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# "Solutions in Hieroglyphic": Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Picturesque Language," and the Ancient Near East

Mathieu Duplay

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- <sup>1</sup> A graduate of Harvard Divinity School and a former Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson was predisposed to view the ancient Near East primarily as a textual corpus, which he identified, for better or for worse, with the Biblical canon. By now, the argument is familiar to every reader of his essays. "Palestine is ever the more valuable as a chapter in universal history," he writes in "Swedenborg; or, the Mystic," conflating the Holy Land with the "Hebrew muse" (RWE, 1850, 683): to him, the Bible is not just a key historical document, but a paradigm of all "history" in its dual sense of bygone events and of their formal, written record. On the one hand, he implies, the past exists only in so far as it is kept alive by subsequent acts of interpretation, like a book whose truth lies in "transition" but which becomes "false if fixed," Scripture being a case in point (682). On the other hand, the possibility of such acts is guaranteed by the existence of reliable modes of decipherment, guided by the "intuition of the moral sentiment" which, in Emerson's view, proves capable of solving the most intractable problems of scriptural interpretation (RWE, 1838, 76; Grusin, 1991, 76). Whatever once happened in the Hebrews' ancient homeland, the actual events matter less than the pages devoted to them in a volume whose "value" is entirely contingent on the uses to which it is put by later generations when they approach it with the benefit of hindsight, especially when it comes to the "stereotyped language" into which the "evanescent images of thought" all too easily degenerate (682):

What have I to do [...] with jasper and sardonyx, beryl and chalcedony; what with arks and passovers, ephahs and ephods; [...] chariots of fire, dragons crowned and horned, behemoth and unicorn? Good for orientals, these are nothing to me.  
(683-84)

- 2 The discerning reader should reject the Bible's "foreign rhetoric" to focus on "the moral sentiment" it conveys (683)—a recommendation ultimately based on the time-honored distinction between "mode" and "essence," between the "literal" and "universal" senses of allegorical writing (675), which plays a central role in Christian theology.
- 3 However familiar it may have become in the meantime, Emerson's argument was original enough to have occasioned a lively controversy when he presented it in 1838 in the so-called "Divinity School Address"; in particular, his insistence that the mechanical application of correct hermeneutic procedures does not in and of itself produce correct readings of Scripture was calculated to alienate both Trinitarian and Unitarian scholars, who had few other points of agreement (Grusin, 1991, 76). And yet, even at his most inflammatory, Emerson seemingly held fast to traditional assumptions whose reliability appeared increasingly dubious, as a series of developments in ancient Near Eastern philology forced a reconsideration of what it means to "read" ancient Biblical texts. Starting in the late eighteenth century, the progressive decipherment of scripts and languages once used in and near Palestine meant that the Biblical canon no longer represented, or would soon cease to represent, the sole source of direct textual information on the ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Bible could not stand on its own for an entire "chapter in universal history"; even more significantly perhaps, Old Testament Hebrew, and the alphabet used to notate it, no longer represented the sole entry point into an otherwise silent world of mysterious, unreadable inscriptions. This scientific revolution drew attention to the semiotic properties of scripts which are neither strictly nor exclusively alphabetical, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs. At the same time, it raised unforeseen questions about the Hebrew and Latin alphabets, whose defining features could no longer be confused with the universal properties of all writing, but were seen to result from contingent choices. Traditionally, Biblical exegesis had concerned itself with the problem of correct interpretation, with finding ways in which the right meanings can be recovered from texts whose letter often appears ambiguous and confusing; the "Divinity School Address" is Emerson's most striking contribution to this debate. Advances in Near Eastern philology raised a different set of questions: What does it mean for a text to be read at all, let alone to be read well? What are the steps that must be taken in order to ensure its basic legibility before correct interpretation becomes an issue? While the two lines of inquiry can be pursued simultaneously, as indeed they are in Emerson's essays, they turn out, in his case, to lead in rather different directions, causing perceptible strain whenever the study of ancient scripts undermines cherished assumptions about the nature of language and writing. The purpose of this essay will be to explore some of these tensions as they complicate Emerson's account of the semiotic nature of language, affect his already troubled relationship with contemporary scholarship, and shape his response to his own writing, in a manner which strikes the twenty-first century reader as strikingly modern.

## **"Reading" the Bible: Decipherment vs. Interpretation**

- 4 Emerson's interest in the new school of Biblical exegesis known as "higher criticism" is well documented and has been explored by a number of scholars (Packer, 1986; Grusin, 1991). Encouraged by recent philological discoveries, the rise of higher criticism made

it possible to confront Biblical passages, treated as texts written by human agents in specific situations, with other Near Eastern sources. Emerson reflects upon this development when he refers to the Bible as a "chapter" in an ongoing series, implicitly recognizing that it can no longer be considered as a self-contained, autonomous work requiring no contextualization. However, this aspect of the question is not what most directly preoccupies him, not least because the decipherment of ancient languages was a slow and painstaking process that did not yield useful results until the second half of the nineteenth century, by which time he had already published most of his major works.<sup>2</sup> To Emerson, the real problem lies in the unexpected light cast by modern philological science on what makes a text legible, regardless of what it turns out to mean. When he comments on proper and improper responses to the Bible in his essay on Swedenborg, Emerson takes it for granted that the letter of the text is not itself elusive, whatever may be said of its spiritual significance: however unfamiliar to most readers, the terms "sardonyx" and "ephod" have supposedly "literal" meanings which the present-day writer can safely discard because they are clearly tied to a particular context in ways that do not compromise their broader allegorical value. No such assumptions can be made about Egyptian hieroglyphs, both because many Egyptian words were (and remain to this day) obscure, and because the very notion of "literalness" appears problematic in connection with a writing system composed of symbols that cannot be adequately described as "letters." The Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets consist of abstract shapes whose primary function is to notate phonemes; as such, they radically differ from hieroglyphic script, which combines phonetic with logographic components and comprises elements that can be understood as representations of various objects. Therein lies the difficulty to which Emerson refers in the opening page of *Nature* when he writes that "[e]very man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put": "he acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth" (RWE, 1836, 7). Although no longer illegible, hieroglyphs afford, at best, a delayed access to truth, not because their meaning is in itself obscure (what humans "act as life," humans can also "apprehend" intellectually), but because the logic that governs its expression is disconcertingly alien, requiring a far greater effort than the alphabets to which we have become accustomed since Biblical times.

