Nature and Self-Reliance

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
1803–1882

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The 1836 and 1841 texts

Rendered into modern English with AI (Claude) and edited



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Nature and Self-Reliance · Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882)

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INTRODUCTION

"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) had left the ministry of the Unitarian church when he published *Nature* (1836), a small book without an author's name on the title page. It became the manifesto of the New England Transcendentalists. Nature, Emerson argues, serves us four ways—as commodity, beauty, language and discipline—and in the end leads beyond itself: standing on bare ground in the woods, he becomes "a transparent eye-ball," and the currents of the Universal Being circulate through him.

"Self-Reliance," the second of his *Essays* (1841), turns the same conviction toward conduct. "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." Emerson attacks conformity, imitation, travel as escape, and "a foolish consistency," which he calls "the hobgoblin of little minds," and asks his readers to live from their own intuition rather than from custom, creeds or property.

The right-hand column is Emerson in lightly modernized English; the left is the text of the first editions.

Nature

The 1836 book: Introduction, then eight chapters—Nature, Commodity, Beauty, Language, Discipline, Idealism, Spirit, Prospects—ending with the song of the "Orphic poet."

NATURE.

1.0 *"Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul; nature being a thing which doth only do, but not know." / Plotinus.*[1]

INTRODUCTION

Emerson asks why we should not have an original relation to the universe, and what nature is for.

1.1 Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us, by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines today also. There is more wool and flax in

1 Plotinus (c. AD 204–270), the Neoplatonist philosopher; the sentence paraphrases his *Enneads*.

the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.

1.2 Undoubtedly we have no questions to ask which are unanswerable. We must trust the perfection of the creation so far as to believe that whatever curiosity the order of things has awakened in our minds, the order of things can satisfy. Every man's condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us. Let us inquire, to what end is nature?

1.3 All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature. We have theories of races and of functions, but scarcely yet a remote approximation to an idea of creation. We are now so far from the road to truth that religious teachers dispute and hate each other, and speculative men are regarded as unsound and frivolous. But to a sound judgment, the most abstract truth is the most practical. Whenever a true theory appears, it will be its own evidence. Its test is that it will explain all phenomena. Now many are thought not only unexplained but inexplicable: language, sleep, dreams, beasts, sex.

1.4 Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, Nature. In listing the values of nature and adding up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses—in its common and in its philosophical meaning. In inquiries as general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thought will occur. *Nature*, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man: space, the air, the river, the leaf.[2] *Art* is applied to the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture. But

2 The NOT ME renders the "Not-I" of German idealist philosophy (Fichte), which reached Emerson through Coleridge and Carlyle.

his operations taken together are so insignificant—a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing—that in an impression so grand as that of the world on the human mind, they do not vary the result.

CHAPTER I: NATURE

Solitude under the stars and in the woods, where Emerson becomes a transparent eyeball.

1.5 To go into solitude, a man needs to withdraw as much from his room as from society. I am not solitary while I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds will put a distance between him and common things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore, and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these preachers of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

1.6 The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a paltry appearance. Neither does the wisest man wring out all her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

1.7 When we speak of nature in this way, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the wholeness of the impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the woodcutter's stick of timber from the poet's tree. The charming landscape which I saw this morning is

undoubtedly made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their land deeds give them no title.

1.8 To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has kept the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His communion with heaven and earth becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says—he is my creature, and for all his irrelevant griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless noon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a tonic of incredible potency. Crossing a bare common, 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. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake its skin, and at whatever period 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 does not see 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 petty egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The cur-

rents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle 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 dearer and more native to me than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds something as beautiful as his own nature.

1.9 The greatest delight which the fields and woods give is the suggestion of a hidden relation between man and the vegetable world. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I believed I was thinking justly or doing right.

1.10 Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For nature is not always dressed in holiday clothes, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as if for the frolic of the nymphs is overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire has sadness in it. Then there is a kind of contempt for the landscape felt by him who has just lost a dear friend to death. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

CHAPTER II: COMMODITY

Nature's first and lowest use: it feeds, warms, carries and serves the human body.

