

# *The Discipline of Abandonment: Emersonian Properties of Transdisciplinarity & the Nature of Method*

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**F**or the last decade or so I have been exploring the meaning of rivers, first through a thematic survey of literary works that feature waterways of the United States and most recently in an investigation of the strange waters of the Los Angeles River. At least to myself but occasionally aloud, I have called this area of study “Textual Potamology,” which involves using texts to think about rivers, using rivers to think about texts, and using this dual usage to enquire into the nature of meaning. “Potamology” is a Greek-rooted word that usually refers to the scientific study of rivers. When combined with “textual,” the result suggests a course of study in which one asks questions about “nature” and watersheds, but also asks questions of “culture” and interpretation.

The origins of this work may be found both in my training as a literary scholar (with a focus on the writings of Emerson and Thoreau) and in courses I teach in Environmental Studies, and for the longest time that connection suggested to me that I was pursuing something of an interdisciplinary approach to the study of rivers. Prompted by a recent invitation to speak from “whatever you take to be your disciplinary perspective,” I have begun to suspect that Textual Potamology bears more of a resemblance to Transdisciplinarity – a mode of scholarly inquiry that “admits and confronts complexity,” “challenges knowledge

fragmentation,” and is characterized by “its hybrid nature, non-linearity, and reflexivity, transcending any academic disciplinary structure” (Lawrence 113). Such qualities hint at a possible relation between primarily European, twenty-first century, science-based Trans-disciplinarity and nineteenth century, humanities-based American Transcendentalism, and in the present essay I explore what Textual Potamology might owe to the latter, as well as how it might participate in the former.

To begin, a word – or more precisely, a root word – regarding the proposed relation between two apparently disparate approaches to knowledge from periods separated by centuries. The “trans” of American Transcendentalism has less to do with a rising above than with a thinking across, beyond, behind customary practices, and the same may be said of Transdisciplinarity. Writing in the *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering and Science*, Roderick J. Lawrence discusses the “transgression” of “the boundaries defined by traditional disciplinary modes of inquiry,” and adds that Transdisciplinarity “requires an ingredient that some have called transcendence” (114). While the shared “trans” is itself intriguingly suggestive of a potential connection, “transcendence,” at least for me, raises the eyebrow higher. In the *TJES* article, Lawrence glosses “transcendence” as “the giving up of sovereignty over knowledge” and “the generation of new insight and knowledge” through the collaborative combination of different realms of experience. Scholars attempt to transcend the traditional disciplinary structure in order to more effectively deal with “environmental concerns” and achieve sustainable “human living conditions on earth.” This is not all that far from how I have interpreted some manifestations of Emersonian transcendence, with its emphasis on change, the development of new ways of thinking, and a reconsideration of the meaning of nature (McMillin 90). Throughout his career as a writer, Emerson explored the nature of nature and different cultural approaches to and uses of the concept. In some instances, readers were encouraged to transcend what

we take to be nature; in others, readers were led deeper into their conceptualizing of nature to find a point of departure for transcendence. Both Transcendentalism and Transdisciplinarity involve a "trans" that transforms traditional conceptions of nature.

As an example of possible cross-over between the two trans-approaches to nature, consider Henry David Thoreau, whose first book, *A Week on the Concord & Merrimack Rivers* (1849), is thought by many to be his "most transcendental book." *A Week* experiments with different aspects of nature, including that which is commonly hidden to us – occluded in part because of the primary "disciplines" that shape our perception of the world. He writes that "After sitting in my chamber many days, reading the poets, I have been out early on a foggy morning, and heard the cry of an owl in a neighboring wood as from a nature behind the common, unexplored by science or by literature" (56). For me, this event suggests a potential model for Textual Potamology: rigorously studying literature *inside* – that is, within the structure designed and built by and for humans, deeply inside culture, as it were, and consumed with a specific disciplinary task (understanding the works of previous writers) – the scholar then goes *outside*, into the field, into the present, surrounded by the foggy atmosphere, which temporarily reduces visual clarity and renders his coordinates indistinct. Whereas before his place and his attention were determined and directed, he now finds himself comparatively directionless and his bearings indeterminate. Suddenly rings out the cry of an owl, calling him to his senses, which, so enlivened, reveal the possibility of something like a nature from which he has been estranged. This calling enables him to question the limits of literary and scientific explorations of "nature" – world, truth, the real, *cosmos* – and imagine another aspect of nature, another "nature," of which we are commonly ignorant.