- 5 Throughout his career, Emerson held firm to the belief that the test of a "true theory" is "that it will explain all phenomena" (RWE, 1836, 7): the ultimate purpose of all intellectual endeavor is to reach for the invisible beyond the visible and to grasp the general principles underlying "accidental picture[s] of the truth," as he writes in his essay on Swedenborg (RWE, 1850, 682). In particular, this applies to speech and writing, which "clothe" thought in "images":

A man conversing in earnest, if he watch his intellectual processes, will find that a material image, more or less luminous, arises in his mind, coterminous with every thought, which furnishes the vestment of the thought. Hence, good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. (RWE, 1836, 23)

- 6 Passages such as this one support John T. Irwin's contention that Emerson subscribed to the "metaphysical" school of interpretation according to which all language is essentially emblematic (Irwin, 1980, 5-6). However, it should be noted that the argument offered here rests on a number of assumptions about the relationships between written and spoken language, between verbal and pictorial expression, between inner *logos* and "discourse" or "writing," which are encouraged by a primary allegiance to an alphabetical system; for instance, the assertion that wisdom consists in

the ability to "fasten words again to visible things" (23) presupposes that this connection has been severed, as is indeed the case when the symbols used in writing have no obvious representational value. Thus, it is doubly ironic that the "metaphysical school" had its roots in Renaissance speculation about Egyptian hieroglyphs, described by Athanasius Kircher as visible emblems of intelligible essences (Irwin, 1980, 5-6); for a passing acquaintance with Champollion's account of hieroglyphic writing is enough to suggest that it was not in any way clearer or easier to read than its alphabetical counterpart. "As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols," Emerson writes in *Nature* (22)—a claim both confirmed and undermined by his generation's experience of Egyptian script, whose decipherment required hitherto unparalleled feats of philological acumen even though its "picturesque" quality is everywhere apparent.

- 7 All this sits uneasily with Emerson's understanding of the Biblical canon, as it makes it impossible to cast aside "the dead scurf of Hebrew antiquity" (RWE, 1875, 306), its antiquated language, and obsolete imagery, in favor of its forward-looking spiritual message. A "solution in hieroglyphic," the record of human experience—the Bible, for instance—is perfectly capable of providing answers to the questions that preoccupy us today; but reaching for these answers implies devoting more, rather than less, attention to the modes of inscription on which the ancient writers relied, and recognizing that the letter of the text resists all attempts at discarding it as a mere "accident" of expression, a quaint "vestment" in which enduring truths are provisionally cloaked. This realization has important consequences, as Emerson's careful wording suggests. Traditional readings of the Bible contrast Egypt and the Hebrews, the land of slavery and the chosen people in search of freedom; likewise, Emerson extols the "intuition of the moral sentiment," emphasizing that interpretation cannot be restrained by "the dead letter of historical authority" (Grusin, 1991, 76): "that is knowledge, which is for our liberation" (RWE, 1850, 685). However, by stating that "hieroglyphics" offer a solution to "every man's condition," he also implies that the priestly script of Egypt continues to shed light on the whole of human history, including that of the liberated Hebrews and their modern counterparts. Thus, hieroglyphs cannot, strictly speaking, be described as an ancient, near-forgotten script that long ago "retir[ed] from its prominence, before western modes of thought and expression" (RWE, 1850, 683); instead, they exemplify an aspect of all writing, either as remnants of the "picturesque language" spoken by humankind in its "infancy" and revived later by the wisest authors or, less reassuringly, as examples of what happens to words once they are "sculptured," "fixed," and "perverted" (682). To put it bluntly, without a "dead letter" there is simply nothing for us to read, and the Bible, like all written documents, carries within itself the Egypt that its writers congratulated themselves on having left behind.
- 8 Richard Grusin states that even in his most antinomian moments, Emerson never conceived of the solution to his spiritual problems as the outright rejection of all institutional authority (Grusin, 1991, 3); he appealed to "moral truth," an authority so fundamentally institutional that it appeared to be innate (6). Likewise, one could argue that even when he questions the literalist impulse that all too often results in "the incongruous importation of a foreign rhetoric" (RWE, 1850, 683), Emerson never considers doing away with the letter of ancient texts; instead, he proposes to

reexamine the ways in which letters actually work, bearing in mind that all writing systems are arbitrary and provisional, and that their very arbitrariness is essential to the survival of writing as an institution since it is impossible to write at all without committing oneself to some kind of system, be it hieroglyphic or alphabetical: all one ever encounters are individual "modes" of a sacred "essence" which never exists in isolation (683). This complex endeavor accounts for his ambivalent attitude towards hieroglyphs, which he simultaneously approaches in two very different and seemingly contradictory ways. On the one hand, they remind him that all forms of expression are likely to be superseded in the long run, helping us distinguish between "universal wisdom" and the merely parochial (683). On the other hand, hieroglyphs stand for the error into which we are always in danger of falling whenever we lose sight of this fact, preferring the "symbol" to the many meanings it is capable of generating (683). Thus perceived, hieroglyphs are not exclusively associated with ancient Egypt; they embody "literature" at its worst, which manifests itself whenever "visible things" are seen as an end in themselves instead of being apprehended as allegories of a higher, invisible truth: "Literature is a poor trick when it busies itself to make words pass for things" (RWE, 1840, 334).

