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AMERICAN METEMPSYCHOSIS



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# AMERICAN METEMPSYCHOSIS

Emerson, Whitman, and the New Poetry

JOHN MICHAEL CORRIGAN

Fordham University Press

NEW YORK 2012

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Corrigan, John Michael.

American metempsychosis : Emerson, Whitman, and the new poetry /  
John Michael Corrigan. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8232-4234-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. American literature—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Self-consciousness (Awareness) in literature. 3. National characteristics, American, in literature. 4. Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 1803–1882—Criticism and interpretation. 5. Whitman, Walt, 1819–1892—Criticism and interpretation. 6. Transmigration in literature. I. Title.

PS217.S44C67 2012

810.9'353—dc23

2011042866

Printed in the United States of America

14 13 12 5 4 3 2 1

First edition



A book in the American Literatures Initiative (ALI), a collaborative publishing project of NYU Press, Fordham University Press, Rutgers University Press, Temple University Press, and the University of Virginia Press. The Initiative is supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. For more information, please visit [www.americanliteratures.org](http://www.americanliteratures.org).

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have benefitted from the support and friendship of numerous people while writing this book—and I would have been unable to persevere without them. I begin by thanking Alan Ackerman for his sure-sighted counsel and steadfast belief in this project; Malcolm Woodland whose warm words of confidence and encouragement I will not forget, coming as they did in times of difficulty and transition; and John Reibetanz whose fidelity to poetry has been an inspiration throughout. I also thank the faculty and administration of the English Department at the University of Toronto and acknowledge the funding of the Ontario government.

Portions of this book have appeared previously: sections of Chapters 4 and 5 in the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* (2011); parts of Chapter 1 in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71.3 (July 2010); and one section of Chapter 2 in *Dionysius* (2009). I gratefully acknowledge their permission to reprint. For the use of William Blake's "Jacob's Ladder" for the cover art, I thank the British Museum.

I thank Fordham University Press and the American Literatures Initiative, particularly Helen Tartar, Thomas C. Lay, Kathleen Sweeney, Tim Roberts, and Alex Giardino. I am also indebted to many others, Tony Brinkley, Betsy Erkkila, Jay Bregman, Elspeth Brown, Robert Berchman, Kodolányi Gyula, and Sally Wolff-King.

To my parents, Kevin and Elena Corrigan, I owe a deepest debt of gratitude; my brother Yuri for his friendship and the many hours he spent reading and editing my writing; Maria and Sarah Corrigan for their love and support; and Jesse Archibald-Barber, a true friend. I would also like to thank Greg Glazov, Francis and Tess Corrigan, and their families. To my

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uncle Jamie Glazov, whose brotherhood has made me a better man, and to my grandmother Marina Glazov, our family's poet, I am truly grateful. Peggy Lee, who stayed by my side at the close of this project, thank you for your love and support.

I dedicate this work to my family, both the Corrigan and the Glazovs, and particularly to the memory of my grandfather Yuri Glazov.



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## Introduction

In the painting *Jacob's Ladder* (1800), William Blake illustrates the nature of the Romantic reconception of human consciousness. At the bottom of the canvas, Jacob lies sleeping, his head resting by the foot of a spiral stair that circles upward through the star-filled sky and finally into the sun itself. Upon the stairway, the souls of angels and human beings pass each other, either descending to earth or ascending to heaven. In the Book of Genesis (28: 11–22), Jacob's dream is a divine revelation: "And, behold, the LORD stood above [the ladder], and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed." Informed by centuries of mystical practice, Blake's ladder is not only an epiphanic event; it is a figurative map of the human psyche. Indeed, Blake foregrounds Jacob's sleeping body; in the background behind Jacob's head, the staircase rises upward, becoming in its climb the focal point of the watercolor. Jacob reclines, moreover, in the posture of crucifixion, the horizontal plane of the material body intersecting with the vertical dimension within or behind consciousness, which the ladder is intended to represent. Here, upon the ancient architecture of ascent, Blake plunges a whole spiritual cosmology into the internal life of consciousness, powerfully demonstrating the extent to which mysticism underpins the development of the modern self.

