

* from **Nature**

In *Nature* Emerson explores the relation of the individual to the natural world. In the famous passage given below, he describes a sudden feeling of unity with all being as he becomes "part or parcel of God."

Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common,¹ in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate² than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

1. **common**: a piece of grazing land shared by a community.
2. **connate** (kŏn'ät): inborn.



"Then, my eye on the sun of noon, — my head
bathed in a blithe air, and uplifted into
infinite space — all mean egotism
vanishes. I become a transparent
eyeball."
— *Nature*, p. 13.

A humorous drawing, c. 1844, by Christopher Pearse Cranch, for *Nature*.
The Houghton Library, Harvard University

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✧ from **Self-Reliance**

"Self-Reliance," published in *Essays* (1841), is Emerson's strongest statement of his philosophy of individualism. What he was preaching, however, was not selfishness but the presence of divine spirit in every individual. Self-trust is the means by which we discover "that divine idea which each of us represents."

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance, that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better for worse as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. Not for nothing one face, one character, one fact, makes much impression on him, and another none. This sculpture in the memory is not without preestablished harmony. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. . . .

Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. . . .

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its

aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. . . .

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. "Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood." Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton,¹ and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood. . . .

1. **Pythagoras . . . Newton:** a list of great individuals with whom we associate revolutionary scientific, philosophical, or religious thinking.

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from **The American Scholar**

On August 31, 1837, Emerson delivered the annual Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard College. In this address he called on every individual to become "Man Thinking" and to assert intellectual independence. "The American Scholar" established Emerson as the leading figure in the intellectual revolution of New England.

In this distribution of functions¹ the scholar is the delegated intellect. In the right state he is *Man Thinking*. In the degenerate state, when the victim of society, he tends to become a mere thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking.

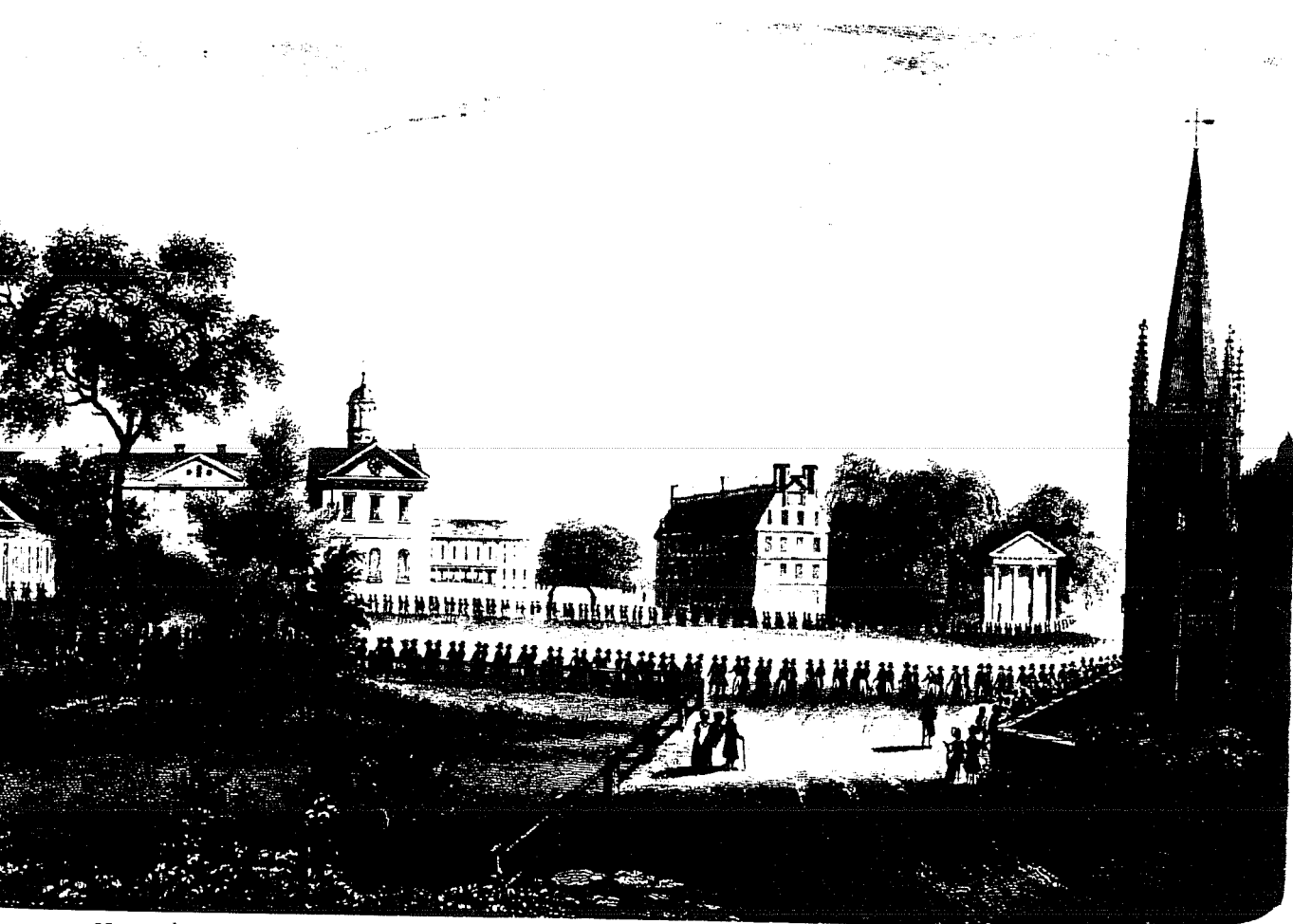
In this view of him, as *Man Thinking*, the theory of his office² is contained. Him Nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures; him the past instructs; him the future invites. Is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof? And, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master? But the old oracle said, "All things have two handles: beware of the wrong one." In life, too often, the scholar errs with mankind and forfeits his privilege. Let us see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influences he receives.