1.11 Whoever considers the final cause of the world will discern a multitude of uses that enter as parts into that result. They can

all be sorted into one of the following classes: Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline.[3]

1.12 Under the general name of Commodity, I rank all those advantages which our senses owe to nature. This, of course, is a benefit which is temporary and indirect, not ultimate, like its service to the soul. Yet although low, it is perfect in its kind, and is the only use of nature which all men grasp. The misery of man appears like childish petulance when we explore the steady and lavish provision that has been made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the heavens. What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences, this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between? this zodiac of lights, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this fourfold year? Beasts, fire, water, stones, and grain serve him. The field is at once his floor, his workyard, his playground, his garden, and his bed.

1.13 "More servants wait on man / Than he'll take notice of."—[4]

1.14 Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the divine charity nourish man.

1.15 The useful arts are but reproductions or new combinations, by the wit of man, of the same natural benefactors. He no longer waits for favoring winds, but by means of steam he makes real the fable of Aeolus's bag, and carries the thirty-two winds in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars, and, mounting a coach with a shipload of men, animals, and merchandise behind him, he darts

3 "Final cause" is the scholastic and Aristotelian term for a thing's purpose. "Commodity" keeps its old sense of usefulness or convenience.

4 From "Man" by George Herbert (1593–1633), English devotional poet, in *The Temple* (1633).

through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow through the air. By the sum of these aids, how the face of the world has changed, from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon![5] The private poor man has cities, ships, canals, bridges, built for him. He goes to the post office, and the human race runs his errands; to the bookshop, and the human race reads and writes of all that happens, for him; to the courthouse, and nations repair his wrongs. He sets his house upon the road, and the human race goes forth every morning, and shovels out the snow, and cuts a path for him.

1.16 But there is no need to specify particulars in this class of uses. The catalogue is endless, and the examples so obvious, that I shall leave them to the reader's reflection, with the general remark that this mercenary benefit is one which points to a further good. A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work.

CHAPTER III: BEAUTY

Nature serves the love of beauty: as delight to the eye, as partner of virtue, and as object of the intellect.

1.17 A nobler need of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty.

1.18 The ancient Greeks called the world κοσμος, beauty. Such is the constitution of all things, or such the shaping power of the human eye, that the primary forms, such as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight *in and for themselves;* a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping. This seems partly owing to the eye itself. The eye is the best of artists. By the mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of whatever character, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are commonplace and unmoving, the landscape which they compose is round and symmet-

5 In the *Odyssey* (Book X), Aeolus, keeper of the winds, gives Odysseus the winds tied up in a bag. The road "paved with iron bars" is the railway.

rical.[6] And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters. There is no object so foul that intense light will not make it beautiful. And the stimulus it gives the sense, and a sort of infinitude which it has, like space and time, make all matter gay. Even the corpse has its own beauty. But besides this general grace spread over nature, almost all the individual forms are agreeable to the eye, as is proved by our endless imitations of some of them, such as the acorn, the grape, the pine cone, the ear of wheat, the egg, the wings and forms of most birds, the lion's claw, the serpent, the butterfly, seashells, flames, clouds, buds, leaves, and the forms of many trees, such as the palm.

1.19 For better consideration, we may divide the aspects of Beauty in a threefold way.

1.20 1. First, the simple perception of natural forms is a delight. The influence of the forms and actions in nature is so needful to man that, in its lowest functions, it seems to lie on the border between commodity and beauty. To the body and mind which have been cramped by harmful work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney, comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough.

1.21 But in other hours, Nature satisfies the soul purely by its loveliness, and without any mixture of bodily benefit. I have seen the spectacle of morning from the hilltop opposite my house, from daybreak to sunrise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to share in its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How Nature deifies us with a few cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous.[7] The dawn is my Assyria; the sun-

6 Greek *kosmos* means order and ornament as well as "world".

7 "Conspire" in its root sense: to breathe together.

set and moonrise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams.[8]

1.22 Not less excellent, except that we are less susceptible in the afternoon, was the charm, last evening, of a January sunset. The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air had so much life and sweetness that it was a pain to come indoors. What was it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind the mill, which Homer or Shakespeare could not re-form for me in words? The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calyxes of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music.