Blake's painting also exhibits a decisive Platonic influence, for his ladder is explicitly a ladder of love, much like the ladder of ascent from Plato's *Symposium*. Midway on Blake's staircase, two lovers meet face to face, ascent and descent, the way up and the way down, united in their mutual embrace. By placing the lovers so centrally on the ladder, Blake underscores

a whole tradition of ascent, which viewed the ladder as a structure of metempsychosis or reincarnation.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, souls descend into bodies, while others transcend the material world. As early as the first century, the ladder had become the site upon which a number of spiritual traditions intersected. Philo of Alexandria, the Hellenic Jewish philosopher, interpreted Jacob's ladder as the *anima mundi*, or world soul, the making of which by the Divine Demiurge Plato depicted in the *Timaeus*. It is this tradition that Philo incorporated into Judaism, recasting the ladder as a model of metempsychosis, as "the ascent and descent of souls," and "interjecting a common theme from Platonic writings into the Biblical narrative."<sup>2</sup> Consequently, Jacob's ladder becomes a mystical symbol not only of ascent and ascent, but of metempsychosis or reincarnation, one of the oldest and most predominant Hellenic beliefs running through the Pythagorean and Orphic traditions into the later (or broader) Platonic heritage and eventually into esotericism and alchemy with the Golden Chain of Homer, which Anton Joseph Kirchweger documented and published in 1723 and which Friedrich Hölderlin and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe studied toward the end of the century.<sup>3</sup>

Where Blake followed certain esoteric and alchemical forms of thought by clothing spiritual mysteries in secret symbolism, Ralph Waldo Emerson made these mysteries not simply available to a wider audience;<sup>4</sup> he directly mapped them onto the idea of American selfhood with its accompanying emphases on self-reliance and individualism. At the heart of Emerson's vision lies a conception of consciousness very similar to Blake's mystical map of the human psyche in "Jacob's Ladder"—except that Emerson much more fully and systematically develops metempsychosis in terms of the cognitive capacity of a single self. Emerson's various depictions of metempsychosis are not occasional portraits; they form part of a lifelong discourse upon the volatile life of the soul in relation to the evolutionary sequence of history. James Freeman Clarke, Emerson's close friend, dedicated much of his book *Ten Great Religions Part II* (1884) to arguing that there is an "essential truth" in the ancient belief of metempsychosis when seen alongside evolution. "The modern doctrine of the evolution of bodily organisms is not complete," he states, "unless we unite with it the idea of a corresponding evolution of the spiritual monad, from which every organic form derives its unity. Evolution has a satisfactory meaning only when we admit that the soul is developed and educated by passing through many bodies."<sup>5</sup>

In "History," the leading essay of the *First Series of Essays* (1841), Emerson declares that the "transmigration of souls is no fable,"<sup>6</sup> yet he does not mean this in any simple, reductionist sense—as an established fact of the grander arc of soul's journey through bodies. Instead, he uses "the

metempsychosis of nature” (*W* 2: 8) as a figurative model for consciousness’ temporal experience of itself. Indeed, following James Hutton’s geologic discovery of deep time in the late eighteenth century, German Idealism had reinstated much of the mystical knowledge of the past in an entirely new way, based upon a new awareness of time. According to this new notion of consciousness, an individual, aided by the correct spiritual knowledge, could transform himself by concentrating on his own temporal development—the mystical science of alchemy transposed onto the human body, the goal not gold, but the creation of a new and more perfect Adam. Adapting a diverse mystical heritage, both Western and Eastern, Emerson follows these attempts to intertwine the idea of immanence with new notions of history that were emerging in the sciences. In so much of Emerson’s oeuvre, the individual realizes that he is part of a series—he perceives the historical sequence like geological strata propping up his present consciousness. But this realization, epiphany even, is only the beginning of a self-reflexive process, the goal of which is ultimately self-transformation.<sup>7</sup>

In “Self-Reliance,” the essay that immediately follows “History,” Emerson writes that power “resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state, in the shooting of a gulf, in the darting to an aim” (*W* 2: 40). Harold Bloom remarks that “nothing is more American, whether catastrophic or amiable, than that Emersonian formula concerning power,”<sup>8</sup> and Jonathon Levin has used Emerson’s “paradoxical poetics of transition”<sup>9</sup> to analyze the emergence of pragmatism and American literary modernism. Yet contemporary criticism has largely ignored the fact that Emerson’s very depiction of power as the soul’s transition from a past to a new state resides explicitly within a metempsychotic purview. Emerson’s attempt to collapse a whole mystical cosmos into the individual mind is not as unlikely an intellectual preoccupation as it might seem. New England’s Unitarian movement in the early part of the nineteenth century prepared for it by championing the domain of a new spiritual self capable of recognizing *the God within* through daily activity and self-reflection.