I. The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; and, after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing—beholding and beholden.

1. **distribution of functions:** This refers to the idea that each member of society performs a designated job—whether it be farmer, priest, scholar, or lawyer. In the best state, individuals realize their own worth and that of others, and the importance of every contribution to society. In the basest state, individuals lose sight of their social significance and sink into the routines of their crafts.

2. **office:** here, the duty of his position.

The scholar is he of all men whom this spectacle most engages. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself. Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find—so entire, so boundless. Far too as her splendors shine, system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without center, without circumference—in the mass and in the particle, Nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind. Classification begins. To the young mind everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem. It presently learns that since the dawn of history there has been a constant accumulation and classifying of facts. But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind? The astronomer discovers that geometry, a pure abstraction of the human mind, is the measure of planetary motion. The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts. The ambitious soul sits down



Harvard University, 1836. Engraving after a drawing by Sally Quincy.
Harvard University Archives

before each refractory³ fact; one after another reduces all strange constitutions,⁴ all new powers, to their class and their law, and goes on forever to animate the last fiber of organization, the outskirts of nature, by insight.

Thus to him, to this schoolboy under the bending dome of day, is suggested that he and it proceed from one root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every

3. **refractory**: unyielding.

4. **constitutions**: here, referring to physical compositions or make-ups.

vein. And what is that root? Is not that the soul of his soul? A thought too bold; a dream too wild. Yet when this spiritual light shall have revealed the law of more earthly natures — when he has learned to worship the soul, and to see that the natural philosophy that now is, is only the first gropings of its gigantic hand, he shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge as to a becoming creator. He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own

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mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, "Know thyself," and the modern precept, "Study nature," become at last one maxim.

II. The next great influence into the spirit of the scholar is the mind of the Past—in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed. Books are the best type of the influence of the past, and perhaps we shall get at the truth—learn the amount of this influence more conveniently—by considering their value alone.