1.23 The inhabitants of cities suppose that the country landscape is pleasant only half the year. I please myself with observing the graces of the winter scenery, and believe that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer. To the attentive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field it sees, every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen again. The heavens change every moment, and reflect their glory or gloom on the plains beneath. The state of the crops on the surrounding farms alters the expression of the earth from week to week. The succession of native plants in the pastures and roadsides, which makes the silent clock by which time tells the summer hours, will make even the divisions of the day perceptible to a keen observer. The tribes of birds and insects, like the plants punctual to their time, follow each other, and the year has room for all. By watercourses, the variety is greater. In July, the blue pontederia or pickerelweed blooms in large beds in the shallow parts of our pleasant river, and swarms with yellow butterflies in continual motion. Art cannot rival this pomp of purple and

8 Paphos, in Cyprus, was the chief shrine of Aphrodite.

gold. Indeed the river is a perpetual gala, and boasts each month a new ornament.

1.24 But this beauty of Nature which is seen and felt as beauty is the least part. The shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars, moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become mere shows, and mock us with their unreality. Go out of the house to see the moon, and it is mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines upon your necessary journey. The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October—who ever could clutch it? Go forth to find it, and it is gone: it is only a mirage as you look from the windows of a stagecoach.

BEAUTY AND THE HEROIC ACT

Natural beauty joins great deeds, from Thermopylae to Columbus and the scaffolds of English patriots.

1.25 2. The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without softness is that which is found in combination with the human will, and never separate. Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue. Every natural action is graceful. Every heroic act is also fitting, and causes the place and the bystanders to shine. We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will. He may divest himself of it; he may creep into a corner, and abdicate his kingdom, as most men do, but he is entitled to the world by his constitution. In proportion to the energy of his thought and will, he takes up the world into himself. "All those things for which men plow, build, or sail, obey virtue," said an ancient historian. "The winds and waves," said Gibbon, "are always on the side of the ablest navigators." So are the sun and moon and all the stars of heaven.[9] When a noble act is done—

9 The ancient historian is Sallust (*The Conspiracy of Catiline*, 2); Gibbon's line is from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

perhaps in a scene of great natural beauty; when Leonidas and his three hundred martyrs spend one day in dying, and the sun and moon come each and look at them once in the steep pass of Thermopylae; when Arnold Winkelried, in the high Alps, under the shadow of the avalanche, gathers into his side a sheaf of Austrian spears to break the line for his comrades—are not these heroes entitled to add the beauty of the scene to the beauty of the deed?[10] When the ship of Columbus nears the shore of America—before it, the beach lined with Indigenous people, fleeing out of all their huts of cane; the sea behind; and the purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago around—can we separate the man from the living picture? Does not the New World clothe his form with her palm groves and savannas as fit drapery? Natural beauty always steals in like air, and envelops great actions.[11] When Sir Harry Vane was dragged up Tower Hill, sitting on a sled, to suffer death as the champion of the English laws, one of the crowd cried out to him, "You never sat on so glorious a seat." Charles II, to intimidate the citizens of London, had the patriot Lord Russell drawn in an open coach through the principal streets of the city, on his way to the scaffold. "But," to use the simple narrative of his biographer, "the multitude imagined they saw liberty and virtue sitting by his side." In private places, among sordid objects, an act of truth or heroism seems at once to draw to itself the sky as its temple, the sun as its candle.[12] Nature stretches out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness. Willingly does she follow his steps with the rose and the violet, and bend her lines of grandeur and grace to the decoration of her darling child. Only let his thoughts be of equal scope, and the frame will suit the picture. A virtuous man is in unison with her works, and makes the central figure of the visible sphere. Homer, Pindar, Socrates, Phocion, associate themselves fitly in our memory with the