"A nature behind the common, unexplored by science or by literature" – Thoreau, who in a later writing reminded readers that the universe is wider than our views of it, here suggests that either approach to knowing, scientific or literary, fails to fully explore nature

due to disciplinary specificity, the kinds of questions asked and the ways in which findings are communicated. The “or” in Thoreau’s phrase is significant; if it were “by science *and* by literature,” we might have the makings of a critique of multi- or interdisciplinarity: something about their combination diminishes our knowing. Instead, we are diminished by the pursuit of one *or* the other. That one approach is empirical and the other not also probably matters: disciplines vastly different in their objects of study, their methods, and their goals cannot, by virtue of the circumscription of their singular scopes, reveal the nature that dwells beneath familiar modes of construing the world, our customary worldviews. And the going outside, beyond the comfortable, familiar structure of his “chamber,” into the foggy now, opens up the possibility for experiencing and taking note of the call of the owl. Had the scholar remained inside, his mind bent on his disciplined study, there would be too many layers, physical and cognitive, too much distance between inside and outside, for the owl’s call to come to his attention. So Thoreau goes outside, though he will eventually come back in to write his rivers book – he never, in any of his expeditions, just goes out and stays out for good. His prototypical experiment in Textual Potamology involves movement back and forth, between inside and outside, and trying to report his findings from that movement. Transcending disciplinary specificity, at least momentarily, opening himself to something wider, grander, Thoreau then connects the experience of that greater world to his disciplinary efforts: in this case, the production of a literary text.

That text was written at a moment when modern disciplinary specificity was still young, but the scholar’s abandonment of his chamber bears a resemblance to Transdisciplinarity. Originating in the twentieth century – some trace its roots to the physicist Niels Bohr, others to Jean Piaget, Edgar Morin, and Erich Jantsch<sup>1</sup> – Transdisciplinarity represents a varying set of responses to complex problems (environmental, social, economic, psychological) as well as to the fragmentation, specialization, and dramatic expansion of

knowledge (Becker 117-18). Like multi- and interdisciplinary approaches, Transdisciplinarity pursues "the cross-fertilisation of knowledge and experiences from diverse groups of people that can promote an enlarged vision of a subject, as well as new explanatory theories" (Lawrence 112). It differs from those other cross-fertilizings in several significant ways: 1) the degree of integration of multiple disciplines; 2) the self-reflective and rigorous questioning of "disciplinary thinking" and its limits (Klein 524); 3) the combination of "logical reasoning" with "imaginative thinking" (Lawrence 114); and 4) the acknowledgment of "*multiple levels of reality that make up an object*" of study (Ramadier 429; emphasis in original). Although there has been more Transdisciplinary work in the sciences than in the arts and humanities, many prominent theorists call for a "suprascientific search for meaning" (Klein 521; also Nicolescu, *Manifesto* 123), proposing that, in order to "understand the actual world" (Lawrence 114) and current troubles, from the environmental to "increasingly complex and interdependent" social problems (Klein 517), new and innovative approaches are required. Lawrence, Head of the Human Ecology Group of the Institute of Environmental Sciences at the University of Geneva, asserts that "transdisciplinarity admits and confronts complexity in science and it challenges knowledge fragmentation..., transcending any academic disciplinary structure" (Lawrence 113).

What does it mean to "transcend" disciplinary structure? To Basarab Nicolescu, currently one of Transdisciplinarity's foremost proponents, both multi- and interdisciplinary methods venture *outside* of the approach of any one discipline but nevertheless remain *inside*, "within the framework of disciplinary research." Nicolescu, a theoretical physicist and president of The International Center for Transdisciplinary Research in Paris, writes in the *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* that to "understand the present world" with its urgent and complex problems, we must go even further outside, beyond a particular idea of disciplinarity: "As the prefix *trans* indicates,

transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline” (44). Especially the last phrase, “beyond all discipline,” connotes something akin to what we might think of as “abandonment”; in Nicolescu’s manifesto, it belongs to a theory of knowing informed by an acknowledgment of “the coexistence between complex plurality and open unity” that constitute Reality (54). This “new Principle of Relativity” supposes that “when our perspective on the world changes, the world changes” (55). Reality comprises multiple levels that correspond to different levels of perception (which in turn vary according to discipline, historical epoch, cultural differences, etc.).

