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## Nature Writing, American Exceptionalism, and Philosophical Thoughts in Edward Bliss Emerson's Caribbean Journal

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## Nature Writing, American Exceptionalism, and Philosophical Thoughts in Edward Bliss Emerson's Caribbean Journal

### Abstract

Through the use of qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), this essay examines the philosophical thoughts presented in the journal and family letters of Edward B. Emerson for 1831-1834, written in the Caribbean while he was seeking relief from consumption (tuberculosis). The analysis focused on the themes of nature writing, American Exceptionalism, and the journal as evidence of a liminal life-death event. Edward was actively engaged in the genres of travel and nature writing, where Transcendentalist ideas were not evident. In contrast, important elements of that movement emerged in his philosophical expressions. Edward evinced an acute and creative mind until the end of his life, and his philosophical thoughts can be placed under the rubric of the philosophy of life. Edward's texts manifest a prejudiced contempt toward the people and culture of Puerto Rico and showed a sense of elitism that reflects American Exceptionalism, but his beliefs of human perfectibility seem to derive from a religious model of absolute moral conceptions. Edward's liminal intimations of mortality elicited a textual silence on consumption and death. The figure of the tragic hero fits Edward's life and demise.

### Keywords

Philosophy, Transcendentalism, Content Analysis, Consumption, Tragic Hero, Edward Bliss Emerson

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## Nature Writing, American Exceptionalism, and Philosophical Thoughts in Edward Bliss Emerson's Caribbean Journal<sup>1</sup>

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This essay explores the philosophical underpinnings of the journal of Edward Bliss Emerson for 1831-1832. The letters he wrote to his family during this period complement the analysis which revolves around three themes: nature writing, American Exceptionalism, and philosophical reflections.

Like other North American travelers visiting the Caribbean in the 19th century, Edward Bliss Emerson was entranced by the exuberance of nature. He describes the novel world he encounters while also revealing the ideas and values that color his vision. The heightened importance of the United States (U.S.) interests in the West Indies in this period of increased commerce (Dietz, 1986) and American expansionism tend to reflect on American Exceptionalism. In addition, as an intellectual New Englander with a strong Unitarian heritage and as the brother of Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edward's religious and philosophical beliefs also permeate the texts. This study will look into whether his ideas antedate the religious and literary discourses of Transcendentalism or if they mainly reflect contemporary ideas. The character of the invalid who travels to warm climates to rest and heal, his life in a fragile state and facing the threat of death, is also evident. Edward is in a liminal situation that fosters philosophical musings.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward B. Emerson's Caribbean journal and letters can be accessed online at <http://bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu/cdm/ref/collection/librosraros/id/1701>. Unless otherwise specified, his letters from that period can be found in that text. Permissions to quote from Edward Emerson's journal and letters have been granted by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Historical Society, and are gratefully acknowledged.

## Nature Writing

The notion of naturalism in American Transcendentalist literature, epitomized by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, informs a philosophical study of the comments and expressions on nature found in Edward's texts. R. W. Emerson's *Nature* (1836/2004) and Thoreau's *Walden* (1854/2004) suggest categories of nature writing for a textual analysis from a period perspective. Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (1844/1992) enriches the analytical framework from another perspective. In addition to Transcendentalists' nature categories (e.g., an original relation with nature, divinity in nature and soul, becoming part of nature, nature's laws), Matos Rodríguez's (1993) criticism of the 1833 "Lecture on Porto Rico" by Charles Chauncy Emerson, the youngest of the five Emerson brothers, provides three additional themes (i.e., centering landscape, Edenic references, and the focus on civilization). Because Transcendentalism was a reformist religious movement, essential notions of nature from both Puritanism (Shuffelton, 2010) and Unitarianism (Grodzins, 2010) orient the theoretical framework used here.

*Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first Transcendentalist work to advance the belief that nature serves humankind in many ways, and launched an understanding of the relation between nature and spiritual life (Gura, 2010). In "The American Scholar," R. W. Emerson combined the Socratic precept of, "Know thyself," and the modern precept, "Study nature;" for him nature was the 'measure of human attainments' (1837/2004, pp. 52-53). Thoreau's writing about nature was "informed by the impulse to know oneself through the world and the desire to speak of that world as genuinely as possible" (Gura, 2010, p. 412). Gura (2010, p. 409) has summarized Buell's (1995) criteria for literary naturalism, as exemplified in Thoreau's prose, as follows: nature as presence, human interests are not the only legitimate ones, environmental ethical accountability, and a sense of the environment as process. To these criteria, Gura adds the "self-consciousness of the capabilities and limits of language." Gura also notes that Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1844) was one of the first American naturalism texts to highlight the "virtual paralysis at the sheer power of nature" (p. 413).

In the late 1830s, Transcendentalism was primarily a religious movement seeking a liberal reformation of religious practices and theological beliefs within New England Unitarianism (Grodzins, 2010). The Unitarian movement emerged from a division between 'evangelicals' (Puritans) and 'liberal Christians' (Unitarians) in the Puritan-descended congregational churches of Massachusetts during the eighteenth century (Packer, 1995/2007). As one scholar indicates, "Unitarians rejected the Puritan, Calvinistic view of human life as hopelessly corrupted by original sin. They denied that people were born sinful, celebrated the potential greatness of human reason and conscience, and developed a spirituality of self-culture" (Grodzins, 2010, p. 52). In contrast to Unitarianism, Transcendentalism held that divine inspiration is natural and universal, was optimistic about ordinary human nature, rejected religious rituals that claimed scriptural authority, regarded prayer as communion or a partaking of the divine as opposed to praise and supplication, saw scripture as poetry, and promoted expanding the 'boundaries of religious fellowship' to other Christian denominations and beyond, without diminishing the superiority of Christianity (Grodzins, 2010). Grodzins asserts that the most profound legacy of Transcendentalism for Unitarianism and liberal religion was its opening of "new possibilities for how to be religious" (2010, p. 67). Ralph Waldo Emerson mainly regarded Transcendentalism as "a philosophical movement" (Myerson, Petrulionis, & Walls, 2010, p. xxiii). However, Transcendentalism originated principally as a religious movement with strong literary manifestations and some important social reform impact; even though none of its leading figures was a philosopher by profession (according to James Murdock; in Gura, 1950/2007), it seems to have made a notable

contribution to the development of philosophy in the U.S., in particular, the philosophy of life and of religion.