- 9 Ultimately, this complicates Emerson's view of the Biblical canon as a historical document, since it raises important questions about the human perception of time and consequently forces a reexamination of what "history" means. To a certain extent, the experience of hieroglyphic writing is undeniably temporal, since it involves a deferral of meaning, a latency period to be traversed before the promised truth becomes accessible. However, it would be incorrect to conclude that hieroglyphs are historical artifacts; rather, Emerson's argument suggests that history is what happens when successive generations of readers struggle with the obscurities of hieroglyphic writing and seek release from the tyranny of reified symbolism. Properly understood, the history of Biblical scholarship, in the full Emersonian sense of an activity that befits "Man Thinking" (RWE, 1837, 63), is a narrative of emancipation from "this eastern monarchy of a Christianity, which indolence and fear have built" (RWE, 1838, 81); like the Pyramids, the "petrified" expressions of insincere "admiration and love" that now surround the person of Jesus stand for a kind of slavery: "the friend of man is made [by them] the injurer of man" (81). The institutional Church, "historical Christianity" (80), carries much of the blame, as the "Divinity School Address" makes abundantly clear. However, the fact is that the Bible lends itself all too readily to such a misreading due to the extraordinary "idioms" and the potentially obfuscating "rhetoric of its language," that is to say the very features that make it so persuasive (80). Thus, the true goal of philology should be the same as that of all political revolutions, to resist these undue impositions and help "new lands" and "new men" create their "own works and laws and worship" (RWE, 1836, 7).
- 10 Paradoxically, Emerson's argument thus appears to de-historicize the Bible and to downplay its indebtedness to a particular place and time, even as he takes advantage of recent scholarly advances to address the enduring presence of a past that continues to exert a deadening influence on current thinking: as the example of Egyptian hieroglyphs suggests, all attempts at breathing new life into old writings inevitably leave the reader groping among "dry bones" that refuse to be resurrected, despite Ezekiel's assurances to the contrary (7). Thus, Emerson appears to struggle with an insoluble conundrum, as he hesitates between a vision of history as allegory—of historical events, and their written accounts, as representations of the unending

human quest for intellectual and spiritual emancipation—and a vision of allegory as history, of the successive stages in human development as an ongoing confrontation with the treachery inherent in all forms of symbolism (including writing), without which thought would come to a standstill.

## History and the Semiotics of Writing

- 11 Emerson's ambivalence about history, and specifically about the historicity of Scripture, largely accounts for his troubled relationship with much contemporary thought—with New England theologians of every stripe, as is well known, but also, and no less significantly, with current advances in Biblical scholarship, even when one would have thought them compatible with his interest in language and his rejection of "parish disputes" (RWE, 1850, 684). One explanation might be that Emerson's interest in the Biblical past takes second place to his preoccupation with the semiotics of writing, and especially with the nature of his own activity as a writer, in the light of which he tends to assess all his other epistemological concerns.
- 12 Emerson shared modern philology's refusal to worship the letter of the Bible in the name of the respect due to Scripture; but this tactical alliance did not extend far beyond a common rejection of literalism, and there is no indication that he was in any way interested in studying Hebrew history for its own sake or in exploring the world of the ancient texts, unlike the nineteenth-century scholars who examined the relationship between the historical or archaeological record of actual events and the accounts given in the Bible. At the time when Emerson was at work on his major essays, the weakening of Ottoman rule at last made it possible for Americans to travel to Palestine in search of traces of the Biblical past. Edward Robinson (1794-1863) journeyed twice to the Holy Land, in 1838 and 1852; his five-volume account of his discoveries, *Biblical Researches in Palestine* (1841-52), became a bestseller whose popularity was eclipsed only by the runaway success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Goldman, 2004, 152). Robinson's endeavor signaled a paradigm shift in Biblical research, as he was motivated both by an interest in German-style historical criticism and by the desire to demonstrate the veracity of Biblical narratives (152-3); his aim was to develop a new form of Christian apologetics reconciling faith and archaeological knowledge, and he was accompanied, on his first journey, by the missionary Eli Smith (154). Emerson took no part in this intellectual revolution. There is no indication that he ever took any interest in Robinson's innovative field work; to him, Palestine remained a purely textual entity, a literary creation testifying to the greatness of the "Hebrew muse," the province of the "Christian symbol" (RWE, 1850, 683)—a term which, in this instance, itself recalls a well-known text, the *Symbolum Nicaenum*, the Nicene Creed in which the early Church sought to present the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith.
- 13 Up to a point, Emerson's attitude can be described as theologically and philologically conservative. A trained minister, he was responsive to the moral message of Scripture, which he approached in a spirit that prefigures Cavellian perfectionism, convinced that regular contact with the Bible helped the reader make ever further advances on the road to spiritual and ethical excellence. As he describes her, the "Hebrew muse" sings in a distinctly didactic strain; he gives her credit for "[teaching] the lore of right and wrong to men" (RWE, 1850, 683), and the "Divinity School Address" shows him looking for "the new Teacher" who will complete the task of educating humankind, begun by



Jesus and, before him, by the Old Testament prophets (RWE, 1838, 92). Thus, to all intents and purposes, Emerson remains scrupulously faithful to the Augustinian tradition of Biblical hermeneutics, as he lays stress on the relationship between the text and a reader who, from the beginning, demonstrates a willingness to approach it in the light of Christ's teachings (Yarchin, 2004, xviii-xix). Everything begins with the experience of conversion, while the ultimate goal lies in meditation and good works; Scripture provides the necessary mediation, as the reader is encouraged to reach beyond its literal meaning in search of insights relevant to the present moment—hence the emphasis on allegory, on the quest for a higher, living truth above and beyond the text's historical relevance.

