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Emerson's Shakespeare and the Myth of Discovery; or, Appropriating Shakespeare for America

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Taking its cue from a contribution of mine to a past issue of this journal ("Persona Pratica e Persona Poetica", *Memoria di Shakespeare* 2, "On Biography", ed. Rosy Colombo and Gary Taylor, 2015, pp. 1-23), this article takes a step further, tracing Emerson's complex relationship with Shakespeare, mainly through his two essays "The Poet" (1844) and "Shakspeare; or, the Poet" (1850). The act of reading is here dramatized: hence the structure in four 'acts' of a composition arranged as an imaginary two-voiced *fugue*. Quotations from Emerson's essays (in italics) are contrapuntually interwoven with my own reflections on texts whose freshness and directness of approach are astounding. Emerson has not developed his theme by singling out any play or character in particular: his "Shakspeare" looks naturally American, before any of the plays exists. His words have fallen out of heaven directly on American soil, and are staring at America's "incomparable materials": waiting, "like the enchanted princess in fairy tales", for the "destined human deliverer" who will be doing justice to them. In what looks like a new act of 'discovery', Emerson does, for American letters, what the early settlers of his own time were doing for the American continent.

Keywords: America, Homer, Influencer, Materials, Medium, Originality, Representative/Representation

Act I: Searching

> *I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. […]. We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer*. (Emerson 1904c, 37)

To see Homer's gods in the barbarism and materialism of the times: of this divine power Shakespeare had been the supreme

incarnation for his epoch, and no less was expected of "Shakspeare"[1], his American avatar, whose descent on the American scene, however eagerly anticipated, was still to be realized.

> *Oregon and Texas […] are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination*. (Emerson 1904c, 38)
> *Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism […] rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphos, and are as swiftly passing away*. (37)

On the new, virgin soil, mythical forces are still in control of men's lives. The yet-to-come American Shakespeare founds his claim to antiquity on his power to be Homer's contemporary and equal.

> *Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words*. (Emerson 1904c, 8)
> *But Homer's words are as costly and admirable to Homer as Agamemnon's victories are to Agamemnon*. (7)

And the same is true of Shakespeare's words: as costly and admirable to him as Homer's words to Homer and Agamemnon's victories to Agamemnon. They have the hardiness and costliness of the iron ore out of which they are extracted – each of them as sharp and sparkling as a warrior's sword. Doesn't Dante's Homer hold a sword in his hand (*Inferno*, IV.86)? American Shakespeare will be the American Homer, the American Dante.

> *Read the antique documents extricated, analyzed and compared by the assiduous Dyce and Collier, and now read one of these skyey sentences – aerolites – which, seem to have fallen out of heaven, and which not your experience but the man within the breast has accepted as words of fate, and tell me if they match; if the former account in any manner for the latter; or which gives the most historical insight into the man*. (Emerson 1904f, 208)

The most historical insight into the man Shakespeare is to be found in human breasts, where his words are inscribed with permanent marks. By this miraculous extra-corporeal circulation of his own

[1] Emerson's spelling is retained in all quotations.

words, Shakespeare is kept alive. No wonder there is no one biography of Shakespeare, but as many as there are men who have accepted his words as words of fate. An infinite number of ever-new biographies has been and will continue to be alive in the breasts of men of different epochs and places. An uncanny literality sustains this all-American reading of Shakespeare as the earliest and most powerful of 'influencers'.

> *[T]he reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that our Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece*. (Vico 1948, 290, §876)

Emerson witnessed the early phase of Vico's influence on modern culture. Maybe he heard about Michelet's unabridged translation of the *Scienza nuova*, and almost certainly saw Henry Nelson Coleridge's – the editor of his famous uncle – translation of its third book, on the "Discovery of the True Homer". Should he not have heard of it, his ideal proximity to the Neapolitan philosopher would be all the more striking.