10 Leonidas of Sparta died holding the pass of Thermopylae against the Persians (480 BC); Winkelried is the legendary Swiss hero of the battle of Sempach (1386).
11 The "Indian Archipelago" here is the West Indies.
12 Sir Henry Vane the Younger was executed in 1662, William Lord Russell in 1683; the biographer is Lord John Russell (1819).

whole geography and climate of Greece. The visible heavens and earth sympathize with Jesus.[13] And in common life, whoever has seen a person of powerful character and happy genius will have remarked how easily he took all things along with him—the persons, the opinions, and the day—and nature became the handmaid of a man.

1.26 3. There is still another aspect under which the beauty of the world may be viewed, namely, as it becomes an object of the intellect. Besides the relation of things to virtue, they have a relation to thought. The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colors of affection. The intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other in man, and the exclusive activity of the one generates the exclusive activity of the other. There is something unfriendly in each to the other, but they are like the alternate periods of feeding and working in animals; each prepares for, and will certainly be followed by, the other. Therefore beauty, which in relation to actions, as we have seen, comes unsought, and comes because it is unsought, remains for the apprehension and pursuit of the intellect; and then again, in its turn, of the active power. Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature re-forms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.

1.27 All men are in some degree impressed by the face of the world. Some men even to delight. This love of beauty is Taste. Others have the same love in such excess that, not content with admiring, they seek to embody it in new forms. The creation of beauty is Art.

1.28 The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature. For although the works of nature are innumerable and all different, the result or the expression of them all is similar and single. Nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even all one. A leaf, a

13 Phocion was an incorruptible Athenian statesman and general of the fourth century BC.

sunbeam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all—that perfectness and harmony—is beauty. Therefore the standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms—the totality of nature; which the Italians expressed by defining beauty "il più nell'uno." Nothing is quite beautiful alone: there is nothing that is not beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace. The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect each seek to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point, and each in his own work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce. Thus Art is a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art does nature work through the will of a man filled with the beauty of her first works.[14]

1.29 The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. Extend this element to the uttermost, and I call it an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty are but different faces of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not, by itself, a solid and satisfying good. It must therefore stand as a part, and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature.

CHAPTER IV: LANGUAGE

Words are signs of natural facts, natural facts are symbols of spiritual facts, and nature is the symbol of spirit.

1.30 A third use which Nature serves for man is that of Language. Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and threefold degree.

1.31 1. Words are signs of natural facts.

1.32 2. Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts.

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14 *Il più nell'uno*: "the many in one." An alembic is a distilling vessel.

1.33 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit.

1.34 1. Words are signs of natural facts. The use of natural history is to give us aid in supernatural history. The use of the outer creation is to give us language for the beings and changes of the inward creation. Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* originally means *straight; wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind; transgression*, the crossing of a *line; supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*. We say the *heart* to express emotion, the *head* to denote thought; and *thought* and *emotion* are, in their turn, words borrowed from things of the senses, and now appropriated to spiritual nature. Most of the process by which this transformation is made is hidden from us in the remote time when language was framed; but the same tendency may be observed daily in children. Children and preliterate peoples use only nouns or names of things, which they continually convert into verbs, and apply to analogous mental acts.

1.35 2. But this origin of all words that convey a spiritual meaning—so conspicuous a fact in the history of language—is our least debt to nature. It is not words only that are emblematic; it is things which are emblematic. Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture. An enraged man is a lion, a cunning man is a fox, a firm man is a rock, a learned man is a torch. A lamb is innocence; a snake is subtle spite; flowers express to us the delicate affections. Light and darkness are our familiar expression for knowledge and ignorance; and heat for love. Visible distance behind and before us is respectively our image of memory and hope.