14 True, Emerson's conservatism in this regard is by no means confident or unproblematic: he increasingly appears to view Palestine, whatever the name means to him, as a question and not just as a repository of answers, of "innumerable christianities, humanities, [and] divinities" yet to be discovered in its bosom (RWE, 1850, 683). While at Harvard, he was made aware of new developments in German philology by Edward Everett (1794-1865), a Göttingen graduate who taught that religion is the expression of philosophical thought in mythological guise (Richardson, 1995, 13); in addition, the young Emerson read key works by Robert Lowth (*Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 1787) and Thomas Blackwell (*Life and Writings of Homer*, 1735), both of them early advocates of "higher criticism" who held that the poetic and prophetic functions are essentially identical, as evidenced by both the Greek and the Hebrew literary traditions (Richardson, 1995, 12). His reminder, in the "Divinity School Address," that the Christian Bible is actually a bilingual book consisting of "[t]he Hebrew and Greek Scriptures" (RWE, 1838, 91), his pointed reference to "the poetic teaching of Greece and Egypt," which he compares to the Christian "Mythus" (80), and his tribute to the Hebrew "muse" (RWE, 1850, 683)—a deity more commonly associated with Mount Parnassus than with Pisgah or Sinai—thus suggest that the Biblical writings should properly be placed in the broader context of an anthropology of ancient Mediterranean cultures.

15 This, however, is not a project to which Emerson actually devotes his energies, convinced though he may be of its epistemological validity: his attention never strays far from the Biblical text itself, and any insights gleaned from other disciplines are immediately reinterpreted in hermeneutic terms. While higher criticism seeks to demonstrate that Scripture fulfills a spiritual impulse common to many civilizations, bolstering Emerson's argument that the Bible should be approached with an eye to the universal rather than to the purely local, he does not see this as an invitation to engage in what we would now term comparative mythology, but directs his attention to the ways in which this tension manifests itself on a semiotic level as a conflict between abstract ideas and cosmic meanings on the one hand, and, on the other, trivial, context-bound symbolism reflecting life as lived in a specific cultural setting.

The piety of the Hebrew prophets purges their grossness. The circumcision is an example of the power of poetry to raise the low and offensive. Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols. The meaner the type by which a law is expressed, the more pungent it is, and the more lasting in the memories of men. (RWE, 1844a, 454-5)

16 What is at stake here is not so much the record of past human experience as the Word itself, the language of divine instruction which points to "the eternal revelation in the heart" (RWE, 1838, 80) by treating "low and offensive" symbols as vehicles of superior



truths. To the extent that history enters the picture at all, it does so on a strictly speculative level when Emerson accounts for the inadequacies of institutional religion by sketching out a narrative of usurpation and decline: "The idioms of [Jesus'] language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes" (80). The point of this statement is not to convince the reader that the early Church, or indeed the Apostles themselves, understood Jesus' teachings more clearly than nineteenth-century Christians were capable of doing; in fact, one strand of Emerson's argument suggests the opposite, when he proclaims his faith in the spread and development of Christianity in America (RWE, 1838, 91-2; Grusin, 1991, 74). Instead, his intention is to describe in narrative form the ambiguous and ever-present relationship between the "law" and its "type," understood as the "small and mean thing" whose "grossness" both conveys and obfuscates the inspiring message of great poetry. Emerson's "ages" are not to be understood as historical eras in the usual sense; they are epochs of the mind, moments in a quasi-dialectical progression, metaphors of conflicting forces that remain present at all times, vying for supremacy:

There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding. The understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips, and said, in the next age, "This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you, if you say he was a man." (RWE, 1838, 80)

- 17 Here, Emerson's brand of history is the same as Rousseau's; in fact, there is a clear similarity between the argument offered in this passage and Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, which states that speech and song, meaning and expression, were initially welded since every word uttered by early humans came straight from the heart (Rousseau, 1781, 103). As in Rousseau, the point is not so much the factual accuracy of this narrative as its ability to illuminate and allegorize the present state of affairs.
- 18 In the end, Emerson's meditations on the ancient Near East invariably contribute to a reconsideration of reading and writing—acquiring, in the process, a distinctly self-reflective cast as they come to illuminate his own authorial practice by comparison with his forebears. When he discusses the Bible, he does not do so in order to confirm its factual accuracy; for him, there is no point in seeking out tangible proofs of the Bible's veracity, which is of a wholly different order—the spirit speaks for itself, and is its own evidence. It is far more useful to note that the fate of the Biblical writings is not unprecedented, and that a similar treatment has been inflicted on other poetic and religious canons. "Christianity became a Mythos, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before" (RWE, 1838, 80). Incompetent readers are certainly to blame, but the very fact that the same mistake has been made several times in different situations suggests that the ancient texts themselves can, to some extent, be held responsible, if only because they are not content with expressing divine "principles," but invariably shroud them in "tropes" that tend to divert attention from their actual import. One such trope is narrativity: "principles" are not allowed to stand on their own, but give rise to stories which seek to explain various aspects of the human condition, thus encouraging readers to describe in terms of linearity and succession a divine impulse that actually operates in an essentially discontinuous manner and "evermore goes forth anew," disregarding its earlier manifestations (80).
- 19 Obviously, this is just what Emerson himself does on numerous occasions, not only when he laments Christianity's dogmatic bent, but, more broadly speaking, whenever he attempts to consider the general drift of human affairs. Theological disagreements

notwithstanding, Emerson remains enough of a Christian to share an apocalyptic and soteriological view of history; he awaits a "Teacher" who will fulfill Jesus' prophecies by demonstrating the essential oneness of ethics, aesthetics, and knowledge. To that extent, he demonstrates his attachment to what François Hartog would term a "futuristic" regime of historicity, one according to which the present and the past only become intelligible in the light of a later revelation (Hartog, 2003, 16); and this futurism governs his own practice as a narrator, for instance in the famous concluding sentence of "Experience," with its pointed use of the future tense: "the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power" (RWE, 1844b, 492). The example of Scripture suggests that this Emersonian "Mythus" is just as capable of giving rise to a fossilized creed as anything to be found in the Bible; therefore, it necessitates, as an antidote, a much darker counter-narrative whose subject is the unceasing accumulation of ossified tropes and lifeless symbols as humankind makes its way forward.