The current analysis seeks to answer a number of questions: Are Edward's perceptions of nature merely incidental travel observations or are they deeper philosophical reflections on nature? Is an environmental consciousness, as illustrated by Thoreau's ethical human accountability to the environment, directing these observations or are they mainly the product of his contemplations of nature? Are his beliefs about nature closer to Unitarian or to Transcendentalist conceptions? How does Transcendentalist naturalism permeate the texts? Do they provide evidence that Edward was an original thinker for his time?

### **Nature in Edward Bliss Emerson's Journal and Letters: Textual Analysis**

Edward's observations on nature can be seen in different ways. Some are travel descriptions of new scenes, including incidental travel observations with aesthetic, social, personal, and sentimental undertones. In some cases, his observations reflect social prejudices and critical attitudes that could be found in other New England travelers. Also, they are observations made by an enlightened traveler with a predominantly intellectual frame of mind. But, more important, they are annotations that reveal an awareness of travel and nature writing, that of a naturalist and a walker reminiscent of his New England relatives and friends.

New landscapes usually stimulate the poetic sense of many travelers. Edward's first impressions of the West Indies, from the ship's deck, compare the scenery to his homeland:

The air like that of a June evening or May morning in New England and the sky as usually of late such as Italians might admire. And such as poets try to paint, i.e. needing naught, full prodigal of beautiful clouds and colors and combinations, and every moment altering its complexion (darkening or kindling some group or region, new shade or light). (St. Croix, Jan. 3, 1831)

Edward's illustrated or informed pretensions are also evident from the beginning in his writings: "St. Croix appeared like a cluster of a dozen or two of hills, peaked enough and black enough to be believed old volcanoes, if that were the case (*de quo nescio*)<sup>2</sup> but not lofty" (St. Croix, Jan. 3, 1831). A keen observer usually captures more than what the uninstructed eye could perceive: "at the distance of 5 miles the aspect of fertility and cultivation is not to be mistaken. Here and there a windmill is revealing the industry of some early risers for it is just sunrise. I like to see their open arms; they always look like acquaintance" (St. Croix, Jan. 4, 1831).

In an 1833 description of San Juan, Edward makes clear that his method of travel writing emulates Thoreau (1861/2010) as a naturalist and a walker: "Without leisure to investigate and still less to invent, I shall put down what occurs to me as anyway remarkable, following no rule but the order of my thought, and writing my letter as I would take a walk" (Puerto Rico, 1832).<sup>3</sup> Edward's brother Charles writes to him the following: "I have not stopped for brake, not stayed for stone, in writing this letter... but please rouse my sluggish faculties... by the tales and speculations of a traveler" (Letter CCE, Cambridge, to EBE, St.C., Feb. 1, 1831, MH bMS Am 1280.226 {5}).<sup>4</sup> Thus, both brothers employ the genre of travel

<sup>2</sup> Latin - of which I do not know.

<sup>3</sup> Journal, Appendix 2 - Edward's description of a walk around San Juan, untitled, ca. 1833, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Ms Am 1280.235 Item 350, quoted hereafter as "Account of St. Johns, ca. 1833."

<sup>4</sup> When making references to letters the following abbreviations are used: William (WE); Ralph Waldo (RWE); Edward Bliss (EBE); Charles Chauncy (CCE); Mary Moody (MME); and Ezra Ripley (ER). For places:

writing through two different means: the journal, a more intimate and informal voice, and the letter, an interactive and more complete expression. At the end of his 1833 narration, Edward reiterates his writing style as a walker while projecting to the reader the stress walking represents for him: "But let us stop in sight of Fort San Cristobal, lest I fatigue you so much that you will never take another walk."

In addition to portraying the views and paths seen by the walker, the texts reveal the intellectual frame of reference of his stories. His affinities with history and tradition are embedded in his comments about the architecture of the colonial era. Thus, in the 1833 "Account of St. Johns," Edward states: "this like many other edifices finds its best title to further toleration in the reverence felt for antiquity." Similarly, his description of El Morro Castle and talk of a tree imbued with historical lore stirs his imagination:

...tradition dignifies a... tree, under which it is said that the first Spanish settlers held their little council... The uncertainty of such a hearsay does not prevent me from investing the supposed council tree with an imaginary gravity. (Account of St. Johns, ca. 1833)

The reference to an "imaginary gravity" is also found in Margaret Fuller's *Summer on the Lakes* (1844/1992). This genealogical and archetypal reference to trees recalls Thoreau's style and allusion to the sacred oak of the Druids, as well as the honor conferred on trees: "instead of calling on some scholar, I paid many a visit to particular trees" (*Walden*, 1854/2004, p. 195).

Another tree that attracts Edward's attention is a perennial plant that resembles the form of a weeping woman. Personification of nature is a common trope in travel literature: "One tree much like a weeping woman stood on the brow of a precipice and drew our eyes and mock-sympathy from whatever point we occupied" (P.R., April 7, 1831). The traveler who seeks healing and leaves behind family and friends is hereby suggested: the weeping woman could be the image of the mother left behind; the precipice, the abyss of consumption and exile. Edward also pays a visit to a magnificent tree, the *ceiba*, a symbol of strength and survival: "I walked early out of town... for the sake of visiting a famous silk cotton tree, & of all the trees which I have seen I think it is the most remarkable..." (St.Th., Oct. 30, 1832).

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature* (1836/2004), "A nobler want of man is served by nature, the love of beauty" (p. 16). Exultations of beauty also appear in Edward's traveler's lens: "These hills show rather more round than when first seen. The brushwood is now and then interrupted by patches of smooth green. *Che bellezza*<sup>5</sup> to those who come from green seas" (St.C., Jan. 3, 1831). "Nature always wears the colors of spirit," is a famous phrase of Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Nature*, 1836/2004, p. 13). Colors are always evoked in travel descriptions, and Edward's work is no exception. Exultations of beauty (e.g., Fuller, 1844/1992) were also considered part of nature's divinity by Transcendentalists.

Walking in Puerto Rico with an esteemed New England friend, Winthrop Cunningham, Edward is stirred by feelings of both beauty and unawareness: "Walked with Mr. Cunningham who said he had oft protected poor Bulkeley in his terrors and school-boy perils.—We saw a brilliant star close to the moon; both of us too ignorant to say what was the name of the beautiful orb..." (P.R., July 12, 1831). The allusion to his intellectually

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St. Croix (St.C.); St. Thomas (St.Th.); San Juan (S.J.); Puerto Rico (P.R.); Boston (B.); Concord (C.); and no place (n.p.). An example of a reference to a letter: Letter EBE, P.R., to CCE, n.p., Oct. 29, 1833. For archival location of letters to Edward, MH - Houghton Library, Harvard University; MHi - Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

<sup>5</sup> Italian – what beauty!

challenged brother (see Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 360, Note 7), Robert Bulkeley Emerson, not only recalls his brother's childhood fears, but also helps to explain Edward's affection towards Cunningham.