> *[S]ince there has come down to us no writer more ancient than Homer […], we are obliged […] to discover the truth, both as to his age and as to his fatherland, from Homer himself*. (Vico 1948, 272, §788)

It was after years spent garnering words on the very lips of people of different tribes – scattered on the craggy territories and the thousand islets that would one day be 'Greece' – that Homer, having recognized, in those words, the distant echo of a future common language, invented the nation of that name. Having lived before 'Greece' was, he could not simply be Greek. He was the inventor of Greece.

> *[T]he reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer*. (Vico 1948, 290, §875)

Even more radically than Vico's 'biography' of Homer, Emerson's 'biography' of Shakespeare comes to light through a self-reflexive movement of the soul.

> *Shakspeare is the only biographer of Shakspeare; and even he can tell nothing, except to the Shakspeare in us, that is, to our most apprehensive and sympathetic hour. […]*
> *Hence, though our external history is so meagre, yet, with Shakspeare for biographer, instead of Aubrey and Rowe, we have really the information which is material*. (Emerson 1904f, 208)

It is a paradox of Shakespeare's biographies that not even Shakespeare himself would be able to edit them.

> *Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history. […]. A man is the whole encyclopædia of facts. […]*
> *This human mind wrote history, and this must read it*. (Emerson 1904a, 3-4)

Just as "the Greek peoples were themselves Homer", so the 'Saxon race' are themselves Shakespeare.

Act II: Digging

> *The breadth of the problem is great, for the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth*. (Emerson 1904c, 5)

A new order of cognitive power is announced in these words: no less than Gloucester's in *King Lear*, Emerson's search for Shakespeare as 'the Poet' is, imaginatively, a jump in the void. It lands him on one of interpretation's blank spaces: not the time-honoured and by now stale issue of 'representation', going back to Plato's myth of the cavern, but the entirely modern topic of 'representative-ness'. Emerson does, for American letters, what the early settlers were doing for the American continent.

> *The entrepreneurial pioneers owned the land and also identified with it. […] This "primordial wilderness" was also "vacant": when the European settlers saw themselves as quickening a virgin land, the modern spirit completed its genesis by becoming flesh in the body of the American continent*. (Jehlen 1986, 4)

The American 'Shakspeare' becomes flesh in the body of the American continent.

> *There is somewhat touching in the madness with which the passing age […] registers every trifle touching Queen Elizabeth, and King James, and the Essexes, Leicesters, Burleighs and Buckinghams; and lets pass without a single valuable note the founder of another dynasty, which alone will cause the Tudor dynasty to be remembered*. (Emerson 1904f, 202)

A harsh judgment, considering how thoroughly Shakespeare's text had been worked upon during the last century and a half. But also a glimpse of Harold Bloom's 'inventor of the human' (Bloom 1998).

> *[The] English genius […] is wise and rich, but it lives on its capital. It is retrospective. How can it discern and hail the new forms that are looming up on the horizon, new and gigantic thoughts which cannot dress themselves out of any old wardrobe of the past?* (Emerson 1904g, 246)

Gigantic thoughts will dress the future anew out of Emerson's American Shakespeare,

> *the man […] on whose thoughts the foremost people of the world are now for some ages to be nourished, and minds to receive this and not another bias*. (Emerson 1904f, 202)

The 'Shakspearized' thought of the present time bears the unmistakable brand of "the Germans, those semi-Greeks, who […], by means of their height of view, […] think for Europe" (Emerson 1904g, 254).

> *Our poet's mask was impenetrable. […]. It was not possible to write the history of Shakspeare till now; for he is the father of German literature […]. It was not until the nineteenth century, whose speculative genius is a sort of living Hamlet, that the tragedy of Hamlet could find such wondering readers. Now, literature, philosophy and thought are Shakspearized. His mind is the horizon beyond which, at present, we do not see*. (Emerson 1904f, 203-4)

In the casual note taken by an anonymous member of the original audience, one can 'hear' Shakespeare being presented as an 'influencer', perhaps for the first time:

> *Mr. Emerson once defined the cultivated man as "one who can tell you something new and true about Shakspeare". […]*
> *In writing of Great Men in 1838 in his journal, he says: "[…] Shakspeare has, for the first time, in our time found adequate criticism, if indeed he have yet found it: – Coleridge, Lamb, Schlegel, Goethe, Very, Herder […]"*. (Emerson 1904d, 347)

The German spirit ought to be thanked, if adequate criticism of Shakespeare can be found in Lamb, de Quincey, Hazlitt and, of course, Coleridge, the master of them all. By them a new mode of looking at the 'Characters of Shakespeare's Plays' as properties, or requisites, of the critic's performance has been invented, and passed on to the popular stages. Squeezed in between German high speculation, British literary gossip and, last but not least, the vanity of the stages, what way was left open for the American scholar to say something 'new and true' about Shakespeare?

> *Malone, Warburton, Dyce and Collier have wasted their oil. The famed theatres, Covent Garden, Drury Lane, the Park and Tremont have vainly assisted. Betterton, Garrick, Kemble, Kean and Macready dedicate their lives to this genius; him they crown, elucidate, obey and express. The genius knows them not*. (Emerson 1904f, 206)

One might wonder whether the genius knew the Sage of Concord, busy – all alone in his study on the other side of the Pond – with etching for him a new, unedited profile. Very likely he did not. It took most of the time it took America to grow as a nation for the genius to acknowledge the powerful, however de-centralized – or maybe powerful *because* de-centralized – likeness of himself produced, early on, in that distant province of his Empire.

Act III: Reaping

> *But whatever scraps of information concerning his condition these researches may have rescued, they can shed no light upon that infinite invention which is the concealed magnet of his attraction for us*. (Emerson 1904f, 205-6)

At some point it must have been clear to Emerson that his quest for Shakespeare as the American Poet was growing into a quest for the American Critic. He had pointed the searchlight on himself, and from this reversal of the critic's standard gesture a re-positioning of Shakespeare had ensued. If the Poet's infinite invention was destined to remain a concealed magnet, the critic's capacity for feeling its attraction was open to self-scrutiny. The moment Shakespeare's attraction is acknowledged as being 'for us', the critic's persona moves centre-stage as the arbiter of Shakespeare's 'influence'.

> *A magnet must be made man […] before the general mind can come to entertain its powers*. (Emerson 1904e, 9-10)

The concealed magnet must be made man 'for us': that is, for the myriad readers, or audiences, who, in the most various formations, are, and will be, interested in entertaining the attraction so powerfully shaking and shaping their breasts. The American Critic knows that the surest path to 'Shakspeare; or, the Poet', is via his own heart (plus, of course, Homer and his gods), and would like to share this knowledge, and the joy it brings with it, with as many as possible of his readers and audiences.

> *Man is that noble endogenous plant which grows, like the palm, from within outward*. (Emerson 1904e, 6)
> *Man is endogenous, and education is his unfolding. The aid we have from others is mechanical compared with the discoveries of nature in us*. (8)

Like the palm, the Critic-as-Philosopher projects his own mind from within outward. At first sight not the most orthodox of cognitive strategies. While testing it on Shakespeare, he finds that his text is the American continent, and his goal no longer the interpretation, but the appropriation of Shakespeare for America.

Gigantic thoughts are brewing.

> *Well, in good faith, we are multiplied by our proxies. How easily we adopt their labors! Every ship that comes to America got its chart from Columbus. Every novel is a debtor to Homer. Every carpenter who shaves with a fore-plane borrows the genius of a forgotten inventor*. (Emerson 1904e, 12)

Ten years earlier, thrilled at the first lightening of the idea, he had jotted it down with the fervour of the Unitarian divine:

> *Life only avails, not the having lived. Power […] resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state […]. This one fact the world hates; that the soul* becomes*; for that forever degrades the past*. (Emerson 1904b, 69)

Now at the zenith of his career as a writer and philosopher, he knows how to substantiate with facts that abstract proposition. Far from degrading it, labour, as a force applied to nature, enhances the past, by 'publishing' the unstoppable transition of substances from old to new states.