In his most famous sermon, “Likeness to God” (1828), William Ellery Channing, the most prominent voice of New England Unitarianism, argues that to “grow in the likeness of God we need not cease to be men. This likeness does not consist in extraordinary or miraculous gifts, in supernatural addictions to the soul, or in anything foreign to our original constitution; but in our essential faculties, unfolded by vigorous and conscientious exertions in the ordinary circumstances assigned by God.”<sup>10</sup> For the generation of transcendentalists that preceded Emerson and his contemporaries, this notion of a unified, complete individual who draws together the spiritual and the physical into one stalwart frame constitutes the continuing Protestant ideal of a new American Adam, capable of

redeeming the failures of the Old World in the promise of America. While this notion of a unified self partially arose in the early nineteenth century in relation to German Idealism and English Romanticism, it also possesses an unmistakable Neoplatonic and esoteric character. In “Oration on Genius” (1821) and *Observations on the Growth of the Mind* (1826), two foundational texts of American transcendentalism, Sampson Reed infuses his writing with the Swedenborgian and larger esoteric teaching that “the science of the mind” will arise out of “all the other sciences.”<sup>11</sup> Because of this transition to a new framework for consciousness, Reed contends, the “moral and intellectual character of man has undergone, and is undergoing a change; and as this is effected, it must change the aspect of all things.” In opening itself up to a greater spiritual and material union, the individual mind can learn to transform itself into something entirely new: “As subjects are presented to the operation of the mind, they are decomposed and reorganized in a manner peculiar to itself, and not easily explained.”<sup>12</sup> Here, Reed anticipates Emerson’s metempsychotic mind in his depictions of how the self witnesses its own cognitive succession and comes to enact death and rebirth in the process.

While Reed does not fully clarify the nature of this mental transformation, he insists that the tabula rasa conception of the mind so central to John Locke’s epistemology (derived in part from Aristotle<sup>13</sup>) is indelibly flawed:<sup>14</sup> “There prevails a most erroneous sentiment, that the mind is originally vacant, and requires only to be filled up.” “The mind,” Reed counters, “is originally a most delicate germ, whose husk is the body; planted in this world, that the light and heat of heaven may fall upon it with a gentle radiance, and call forth its energies.”<sup>15</sup> In *Representative Men* (1850), Emerson argues that this idea of the mind as “a germ of expansion” comprises the very heart of a great intellectual tradition of representative figures, a tradition whose principal value is the Platonic or Neoplatonic Intellect. Plato “is more than an expert, or a schoolman, or a geometer or the prophet of a particular message,” Emerson writes. “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” (*W* 4: 46). In the accompanying essay, “Swedenborg; or the Mystic,” Emerson identifies Intellect’s expansion in terms of metempsychosis, arguing that Swedenborg’s best work “was written with the highest end, to put science and the soul, long estranged from each other, at one again” (*W* 4: 63). Here, as in the *First Series of Essays*, Emerson does not advocate a literal metempsychosis; rather, he argues for its “subjective” character, which “depends entirely on the thought of the person” (*W* 4: 70).

Emerson’s various depictions of the metempsychotic self do not necessarily present a soothing doctrine of the soul’s immortality through

successive incarnations—nor an optimistic humanism based upon a spiritual foundation. In *Orphic Sayings* (1840–41) and *Table-Talk* (1877), Amos Bronson Alcott, another close friend of Emerson, indicates how metempsychosis was being interpreted as a pattern of identity, rather than a cosmic vision of soul's immortality. The very transition, Alcott writes, between the sleeping and waking periods of life provides a record of succession that an individual must realize in himself so that metempsychosis operates not simply between lives, but within one single life: "I am sure of being one and the same person I then was, and thread my identity through successive yesterdays into the memory out of which my consciousness was born, nor can I lose myself in the search of myself." Alcott transcribes the soul's continuity and shaping influence upon a series of bodies onto the daily pattern of waking and sleeping so that a whole cosmic vision of soul's eternal life is collapsed into one being: "Every act of sleep is a metamorphosis of bodies and metempsychosis of souls."<sup>16</sup>

Unlike his Unitarian precursors or transcendentalist contemporaries, Emerson unequivocally champions the metempsychotic self as a dynamic part of a radically unsettled cosmos. "I unsettle all things," he affirms. "No facts to me are sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment" (*W* 2: 188). At times, he extols "the firm nature" underneath "the flowing vest" (*W* 3: 21), while elsewhere he contends that "there are no fixtures to men, if we appeal to consciousness" or to the "soul" (*W* 2: 182). These statements are neither random nor arbitrary flights of metaphysical phrase. Instead, they, like many of his dualities, denote the problem of the "double consciousness" (*W* 1: 213; *W* 6: 25), a carefully conceived and highly coherent dialectical philosophy that Emerson initially employs to problematize the prospect of a unified self. In "The Transcendentalist" (1841), Emerson laments a deep schism within the consciousness of human beings—one side the recognition that consciousness unfolds in the temporal present and the other side a hunger for the soul whose life is in the future. In his later writing, Emerson ceases to lament this polarity within the human frame and comes rather to celebrate it. Consciousness cannot be united—and its very oscillation underscores the eternal vicissitudes of an unsettled universe. As he expresses in his fourth lecture of the series *Natural Method of Mental Philosophy* (1858), the "*va et vient*, the ebb and flow, the pendulum, the alternation, the sleeping and waking, the fits of easy transmission and reflection, the pulsation, the undulation, which shows itself as a fundamental secret of nature, exists in intellect."<sup>17</sup> Such a conception is similar in outline to Hegel's dialectic, but without the overarching drive for an absolute *telos* wherein everything foreign will have been sublated in the final experience of self-knowing.