The wonder provoked in the newcomer by extreme weather is contrasted with the indifferent reactions of the locals: "I never witnessed thunder more instantaneous and terrific... The want of solemnity, on the descent of the lightning, in those around me appeared unaffected and I suppose comes from habit and education" (P.R., Aug. 22, 1831). Edward's reactions to these booming thunderclaps evoke Fuller's "virtual paralysis at the sheer power of nature" (Gura, 2010), but Edward's resultant emotions tend to be more sociological than Fuller's philosophical "promise of peace"—a rainbow after the storm (Fuller, 1844/1992, p. 220).

Early in his journey, Edward faces the death of other countrymen who had come to the tropics to heal. Despite confronting their graves, he does not lose faith because he seems to be uplifted by nature:

Chance led me directly into the graveyard where some victims to consumption were laid who had come hither from New York... Afterward I passed by a garden wall over which was seen the cabbage tree so eminent for beauty... I walked to the shore and looked out again on the broad ocean which is truly a glorious sight to one who views it in security from an island like this, untossed and unterrified. (St.C., Jan. 6, 1831)

The sounds of sea waves, "loud enough to impress the mind with the sense of their power, almost equal to that felt when we float at their mercy & in their lap," imparts an emotion of uncertainty concerning the possibilities of returning to his New England home: "And now it crosses my mind that this sound admonishes me of the uncertainty which rests on the prospect of my reunion with my distant friends." The possibility of a successful return voyage, leads him to ask, "how shall I chain the winds or calm the sea at the time of my homeward passage?" Here prayer seems to be the answer: "I must look humbly to heaven" (P.R., Sept. 3, 1831).

For an invalid suffering from consumption, the tropics could be an Eden: "went to West End returning in a beautiful evening under a vertical moon. Well has [the author Bryan] Edwards called this the climate of Paradise" (St.C., Jan. 23, 1831). Edward sees the weather as an important factor in the healing process: "Rode out horseback, country quite dry and air pure although rain fell in the night. This island is to me very agreeable on this account of the quickness of recovery from damp and shower, to a soft and clear weather" (St.C., March 4, 1831). The atmosphere, and particularly the air, seems a distinctive attribute worthy of detailed descriptions for the invalid. Thus, Edward's journal is full of different and vivid images of the tropical air. The enchanted air evokes memories of Aunt Mary: "The air is such as to leave nothing to be desired. What a treasure this serenity, this purity of atmosphere - the old woman that Aunt M. tells of w<sup>d</sup>. say 'this blessed air,' with justifiable rapture, here" (P.R., Aug. 15, 1831). Aunt Mary reminds Edward of a philosophical ecstatic state.

Hurricanes are a forced reference for everybody in the tropics, especially foreigners. The equinox having passed, "I suppose men take courage about the weather & don't fear hurricanes so much" (P.R., Sept. 26, 1831). The execution of a pirate also draws attention: "The moonlight evening was occasionally disturbed by squalls of wind & rain... Almeyda a pirate who has been 3 years imprisoned here was shot today" (P.R., Feb. 14, 1832). Both the fearful event of a hurricane, as well as epic visions of executed pirates, serve as counterpoints to Edward's tropical Edenic references.

Philosophical and psychological notions are interwoven in Edward's perceptions: "In

my walk to the house I was glad to see that nature does not disappoint so sadly as art, and that the cocoa and the cabbage tree... are as beautiful to the eye as the description and pictures are exciting to the imagination..." (St.C., Jan. 4, 1831). The reference to the thwarting promises of art in contrast to nature's wonders has to be considered the most profound of all Edward's writing on nature, and foretells Ralph Waldo's and Thoreau's most famous insights on the same topic.

Edward's style of nature writing is closer to Thoreau and Fuller than to his brother Waldo. His observations and descriptions of nature seem removed from his Unitarian heritage and beliefs even when other parts of the texts confirm that he held Unitarian and liberal theological notions. In terms of nature writing, the examined texts show no evidence of a conception of nature based on divinity or universal natural laws, nor on nature as a presence which links history to ethical considerations. Edward's concerns about nature are more the product of his contemplations and imagination rather than of an environmental consciousness. Thus, Transcendentalist conceptions of nature seem to play no major role in Edward's writing. In contrast, some important philological, literary, sociological and philosophical reflections evidence his acute mind and academic background.

The following is the last scenic description found in the journal, and captures Edward's depiction of the port of St. Thomas while returning to Puerto Rico from his short and last visit home:

Came to anchor in the offing or entrance of St. Thomas harbor where we were directed to remain till the Board of Health should determine the length of our quarantine. The beauty of the port often compared with that of Naples - the grand hills which form the cup that contains this little harbor & the tripartite settlement of the city itself which covers with its painted roofs & balconied houses three small eminences which swell out from the northern range as if for the purpose to which they have been turned, - offered a scene so pleasant as to take away the tediousness of involuntary delay. (St.Th., Oct. 26, 1832)

The mention of the quarantine, evocative of psychological notions of separation and segregation, suggests an image of forced exile for the invalid. The quarantine is highly symbolic of his tragic destiny. The narrative also reflects the progressive serenity of a person that 'lingers content to exist' (Letter EBE, St.C., to MME, B., March 11, 1831) as the end of his tragic fate approaches. It points out to the image of the journey of the tragic hero that solemnly approaches an abysmal liminal event: the final degradation by consumption.

### **American Exceptionalism**

Another major theme is Edward's notion of "the perfect man." In his journal he writes, "Men do not strive here as in New England after the perfect man. It is present pastime or gainful industry or chance which they follow as their stars" (P.R., July 3, 1831). Clearly, his phrase pits a superior New England spiritual aspiration against a tropical indolence. Because it is expressed in the journal of a New England intellectual that antedates American territorial expansion in the Caribbean, this moral notion of human perfectibility could be an exemplar of American Exceptionalism, a belief that eventually impinged upon Transcendentalism (Gura, 1950/2007, p. xv). American Exceptionalism has been defined as follows: "America and Americans are special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself and, at the same time, America and Americans must sustain a high level of spiritual, political and moral commitment to this exceptional destiny" (Madsen, 1998, p. 2). This notion of U.S. exceptionalism has been also associated to the ideology of Manifest Destiny



that was used "to justify the annexation of the Hispanic south-west and the continuous subjugation of native Americans" (Madsen, 1998, p. 70).