> *Justice has already been done to steam, to iron, to wood, to coal, to loadstone, to iodine, to corn and cotton; but how few materials are yet used by our arts! The mass of creatures and of qualities are still hid and expectant. It would seem as if each waited, like the enchanted princess in fairy tales, for a destined human deliverer*. (Emerson 1904e, 9)

Dazzled by America's 'ample geography', the observer's imagination is fired with enthusiasm for America's 'incomparable materials'. Not even the polar divide from Columbus to a forgotten inventor – from 'great man' to workman – is too great to be bridged, were it only by proxy. But the mass of creatures and qualities is still waiting to be delivered and made representative of human labour by use.

> *Man, made of the dust of the world, does not forget his origin; and all that is yet inanimate will one day speak and reason. […]*
> *Thus we sit by the fire and take hold on the poles of the earth. This quasi omnipresence supplies the imbecility of our condition. […] [W]e wish for a thousand heads, a thousand bodies, that we might celebrate its immense beauty*

> *in many ways and places. Is this fancy? Well, in good faith, we are multiplied by our proxies*. (Emerson 1904e, 11-12)

"This is" pure "Orphic Emerson: shamanistic, anarchic, devoted to self-union" (Bloom 2015, 157). Endogenous, like the palm. Of the degrading of the past implicit in the 'becoming' of the soul, he has no fear. Quite the contrary: what might be felt as a miscegenation exalts his soul to the delirium of 'quasi omnipresence', of which the twin utopias of full expression and unrestrained joy are the outposts.

Act IV: Shakespeare

> *Shakspeare is not literary, but the strong earth itself*. (Emerson 1904d, 347)

If power resides in the moment of transition, the biggest accumulation of power is the earth itself, with its still unfathomed reservoir of materials, deep in the process of passing from a past to a new state. To the eyes of the American critic, Shakespeare, who is not literary but the strong earth itself, has the appeal of America's incomparable materials.

> *This pleasure of full expression […] is the secret of the reader's joy in literary genius. Nothing is kept back. There is fire enough to fuse the mountain of ore. Shakspeare's principal merit may be conveyed in saying that he of all men best understands the English language, and can say what he will*. (Emerson 1904e, 15)

Shakespeare can say what he will – no doubt about that – yet his is not – nor could it ever be – the full-throated ease of Keats's nightingale.

> *[T]hese unchoked channels and floodgates of expression are only health or fortunate constitution. Shakspeare's name suggests other and purely intellectual benefits*. (Emerson 1904e, 15-16)

Unrestrained utterance can only signal a healthy body and a happy constitution. But the other, purely intellectual benefits, by which Shakespeare is made a 'representative man' – perhaps the most

representative of the six taken into consideration – are still to be dug out[2].

> *Unpublished nature will have its whole secret told. Shall we say that quartz mountains will pulverize […] till they are made vehicles of more words?* (Emerson 1904e, 12)

Shakespeare's capacity for full expression is continuous with fire's capacity for fusing the mountain of ore. Priceless raw materials will be made the vehicles of more and more words… One cannot not think of the costly minerals encrypted in those unsurpassed vehicles of words that are our cell phones; of battles fought to the death, in order to gain control over those minerals: at bottom, over more words…

> *As plants convert the minerals into food for animals, so each man converts some raw material in nature to human use*. (Emerson 1904e, 8)
> *Each material thing […] has its translation, through humanity, into the spiritual and necessary sphere*. (11)

'Material' does not translate so well into 'spiritual'; nor into 'intellectual' either. Or, if it does, it does so symbolically, or metaphorically. But nothing could be further from Emerson's mind than this abstraction. In his system, substances – no less than men, and especially 'great men', have their translation into the spiritual