“Complex plurality and open unity” resemble the qualities of nature posited in some of Emerson’s writing, including poems (e.g. “Each and All”) and essays such as “The Method of Nature,” where it is figured as beyond analysis, “the result of infinite distribution,” “perpetual inchoation” (I.124). Nicolescu’s manifesto is remarkable for many reasons, one being for its numerous links to Emersonian ideas, though neither Emerson nor any of his ilk are directly mentioned. I don’t mean to suggest that Transdisciplinarity owes anything to Emerson but that points of connection can tell us something about Transdisciplinarity and something about Transcendentalism as well, and to move from Nicolescu to Emersonian questions, here are three postulates drawn from the *Manifesto* regarding three potential points of crossover: 1) Nature; 2) Discipline; 3) “Trans” (movement across, through, beyond).

NATURE, in the *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, is not something other than humans but an ever-changing system comprising multiple levels of Reality as well as multiple ways of perceiving that correspond to those multiple levels – “not a lifeless book that has been put at our disposal to decipher, but a living book” (25). In recasting the familiar metaphor of nature as text by using principles of quantum physics, Nicolescu emphasizes the inclusion of subjective, conceptual aspects of reality. Nature, in short, is not separate from our thinking

about it. Cognitive "abstraction," for example, "is not simply an intermediary between us and Nature, a tool for describing reality, but rather one of the constituent parts of Nature" (20). Seen from this approach, Trans-disciplinarity defines "living Nature" by a three-part structure consisting of Objective Nature, Subjective Nature, and "trans-Nature," the latter quality representing change informed by movement between the first two. Nicolescu also characterizes this third aspect of Nature as "the sacred" (72), by which he means a form of ligature: "The sacred is that which connects" (125). Subjective, Objective, and Trans-Nature make up Nature. Nature in sum is 1) what is, the present, a set of the conditions – forces, phenomena, space, time – that produce the present, but also 2) an open set of potential realities, and 3) our understanding of those conditions and our imagination of those realities.

DISCIPLINE specifically refers to branches of knowledge and generally to ways of knowing, ways of perceiving Nature. To address the complexity and open unity of Nature, Nicolescu calls into question "classical thought," based in a particular notion of precision, determinism, and binary logic, that has "ruled our thinking for two millennia and continues to dominate it today (particularly in political, social, and economic spheres)..." (26). Transdisciplinarity does not discount the important contribution that traditional disciplinary thinking has made and continues to make to our understanding of Nature, but considers such an approach to knowledge as insufficient, offering only a limited and homogenized version of Reality, a version conditioned by the historical means of imagining Nature:

the view of Nature of a given period depends on the kind of imagination that predominates during that period; in turn, that view depends on many factors: the degree of scientific and technological development, social organization, art, religion, and so forth. Once formed, an image of Nature exercises an influence on all areas of knowledge. (57-58)

The ways in which we approach Nature condition the Nature we perceive; the Nature we perceive conditions the ways in which we approach Nature. Instead of operating with Nature as understood by Physics alone, say, or Chemistry or Biology or Economics, Nicolescu argues against the notion that any particular discipline or approach “constitutes a privileged place” from which we can view the whole (54-55). One way of knowing cannot be *the* way, only *a* way. Prevailing disciplinary-specific approaches to nature are based in and serve to maintain a particular perspective. Transdisciplinarity offers the possibility of a change in perspective, a change that combines specific disciplines, complements disciplinarity, and in doing so seeks to revise ways of knowing. Involving the means by which we cognitively construe the world, Discipline can be understood as vision. In Transdisciplinarity, Discipline is the act of trying to see Nature clearly while acknowledging complexity and constant flux.

The TRANS of Transdisciplinarity indicates the importance of movement, of moving between, across, and beyond customary practices of perceiving Nature. This motion entails intellectual movement from one way of seeing to another, not necessarily in a particular direction to a stated destination (say, “up,” to a detached vantage point) nor by a predictable and steady course, from the old to the new-and-improved by gradual steps. “The passage from one viewpoint to another is not progressive, continuous – it happens by sharp, radical, discontinuous breaks” (58). “Trans” represents movement through Nature, across disciplines, between the Subjective and Objective aspects of reality, toward the beyond of “Nature” as traditionally construed. Transdisciplinarity attempts to transform Discipline and thus Nature through connection, expansion, clarification, and movement toward what might be next, into something akin to Thoreau’s “nature behind the common.” The goal for Nicolescu is a conscious, responsible participation in “self-transcendence,” a metamorphosis to be affirmed through more rigorous science, more open self-reflection and self-critique, and the “included third” that unites better science with better



understanding (73), as proposed in a chapter titled "Homo Sui Transcendentalis."