Transcendentalism's emergence coincided with the rise of the ideology of U.S. Manifest Destiny as a 'historically sanctioned right to continental expansionism.' This continental ideology later developed into a special mission of universal civilization and salvation (Buell, 2010). Gura (1950/2007) has advanced the thesis that Transcendentalists "awakened to the possibility of a fully egalitarian brotherhood," but then, "under the pressure of insular politics" lost their battle, thus explaining "how a movement whose roots were catholic and universal eventuated in a discourse that promoted an American Exceptionalism based on self-interest" (p. xv). Madsen (1998) sustains an eager complicity between Transcendentalism and American Exceptionalism. She argues that it is in "The American Scholar" address that R. W. Emerson (1837/2004) advances the idea that "American nature must become the model for an ideal American society," which Madsen portrays subsequently as the expansionism "connection between 'Americanness' and the American landscape" (p. 75). However, that Emerson is proclaiming in this address, first, the need of American intellectuals for independence from "foreign harvests," and thus to "fill the postponed expectation of the world," and that *nature*, in the spirit of the scholar, "is the first in importance of the influences upon the mind," together with the knowledge of the *mind of the past* and the notion that the scholar is also a being of *action*, and his final statement that "a nation of men will for the first time exist," could hardly be seen as a cry for American expansionism nor, necessarily, a conceptual model construction of a nation. Nonetheless, in general, Emerson's conceptualization of nature is not only part of his idealist philosophy, but is deeply related to the universal idea of the "divine in man." How Transcendentalist notions of universal human divinity become entangled with nationalistic tones of divine destiny and human perfectibility, core elements of exceptionalism, seem to be an essential connection for further consideration.

Puritans, Unitarians, and Transcendentalists believed in, respectively: the need to develop "a pure and uncorrupted church" (Madsen, 1998, p. 3); self-culture and a constant striving towards perfection (Packer, 1995/2007); and the removal of obstructions to spiritual development (Grodzins, 2010). The overlapping belief systems had political implications. Nineteenth-century intellectuals, like the Transcendentalists, anticipated the perfection of democratic institutions. The conception of a divine destiny and striving for perfection, both as a nation and as individuals, was contradicted by the 'peculiar institution' of slavery; therefore, this obstruction to spiritual development had to be eradicated. Edward's notion of the perfect man seems to be deeply engrained in his Puritan and Unitarian heritage, with some hints of Transcendentalism and American Exceptionalism.

## Textual Analysis

In order to properly evaluate the issue of American Exceptionalism as possibly latent in the notion of the perfect man, it is important to trace Edward's different perceptions and evaluations of the people that he encountered and their customs and characters.

The construction of the tropics as a geographical Paradise discovered by Columbus for the enjoyment of Europeans, so common in Caribbean travelers' accounts, is also found in Edward's journal. But Emerson is more critical when he ascribes to "ordinary motives & common adventurers, —under the favor of the watchful government of Spain," the resolution of Spanish colonizers "to defend themselves as in a newfound Paradise" (Account of St. Johns, ca. 1833).

Edward judges Puerto Rican society and its people with disdain. Even though his observations of the Catholic Sabbath can be considered liberal in the theological sense, this is

the first time in his journal where a negative evaluation of the Puerto Rican people and society is expressed:

It is very possible that much more intellectual and moral entertainment might be furnished to the thousands of ignorant people to be found here, in both upper & lower classes of society; & some attention to this subject is extremely desirable... No lectures, no sermons (at this season) no reading rooms, no public libraries, even the theatre not yet completed, nor when completed likely to be well supplied with entertainment,- this is an excess of apathy or ignorance, as to the value of the intellectual faculties & the need of cultivation,- & I am willing to see it remedied sooner the better. (P.R., June 26, 1831)

The desire for remediation can hardly offset his contempt; rather, one might call it ironic.

On October 30, 1831, in a letter to his step-grandfather Ezra, Edward describes Puerto Rico as follows: "this island like a docile child follows the mother country, & rests in the bosom of the Catholic Church," not acknowledging the oppressive character of the Spanish rule (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 27). Only in a few instances does he casually bring out some of the repressive measures enacted by the government. For example, he mentions that a petition to the government "cannot go up from more than 3, under pain of being considered mutinous" (P.R., Aug. 21, 1831).

Edward's negative opinion on the lack of instruction, patriotism and virtue that he found on the island did not disappear with longer acquaintance, as indicated in a letter in Spanish to his brother William almost a year later (Letter EBE, n.p., to WE, N.Y., July 29, 1832). They are also expressed in a letter to Ralph Waldo in 1833, with some regret over his brother's decision to go to Europe instead of visiting him in Puerto Rico:

I lie not when I say I'm glad that you did not come here... What is the puppet show of a few thousand ignorant & sensual men... what is this daubed & miniature caricature of life, to the mighty spectacle you now look on! (Letter EBE, P.R., to RWE, London, Aug. 16, 1833)

Edward attributed childlike traits to the Puerto Rican people and, in spite of his knowledge of their history, considered their character as frozen in time, unchangeable.

These negative evaluations are accentuated when they are contrasted with New England life: "Boston still the land of steady habits, the city of the sensible, the intelligent" (P.R., Aug. 18, 1831); "you must not expect no echo from P.R. to such intelligence" (Letter EBE, P.R., to CCE, n.p., Oct. 29, 1833, on Commencement day at Harvard); and "here, where the name of Deity & the name of virtue come so seldom to the ear, with the tone & the doctrines that usually accompany them in New England. I say not that there is no internal piety or virtuous effort or sacrifice here, but if such fruits do abound,- the leaves & the blossoms are so scanty & the produce so disposed of as to make the vineyard very unlike the pictures of a 2d Eden that we form under the instructions of northern divines" (P.R., Aug. 7, 1831). It is while comparing life at home with life in Puerto Rico that Edward asserts his notion of the perfect man.

Edward refers proudly to the United States as a military nation, praising its discipline and power. At diverse moments throughout the journal, he shows interest and admiration for military parades and military vessels. He writes: "Troops in white: not exhib<sup>g</sup>. the discipline of West Point" (P.R., April 8, 1831). In a letter to his brother William, in Spanish, he mentions the visit of a warship to Puerto Rico and asserts that such visits evoke respect

because they show that the United States has a strong armada and thus is a powerful country (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., March 7-12, 1832). And his vivid annotations on the Fourth of July are to be expected coming from an exiled New Englander with apprehensions of being "left and cast away" in the Caribbean for reasons of health and distance (P.R., July 14, 1831).