From another vantage point, Emerson's double consciousness can be understood in relation to the redefinition of science in the early modern

era. The emergence of modern science from out of the practice of alchemy, magic, and the occult was not the kind of clean break that many would suppose; rather, much of our contemporary conception of science relates to the discovery of deep time in the eighteenth century and the accompanying invention of the idea of evolutionary history, culminating in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Before James Hutton's discovery of geologic time, which initiates the temporal revolutions, one of the chief aims of scientists was to restore the human being to God's grace. In the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon understood scientific progress as a means of attaining salvation. Bacon's "view of the future of science was not that of progress in a straight line. His 'great instauration' of science was directed towards a return to the state of Adam before the Fall, a state of pure and sinless contact with nature and knowledge of her powers."<sup>18</sup> Bacon's aim, moreover, was itself a natural extension of the sixteenth-century occult writings of Cornelius Agrippa and John Dee who served as a scientific adviser to Elizabeth I. As was the aim of many occult scientists during this period, Dee "believed that he had discovered a combined cabalist, alchemical, and mathematical science which would enable its possessor to move up and down the scale of being from the lowest to the highest spheres," a discovery suggesting not simply the perfectibility of the human being on the ladder of ascent and descent, but a new science that could allow the human being mastery over the celestial chain connecting earth and heaven.

In the figure of the double consciousness, Emerson attempts to balance these two corresponding, yet radically different scientific aims: first, the perfectibility of the human being through spiritual science; second, the idea of material evolution, which irrevocably displaced the Enlightenment conception of the human being. Emerson thereby maps the older desire for salvation onto the evolutionary pattern of history, repeatedly portraying the chronological sequence of time as a ladder or stairway linking earth and heaven. In "Love" (1841), which accompanies his depiction of the metempsychotic self of "History," he depicts the Platonic ladder of ascent as a foundational model taught by all great teachers throughout the ages. The "lover ascends to the highest beauty," he writes in the essay, "to the love and knowledge of the Divinity, by steps on this ladder of created souls" (*W* 2: 106). Like Philo's ascending and descending biblical ladder, this "ladder of created souls" possesses two opposing gravities, first the downward fiery procession of the soul from the One and second the upward education of the soul as it attempts to convert itself back to the One. Here, the Neoplatonic triad of procession, conversion, and self-constitution underlies Emerson's description of how a celestial fire falls from heaven and eventually learns to realize itself in the emergent complexity of material consciousness, which evolves from a preconscious state to the self-reflexivity

of poetic creativity. As in “History,” Emerson uses metempsychosis as a model for this cognitive ascent, as a way to invert the mimetic movement away from the One and to reachieve an affinity with the fire of creation, followed by a synthesis into light itself.

Emerson’s double consciousness with its downward mimetic gravity and upward metempsychotic progression forms an open template of incessant self-constituting change that draws the Idealist philosophies of the past as well as the revolutions of modern science into the depiction of one single being, psychologically limited in its vision, yet seeking nonetheless to extend its range by virtue of a Neoplatonic second sight to renew the material world. As with German Idealism and later Romanticism in general, Emersonian metempsychosis unfolds as a patently phenomenological project. Metaphysical values—particularly Plato and Plotinus’s conception of an ensouled eyebeam that constitutes itself in what it sees—underlie the very act of reading so that the relationship between perceiver and page both retains the classical focus of the Platonic tradition and simultaneously questions the steps by which we arrive at this splendid metaphor. In “Circles,” which continues the metempsychotic emphasis upon perception in the *First Series of Essays*, Emerson depicts the conversion of dead statues into fiery men as a phenomenological process that the eye enacts in its attempt to overcome mimetic reality: “Then cometh the god, and converts the statues into fiery men, and by a flash of his eye burns up the veil which shrouded all things, and the meaning is manifest” (W 2: 184). Emerson’s depiction of the flash of the eye powerfully captures the theme of theurgic reanimation of statues in the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus and Proclus,<sup>19</sup> while also recalling the later mystical and alchemical emphasis upon achieving the resurrection of the body. In *The Signature of All Things* (1621), for instance, Jacob Böhme portrays the death of Adam after eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a process by which the divine light withdrew from the corporeal body, taking with it the fire of the soul. Later inspiring Emerson, Böhme’s mysticism powerfully, if not surreptitiously, describes the alchemical process by which the “soul must help itself with the sun’s light” so that the body is restored. With the infusion of God’s desire, incarnated in the image of fire, the body becomes “again capable of the divine sunshine,”<sup>20</sup> a process of restoration wherein the divine comes to know itself more fully.