[The] Hebrew muse [...] had the same excess of influence for [Swedenborg], it has had for the nations. [...] The genius of Swedenborg [...] wasted itself in the endeavor to reanimate and conserve what had already arrived at its natural term, and, in the great secular Providence, was retiring from its prominence, before western modes of thought and expression. (RWE, 1850, 683)

- 20 Every time the human race takes one step in the direction of greater enlightenment, its discarded beliefs and the antiquated language in which it once chose to voice them are added to the giant dust-heap that is history itself, understood as the repository of ideas that once were alive, but have lost all relevance now that they no longer meet a genuine spiritual need. "Miracles, prophecy, poetry; the ideal life, the holy life, exist as ancient history merely" once faith has deserted them (RWE, 1838, 79). Swedenborg mistook the quaint remains of dead beliefs for the early manifestations of a new spiritual awakening; hence his insistence on retrospection, on the artificial preservation of "a poetry and philosophy [...] of tradition" rather than "insight" (RWE, 1836, 7). Emerson refuses to make the same error, but this forces him to dwell on the dark side of human experience, if only for the sake of contrast and in order to make his point sufficiently clear. While he complains that "[o]ur age is retrospective," he cannot wholly exempt himself from this general condemnation, and the first object he dwells upon is "the sepulchres of the fathers," much as he would prefer to roam the fields in search of "wool and flax" (7).

## Hieroglyphs and the Question of Meaningful Expression

- 21 This is the point at which the question of hieroglyphic writing becomes crucial. Hieroglyphs are an ideal metaphor for the complications inherent in allegorical modes of expression and interpretation, for the ever growing tension between an eager anticipation of the advent of truth and a retrospective inquiry into the lost meaning of discarded and, by now, largely unintelligible tropes. "Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth" (RWE, 1836, 7). Hieroglyphs stand for the time "before," for a script once familiar to the literate, but falsely believed to be illegible after many centuries of disuse—and these remnants of a bygone age are to be approached in the light of what comes after them, of a "truth" they have always heralded in ways to

which everyone long remained oblivious. Thus, "hieroglyphics" crystallize the ambiguous temporality of interpretation: no matter how forward-looking, it is perpetually shadowed by the past, which somehow manages to remain enigmatic and forbidding even when it turns out to have found the "solution" to questions yet to be formulated.

- 22 However, this isolated but highly visible reference to hieroglyphs also expresses a deeper anxiety about the possibility of meaningful expression, in ways to which the scenario outlined above does not do full justice. To interpret Emerson's statement in the manner that has just been attempted is to assume that the main difficulty is tropological—that hieroglyphs are tropes, that their eventful history can be turned into a convenient allegory, and that what they most convincingly stand for is allegory itself, language's propensity to cloak meaning in figures, the "mean types" out of which "great symbols" are fashioned, as Emerson argues in "The Poet" (RWE, 1844a, 454). This plausible assumption makes sense given the general drift of Emerson's argument, but it fails to take into account the peculiar nature of the difficulties with which hieroglyphic writing, unlike the Biblical canon, confronts the modern reader. Far-ranging questions may legitimately be raised about the best ways of interpreting the Old and New Testaments, but what is not in doubt is that deciphering them requires little more than a willingness to learn ancient languages and alphabets superficially different from, but ultimately comparable to, the one in use in the English-speaking world. The case of ancient Egyptian is qualitatively different, for the nature of the script itself is a problem, raising unexpected questions about the function of interpretation. An alphabetical system relying on abstract shapes, each in theory associated with a sound present in the spoken language, is not in danger of "mak[ing] words pass for things," as bad literature is wont to do (RWE, 1840, 334), since the individual letters are unlikely to be perceived as pictures of actual objects, let alone to be confused with them; whatever associations may be culturally established between a given alphabet and the world of "things," these usually remain speculative, as shown by Talmudic and Kabbalistic theories about the mystical functions of Hebrew letters. This is a far cry from the difficulties raised by Egyptian hieroglyphs, which mostly consist of signs that can readily be seen as pictograms even though, as Champollion demonstrated, their actual meaning often bears no discernible relation to what they appear to represent. In other words, hieroglyphs question the tropological nature of all writing, besides encouraging the reader to wonder about the rhetorical status of tropes in expressive discourse, a different issue altogether.
- 23 When the key to the ancient Egyptian script was lost, the symbolic meanings of the texts it notated became a moot point, since they could no longer be read; on the other hand, the pictorial quality of the writing itself came into prominence, causing numerous authors to theorize that hieroglyphs referred directly to things without the mediation of words (Parkinson, 1995, 15-6). Well established since the Renaissance, this mode of thinking had not yet been entirely supplanted by modern scholarship when Emerson wrote his most important essays; although Champollion's discoveries soon gained wide currency, they continued to attract controversy for several decades, and as late as 1854, the German-American Egyptologist Gustavus Seyffarth lectured in New York City on the merits of his alternative theory, showing that Champollion's ideas still had some way to go in convincing the scholarly community of their validity (Parkinson, 1995, 41).