There can be no confusion regarding the prejudice and contemptuous attitude and sense of arrogance reflected in the journal and letters. In summary, the charges are: the promotion of indolence by the tropical climate; the lack of good work in the West Indies; the excess apathy or ignorance, depicting the island as a docile child; the personal and social character of the people tied to their dependence on gambling and diversions; the puppet show of a few thousand ignorant and sensual men; the daubed and miniature caricature of life; the childlike character in the outward and intellectual collective features; and the contrast between Boston, the land of steady habits, the city of the sensible and of the intelligent and the ignorance widely prevalent in Puerto Rico. Even though some of his observations are based on the harsh realities tied to life in a backward colony in the nineteenth-century Caribbean, Edward does not attribute these behaviors to the inherent social structure of domination and colonialism but rather to the character and manners of the people and their culture.

The majority of Edward's expressions of prejudice and contempt may be attributed to intellectual and moral arrogance, particularly coming from an educated New England man. For example, Bosco and Myerson (2006) say about Edward's letters from Alexandria and Worcester, where he "sought refuge for his health," that "they each exhibit Edward's ability to create and sustain an engaging epistolary narrative based on his surprise that not all communities in America impose New England habits on their citizens, even those that are less than a day's journey from Boston, the New Englander's center of the universe" (p. 54). Thus, Edward's expressions include ideological features common to, but not identical with, the ideologies of American Exceptionalism (e.g., the development of personal and social perfection and a high level of moral and spiritual commitment to this aspiration) and Manifest Destiny (e.g., the perfection of democratic institutions). García (2009) emphatically affirms, based on the evidence of one letter written by Edward to his step-grandfather and one to his brother Ralph, that Edward's letters "deployed," "anticipated" and, even, "promoted" the colonial representations that later "justified" U.S. imperialist expansionism in the Caribbean. Similar to her analysis, this study sustains the disdain expressed toward the people and some anticipation of discourse. But García's essay came short on evidence on the promotional and justification claims.

Edward's notion of human perfectibility, present both in Unitarianism and Transcendentalism, has an inherent potential for flowing into these types of political constructions. Thus, this study sustains some anticipation of the discourse of those ideologies. It could also be said that these texts reflect a sense of superiority and elitism, as well as a tendency towards harsh social and cultural criticism that was perhaps not uncommon to the New England intellectual elite. For example, in his exposition on self-reliance, from the perspective of a non-conformist person, Ralph Waldo affirms the following: "when the ignorant and the poor are aroused, when the unintelligent brute force that lies at the bottom of society is made to growl and mow, it needs the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment" ("Self-Reliance," 1841/2004, p. 119). For the invalid travelers Edward and Charles (e.g., see Charles Chauncy Emerson's "Lecture on Porto Rico" of 1833; and Matos Rodríguez, 1993), the tropical trifles were inferior, scurrilous, and without value.

### **Philosophy in Extremis**

The elucidation of Edward's philosophical conceptions as the last major theme considered in this essay revolves around his intellectual reflections and his liminal intimations of mortality which gave rise to several kinds of silences.

Unitarian liberal beliefs permeated both Edward's family environment as well as the intellectual climate at Harvard, where he studied in the early 1820s. All the Emerson brothers, with the exception of Robert Bulkeley, studied at Harvard at different but overlapping moments (Bosco & Myerson, 2006). An examination of the curriculum and the philosophical ideas that prevailed at Harvard College between 1817 and 1837 indicates that, "nowhere... is there to be found any trace of the German philosophy identified with Kant," and "in metaphysics two divergent streams are found: English empiricism systematized by Locke, and the natural realism or 'common sense' Scottish philosophy, originating with Thomas Reid" (Todd, 1943, p. 67). Unitarians, who initially held ideas not much in dispute with Locke's acceptance of biblical revelation and that share "an empiricism hostile to violations of natural laws," faced several dangers to their early beliefs: Humean skepticism (e.g., Hume's arguments against miracles), science (e.g., geology), and biblical or sacred criticism (e.g., attack on the factuality of biblical narratives) (Packer, 1995/2007, chap. 1). Toward the end of the 1820s, various "cultural mediators" such as Madame de Staël and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (both mentioned by Edward in the texts) made the young Bostonians aware of significant changes in Continental philosophy (Packer, 1995/2007, chap. 2). Coleridge's influence with the Transcendentalists waned when it was found, through the critical observations of Harvard professor Frederick H. Hedge (highly esteemed by the Emerson brothers), that in his famous distinction between reason and understanding, his usage of the terms was un-Kantian (Gura, 1950/2007, chap. 2)—see further discussion below. It seems that Kant's transcendental philosophy influenced the New England Transcendentalists, mainly through British literary transcendentalism (in particular, through the interpretations of Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle); however, it also seems to be true that it had more in common with mainstream Unitarian thinkers and "common sense" philosophers than with German thinkers (Grodzins, 2010).

A confirmatory hint that Edward was thinking actively of philosophical issues of concern to both New England Unitarians and Transcendentalists is highlighted by Waldo's biographer, Robert Richardson: "There were still flashes of the old Edward, as when in a letter to Waldo he objected to the Coleridgean terminology of reason and understanding" (Richardson, 1995, p. 183; see also EBE's letter, P.R., to RWE, B., July 7, 1834).

In contradistinction to the abundance of literary criticism, there is one idea treated and elaborated on his texts that reveals Edward's philosophy of life: fraternal love or brotherhood. Very early in his journey (P.R., March 21, 1831) he writes that he "read a little of Cicero" — who wrote a famous treatise on friendship, *De Amicitia*—and in a letter to Waldo in 1833 (EBE, P.R., to RWE, B., Jan. 20, 1833), he even uses the Latin terms for 'friendship' and 'friend.' After reading some lines in Spanish by the English poet, Alexander Pope, ("Pope's *Abelard & Eloisa*"), Edward indicates they "describe writing as the 'gift of heaven', & the 'invention of lovers' & it occurred to me the while that I could assent to the proposition amended by putting 'brothers' for 'lovers'" (P.R., July 14, 1831). Writing in his journal while Charles was in Puerto Rico, Edward expands on the meaning of a brother: "A mother is a benefactress, a nurse, a guardian, as well as a friend; but the brother is the friend without the other claims upon love & respect" (P.R., Dec. 23, 1831). And finally, in his letter to Waldo, (Jan. 20, 1833) he thoughtfully refers to fraternal sympathy and asks for the revival of brotherly love. Indeed, the sentiments of love and esteem for his brothers are expressed in an intellectual manner, but in a way that provides eloquent insights.