1.36 Who looks upon a river in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things? Throw a stone into the stream, and the circles that propagate themselves are the beautiful emblem of all influence. Man is conscious of a universal soul

within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul he calls Reason: it is not mine or yours or his, but we are its; we are its property and men. And the blue sky in which the private earth is buried, the sky with its eternal calm, and full of everlasting orbs, is the emblem of Reason.[15] That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit has life in itself. And man in all ages and countries embodies it in his language as the Father.

1.37 It is easily seen that there is nothing lucky or capricious in these analogies, but that they are constant, and pervade nature. These are not the dreams of a few poets, here and there, but man is an analogist, and studies relations in all objects. He is placed in the center of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. All the facts in natural history taken by themselves have no value, but are barren like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life. Whole Floras, all the volumes of Linnaeus and Buffon, are but dry catalogues of facts; but the most trivial of these facts—the habit of a plant, the organs, or work, or noise of an insect—applied to the illustration of a fact in intellectual philosophy, or in any way associated with human nature, affects us in the most lively and agreeable manner.[16] The seed of a plant—to what affecting analogies in the nature of man is that little fruit put to use, in all discourse, up to the voice of Paul, who calls the human corpse a seed: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body." The motion of the earth around its axis, and around the sun, makes the day and the year. These are certain amounts of brute light and heat. But is there no intent of an analogy between man's life and the seasons? And do the seasons

15 Following Coleridge, Emerson uses Reason for the higher, intuitive faculty, as against the practical Understanding.

16 A Flora is a systematic catalogue of a region's plants; Linnaeus and Buffon were the great eighteenth-century naturalists.

gain no grandeur or pathos from that analogy?[17] The instincts of the ant are very unimportant considered as the ant's; but the moment a ray of relation is seen to extend from it to man, and the little drudge is seen to be a teacher, a little body with a mighty heart, then all its habits, even the one said to have been recently observed, that it never sleeps, become sublime.

1.38 Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, preliterate peoples, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; that is, all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. The same symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages. It has moreover been observed that the idioms of all languages approach each other in passages of the greatest eloquence and power. And as this is the first language, so is it the last. This immediate dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into an emblem of something in human life, never loses its power to affect us. It is this which gives that piquancy to the conversation of a strong-natured farmer or backwoodsman which all men relish.

1.39 Thus nature is an interpreter, by whose means man converses with his fellow men. A man's power to connect his thought with its proper symbol, and so utter it, depends on the simplicity of his character, that is, upon his love of truth and his desire to communicate it without loss. The corruption of man is followed by the corruption of language. When simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas is broken up by the prevalence of secondary desires—the desire of riches, the desire of pleasure, the desire of power, the desire of praise—and duplicity and falsehood take the place of simplicity and truth, the power over nature as an interpreter of the will is in a degree lost. New imagery ceases to be created, and old words are perverted to stand for things which are not; a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults. In due time, the fraud is

17 1 Corinthians 15:44.

manifest, and words lose all power to stimulate the understanding or the affections. Hundreds of writers may be found in every long-civilized nation who for a short time believe, and make others believe, that they see and utter truths, who do not of themselves clothe one thought in its natural garment, but who feed unconsciously upon the language created by the primary writers of the country, those, namely, who hold primarily to nature.

1.40 But wise men pierce this rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things; so that picturesque language is at once a commanding certificate that he who employs it is a man in alliance with truth and God. The moment our discourse rises above the ground line of familiar facts, and is inflamed with passion or exalted by thought, it clothes itself in images. A man conversing in earnest, if he watches his intellectual processes, will find that a material image, more or less luminous, always arises in his mind at the same moment as every thought, and furnishes the garment of the thought. Hence good writing and brilliant discourse are perpetual allegories. This imagery is spontaneous. It is the blending of experience with the present action of the mind. It is creation in the proper sense. It is the working of the Original Cause through the instruments he has already made.