- 24 In retrospect, these Neoplatonic speculations can be construed as logocentric fantasies of pure, unadulterated ideality; Emerson undoubtedly shared them to a certain extent, believing, as John T. Irwin puts it, that the physical fact serves the spiritual fact (Irwin, 1980, 11). However, they can also give rise to the fear that hieroglyphs bypass ideality altogether and deny the authority of *logos*, preferring to establish connections between material things, between graven images and natural or man-made objects. The latter interpretation is entirely consonant with Emerson's pessimistic take on antiquated modes of expression and thought: if it is correct, hieroglyphs can be described as tropes concealing tropes—as reified pictures enclosing, as in a hermetically sealed casket, the dead rhetoric of an ancient priestly class whose irrelevant beliefs have faded from human memory along with the language in which they were once articulated. Indeed, it is doubtful whether hieroglyphs, thus understood, still constitute tropes, since they “pass for things” to the point where it becomes unclear whether they have anything to do with words. In this light, hieroglyphs mark the limit between the realm of the “universal soul,” as manifested in speech, and the lifeless husk which is all that remains of nature once it has been stripped of its spiritual associations. “All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex” (RWE, 1836, 21).
- 25 It would be tempting to state that hieroglyphs are an isolated case if Emerson did not stress that they shed light on “every man's condition,” and if he did not argue, in a later section of *Nature*, that all language is susceptible to death and decay, like the ancient Egyptian tongue, and for the same reasons.
- When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up [...], the power over nature as an interpreter of the will, is in a degree lost; new imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed, when there is no bullion in the vaults. (22)
- 26 Bearing in mind that the word “character” can be understood in an ethical sense as a synonym for “personality,” but also as an allusion to the symbols used in writing, this statement aptly describes the decline of hieroglyphic script, which rejects the “sovereignty of ideas” and compromises language in its entirety, much as inflation, the lack of sufficient bullion, threatens to make money worthless. The only way of healing this “rotten diction” is to “fasten words again to visible things” (23), i.e. to restore a connection that hieroglyphs were supposed to guarantee, but which they eventually tended to undermine. Whenever a true poet proves equal to the task, he—Emerson's preferred pronoun—shows himself to be “a man in alliance with truth and God,” like Moses whose “good writing and brilliant discourse” rescued the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt (23). Ironically, the great prophet's successors—and, by implication, Moses himself—thus fulfill their mission by creating another Egypt within the very language they deploy as they leave behind the land of the Pharaohs and turn their backs on a “long-civilized” but decadent nation, dissatisfied with its utter inability to “clothe one thought in its natural garment” (22).

## “Speaking with the Dead”: History and the Pragmatics of Writing

- 27 All this confirms that the reality (past or present) of the Near East, the lessons of biblical archaeology, and the latest advances in Egyptological research have no bearing

on Emerson's argument, except in so far as they shed light on the complex relationships between thought, language, and writing, which are his real center of interest. To him, the East is not so much an actual place as it is a near-paradigmatic example of the factors affecting any poetic or prophetic enterprise, including his own. His ancient Near East is first and foremost a mental construct, a theoretical model meant to challenge dogmatic theology. As such, it is indebted to modern scientific approaches, which likewise question entrenched attitudes and beliefs; however, archaeology and textual criticism cease to interest him as soon as they lead in directions different from those he wishes to take, and in particular whenever they describe history in positive terms, as valuable in its own right and not just as the dark obverse of the human spirit's aspiration to a higher visionary state. To that extent, Emerson's project partakes of Orientalism, defined by Edward Said as "a created body of theory and practice," "a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness" that can be construed as "a sign of European-Atlantic power" (Said, 1978, 6); for while Emerson did not devote much attention to recent developments in regions such as Egypt and Palestine (then at a turning point in its eventful history, as British influence in the Levant was on the ascendant due to the weakening of Ottoman rule), his insistence that Eastern culture has long "retired from its prominence, before western modes of thought and expression" (RWE, 1850, 683) provides a handy justification for the colonial enterprises then under way. True, it is important to realize that Emerson's disparaging comments on the inevitable decline of Oriental civilization are mainly intended as a critique of European (and, by extension, American) literature and philosophy. His real target is not the East or its religious and poetic legacy, but the Western thinkers who, like Swedenborg, insist on borrowing an extinct phraseology from writings whose interest is by and large of an antiquarian nature; Emerson's aim is not to instill in Westerners a sense of their unfailing superiority, but rather to goad them into taking better care of their own spiritual needs. Nonetheless, it cannot be denied that the Orient/Occident dichotomy, understood as "an ontological and epistemological distinction" (Said, 1978, 2), persistently informs his discussions of the Christian West's biblical heritage, in a manner that certainly cannot be considered as innocuous.

- 28 That being said, the most troubling ambiguity inherent in Emerson's argument concerns his largely negative portrayal of Judaism, whose reliance on "arks," "passovers" (shorn of their capital P) (RWE, 1850, 683), and supposedly "obscene" symbols such as ritual circumcision (RWE, 1844a, 454), repeatedly comes in for sharp, if largely indirect, criticism.
- 29 To some extent, this can be explained by Emerson's lack of exposure to, and consequent ignorance of, the living realities of Judaism. As Shalom Goldman points out, Jewish presence in the United States was virtually non-existent until the 1830s, and the first major wave of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe did not begin until the early 1880s (Goldman, 2004, 112), by which time Emerson's career was over (he died in 1882). Thus, his knowledge of Judaism was essentially, if not indeed exclusively, bookish, and he remained largely indebted to the long line of Christian Hebraists whose American origins coincide with the founding of Harvard College (9). Goldman describes the ambivalent attitude that these scholars adopted towards Hebraic sources. On the one hand, they relied on Jewish writers for information on the world and language of the Old Testament; on the other hand, they argued that the Christian faith was intrinsically

superior to Judaism, and therefore tended to treat their Jewish contemporaries with indifference (12), when they did not actively attempt to convert them—in 1820, the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews was founded for that purpose by one J. C. S. Frey (1771-1850), himself a Jewish convert to Christianity (95). Up to a point, Emerson conforms to this well-established pattern, for instance when he argues that the Bible conveys a universal wisdom not to be confused with the obsolete ways in which it is expressed: this implies that the truth contained in the Hebrew Scriptures can be claimed neither by the Hebrews themselves nor by their Jewish heirs as their exclusive property, and may even be taken to suggest that the "eastern men" mentioned in the "Divinity School Address" are unable to do full justice to their own Scriptures (RWE, 1838, 91). In this regard, Emerson's position is far from original, save in his insistence that the Christian churches are not immune from a similar condemnation, that the faith they stand for is still too "Eastern," too respectful of the letter of the Biblical text, and too indifferent to its spirit.