Another example of Edward's philosophy of life is found in the archetype of the old man. In the journal, during his stays in St. Croix (at the initial stages of his journey) and in St. Thomas (while returning to Puerto Rico from Boston), he writes two stories about old men whom he respects and admires.

The first story is about a knowledgeable solitary old man, born in St. Kitts, who quoted two English poets, Edward Young (1681-1765) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744), demonstrating "grammar acuteness" in Greek:

He is 'catholic' & talked about the Trinity, but not like a bigot... His critical manner of noticing 'ev [oneness, unity], & I am he. His longevity he attributes to natural strength of constitution... He does not "trouble himself much about the world so long as it does not trouble him." He did not... evince a lively concern in affairs. He has written for some books to be "put up in boxes so tight that none but such book-worms as himself can get them" which he said with apparent enjoyment of his own pleasantry... (St.C., April 21, 1831)

The second story concerns an old beggar, African born, *de facto* emancipated by the authorities because of his misbehavior:

An old beggar... quite an original in character... he has long followed his present business as a mendicant, evading all other industry in despite of the claims of his owner. His reputed insanity is his shield & buckler & his generally inoffensive character makes it the part of humanity to let him wander at his own will... He denies that he is a slave & asserts his right to whatever land he selects for his subterranean abode; so that he is half philosopher with all his infirmity. (St.C., Oct. 31, 1832)

It seems that the educated wisdom and longevity of one and the mental infirmity of the other touched Edward's literary persona because of his own ill health and his past mental illness.

Philosophical dialogues, however, come alive mostly through his interlocution, by letter or personally, with Charles and Waldo. There are two figures that appear spontaneously in Edward's notes: Madame de Staël, on the distinction between morality and self-interest (P.R., Jan. 29, 1832) and Emmanuel Swedenborg, on a talk on Swedenborgianism with Dr. William E. Channing —New England Unitarian liberal preacher, supporter of Transcendentalist ideas and social actions, who was in St. Croix for his health (St.C., Feb. 17, 1831 & Letter EBE, St.C., to WE, N.Y., Feb. 19-22, 1831). Marcus Tullius Cicero is the only known philosopher that he mentions in an independent manner in the journal. Baruch Spinoza, Swedenborg and Coleridge are mentioned once in the dialogues with his brothers; the first two with Charles. However, the most conspicuous scholarly commentary, on Coleridge, is found in a letter to Waldo.

The philosophical arguments advanced by Edward on the Coleridgean distinction merit a longer quotation:

Nevertheless next year when I come to see you... and if my own steps be guided into a less pleasant path I may at least come a welcome pilgrim visitor from time to time,—and repose & repent & learn & unlearn as need may be, in your philosophic & religious shades.

And now as to the transcendental lecture you gave me about Reason & Understanding, I take—as the phrase is—but I protest against either Coleridge

or the Germans claiming the merit of the discovery of this all important distinction which is, as you say, like all other truth very practical... I don't deny that Coleridge has (in some few pages of that volume which you lent me) put in forcible light the distinction referred to & that makes me respect him; but again I wholly disapprove the nomenclature so to call it of his system... I even would prefer the old fashioned title by which after all we best attain his "Reason" and by which the theologians have ever termed it... Soul...It is only confounding and not enlightening people to tell them that they 'reason' with their 'understanding'... Newton never would have insisted on men's talking astronomically about the common apparent motions of the heavenly bodies. Probably you care as little about the terms to which I have alluded, provided the great doctrine can be well evolved without them & it seems to me they impede, not help. (Letter EBE, P.R., to RWE, B., July 7, 1834)

Coleridge makes a strong distinction between the spiritual and the natural spheres, and asserts that the faculties by which each of them are perceived are also different: reason is the super-sensuous, intuitive power, source of morality and of the highest intellection, and the understanding is the humbler servant who mediates sensation (Packer, 1995/2007). Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781 & 1787/1997, A15-16/B29-30) distinguishes between spheres of human knowledge: objects are given to us through sensibility and then thought by the understanding. Sensitivity is receptive but contains a priori principles (the intuitions of space and time). The intuitions of sensibility and the concepts of the understanding constitute coordinated manifolds of the conditions of experience. According to Caygill (1995), in the *Critique*, where judgment comes to be distinguished too, understanding is seen as working through rules while reason secures those rules under principles (pp. 346-350). Thus, Coleridge's distinction seems un-Kantian (Packer, 1995/2007). But Edward's objection to it is based upon other arguments.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *Nature*, distinguishes reason and understanding as follows. With respect to reason, he is in more proximity to Edward's notion of reason as soul: "man is conscious of a universal soul, in the sense of the flux of all things." This universal soul Waldo called reason, intellectually considered, but spirit, in relation to nature (*Nature*, 1836/2004). However, concerning the understanding, Waldo's concept is more in agreement with Coleridge's usage as the faculty which mediates sensation: "every property of matter is a school for the understanding" (*Nature*, p. 27). Even though for both brothers reason, as soul, illuminates and transcends experience, Edward's main argument against the Coleridgean distinction rests on the confusion it creates when telling people that 'they reason with their understanding.' In this regard, he seems to be defending common sensism and the considered views of the ordinary person. Thus, he rejects the need and usefulness of the conceptual differentiation of the faculties based, first, on theological considerations, and second, on a common life argument. Edward's notion of reason is similar to the pre-Kantian philosophical tradition that considers reason in a broader sense as the faculty of the soul which reasons.

I would like to single out Edward's reference to the term *transcendental*, referring to Waldo's lecture and making his own connection with German idealism. He seems to be very aware not only of its conceptual origins, but also of the influence of this philosophy on young New England intellectuals. This is suggested when he says, in a critical and demanding way, to Charles, "you who are of the new philosophy" (Letter EBE, P.R., to CCE, n.p, Oct. 29, 1833). Even though he appreciates and values Waldo's philosophical-religious wisdom (i.e., "in your philosophic & religious shades"), these comments to Waldo and to Charles also reflect his intellectual distance from, or ambivalence toward, this new philosophy. Transcendentalism in New England was essentially developed after Edward's death in 1834,

but his life was embedded in personal and social contexts that could foster these spiritual and philosophical ideas and a congenial attitude toward them. However, it is also possible that, had he lived long, the intellectual distance mentioned might have prevailed. It is of symbolic importance, as indicative of this separation of opinion, that Edward's 1832 poem, "The Last Farewell," written "whilst sailing out of Boston harbor, bound for the Island of Porto Rico," was printed in 1840 in the first number of the quarterly journal of the Transcendentalists, *The Dial*.