Another version of these properties of Transdisciplinarity – complex Nature, different ways of seeing, active intellectual movement – can be found in American Transcendentalism. By considering the peculiar concept of "abandonment" in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings – a consideration facilitated by the recently completed Harvard University edition of his works – I hope to open a different channel of interest in Transdisciplinarity, gain a different perspective on nineteenth century Transcendentalism, and outline some of the principles of Textual Potamology. Ample in output and eclectic in approach, Emerson wrote sermons, lectures, essays, and poems on history, politics, philosophy, culture, nature, and religion. While it is difficult – and missing the point – to sum up these writings, I will venture to say that throughout his career, Emerson sought to encourage critical reflection and imagination in his readers and listeners, believing that his contemporaries were prone to take up and cling to particular ideas, a culturally conditioned intellectual conservatism from which it was nearly impossible to escape, a sleep from which he enjoined us to awake. As he himself put it in "The Fortune of the Republic," a lecture from late in his career, "The source of mischief is the extreme difficulty with which men are roused from the torpor of every day. Blessed is all that agitates the mass, breaks up this torpor, and begins motion."<sup>2</sup> Emerson proposed that, in the current state of affairs, people had turned their backs on newness and change – on hope – and had succumbed to the inertia that comes from holding on to accustomed perspectives and institutionalized practices.

Being willing and able to reconsider the state of affairs is necessary for us to drag ourselves from stagnation and move onward toward some yet unimagined understanding of the way things are. Emerson pursued this issue from an unlikely analogy: "*Corpora non agunt nisi soluta*; the chemical rule is true in mind. Contrast, change, interruption, are necessary to new activity and new combinations" (*W*

XI:415). Citing a chemical or alchemical principle dating back to Aristotle, Emerson's use of the phrase promotes a fluidity of mind over a solid or static state, for the sake of new ways of thinking and new modes of conducting what we take to be our business. With the potential for such newness comes hope.

Emerson's interest in the importance of fluid boundaries, for instance, resonates with what I understand to be one of the most provocative terms in his writing – Abandonment. The word, which appears incidentally in a number of his published writings throughout his career and at key moments in some of his most prominent essays, was itself subject to substantial fluidity in its definition and usage, and his collected works afford us an opportunity of following the term through its multiple forms.<sup>3</sup> In an essay on “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” abandonment is associated with “daring imagination” (*CW* IV:32), whereas in *English Traits* it is depicted negatively as a lack of control (*CW* V:171). More often than not, however, abandonment has positive connotations, used to describe the power of the works of Hafiz in the essay on “Persian Poetry” (*CW* VIII:143) or, more generally, to discuss the lack of linearity in the manner in which life unfolds. In the essay “Works and Days,” after observing that “Everything in the universe goes by indirection” and thus “There are no straight lines,” Emerson endorsed a statement of a “foreign scholar”: “There can be no greatness without abandonment.” Readers are enjoined to “fill the hour,” not just let it lapse or expire. Abandonment is a joyful giving oneself up to the forces of the earth, surfing on the changing waves of time, the exhilarating enjoyment of place, actively and interconnectedly living (*CW* VII:91-92).

In the essay “Immortality,” abandonment belongs to a religious sentiment; it is a giving oneself up to “the Highest” (*CW* VIII:192). Similarly (and yet not quite), in “The Preacher,” abandonment functions in two different ways: first, to describe a culture's lamentable turning away from religious sentiment, and secondly as the sentiment itself. People have abandoned religious, scientific, political, and economic

institutions "for other better or worse forms"; traditions "are losing their hold on human belief"; and everything is marked by "restlessness and dissatisfaction." "The old forms rattle," Emerson moaned, "and the new delay to appear; material and industrial activity have materialized the age, and the mind, haughty with its sciences, disdains the religious forms as childish" (*W X*:209). As a result, we have lost the "religious submission and abandonment which give man a new element and being, and make him sublime..." (*W X*:210). We have, that is, abandoned abandonment and conformed our mental operations (and thus the world those operations construct) to the terms of material, industrial, scientific discourses. Emerson's concern arose at a radically different historical moment and pursued an angle divergent from contemporary Transdisciplinarity, but I see a connection between his concern in "The Preacher" and that expressed by Nicolescu. The physicist proposes that we are on the verge of "triple self-destruction – material, biological, and spiritual" and that this perilous state is the result of "a blind but triumphant technoscience, obedient only to the implacable logic of utilitarianism" (8). In phrasing that mirrors some of Emerson's, Nicolescu laments that "the word *spirituality* has become suspect and its use has been practically abandoned" (13). He urges readers to learn from the lessons of quantum physics, rethink the relations between subjects and objects, and transcend our current ways of knowing. "Transdisciplinarity," he writes, "is a generalized transgression which opens an unlimited space for freedom, understanding, tolerance, and love."<sup>4</sup>