- 30 However, the importance of these contextual factors should not be overstated, and the key to Emerson's quarrel with Judaism is linked to a philosophical disagreement that cannot be entirely explained away as a sign that he shared the prejudices of his time. Alfred Kazin makes remarks to this effect in a diary entry dated 1969:

RWE believes that nature is something for men to think with. It is comprehensibility (and in his case expressiveness) incarnate. It is the beginning of "natural" thinking—thinking according to nature, by the light of nature, according to the (great) book of nature. Everything is open—everything is possible. There is nothing inherently different from men (witness Plato's eternal realm), only the first cause (which too lurks in nature—at the end of the labyrinth so to speak.)

What has always bothered *me* in all this is the applicability and practicality of everything. There is sublimity of course, but no mystery. Whereas nothing is so obvious about the Jewish *condition* (to say nothing about the Jew's God) as its mystery. (in LaRocca, 2013, 616)

- 31 Emerson's account of the Hebrew Bible lays stress on its fundamental intelligibility. Although he is aware of the difficulties involved in bringing to life such an ancient text, and while he implies that they are, in part, to be blamed on the self-defeating tendencies inherent in all forms of expression, a full understanding and lucid presentation of universal truths remains the ultimate goal; as to the Biblical text's many obscurities, he views them either as imperfections in need of a corrective or as inevitable, but temporary, obstacles on the way to enlightenment. Ultimately, this argument is predicated on the belief that Scripture's purportedly divine origin is essentially irrelevant to the scholar since God is another name for the spirit at work in the depths of the human soul, and is therefore present in all poetry worthy of the name. This accounts for Emerson's view that "hieroglyphics," taken as a synecdoche for writing in all its forms, are akin to a problem in need of an ingenious "solution" (RWE, 1836, 7): what God says or does, humans can comprehend, as they are essentially one and the same. Nothing could be further removed from the Jewish belief that the Biblical text uniquely records the ancient prophets' dealings with a transcendent power whose essence lies beyond human comprehension, and that the letter of the sacred text, no less than its meaning, partakes of a mystery deserving of infinite respect.
- 32 Ultimately, Emerson's philosophical disagreement with Jewish readings of the Bible reflects divergent conceptions of the relationship between writing and divine Law. "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than



whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation," Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance" (RWE, 1841b, 262), alluding to the Jewish tradition of placing a *mezuzah* (a small capsule containing a fragment of Deuteronomy) near the front door of one's home in order to invoke divine protection. In Judaism, the *mezuzah* is a reminder that believers must scrupulously conform to divine commandments in exchange for supernatural aid; the ritual itself is a sign of obedience, as the Bible makes it mandatory (Dt 6:4-9). Emerson substitutes the word "whim" for the Scriptural quotation: the imperative to which he must be faithful at all costs originates neither in prophetic writings handed down from generation to generation, nor in obedience to the dictates of a transcendent Deity, but in the inner force that makes him "greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men's devotion" (RWE, 1841a, 399). According to Deuteronomy, God's decrees guarantee genuine freedom since they stand for the one true Law, as opposed to the false authority wielded by the Egyptian slaveholders (Dt 6:20-5); the *mezuzah* is an acknowledgement of this fact (Dt 6:9). In "Self-Reliance," the word inscribed on the door-post paradoxically urges whoever reads it to disobey written orders—a prohibition from which it is exempt since it does not actually command anything and mandates no specific course of action. Indeed, it would make no difference whatsoever if its meaning were eventually forgotten, or if readers found Emerson's cursory "explanation" unclear and decided to act as they pleased; for in doing so, they would unwittingly carry out the writer's recommendation and prove faithful to the spirit of the inscription, even if its letter eluded them. Thus, Emerson's subversive *mezuzah* stands as the ultimate answer to the errors into which Christian and Jewish exegetes of the Bible customarily fall: a foolproof piece of legislation, it cannot possibly be misunderstood, not even by the illiterate, and serves as a reliable guide to conduct in all circumstances, even when the people passing by have no inkling of its meaning.

- 33 Obviously, it helps that the inscription consists of just one ingeniously chosen word; this bold combination of a pithily expressed idea and a rhetorical strategy designed to make interpretation irrelevant probably cannot be sustained any longer (although it could be argued that Emerson never stops trying—hence the oracular obliqueness of his prose, which often manages to be both explicit and strangely elusive at the same time as if to discourage the reader from trying to pinpoint a specific meaning even when plausible interpretations teasingly suggest themselves). This does not diminish the importance of Emerson's claim, understood as a statement of intention ("I *would* write"). According to him, neither theology nor philology demonstrates the proper use of the Bible: both value attention to the letter of the text and assess the validity of particular readings according to their degree of conformity to established hermeneutic practice, whereas Emerson contends that "[w]hoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (RWE, 1841b, 261). The mark of true Emersonian "scholars" is that they never bow to the demands of "scholarship" in the usual sense of the word, and that any conflict between interpretive accuracy and "the integrity of [their] own mind[s]" (261) is fearlessly resolved in favor of the latter. In other words, coming to terms with the legacy of slavery in Egypt means realizing that the ancient writings in which it is commemorated should not intimidate us as the Pharaohs enslaved the Hebrew laborers: subjugation to a text, even one that recalls a nation's epic struggle against oppression, is no better than subjugation to a tyrant. What saves this argument from spilling over into needless provocation is that Emerson does not shrink from its consequences as regards his own work, and tries to distance himself from what is still



too "Eastern," too literalist, too cryptically dogmatic, in his own largely allegorical discourse. If, in his view, ethical trump epistemological concerns when it comes to writing, then it behooves him to act in a responsible manner, showing respect where it is due—in his relationship to his reader—the better to question the false pieties that all too often limit our understanding of ancient texts.