While in the West Indies, Edward was confronted with several images of death. These include his visit to a "graveyard where some victims to consumption were laid who had come hither from New York" (St.C., Jan. 5 & 6, 1832); the death of Waldo's first wife, Ellen, who also had consumption or tuberculosis; the accidental death of a negro man and a mulatto woman killed during festivities; the Dance of Death in a street masque; the vigil over a dead woman's corpse in his own house; the death of José Dorado, the father-in-law of his employer, Sidney Mason; and the news of deaths from a cholera epidemic in Boston in August 1832. Only Ellen's death elicited in him a sentiment worth expressing in writing (St.C., Feb. 23, 1831). Dorado's death brought out an unemotional contrast with his own health and age (P.R., Sept. 19-20, 1831). In a letter to his brother William he sent his grateful regards to the doctor that counseled him to come to a place with warm weather and thus saved his life (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., Feb. 11, 1832). Only once did he express the hope of not dying in another country with people and customs so different from his own (Letter, EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., July 29, 1832), and this was to justify the inquiries he made to his brother about job opportunities in New York.

Thoughts about other cases of consumption provoked no expression of emotion in the texts concerning his own infirmity (with the exception of Ellen); not even when other close members of his family, like Waldo and Charles, were afflicted. On illness and death, Edward's discourse is characterized by a profound blunting or even silencing of affect. Why this solemn silence? Some possible answers are: an understandable evasion of tragic sense on the edge of the abyss; a concealment of the writing self (Hudspeth, 2010) that previously has lived an intense moment of insanity; or both. Can we let a text's voice be heard about its own silences? As a poet once said: "...and it is now my imminent death, which is saying in silence, come, but I make myself deaf" (Benedetti, 1995/2011, p. 14; free transl.). If health is the silence of the organs of the body (Canguilhem, 1989/2004, p. 49), silence as a response to degradation throws out the terrors of consumption and death; and it hides exclusion, social as well as personal.

Edward's ideas about death were partly shaped by his paternal aunt, even when they did not agree on many issues. In Edward's texts, her presence seems intriguing and enigmatic. Aunt Mary ("self-educated, widely read, formidably articulate, a tireless controversialist and vigorous theologian") was the person "who set the real intellectual standards" for the Emerson brothers (Richardson, 1995, p. 23). For Waldo, she was the Angel of Death, "death being for her the ultimate experience of life" (Richardson, 1995, p. 27). In a letter to Waldo, Edward used a morbid phrase: "the angel's arrow has pierced too deeply" (in French; Letter EBE, P.R., to RWE, B., Nov. 13, 1833). "The angel" refers to what Aunt Mary called "the angel of consumption." (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 177). Edward had a conflictive relationship with Aunt Mary (Tolman & Forbes, 1929/2010). Cole (1998) points out that "as a Harvard student, Edward drove himself to make a mark on the world, repudiating Mary's counsel to inwardness and battling familiar symptoms of consumption" (p.182). In 1828, she considered his mental breakdown a punishment, "a Calvinistic-style stroke from God for his impiety... a response that created a breach between them for the remainder of Edward's life" (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 27). Nevertheless, soon after his arrival in the Caribbean, Edward shared with Aunt Mary his thoughts concerning moral sense and limit experiences

(St.C., March 11, 1831):

Sentiment—that word which brings up your image... —sentiment is eternal.— Yes, it is 'delightful' to meet, as you say, on our pilgrimage,—to speak or hail one another on this great sea & learn the destination of our several barks & strive to correct now & then a false reckoning of the moral latitude & longitude. But you overrated (or perhaps for my advantage preferred to appear so to do) the enjoyments of what you supposed my situation—I found when weakest—when nearest to the border line—so much of earth in me & so little of celestial buoyancy that I looked on this life—acquainted as I am with some of its darker passages—as on an unfinished feast & a half cultivated field to which I was willing if not anxious to return. Had I been more what I ought to be, I might perhaps have been able to lift the hand & eye of faith in the way you intimate. As it is, I linger content to exist... (Letter EBE, St.C., to MME, B., March 11, 1831)

Edward had descended previously into the darkness of the abyss. In May 1828 he suffered a complete mental collapse that required his being hospitalized for five months. This "manic depression" was attributed to his obsessive personality and to "the physical and mental exertion that he had applied to his studies" (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, pp. 220-225). At that time, Waldo recognized in Edward the "sadness of frustrated expectations." That 'sense of fatalism' can be recognized in his letters (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 225). Before Edward's departure to the West Indies in December 1830, his brother Charles perceived the "sting of Death" on Edward but kept up his hopes based on Edward's calm spirit and strong faith (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, pp. 230-231). In a letter to Edward in St. Croix, on January 1831, Waldo's first wife Ellen, suffering the same "curse" and anticipating her own death, says in an intriguing manner: "One is a slow, uncertain death and an ill spent life, the other a quick and sure remedy or a certain and an (sic) not agreeable but more preferable death" (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 232).

Edward's spirits rose and fell as the tides he observed. In January 1832, after ten months in Puerto Rico, he made an important reflection on his health and moral aspirations: "what extreme of folly to pretend on one hand to aspire after a noble & perfect character, & on the other to grumble at the great or little evils connected with our constitution or place" (P.R., Jan. 6, 1832). Edward's extended stay in Puerto Rico definitely prolonged his life. He felt physically better and temporarily invigorated (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., Feb. 11, 1832), but after Charles returned to Boston on April 1832, after a stay of almost four months, Edward felt lonelier than ever (P.R., April 10, 1832) and the longings for his friend Cunningham were accentuated (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., April 13, 1832). In July, he mentioned to his brother William his plans to return to practice law in New York (a desire that all his brothers opposed) and asserted with conviction that he would never consider the time passed in Puerto Rico as a loss (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., July 15, 1832). In the next letter to William, he recognized that his desire to go back to the law "can be frustrated" and expressed, again, the wonders of living in Puerto Rico's fine weather, despite his limited respect toward the people and its culture (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., July 29, 1832). Quickly thereafter he returned to New York and Boston, but only briefly, during the late summer and fall of 1832.