1.41 These facts may suggest the advantage which country life possesses for a powerful mind over the artificial and curtailed life of cities. We know more from nature than we can at will communicate. Its light flows into the mind evermore, and we forget its presence. The poet, the orator, bred in the woods, whose senses have been nourished by their fair and soothing changes, year after year, without design and without heed—shall not lose their lesson altogether in the roar of cities or the broil of politics. Long hereafter, amid agitation and terror in national councils—in the hour of revolution—these solemn images shall reappear in their morning luster, as fit symbols and words of the thoughts which the passing events shall awaken. At the call of a noble sentiment, again the woods wave, the pines murmur, the river rolls and shines, and the cattle low upon the mountains, as

he saw and heard them in his infancy. And with these forms, the spells of persuasion, the keys of power, are put into his hands.

1.42 3. We are thus assisted by natural objects in the expression of particular meanings. But how great a language to convey such peppercorn bits of information! Did it need such noble races of creatures, this profusion of forms, this host of orbs in heaven, to furnish man with the dictionary and grammar of his everyday local speech? While we use this grand cipher to expedite the affairs of our pot and kettle, we feel that we have not yet put it to its use, nor are we able to. We are like travelers using the cinders of a volcano to roast their eggs. While we see that it always stands ready to clothe what we would say, we cannot avoid the question whether the characters are not significant of themselves. Do mountains, and waves, and skies have no significance but what we consciously give them when we employ them as emblems of our thoughts? The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a mirror. "The visible world and the relation of its parts is the dial plate of the invisible." The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics. Thus, "the whole is greater than its part"; "reaction is equal to action"; "the smallest weight may be made to lift the greatest, the difference of weight being compensated by time"; and many like propositions, which have an ethical as well as a physical sense. These propositions have a much more extensive and universal sense when applied to human life than when confined to technical use.

1.43 In like manner, the memorable words of history and the proverbs of nations usually consist of a natural fact, selected as a picture or parable of a moral truth. Thus: A rolling stone gathers no moss; A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush; One who limps in the right way will beat a racer in the wrong; Make hay while the sun shines; It is hard to carry a full cup even; Vinegar is the son of wine; The last ounce broke the camel's back; Long-lived trees make roots first—and the like. In their primary

sense these are trivial facts, but we repeat them for the value of their analogical import. What is true of proverbs is true of all fables, parables, and allegories.

1.44 This relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men. It appears to men, or it does not appear. When in fortunate hours we ponder this miracle, the wise man doubts whether at all other times he is not blind and deaf;—"Can these things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder?" for the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own shines through it.[18]

It is the standing problem which has exercised the wonder and the study of every fine genius since the world began, from the era of the Egyptians and the Brahmins to that of Pythagoras, of Plato, of Bacon, of Leibniz, of Swedenborg. There sits the Sphinx at the roadside, and from age to age, as each prophet comes by, he tries his fortune at reading her riddle. There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, preexist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit.[19] A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world. "Material objects," said a French philosopher, "are necessarily kinds of *scoriæ* of the substantial thoughts of the Creator, which must always preserve an exact relation to their first origin; in other words, visible nature must have a spiritual and moral side."[20]

18 The verse is from Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, III.iv.

19 Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Swedish scientist and mystic, whose doctrine of correspondences between natural and spiritual things deeply influenced Emerson.

20 The French philosopher is Guillaume Oegger, a Swedenborgian, in *Le Vrai Messie* (1829). *Scoriae*: slag, the dross left after smelting.

1.45 This doctrine is abstruse, and though the images of "garment," "scoriæ," "mirror," etc., may stimulate the fancy, we must summon the aid of subtler and more vital expositors to make it plain. "Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which gave it forth"—this is the fundamental law of criticism. A life in harmony with nature, the love of truth and of virtue, will purge the eyes to understand her text. By degrees we may come to know the primitive sense of the permanent objects of nature, so that the world shall be to us an open book, and every form significant of its hidden life and final cause.

1.46 A new interest surprises us while, under the view now suggested, we contemplate the fearful extent and multitude of objects; since "every object rightly seen unlocks a new faculty of the soul." That which was unconscious truth becomes, when interpreted and defined in an object, a part of the domain of knowledge—a new addition to the storehouse of power.

CHAPTER V: DISCIPLINE

Nature trains the Understanding in intellectual truths and the Reason in moral law.