How this transgressive approach resembles that of Transcendentalism perhaps can be clarified through more careful consideration of the vicissitudes of abandonment. In "The Method of Nature," Emerson associated abandonment with Love. The essay, based on a lecture delivered in August 1841 to a literary society ("the Society of the Adelphi") at what eventually became Colby College, proposed abandonment as an *attitude*, a position one might take albeit disposed towards shifting and flexibility. Emerson connects this attitude – a

disposition toward dispossession, a sort of beside-oneself-ness – with love, which he defined as “an overpowering enthusiasm,” “never self-possessed,” “all abandonment” (*CW* I:133). This idea comes forth near the end of an oration intended for young *literary* scholars, part of an overall point that, in order to think well about the things in which we are interested, we need to actively relate those things and that thinking to nature and nature’s “method.” Removed from nature, a discipline dries up: “Nothing solid is secure; everything tilts and rocks. Even the scholar is not safe; he too is searched and revised. Is his learning dead? Is he living in his memory? The power of mind is not mortification, but life” (*CW* I:121). Emerson recommended “exploring the *method of nature*” (*CW* I:123) and transferring what is learned to our disciplinary efforts, trying to be mindful of what most scientists must concede: that “a mysterious principle of life must be assumed, which not only inhabits the organ, but makes the organ” (*CW* I:125).

Abandonment, a word used in the essay to describe the effects of Love, characterizes a stance or attitude of enthusiasm “in which the individual is no longer his own foolish master” (*CW* I:133). Having abandoned the customary self and its perspective on the world, the abandoner opens herself or himself to new ways of seeing the world and “consults every omen in nature with tremulous interest.” To adopt such a stance, one must first overcome “fancied freedom and self-rule,” for these amount to “so much death.” That is, one’s imagined independence of thought and understanding, coupled with the perceived control of one’s destiny through self-imposed discipline, are but forms of cutting oneself off from life. To overturn such a condition of “so much death” requires an act of will that sets the perceiving self in motion, from which one can begin to become “wiser.” The Abandoner “seeth newly every time he looks...” (*ibid.*).

Understood in the context of counsel given to scholars, abandonment supposes taking off the lab coat, the mortar board, the familiar and customary, a shucking and shedding of established credentials and attendant view points, all for the love of truth.<sup>5</sup>

Abandoning one's scholarly position involves turning one's back on oneself, looking forward to what else might be seen. A scholarly attitude of abandonment gives one a chance to look at one's looking, to follow the line of the disciplinary gaze and see how it positions the object under scrutiny. Abandonment allows for self-reflection by putting the self in motion. You are not walking out on your family, colleagues, profession, or society as much as you are abandoning peculiar, received, and static notions of yourself and reconnecting your methods – what you do and how you think – with the method of nature. Thence some really difficult but really fresh ways of thinking might arise.

Whereas in "The Method of Nature" abandonment is an attitude, two essays from the 1841 *First Series* (Vol. II) feature it as a quality to enliven thought and communication. In "Spiritual Laws," Emerson bemoaned the lack of power and meaning in public discourse, a problem he attributed to an absence of abandonment. After explaining that attending to one's work and performing it as fully as possible is a means of "unfolding" oneself, Emerson surmised that this "unfolding," especially when considered in areas involving public expression, affected the very ways in which one would be received and understood. "Unfold" connotes some sort of natural process of opening or "ripening," as Emerson stated earlier in the essay. Unless we work in such a way as to unfold ourselves and communicate from within the process of that unfolding, we will have little to contribute to the communities we inhabit. "Our public speaking," he complained, "has not abandonment" (*CW* II:83) – that is, our modes of formal communication are too careful, confined to expectations, too conventional, bent to conform to the small offices in which we are folded up.

In this essay, Emerson's admonishment yielded encouragement: if you wish to speak truly and newly and necessarily and meaningfully with those of your community, whether great or small, then "let out all the length of all the reins." Public expression becomes a means by which one can practice abandonment – "frank and hearty expression of what force and meaning" one contains – which means further that public discourse

presents the possibility of actively communicating one's own unfolding, passing along that unfolding to others. Emerson warned against "the common experience" of fitting oneself to "the customary details of that work or trade" into which one had fallen, thereby becoming part of the machine one operates, the technology one wields, the discipline to which one's professing must conform. What happens then? Well, for one, the living being "is lost," a dire consequence which suggests that we passively lose the better part of ourselves in merely performing work-, trade-, or discipline-specific functions. Active abandonment, according to Emerson, redresses that state of loss. One has to lose what one has taken to be oneself in order to recover one's lost self, in order to regain one's vitality: "Until he can manage to communicate himself to others in his full stature and proportion, he does not yet find his vocation" (*ibid.*). Unfolding involves communication, vocation requires provocation: call out to others as a means of calling yourself out, communicate your living being and meaning to others as a means of broadening your understanding of your calling.