Nine months later, back in Puerto Rico (July 1833), Edward again expressed regret to be on the island due to his poor health. Even though he ascribed it to the burden of his obsessive working habits and some fundamental personal defect (i.e., moral, physical, or intellectual), he still found himself in the dark as to the real cause (Letter EBE, P.R., to CCE,



n.p., July 27, 1833). This darkness was clearly perceived by his brothers: "I think his letters breathe rather a melancholy strain. And what wonder? To be poor & dependant is hard, hard enough. But to be besides a banished man..." (Letter CCE, B., to WE, N.Y., Sept. 9, 1833; MHi Ms N-251 {297}). Edward even wrote to William that he felt his continued presence in the Caribbean only prolonged an existence of little benefit (Letter EBE, P.R., to WE, N.Y., Sept. 29-Oct. 17, 1833). This marked the beginning of Edward's final year.

### **Conclusion**

This essay has explored Edward Emerson's journal through the methodology of qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002), focused on the themes of naturalism and American Exceptionalism, and a consideration of the text as evidence of a liminal life-death event.

The chosen methodology of content analysis has proven to be worthwhile for the philosophical and critical understanding of Edward's texts. The decision was made early to consider the diary as an example of a liminal event. After creating a preliminary conceptual scheme based on the first encounter with Edward's diary, a set of pre-comprehension questions (e.g., How does Edward endure the limit situation of an almost terminal sickness? How are the notions of naturalism and Transcendentalism projected in the texts?), and related themes (e.g., religious and intellectual ideas, humankind notions, nature and landscape views) were developed—as has been previously illustrated. From this perspective, a series of categories for textual analysis were generated following the themes of naturalism (e.g., beauty, power, wildness) and Transcendentalism (e.g., divinity in nature, intimation with nature), as well as the aspects of health, consumption, and death. The diary was systematically examined using these categories and clusters of meaningful data-imprints commonalities were generated, continuing the dialogical process of both textual reduction (e.g., descriptions of trees and old people) and emergent novel sets (e.g., archetypes). Following this path, other categories were brought forward (e.g., sociological narratives, expressions of contempt) and the theme of American Exceptionalism emerged as an important topic.

In summary, Edward was actively engaged in the genres of travel and nature writing. Walking and writing contributed both to his health and to recording and sharing his observations and evaluations of new lands and their peoples. Edward's nature writing is characterized by the point-of-view of an illustrated traveler and of a literary mind; variations in the quality of language style and usage; a sociological understanding interlaced with a rich environmental imagination; Edenic references complemented by images of rupture; descriptions of landscapes that juxtapose memories of New England and the Mediterranean; emotional reactions to nature's power, wonder and beauty; perceptions of atmosphere and weather highly impinged upon by his infirmities; a preference for antiquity and tradition in which trees are revered; insights on nature such as the enduring power of art; and, finally, a controlled expression of invalidism, that silently disguises death's personal face and conforms to the myth of the tragic hero.

Edward's texts reveal prejudiced contempt toward the people and culture of Puerto Rico and show a sense of superiority that reflects ideas on American Exceptionalism. His elitism and Unitarian religious heritage play a significant role in his notion of personal and social striving toward moral perfection, which is a key ideological feature of U.S. exceptionalism. In this sense, the present analysis suggests some anticipation of the discourse of those political constructions. However, Edward's beliefs in human perfectibility are better characterized as a religious model of absolute moral conceptions with nationalistic undertones, rather than as an anticipation of the ideology of Manifest Destiny.

Transcendentalist ideas are not manifested in Edward's nature writing. For example, the examined texts show no evidence of a conception of nature based on the divine, a central notion among Transcendentalist nature writers. However, his philosophical thoughts are conceptually germane to the new philosophy emerging within his New England social and cultural milieu. In general, his intellectual discourse mainly reflects contemporary ideas. Nevertheless, the enunciated reverence toward trees and respect for elders, the reflections on brotherhood and the enduring power of art, his arguments over the faculty of reason, and his philosophy of life are evidence of Edward's creativity as a thinker until the end of his life. Impending doom seemed to stimulate in him a longing for past and unfulfilled intellectual expectations. Edward's liminal intimations of mortality and tragic sense elicit a textual solemn silence on consumption and death.

To close the hermeneutic circle of textual comprehension (Gadamer, 1986/2002) and as an instance of dialogic creative movement (Lautman, 2006/2011), an important question arises. Does the philosophical idea of the tragic hero (as in Aristotle's *Poetics*, Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*) apply to Edward's life and demise? Tragedy involves a great person who experiences a reversal of fortune that could be the product of a character flaw or a mistake. Edward was recognized: as "a living type of noble ambition and refinement" (Margaret Fuller); as one "among the rising lights and hopes of our American republic of letters... of a very superior nature intellectually and morally" (Edward Everett); and "a beautiful countenance full of force & fire, yet of an almost feminine refinement" (Frederick H. Hedge) (all quoted by Bosco & Myerson, 2006, pp. 67-71). Edward battled with frail health to attain academic and professional distinction, but at age twenty-three, he suffered a devastating reversal of fortune (a mental breakdown) that was ascribed to his ambitions and obsessive personality. Thus, in Edward's tragedy, the character's downfall is brought about by an internal cause and cannot be characterized as a misadventure. While Edward was recovering his reason and health, but returning also to his old hard-working ways, consumption placed him near an abyss. The tragic hero was called to adventure by a messenger of medicine: go to warm climates or face death. The journey was towards an uncertain destiny in which he faced the trial of a further intellectual degradation (labor as a clerk). He survived a severe challenge and prolonged his existence. Edward enjoyed for a short while the companionship of his brother Charles and of his dear friend Winthrop Cunningham. Their departure left him alone with his fate. The tragic protagonist confronted the decision to return to the ordinary world (home) or face his tragic destiny in the world of adventure (the tropics). A tragic hero evokes pity or fear. In Edward's case it was pity: "his destiny was a sort which cast a mournful and tender interest round him" (Fuller); "too soon, alas, the bright prospect was clouded" (Everett); and "his death... was hastened by grief for his failed ambition" (Hedge). At the end, Edward remained faithful to his passions. His inner compulsions determined the progress towards self-knowledge and demise. Evoking Shakespeare's Hamlet, Everett depicted Edward's tragic sense: "that unmatched form & feature of blown youth, blasted with ecstasy" (Bosco & Myerson, 2006, p. 69).

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