.
 42. *ibid*, 11 : 210.

- 43 *ibid*, 13 : 353, 9 : 367.
44. *EL* 1 : 350.
- 45 *JMN*, 5 : 144-145.
46. *ibid*, 12 : 110.
47. *E.L.*, 1 : 353.
48. *Complete Works*, 9 : 359. The poem first appeared in *The Dial* I (January 1842), 373.
49. *Complete Works*, 9 : 510, See Ralph Waldo Emerson to William Henry Channing, November, 1851, *Letters of Emerson*, 4 : 267.
50. Clarence Paul Hotsen, "A Background for Emerson's Poem 'Grace,'" *New England Quarterly* I (1928). 124-132; G.R. Elliott, "On Emerson's 'Grace' and 'Self-Reliance,'" *New England Quarterly* II (1929), 93-104; Brittin, "Emerson and the Metaphysical Poets," 10-11.
51. *The English poems of George Herbert*, ed. C.A. Patrides (London, 1974), pp. 65-66,
52. John C. Broderick, "The Date and Source of Emerson's 'Grace,'" *Modern Language Notes* LXXIII (1958), 91-95
53. John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics. The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven and London, 1980). For an excellent discussion of Emerson's literary use of hieroglyphics, see William J. Scheick, *The Slender Human Word: Emerson's Artistry in Prose* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1978).
54. *EL*, 3 : 158.
55. *ibid*, 1 : 349.
56. *ibid*, 1 : 353.
57. Patrides, *Poems of Herbert*, pp. 106-110.
58. *Complete Works*, 1 : 68-69,
59. *EL*, 3 : 158.
60. *Complete Works*, 2 : 161, 163.
61. *ibid*, 2 : 131.
62. *ibid*, 2 : 165-166.
63. Patrides, *Poems of Herbert*, p. 188.
64. *EL* 1 : 263, 375, 2 : 93, 3 : 81, 158.
65. *JMN*, 4 : 255.
66. *Complete Works*, 4 : 5.
- 67 Ralph Waldo Emerson to Lydia Jackson, February 1, 1835, *Letters of Emerson*, 1 : 435.
68. Ralph Waldo Emerson to Lydia Jackson, February 1, 1835, *Letters of Emerson*, 1 : 435.
69. *JMN*, 5 : 145.
70. *ibid*, 3 : 148.

J. A. S O K O L O W.