[2] In 1850 Emerson published *Representative Men*, a collection of essays derived from his lectures. Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Napoleon, Shakespeare and Goethe are the champions presented. The seventh and introductory essay is provokingly titled "Uses of Great Men". To our idealistically-trained minds, 'greatness' and 'use' make strange bedfellows. But a title like that must have startled original audiences as well. It was all right for the six 'representative men' to be labelled with their respective qualifications: all right for Plato to be the Philosopher, Swedenborg the Mystic, Montaigne the Skeptic, Napoleon the Man of the World, Goethe the Writer, and Shakespeare, of course, the Poet. But that each of these daunting 'greatnesses' should be checked against their respective 'uses' must have sounded embarrassing even to Puritan ears. Wasn't it a duty for all men to be 'useful'? For a 'great man' to be indexed under the heading 'use' was tantamount to having his strong singularity dissolved into the myriad trades and professions that were making great the American nation of the mid-century. Once made transferrable – like money – the very idea of singularity was lost.

by the mediation of their 'uses'. This is what he calls "having justice done to", or "being representative". It remains to be seen in what way this applies to Shakespeare.

> *Man in society, with all his passions and his pleasures, […] becomes the object of the passions and pleasures of man; an additional class of emotions produces an augmented treasure of expressions; and language, gesture, and the imitative arts become at once the representation and the medium.* (Shelley 1915, 76-77)

In Shelley's seminal text, Emerson found Wordsworth's legacy augmented and transcended. The language of poetry was not just 'recollection', but a complex of verbal and bodily elements. The formula 'both the representation and the medium' seemed to open the way to further, unheard of, developments. Four years later, he would go back to those words.

> *The poet is […] the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.* (Emerson 1904c, 6)

The power to receive and to impart – or, to become *at once the representation and the medium* – is at its highest in Shakespeare, whose words are, consubstantially, received from the earth – wherefrom else? – and imparted to men. Justice has been done to steam, iron, wood, coal, loadstone, iodine, corn, cotton, by their uses. But all these materials, and possibly many more, are waiting to be 'published' by Shakespeare. By entering art's dominion they are made 'representative', to a higher degree than in the everyday use of the words. The power of words in poetry manifests itself in their double nature. In one and the same act, they are both the representation and the medium.

> *Great genial power, one would almost say, consists in not being original at all; in being altogether receptive; in letting the world do all, and suffering the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind*. (Emerson 1904f, 191)

The received opinion according to which a literary genius must be, first of all, an 'original' is abolished; 'representative' and 'original'

seem here to live at opposite ends. Great genial power does not consist in pouring your never-heard-of inventions on the expectant world. It is rather a voiding of the self, executed as a preliminary to letting the spirit of the hour pass unobstructed through you. One might even think that a camera would provide that type of 'unobstruction'.

> *In short, he [Shakespeare] is the chief example to prove that more or less of production, more or fewer pictures, is a thing indifferent. He had the power to make one picture. Daguerre learned how to let one flower etch its image on his plate of iodine; and then proceeds at leisure to etch a million. There are always objects; but there was never representation. Here is perfect representation, at last; and now let the world of figures sit for their portraits. No recipe can be given for the making of a Shakspeare; but the possibility of the translation of things into song is demonstrated*. (Emerson 1904f, 213-14)

A project of infinite reproducibility is implied by Emerson's work on 'representative-ness'. The unexpected appearance, in this context, of the photographer Daguerre confirms the presence of that strain, or variant, in the blood of American Shakespeare. Just because they are 'medium', Shakespeare's words are not 'original' but 'representative': that is, deep in the process of passing from a past to a new state, like the earth.

> *[H]e borrows very near home. […]. He knows the sparkle of the true stone, and puts it in high place, wherever he finds it. Such is the happy position of Homer perhaps*. (Emerson 1904f, 197)

Shakespeare is here the gold digger who looks at 'the cropping out of the original rock' and sees the sparkle of the true stone in it: a more 'American' portrait of the Poet could not be conceived. The scenario is the mythic one a number of western movies have imaginatively fixed for us to mid-nineteenth century: however unwittingly, those hunters for riches were fully contemporary with Emerson's passionate search for an American Shakespeare. With Homer's shadow peeping round the stage door…

> *Shakspeare knew that tradition supplies a better fable than any invention can. […] [A]t that day, our petulant demand for originality was not so much*

> *pressed. […]. He is therefore little solicitous whence his thoughts have been derived; whether through translation, whether through tradition, whether by travel in distant countries, whether by inspiration*. (Emerson 1904f, 196)

Representative men are made 'great' by their capacity for 'publishing', or re-presenting, nature's uses. This capacity is at its fullest in literary genius. The American Shakespeare makes his entrance on a waste land of literary materials and – like Homer, who invented 'Greece' – invents the 'Elizabethan age', contextually making of it a precious heritage for generations yet to come.