1.47 In view of this significance of nature, we arrive at once at a new fact: that nature is a discipline. This use of the world includes the preceding uses as parts of itself.

1.48 Space, time, society, labor, climate, food, locomotion, the animals, the mechanical forces, give us sincerest lessons, day by day, whose meaning is unlimited. They educate both the Understanding and the Reason. Every property of matter is a school for the understanding—its solidity or resistance, its inertia, its extension, its figure, its divisibility. The understanding adds, divides, combines, measures, and finds everlasting nourishment and room for its activity in this worthy scene. Meanwhile, Reason transfers all these lessons into its own world of thought, by perceiving the analogy that marries Matter and Mind.

1.49 1. Nature is a discipline of the understanding in intellectual truths. Our dealing with sensible objects is a constant exer-

cise in the necessary lessons of difference, of likeness, of order, of being and seeming, of progressive arrangement; of ascent from particular to general; of the combination of manifold forces to one end. Proportioned to the importance of the organ to be formed is the extreme care with which its tuition is provided—a care omitted in no single case. What tedious training, day after day, year after year, never ending, to form the common sense; what continual reproduction of annoyances, inconveniences, dilemmas; what triumphing of little men over us; what disputing of prices, what reckonings of interest—and all to form the Hand of the mind; to instruct us that "good thoughts are no better than good dreams, unless they be executed!"[21]

1.50 The same good office is performed by Property and its filial systems of debt and credit. Debt, grinding debt, whose iron face the widow, the orphan, and the sons of genius fear and hate; debt, which consumes so much time, which so lames and disheartens a great spirit with cares that seem so base, is a teacher whose lessons cannot be forgone, and is needed most by those who suffer from it most. Moreover, property, which has been well compared to snow—"if it falls level today, it will be blown into drifts tomorrow"—is merely the surface action of internal machinery, like the hands on the face of a clock. While it is now the gymnastics of the understanding, it is storing up, in the foresight of the spirit, experience in profounder laws.

1.51 The whole character and fortune of the individual are affected by the least inequalities in the culture of the understanding; for example, in the perception of differences. Therefore Space exists, and therefore Time, that man may know that things are not huddled and lumped, but sundered and individual. A bell and a plow each have their use, and neither can do the work of the other. Water is good to drink, coal to burn, wool to wear; but wool cannot be drunk, nor water spun, nor coal eaten. The wise man shows his wisdom in separation, in gradation, and his scale of creatures and of merits is as wide as

21 Adapted from Francis Bacon's essay "Of Great Place."

nature. The foolish have no range in their scale, but suppose every man is like every other man. What is not good they call the worst, and what is not hateful they call the best.

1.52 In like manner, what good heed nature forms in us! She pardons no mistakes. Her yea is yea, and her nay, nay.[22]

1.53 The first steps in Agriculture, Astronomy, Zoology (those first steps which the farmer, the hunter, and the sailor take) teach that nature's dice are always loaded; that in her heaps and rubbish are concealed sure and useful results.

1.54 How calmly and genially the mind apprehends, one after another, the laws of physics! What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to Be! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast. Man is greater in that he can see this, and the universe less, because Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known.

1.55 Here again we are impressed and even daunted by the immense Universe to be explored. 'What we know is a point to what we do not know.' Open any recent journal of science, and weigh the problems suggested concerning Light, Heat, Electricity, Magnetism, Physiology, Geology, and judge whether the interest of natural science is likely to be soon exhausted.

1.56 Passing by many particulars of the discipline of nature, we must not omit to specify two.

1.57 The exercise of the Will, or the lesson of power, is taught in every event. From the child's successive possession of his several senses up to the hour when he says, "thy will be done!" he is learning the secret that he can reduce under his will not only particular events but great classes, indeed the whole series of events, and so conform all facts to his character. Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode. It offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mold into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. He forges the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious

22 Echoing Matthew 5:37 and James 5:12.

words, and gives them wings as angels of persuasion and command. More and more, with every thought, does his kingdom stretch over things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will—the double of the man.