- 34 Interestingly, while this unconventional attitude appears calculated to exacerbate the tensions inherent in what were then the dominant modes of Biblical interpretation, Emerson's insistence on the pragmatics of reading and writing appears less problematic in the light of more recent conceptions of history and archaeology. Twentieth and twenty-first century research has challenged the assumption that exploring an extinct culture is akin to cracking a code, and that deciphering the script, syntax, and vocabulary used by ancient writers is enough to understand what they had to say. As Robert Parkinson points out, texts are cultural and material artifacts, inseparable from their social context and the means of their production and circulation (Parkinson, 1995, 12). Thus, an excessive preoccupation with the literal meanings of ancient writings is likely to prove counterproductive: it obscures the considerable difference between archaeologists and cryptanalysts who, when trying to decipher a message, usually know its origin, destination, and general purpose, unlike historians struggling to comprehend the full significance of inscriptions whose original context and pragmatic function may be difficult to ascertain, even when the script and language are unproblematic (Parkinson, 1995, 191-5). In this light, Emerson's disregard for the niceties of textual scholarship and preference for readings that emphasize the life of language in actual communication may appear more attuned to contemporary preoccupations. Instead of indulging in the fantasy that the scholar can open a window on the past by means of careful philological research, he stresses that whatever interest ancient writings retain for us today lies in their contribution to present-day conversations between people who, in good faith, fearlessly desire enlightenment, as evidenced by "the institution of preaching,—the speech of man to men," by which we are urged to "speak the very truth, as [...] life and conscience teach it, and cheer the waiting, fainting hearts of men with new hope and new revelation" (RWE, 1838, 91). Not unlike twenty-first century scholars, Emerson thus stresses that the true location of meaning lies not in the texts themselves, but in our ongoing, dynamic exchanges with and about them: deciphering an ancient document will not bring it to life unless we are aware of its unique relevance in its present-day context, of the interaction between the position we adopt in regard to it and what we know of the situation in which it was originally composed. This may be the closest we can come to "speaking with the dead" (Parkinson, 1995, 195) in such a way that their voices can be heard again, and their contributions properly appraised, without drowning out our own. "I look for the hour when that supreme Beauty, which ravished the souls of those eastern men, and chiefly of those Hebrews, and through their lips spoke oracles to all time, shall speak in the West also." (RWE, 1838, 91)

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## NOTES

1. In 1758, the Phoenician alphabet was deciphered by Jean-Jacques Barthélémy (1716-95) ; then came the turn of Egyptian hieroglyphs, thanks to the combined efforts of Thomas Young (1773-1829) and Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832). Soon afterwards, cuneiform was deciphered by Henry Rawlinson (1810-95) and Sir Edward Hincks (1792-1866), whose task was more or less complete by the late 1840s.

2. Champollion's discovery of the key to ancient hieroglyphs is usually thought to have taken place in 1822, when for the first time he was able to read a royal cartouche whose meaning was not already known to him from a Greek translation (Parkinson, 1995, 35). However, it still took him several years to sketch out his pioneering grammar of ancient Egyptian, which was posthumously published in 1836, the same year as Emerson's *Nature* ; and it was not until 1858 that the full text of the Rosetta Stone became available in an American translation (Parkinson, 1995, 41).

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## ABSTRACTS

Ancien pasteur unitarien, Ralph Waldo Emerson assimile l'Antiquité proche-orientale à un corpus de textes (le canon biblique) ; pour lui, elle relève d'une enquête herméneutique, indissociable d'une réflexion poussée sur la nature et les enjeux de l'écriture et de la lecture. Héritée de la théologie chrétienne, cette approche s'appuie sur des présupposés devenus problématiques à l'heure où les progrès de la philologie jettent un éclairage novateur sur l'histoire de l'écriture, notamment grâce aux découvertes de Champollion qui permettent de déchiffrer les inscriptions hiéroglyphiques. Traditionnellement, l'exégèse biblique s'était jusque-là donné pour tâche d'élaborer des interprétations correctes, de retrouver la signification exacte de textes dont la lettre paraît souvent ambiguë et confuse ; le discours connu sous le nom de « Divinity School Address » constitue la principale contribution d'Emerson à ce débat. Au début du dix-neuvième siècle, les progrès de la philologie proche-orientale posent des problèmes d'un autre ordre : que signifie « lire » un texte, et *a fortiori* le lire « correctement » ? Quelles précautions faut-il prendre afin de garantir sa lisibilité minimale avant même que ne se pose la question de la « juste » interprétation ? Le présent essai tente d'examiner quelques-unes des tensions qui résultent de cette situation nouvelle. Il s'agit de montrer en quoi elles infléchissent la réflexion d'Emerson sur la nature sémiotique du langage, compliquent ses rapports avec la pensée contemporaine et

déterminent l'attitude qu'il adopte vis-à-vis de sa propre écriture, d'une manière qui, du point de vue du vingt-et-unième siècle, conserve une grande actualité.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Ralph Waldo Emerson, Antiquité proche-orientale, écriture, hiéroglyphes, herméneutique, pragmatique

**Keywords:** Ralph Waldo Emerson, ancient Near East, writing, hieroglyphs, hermeneutics, pragmatics

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