"Spiritual Laws" represents a different stage or phase of abandonment. Here, abandonment comes through expression, a communicating of your unfolding self to others who inhabit particular spheres with you. But your calling, Emerson tried to point out, is not to be confused with the narrow confines in which one customarily operates, "the meanness and formality of that thing you do" (*ibid.*). "Meanness" denotes the meager, the commonly accepted, and the selfish; "formality," submission to circumscribed limits and exterior forms. Passively accepting the place determined by your position within a profession or occupation is but a fool's errand; the wise, he remonstrated, will actively "convert" that thing you do, your actions and endeavors, "into the obedient spiracle of your character and aims" (*ibid.*). A spiracle is an aperture for breathing. This essay proposes that when our actions open to the larger world to which our fields and subfields belong, those things we do will be more readily (and more truly) understood to be part of life, living. When our public expression

"has" abandonment, we connect with and invigorate the process of unfolding in ourselves and others. This expressive mode of abandonment does not require that scholars invent some wacky and reckless manner of presenting their ideas to other scholars but rather that we breathe new life, as Emerson suggested in the Divinity School Address (*CW* I:92), through the existing forms of the paper, the lecture, the book, the report. Let us let out the reins in our speaking and writing, unfolding within the discipline and beyond.

"Circles," the other essay from the 1841 volume, lays out Emerson's principles for the role of literature in intellectual endeavors and makes a case for different ways of thinking. Literature, according to "Circles," entails writings that, by their nature, occupy a point outside of our customary ways of perceiving the world; such writings are poised to offer fresh perspective on the world and on our present modes of making sense of the world. In this essay, abandonment is associated with "forget[ting] ourselves," with being "surprised out of our propriety." That which we take for the self is based largely on the piecing together of the personal past, projecting a course into the future based on the trajectory of that past, and staying the course of proper or appropriate behavior more or less unquestioningly and presumably indefinitely. Abandonment involves being willing to imagine another direction, degree, or drift, as well as the ability "in short, to draw a new circle" (*CW* II:190). These qualities of imagination and writing connect abandonment with literature and its potential uses, but Emerson intimated that the latter belongs to the former, that literary activity might best be considered a medium through which intellectual circles may be understood and, on occasion, revised or abandoned. Abandonment, Emerson proposed in "Circles," is a fundamental property of life itself. "The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment" (*ibid.*).<sup>6</sup>

Abandonment, in other words, is natural. It is a vein through which life flows, a means by which change occurs, a product of and process through which natural forces and conditions carry on and unfold. The

complexity of “the way of life” – how life lives or unfolds, the method of life, including growth and death, composition and decomposition, entropy and negentropy – informed and conducted in part by abandonment, requires (or at least invites) would-be thinkers to acknowledge and affirm so elemental an aspect in their intellectual efforts to understand life and its ways. Thinking, for Emerson, entailed letting go as much as or even more so than holding fast, abandoning one’s circle as much as or more than maintaining it, mainly because he reckoned that, given the current state of things, most people would take care of the holding fast and maintaining. Hope for better ways of living depends upon the temporary suspension of the ties that bind us to one way of thinking or another: “People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them” (*CW* II:189).

If I let “Circles” function as Emerson suggested literature might – as a “smiting” slap to the back of my head that helps break up “my whole chain of habits” (*CW* II:185) – I might get a glimpse of my own academic circle and its limits. Disciplines and disciplinarity are self-maintained circles, with boundaries fixed, interiors explored in depth, exteriors largely left to the maintenance of others, allowing for occasional intersection with another circle that in some instances enriches both (an intersection also known as interdisciplinarity). Emerson’s essay on thinking can be understood as a Transcendentalist prototype of Transdisciplinary intellectual processes. His abandonment encourages radical tangents that revise the nature of existing circles, identifying literature as a peculiarly effective means of revision (presumably because it combines imagination, language, reflection, association – i.e., heightened and diverse modes of intellectual activity). Transcendental Transdisciplinarity inflects circularity with Onwardness, infusing life with thinking, thinking with life, and all by way of abandonment.