In Emerson’s oeuvre, the flash of the eye and the restoration of the material world come to evoke a poetic crisis of American nationhood. In “The Poet” (1844), Emerson heralds the future American poet not as a solution, but as the central dilemma of the age: “The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial man for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth.”

Here as well, Emerson employs metempsychosis to evoke this future poet, for the attainment of commonwealth sends the individual on a journey to account for every partial, transitory object and to unite all of these objects in his own greater vision. The poet thereby “uses his eyes” to follow the soul’s journey through successive forms and, in doing so, “flows with the flowing of nature” (*W* 3: 13). Perceiving not simply one vantage point, but with “all eyes” (*W* 3: 21), the poet reaches an affinity with the natural world not simply by observing the sequence of its animation, but by infusing the world with the fire of new creation. At the same time, Emerson consistently problematizes this venture, for perception upholds a succession of experience that being itself cannot. Thus, in “Experience,” which follows “The Poet” in the *Second Series of Essays*, he writes, “I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West” (*W* 3: 41). Indeed, the wish to be *born again* underlies the bulk of Emerson’s writing, yet it is also a desire that he repeatedly questions, for an individual may perceive a new vista of experience opening before him and still be unable to approach it.

Emerson’s conception of metempsychosis thereby provides the site upon which the shaping forces of ancient philosophy and mysticism, particularly Hinduism, Pythagoreanism, Platonism, Neoplatonism, and Christian esotericism can be recombined with a new awareness of the historical series of being and the individual’s provisional place in, and negotiation with, that series. In the era leading up to Charles Darwin, this emerging awareness of series—especially geological and biological sequence—offered a prospective reintegration of metaphysics and science. For Emerson, both poet and scientist engage the same problem: they attempt to understand how the series establishes itself and the direction it will take in the future. Discovery, in this sense, becomes a method of observation, a way of perceiving how life enacts a sequential order through time. Emerson’s repeated call for a finely adapted human being, a poetic reconciler, synthesizes these various strands of influence, from the ancient Platonic lover climbing the ladder of being to contemplate a single science and the vision of the Beautiful itself, to the nineteenth-century religious portrayal of a complete American individual who uses his own contemplation and self-reflection to achieve heightened consciousness.

Emerson repeatedly portrays the metempsychotic relationship between perception and the succession of its experience as a foundational pedagogy for consciousness. While the ceaseless fluctuations underlying and involving all individual and universal motion overwhelm the human being’s capacity for comprehension, yet does the text—the poetic inscription and mirror for nature’s changing order—offer him an activity that may allow him to develop and expand his cognitive capacity to participate in the



greater cosmological order. The text, accordingly, does not simply contain a message that must be apprehended and understood; it provides a structure that exceeds its narrative or content. In the movement between eye and word, Emerson insists, the wealth and poverty of history reemerge to teach a lesson to its readers. They may yet come to know themselves and to understand the greater series that runs through and in them; they may yet attain a mastery over their inscribed existence and learn the ever-elusive art of self-transformation, that science for which the alchemists strove and that essential experience which Hegel championed as self-knowing.

While Emerson lays out the transcendental delineations of the metempsychotic self in America, it is Walt Whitman who thoroughly modernizes and formalizes this project in terms of nineteenth-century democratic struggle and situates its work as an expressly poetic activity. In the first edition of the *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman announces the very maturation of expanding individuality as a form of metempsychotic becoming, hinging as ever upon perception: "There was a child went forth every day,/ And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became."<sup>21</sup> Here, most assuredly, is an American drama of selfhood in which the poet must accept his own teeming nation on equal terms and must do so precisely through a metempsychotic phenomenology. Whitman's startling statement in "Song of Myself" that "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there"<sup>22</sup> further emphasizes that the self in *Leaves of Grass* is one that seeks and potentially possesses a plethora of experience, not simply that of one self or body, but of many bodies. In Whitman's poetry, this self attempts to inhabit all the bodies of American union and does so precisely through a successive pattern of transmigration and metamorphosis. The elusive goal of the effort, as in many of Emerson's depictions of metempsychosis, is to unify the temporal sequence in the experience of consciousness so that "past and present and future are [ . . . ] joined," a drawing together of history's materials into a new and thoroughly self-referential arrangement, necessarily including the future reader who will assume the sequence and live through each of its coverings.