The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him truth. It came to him short-lived actions; it went out from him immortal thoughts. It came to him business; it went from him poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires. Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.

Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone of transmuting life into truth. In proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. But none is quite perfect. As no air pump can by any means make a perfect vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought that shall be as efficient in all respects to a remote posterity as to contemporaries, or rather to the second age. Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.

Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sa-

credness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero,⁵ which Locke,⁶ which Bacon,⁷ have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.

Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate with the world and the soul. Hence the restorers of readings, the emendators, the bibliomaniacs of all degrees.⁸

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire. . . .

5. **Cicero**: Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.), Roman orator, essayist, and philosopher.

6. **Locke**: John Locke (1632-1704), English philosopher and political thinker.

7. **Bacon**: Francis Bacon (1561-1626), English essayist and proponent of scientific thought.

8. **Hence . . . degrees**: All these are men who value a book for some reason other than what it says, or who are more concerned with details than with the whole. *Restorers* and *emendators* refer to scholars who do research on a literary work in order to restore it to the author's original text. *Bibliomaniacs* refers to book collectors who have allowed their avocation to become a passion.

quadruped ill-disguised, hardly escaped into biped—and has paid for the new powers by loss of some of the old ones. But the lightning which explodes and fashions planets, maker of planets and suns, is in him. On one side elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock ledges, peat bog, forest, sea and shore; and on the other part thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature—here they are, side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man.

Nor can he blink the freewill. To hazard the contradiction—freedom is necessary. If you please to plant yourself on the side of Fate, and say, Fate is all; then we say, a part of Fate is the freedom of man. Forever wells up the impulse of choosing and acting in the soul. Intellect annuls Fate. So far as a man thinks, he is free. And though nothing is more disgusting than the crowing about liberty by slaves, as most men are, and the flippant mistaking for freedom of some paper preamble like a Declaration of Independence or the statute right to vote, by those who have never dared to think or to act—yet it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other. His sound relation to these facts is to use and command, not to cringe to them.

FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. In the excerpt from *Nature*, how would you describe Emerson's attitude toward the natural world? In what way might his attitude be one-sided or unrealistic?
2. Where in "The American Scholar" excerpt does Emerson suggest that the systematic and orderly aspects of nature are reflected by the human mind? How must books be used if we are to avoid becoming slaves to other people's ideas?
3. In "Self-Reliance," what does Emerson mean by saying "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds"? In what ways does he associate being misunderstood with greatness and wisdom?

4. In "Fate" Emerson turns to the "rough and surly" side of the natural world that is the opposite of the beauty he described in *Nature*. He shows us that nature has the power to limit as well as to inspire. In what way does Emerson consider human beings as powerful as nature? What keeps us from being controlled by the side of nature called fate?

LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

Discuss the meaning and implications of each of the following italicized words, and tell why, in your opinion, Emerson chose each of these words rather than more familiar and more easily understood words.

1. . . . the air is a *cordial* of incredible virtue. (*Nature*)
2. The *sluggish* and perverted mind of the multitude . . . ("The American Scholar")
3. A foolish consistency is the *hobgoblin* of little minds . . . ("Self-Reliance")
4. Intellect *annuls* Fate. ("Fate")

FOR COMPOSITION

Emerson's essays have many proverbial sentences that sum up a great deal in a few words. "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." In that single sentence he exhorts us to self-trust, indicates that this idea is instinctively appealing to the inner self, or "heart," of every person, and implies in the phrase "that iron string" that this doctrine is a hard but reliable one to live by.

Choose one of the following proverbial sentences from Emerson's essays. First explain what idea or ideas the sentence contains. Then relate the sentence to Emerson's general thinking as revealed in the selections from the essays.

"In the woods, we return to reason and faith."
(*Nature*)

"Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst." ("The American Scholar")

"Whoso would be a man [or woman] must be a nonconformist." ("Self-Reliance")

"So far as a man [or woman] thinks, he [she] is free." ("Fate")