The essay titled “The Poet,” the keynote for his 1844 *Second Series* (Vol. III), appeals to “every intellectual man” to develop “a new energy” by “abandonment to the nature of things” (*CW* III:15). I take this phase



or aspect of abandonment to involve drawing on what Emerson described as "a great public power" rather than on one's "privacy of power" as an individual, which again rhymes with recent manifestations of Transdisciplinarity. The essay urges the intellectual to unlock, "at all risks, his human doors," an opening up that permits "the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him" (*CW* III:15-16). When that occurs, the person is truly transformed into a living being belonging to life, maybe even more fully alive by virtue of letting life circulate through oneself rather than restricting/controlling/protecting against such flow. The unlocking and unblocking result in a new-found energy, which in turn brings with it new forms of power and authority: when "the poet" abandons the self to the nature of things, "... he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals" *CW* III:16).

Emerson identified "the Poet" here as something other than "one who writes poetry" (and all the cultural associations that adorn such a person). The Poet is a name for one who is no longer oneself, who has abandoned the self to nature through active use of the intellect, an intellectual who reckons that "adequate" communication requires one to speak "somewhat wildly." To speak so is to connect the intellect with "celestial life," a far wider application of mind than the customary instrumentality of "intellect ... used as an organ." The Poet affirms "intellect inebriated by nectar," letting go the reins and trusting "the divine animal who carries us through the world." Once we have abandoned our petty selves and our parceled-out intellects, "new passages are opened for us into nature." The mind is released to participate in the "flow" of life, the living flow that streams through the nature of things, and "the metamorphosis is possible" (*ibid.*).

Interpreted as a poetical calling-forth rather than as a prosaic, literal set of instructions, this essay posits abandonment as an act of letting go, with an emphasis on nature as that to which one lets oneself go. The thinker releases the self from the ties that bind and the customs that constrain thinking, unbinding the intellect to reconnect with the "nature

of things,” which is at once the nature of things of this earth (e.g., “plants and animals”) and the nature of “celestial life” – a natural force represented in the combinatory figure of the “divine animal” on which one is carried through the world, the *animus* or animating principle in all living beings. Abandoning one’s particular and peculiar self to the nature of things empowers one to speak in a way resonant with nature (thunderous), consonant with natural principles, and redolent with meaning (“universally intelligible”). Abandonment is the intellectual affirmation of something bigger (to which we always belong) through the negation of something smaller (that which we mistake for our “natural” mode of thinking and being). Abandonment makes possible metamorphosis, the transformation of whatever we are now, into whatever we might be next – maybe the next phase of *Homo Sui Transcendentalis*.

Transcending limits, including disciplinary boundaries, and letting one’s self-understanding be infused by, suffused to, re-fused with nature, the practitioner of abandonment risks confusion but is re-formed into a voice for the nature of things, speaking “somewhat wildly” and expressing new elements of nature through which courses the inseparably laminate flow of the animal-celestial. Abandonment thus can be understood as a trans-discipline: a way of study, a way of life, a way of connecting study to life and living. The word commonly carries negative connotations: deserting someone or forsaking something, behaving with frightful recklessness, leaving home and hope behind. But transcendental abandonment, transdisciplinarily considered, is also a way of going home. Comparing Emersonian Transcendentalism with contemporary Transdisciplinarity is not just academic, not just for amusement nor for the satisfaction of a curiosity, but belongs to a search for responsible approaches to ecological, social, intellectual, and spiritual urgencies. The points of connection extend Transdisciplinarity beyond the sciences and lead to reconsidering the extent to which elements of historical Transcendentalism might inform present thinking beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to address real problems.

Abandonment, for example, taken in its different "trans" aspects, represents some of the key principles, methods, and goals of Textual Potamology.

My work on the Los Angeles River thus far has found various forms of abandonment, from more common denotations to the special connotations I've been developing above. The river itself was abandoned by the people of Los Angeles, beginning in the nineteenth century and increasingly so in the twentieth, with massive engineering projects fixing its course in concrete and rendering it a "flood control channel." Although a number of organizations have worked hard for several decades to improve the status and stature of the river, it still functions largely as 1) a conduit to move rainwater as swiftly as possible to the ocean, and 2) as a 51-mile collector of the goods and waste abandoned by the ten million people living in Los Angeles County and the forty million people who visit in a given year. A recent scheme to place screens and booms at several sites along the river is designed to "keep 840,000 pounds of debris – the equivalent of about 450 Volkswagen Beetles – from reaching the ocean each year."<sup>7</sup> Tons and tons of garbage enter San Pedro Bay at the mouth of the river through its channel, trash from a million passers-by and passers-over, flotsam flushed by storms down drains and tributaries, filth from the wreckage of day-to-day consumption, the effervescent effluents of production and transportation. Although not completely covered over by human structures – the fate of many urban waterways – the L.A. River has been un-rivered, its nature as a river largely lost to human awareness.