Although many scholars have depicted Whitman as the poet of the body, Whitman presents a pattern of poetic ascent and descent very similar to Emerson's in character. Indeed, Whitman's soul and body relation is not some amorphous, nebulous one, but a developed and mystically inspired figuration of poetic maturation in which the soul plays a decisive and principal role. In "Song of Myself" and the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman develops the trope of the metempsychotic self by depicting his own poetic development with the image of a stairway. In mounting the staircase and sequentially experiencing all the knowledge that each step or age provides, Whitman proclaims his growing power to be the soul's

experience of a vast temporal sequence: “All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me,/ Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul” (44.1168–69). Whitman transforms the ascent of the soul for modern selfhood, formalizing Emerson’s metempsychotic project as a textual event, one whose structure rejects traditional poetic form and opens the reader up to a past network of relations and requires him to experience its movement for himself. In this respect, American metempsychosis becomes a methodology of poetic reading and writing, encapsulated in the relation between a reader and a sequence of words that exists before the reader apprehends it, yet that requires our present consciousness to engage and open up its discourse in a heightened act of becoming. Consequently, the advent of modern poetic form is not simply a freedom from past convention, but an effort to understand the past more thoroughly and engage in its reformation more actively.

In the last three decades, the widespread understanding of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a philosopher of metaphysical unity has given way to a more postmodern appraisal. Scholars have come to view Emerson's thought as a contemplative progression where no determination can be final, since the process itself is perpetually ongoing and open-ended.<sup>1</sup> These recent efforts at de-transcendentalizing and revitalizing Emerson counter the long-established tendencies of criticism to portray him as a cheerful mystic who is but an echo—however powerful and influential—of traditional metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> Instead, scholars characterize Emerson as a post-Idealist, a pragmatist, an evolutionist, or a political radical. While these depictions may seem appropriate, Emerson's lifelong attempts to safeguard the idea of the soul in an age of scientific advancement by conceptualizing it as "a volatile essence," ever playful and mysterious, neither a foundation nor a touchstone for being, but an unsettling indeterminacy within the structure of human cognition—this deserves renewed attention. Emerson's recurrent use of the ancient notion of metempsychosis—the transmigration of the soul through successive bodies—is one principal instance of his literary and philosophical inventiveness at work, namely, his search for a figurative blueprint to marry the vast, material sequence of history with the elusive, unsettled activity of the soul.

While older scholarship ignored or tended to dismiss such depictions of metempsychosis,<sup>3</sup> Arthur Versluis makes the case that Emerson "took transmigration seriously" and tended to view it "as a literary conceit first and as a doctrine second," although he was "always seeking to express it in Western terms."<sup>4</sup> Versluis is indeed correct to emphasize the freedom

with which Emerson “manipulates” the idea of Indian transmigration and combines it with a Neoplatonic reading, but it is my contention that Emerson adapted the idea of metempsychosis in a much more thorough manner than anyone has previously shown. Like so many of his contemporaries, Emerson used Vedantic and Confucian sources through the filter of Idealistic thought on the esoteric assumption that all great religions and philosophies contain the same universal truths. At the same time, Emerson’s use of metempsychosis is more complex and nuanced than this might suppose, for it can be most appropriately understood not simply as an esoteric, exotic, or mystical doctrine, common to both Eastern and Western traditions, but as a figurative template for placing the modern individual within the vast record of history—“in the entire series of days” (*W* 2: 3). Incorporating the language of metaphysics into the revolutions of science, particularly the new vastness of the geological record and theories of adaptation and evolution emerging in biology, Emerson repeatedly stresses how the structure of transmigration—the soul running through the historical series—can indicate the initial outlines of a greater theory of human cognition and perception.

I begin with Emerson’s most detailed description of “the metempsychosis of nature” (*W* 2: 8) from the leading piece, “History,” of his *First Series of Essays* (1841). Here, Emerson presents metempsychosis not as literal religious doctrine, but as a mode of perception that culminates in an active search for cognitive unity. In the following sections, I outline the principal influences upon Emerson’s metaphysics: ancient Greek metempsychosis, especially the Platonic tradition, which I discuss throughout, Hindu reincarnation, Goethean metamorphosis, Hegelian phenomenology, and Christian esotericism. With this diverse array of influences, I show how Emerson transforms metempsychosis into a developmental and evolutionary prototype, a truly volatile poetic power that unsettles the static delineations of history so that an individual can command his or her own self-development. In such a setting, Emerson’s metempsychotic mind underscores the prospect of a new humanism, a spiritual science that reconceives of the human being’s cognitive and artistic capacity by adapting metaphysics to modern consciousness.