> *At the time when he left Stratford and went up to London, a great body of stage-plays of all dates and writers existed in manuscript and were in turn produced on the boards. […]. All the mass has been treated, with more or less skill, by every playwright, and the prompter has the soiled and tattered manuscripts. It is now no longer possible to say who wrote them first. They have been the property of the Theatre so long, and so many rising geniuses have enlarged or altered them, inserting a speech or a whole scene, or adding a song, that no man can any longer claim copyright in this work of numbers. Happily, no man wishes to*. (Emerson 1904f, 192-93)

By a sort of diplopia, or double vision, Shakespeare's image is here projected against the background of a 'primordial wilderness' of letters. Like the entrepreneurial pioneers of Emerson's own time, who saw themselves as quickening a 'virgin' land – virgin to their rapacious eyes, but as old and lived upon as the rest of the created globe – this new Shakespeare of Emerson's invention looks at the mass of soiled and tattered manuscripts – or better *pulp scripts* – that are left-overs from other stages, and what his 'tyrannous eye' descries in them is a boundless expanse of 'incomparable materials', both immensely old and startlingly new, not unlike those whose picture he so much admires in Homer. And unsurprisingly like those the early settlers were discovering, and doing justice to, at that time, in America.

> *[H]e borrows very near home. […]. He knows the sparkle of the true stone, and puts it in high place, wherever he finds it. Such is the happy position of Homer perhaps*. (Emerson 1904f, 197)

The mountain of waste stock is waiting to be pulverized into words and, in the absence of authors and copyright claimers, any experiment can be freely tried on it. According to a method of work strongly reminiscent of the labour of the *chiffonniers*, or dustmen, active on the streets of nineteenth-century Paris and London, and known to Emerson from the pages of Dickens and Baudelaire. But there were rag-and-bone men in sixteenth-century London too. And second-hand clothes trade was flourishing.

> *The greatest genius is the most indebted man. […]*
> *The Genius of our life is jealous of individuals, and will not have any individual great, except through the general. There is no choice to genius*. (Emerson 1904f, 189-90)
> *Shakspeare did owe debts in all directions, and was able to use whatever he found*. (195)

The Poet whose genius consists in looking at the mass of accumulated literary materials and seeing Homer's gods in them is the 'American Shakspeare'. That genius, and not another, will give the world, as a bias, America's challenging perspective: through his eyes, and not another's, what will be called "the Elizabethan age" is perceived, for the first time, as a *spatially* remote age. The Old World did not entertain other than a *temporal* image of that remoteness.

But the most dizzying fact, on reading Emerson on 'Shakspeare', is the impression of nearness produced by that extraordinary distance in space. The ensuing somersault is Emerson's own gift to the reader. Looking from today's perspective, it appears almost obvious that Shakespeare's 'lack of originality' should be the source of his infinite productiveness: not in terms of the number of dramas brought on the stage, but of the power displayed in them, to re-use the past, and invent a future which was from the start a heritage. All but ignored by the intellectuals of his time, Shakespeare was loved by his public – all too prompt in following the scent of a possible future – and made his fortune.

As a counter evidence, reference may be made to Shakespeare's contemporary reception:

> *The unique fact in literary history, the unsurprised reception of Shakspeare – the reception proved by his making his fortune; and the apathy proved by the absence of all contemporary panegyric – seems to demonstrate an elevation in the mind of the people. Judge of the splendor of a nation by the insignificance of great individuals in it*. (Emerson 1904g, 237)

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