As a stranger to Los Angeles, I am exploring what methods might foster a reckoning of such estranged, forsaken nature. By combining fieldwork on the present river with other research about the area, I see Textual Potamology in this case as a potential means of "daylighting" the river. "Daylighting" most commonly refers to the process of uncovering the channel of a stream that has been obstructed by human structures, a physical return to open air. I have adopted the term to

describe a Transdisciplinary study of the cultural constructions and physical processes of the L.A. River as part of an effort to imagine new ways of understanding the stream's nature, the meanings of a complex watershed. Textual Potamology in L.A. attempts to bring to light not only the stream but the historical forces and cultural practices that led to deserting the river, the ways of thinking that forsook the river, a way of life estranged from the nature of the river. Transdisciplinary abandonment represents an effort to go beyond ways of knowing that limit the nature of the Los Angeles River. That effort requires methods that move between disciplines, across disciplines, and, perhaps, "beyond all discipline," toward an as yet undetermined means of knowing.

Daylighting the river through scholarly abandon is not driven by nostalgia. The way into the nature of the river does not go back to some mythical past of purity, does not disconnect the present from history nor disconnect the non-human from the human. Informed by Emersonian principles, Transdisciplinary abandonment goes onward into an unmade nature, into nature in the making. The goal is to participate mindfully in that making, accepting estrangement as an opportunity for imagining a new way of belonging, a new way of being home. An owl calls at the beginning and end of Gary Snyder's river poem, "Night Song of the Los Angeles Basin" (62-64). In between, the poet observes the stream and many types of beings that inhabit the watershed, including a variety of varmints, drivers of cars, ghosts and goddesses, offering the poem as a means of taking readers to the place "Where the river debouches/ the place of the moment/ of trembling and gathering and giving...." For Snyder, the river is a living emblem of complexity. Textual Potamology acknowledges this complexity, the tangles between the past and the present, between culture and nature, between sciences and philosophies, faith and doubt, working through texts and contexts to get to the living river. A Textual Potamologist attempts to transcend traditional disciplinary structure, abandoning the cubicle, the lab, the

library, and the study, walking out of such chambers into the confusion of the present, to study the lives of the river, the "calligraphy of lights on the night/ freeways of Los Angeles," to hear the owl, clear as a bell, calling us out, calling us forth, calling us home, to a nature behind the common.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example the "short chronology" in *Transdisciplinarity – Theory and Practice* (Nicolescu 2008), 253-55; cf. Ramadier 426.

<sup>2</sup> From the 1878 version of "Fortune of the Republic," in Vol. XI of the Riverside Press edition of *The Works of Emerson*, edited by James Elliot Cabot, 414-15. (Volumes from this edition are abbreviated as *W*. Volumes from the Harvard University Press are designated *CW*.) "Fortune" was first delivered in December 1863 and underwent many changes, some at the hands of Cabot as well as Emerson's daughter Ellen, before appearing in the 1870s (Bosco and Myerson 319-20).

<sup>3</sup> In some forms, Abandonment resonates with what Branka Arsić calls "leaving"; in others, it relates to what Sharon Cameron means by the "impersonal." Stanley Cavell captures some of the word's multiple meanings in "Thinking of Emerson" (1981): "The idea of abandonment contains what the preacher in Emerson calls 'enthusiasm' or the New Englander in him calls 'forgetting ourselves...,' and also includes elements of the following: leaving, relief, quitting, release, shunning, allowing, deliverance, trusting, suffering (136). Elsewhere, Cavell speculates that Emerson's very writing, his way of writing, is the effort to enact "thinking, or abandonment" (1988, 40).

<sup>4</sup> Nicolescu 74.

<sup>5</sup> For some Transdisciplinarians, this goal – "the love of truth" – might be phrased as "unity of knowledge" (Nicolescu 44), for others, "articulation" (Ramadier 432).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Packer saw this as a kind of pun on different directions of “double abandonment,” away from “the ossified circumference of past thought” and toward the “central principle of life” (136-37).

<sup>7</sup> *Los Angeles Times* 11/1/11.

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