### Soul and the Historical Series

Emerson’s notion of self-reliance has become a thoroughly American value, although it can be properly understood as an expression of the Protestant faith he both inherited and abandoned. Already in his early lectures, Emerson anticipates the spirit of *Representative Men* (1850) in his biographies (1835) of Martin Luther (1483–1546) and George Fox (1624–91)

who embody, for him, the ideas of immanence, reform, and self-reliance expressing themselves in history. Of Luther, he writes, "No man in history ever assumed a more commanding attitude or expressed a more perfect self-reliance."<sup>5</sup> Luther is thereby more than a man; his very words express a Divine Will that founds nations and refreshes the natural order: "His words are more than brave, they threaten and thunder. They indicate a Will on which a nation might lean, not liable to sudden sallies and swoons, but progressive as the motions of the earth" (*EL* 1: 136). In his notes for these biographic lectures, Emerson wonders whether the indwelling spirit that spoke through Luther resurfaced in Fox: "Did he reappear in George Fox?" (*EL* 1: 118). What may seem idle supernatural speculation of soul's transmigration into new bodies can be viewed in Emerson's oeuvre as a consistent effort to understand how ideas become embodied and adapted in history. Both Luther and Fox, Emerson argues, were poor and humble, yet held fast to the inner voice of conscience and, as a result, they shook the very fabric of Europe's social order and lay the foundation for America's budding democratic enterprise. Yet it is not imitation of these reformers that Emerson desires of his contemporaries; rather, he views their reform as only an emerging, not yet fully expressed example that requires further amelioration. In "Nature" (1836), the essay that brought him fame, Emerson indeed laments an American people who see only through the eyes of tradition and cannot enjoy "an original relation to the universe" (*W* 1: 7). Rather than fall prey to a second-hand, ascribed existence, the American people must learn to think new thoughts; in short, they must learn to think for themselves: "There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship" (*W* 1: 7).

The ability to think new thoughts requires, for Emerson, a new way of imagining the human mind and its potential to recreate itself in better form. Over the last two decades, Stanley Cavell has developed a critical context that helps to understand Emerson's distinctive map of human cognition. According to Cavell, the quintessential Emersonian prototype for consciousness is a form of "aversive thinking," the individual *turning away from*, and *toward*, "the dominantly desired virtue of his society." Thinking, in this sense, cannot be understood as a linear enterprise; rather, it is a form of conversation, an engagement with other persons in which one field of possibility is checked and complemented by reversal. Emerson, thereby, "characterizes thinking as marked by transfiguration and conversion" for to "think is to turn around, or turn back [ . . . ] the words of ordinary life" so as to change the "present form of our lives that now repel thought." Cavell underscores the Emersonian process of moving through a series, even while necessarily placing all its steps under refutation, "always under criticism (held in aversion)."<sup>6</sup> This brief, general

sketch of Cavell's argument can also help to clarify Emerson's repeated depictions of metempsychosis. It is not so much literal transmigration that preoccupies Emerson, but a way of challenging the cognitive capacity of each individual to transform a preestablished tendency into a new, living progression.

In "History," the leading essay in his *First Series of Essays* (1841), Emerson presents his first sustained account of metempsychosis as a direct challenge to his readers. "The transmigration of souls is no fable," he warns. "I would it were; but men and women are only half human" (*W* 2: 18). Emerson confronts his readers with a dilemma that curiously reflects the formation of American individualism: to evolve and become fully human requires not simply self-transcendence, but a way of entering into greater conversation with history itself. Emerson thereby asks his audience not to abide by the definite shape or character of tradition, but to transform by taking on many selves and points of view. To achieve transformation, therefore, an individual must be willing to abandon the single self along with its conventions and ostensible stability and recognize the endless metamorphosis of all living things: "The philosophical perception of identity through endless mutations of form, makes him know the Proteus. What else am I who laughed or wept yesterday, who slept last night like a corpse, and this morning stood and ran? And what see I on any side but the transmigrations of Proteus?" (*W* 2: 18). Here, the dramatic, mythological figure of the ever-changing Greek god, Proteus, points not simply to a metaphysical cosmic order, but to a "perception of identity" whose structure is explicitly metempsychotic.

In "History," therefore, Emerson's portrayal of "the human spirit [which] goes forth from the beginning to embody itself in the entire series of days" (*W* 2: 3) provides a type of metaphysical blueprint radically reenvisioned through the lens of modern selfhood. Transforming Plotinian Intellect under the modern Idealist auspices of historical consciousness, Emerson's portrayal of the metempsychotic mind can be understood as a humanistic expression of the individual's cognitive ability to convert "the whole encyclopedia of facts" (*W* 2: 3) into a living progression. In order to understand the sequence of which he or she is a part, the individual must learn to think metempsychotically: each individual must look within himself to discover that he already contains the whole record of history in his own mind: "Of the works of this mind history is the record. Its genius is illustrated by the entire series of days. Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history" (*W* 2: 3). The universal mind or Intellect already holds all of history within it—and thus the effort to remember, reconstruct, or revitalize necessarily becomes an individual attempt to convert the already created world of brute matter back into living unity.

While affirming the spiritual role of a unifying consciousness in history, Emerson also emphasizes the provisional nature of the vision supplied by the soul's metempsychotic awareness. The individual perceives only parts of the historical series of being, and it is precisely this fragmentary record that inspires his attempts to fit all the pieces of history back into one flowing sequence. The human tragedy is that the individual is incapable of such a feat. The role of genius, however, forcefully intensifies the promise of unity, and for this reason, Emerson's human being of superlative gifts comes closest to unifying history's series: such an individual both recognizes and demonstrates history as a metempsychotic drama in which each stage is a distinct face or embodiment, adopted, and in turn, discarded by the soul that always seeks a new and heightened progression:

Genius studies the causal thought, and far back in the womb of things, sees the rays parting from one orb, that diverge ere they fall by infinite diameters. Genius watches 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)

Characteristically, Emerson does not construct the metempsychotic order in any static, univocal way. In his depiction, the great chain of being has given way to a model in which consciousness itself gives rise to the abundance of nature and its sequential order. The historical series of being exists prior to individual consciousness, but its order and laws are reconstructed by a consciousness that attempts to turn back upon itself and remember the entire history of its amelioration. Equally noteworthy is Emerson's emphasis on perception as the fundamental basis of human knowledge. The order of ascension progresses from "fly," through "caterpillar," "grub," "egg" to "constant individual" because of genius' *perception* or *observation* of the series. The human being observes the principle of life perform "the metempsychosis of nature"; he or she watches the "monad"<sup>7</sup> enacted or performed through all its dramatic masks and, thereby, sees the dispersal of eternal unity into all life's seemingly discrete particulars, from a temporary origin, "the womb of things," into rays that manifest themselves in and through all the world's species, arriving at last at "the steadfast type," a provisional entity that has succeeded in pulling itself together out of the multiplicity of the historical series.

To see the metempsychotic structure of nature, therefore, the individual must go over the whole ground of history not just by relating it to himself

and his own experience, but by properly enacting it within his perception and very being. Certainly, the observer receives a historical series, a sequence that exists before and after his individual existence, but this process is never a passive reception. By virtue of his immanent perception, Emerson's superlative individual pierces the external multiplicity of nature to yield its secret law,<sup>8</sup> thereby taking on the power to reorganize the world at will: "He must attain and maintain that lofty sight where facts yield their secret sense [ . . . ]. By surrounding ourselves with the original circumstances, we invent anew the orders and the ornaments of architecture" (*W* 2: 6, 11). Just as consciousness cannot exist without its object(s), the historical series is most real and tangible in the individual's activity of self-constitution.

The individual must make himself the fully self-conscious record of history by using his or her own subjective perception as a receptive and constitutive power: "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). Emerson argues for a more concrete conception of historical sequence even while proposing that any knowledge of the truth of this series arises from the individual's own activity in realizing history's progression in himself—in his perception and being.<sup>9</sup> Each active reading reorganizes all the manifold elements of history and gives them a new, contemporary variation, raising the metempsychotic series to yet another heightened step in the universe's ceaseless process of self-renewal.<sup>10</sup>

All inquiry into antiquity,—all curiosity respecting the pyramids, the excavated cities, Stonehenge, the Ohio Circles, Mexico, Memphis,—is the desire to do away with this wild, savage and preposterous There and Then, and introduce in its place the Here and Now. [ . . . ] When he has satisfied himself, in general and in detail, that it was made by such a person as he, so armed and so motivated, and to ends to which he himself should also have worked, the problem is solved; his thought lives along the whole line of temples and sphinxes and catacombs, passes through them all with satisfaction, and they live again to the mind, or are now. (*W* 2: 7)

The problem of the past, its discontinuity with the present and the limitations it imposes—all these can be overcome by means of a perceptive inquiry that enacts a metempsychotic journey, a passage of individual thought through the whole milieu of time—"along the whole line" of history's monuments—so that the materials of the past can be revitalized in



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