1.58 2. Sensible objects conform to the premonitions of Reason and reflect the conscience. All things are moral; and in their boundless changes they have an unceasing reference to spiritual nature. Therefore nature is glorious with form, color, and motion, so that every globe in the remotest heaven; every chemical change from the rudest crystal up to the laws of life; every change of vegetation from the first principle of growth in the eye of a leaf to the tropical forest and antediluvian coal-mine; every animal function from the sponge up to Hercules, shall hint or thunder to man the laws of right and wrong, and echo the Ten Commandments. Therefore nature is always the ally of Religion: she lends all her pomp and riches to the religious sentiment. Prophet and priest, David, Isaiah, Jesus, have drawn deeply from this source.

1.59 This ethical character so penetrates the bone and marrow of nature as to seem the end for which it was made. Whatever private purpose is answered by any member or part, this is its public and universal function, and it is never omitted. Nothing in nature is exhausted in its first use. When a thing has served an end to the uttermost, it is wholly new for a further service. In God, every end is converted into a new means. Thus the use of Commodity, regarded by itself, is mean and squalid. But it is to the mind an education in the great doctrine of Use, namely, that a thing is good only so far as it serves; that a conspiring of parts and efforts to the production of an end is essential to any being. The first and gross manifestation of this truth is our inevitable and hated training in values and wants, in corn and meat.

1.60 It has already been illustrated, in treating of the significance of material things, that every natural process is but a version of a moral sentence. The moral law lies at the center of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All

things with which we deal preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel? The chaff and the wheat, weeds and plants, blight, rain, insects, sun—it is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields. But the sailor, the shepherd, the miner, the merchant, in their several haunts, each have an experience precisely parallel and leading to the same conclusions. Because all organizations are radically alike. Nor can it be doubted that this moral sentiment, which thus scents the air, and grows in the grain, and impregnates the waters of the world, is caught by man and sinks into his soul. The moral influence of nature upon every individual is that amount of truth which it illustrates to him. Who can estimate this? Who can guess how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman? how much tranquility has been reflected to man from the azure sky, over whose unspotted deeps the winds forevermore drive flocks of stormy clouds, and leave no wrinkle or stain? how much industry and providence and affection we have caught from the pantomime of animals? What a searching preacher of self-command is the varying phenomenon of Health!

1.61 Herein is especially apprehended the Unity of Nature—the Unity in Variety—which meets us everywhere. All the endless variety of things makes a unique, an identical impression. Xenophanes complained in his old age that, look where he would, all things hastened back to Unity. He was weary of seeing the same entity in the tedious variety of forms. The fable of Proteus has a truth at its core. Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole. Each particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world.[23]

1.62 Resemblances exist not only in things whose analogy is obvious, as when we detect the type of the human hand in the flipper of the fossil saurus, but also in objects wherein there is great superficial unlikeness. Thus architecture is called ‘frozen

23 Xenophanes (c. 570–475 BC), Greek philosopher who taught that all is one. Proteus: the Greek sea god who constantly changed his shape.

music' by de Staël and Goethe. 'A Gothic church,' said Coleridge, 'is a petrified religion.' Michelangelo maintained that, to an architect, a knowledge of anatomy is essential. In Haydn's oratorios, the notes present to the imagination not only motions, as of the snake, the stag, and the elephant, but colors also, as the green grass. The granite is differentiated in its laws, only by the more or less of heat, from the river that wears it away.[24] The river, as it flows, resembles the air that flows over it; the air resembles the light which traverses it with more subtle currents; the light resembles the heat which rides with it through Space. Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same. Hence it is that a rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. So intimate is this Unity that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of nature, and betrays its source in universal Spirit. For it pervades Thought also. Every universal truth which we express in words implies or supposes every other truth. *Omne verum vero consonat*. It is like a great circle on a sphere, comprising all possible circles; which, however, may be drawn so as to comprise it in like manner. Every such truth is the absolute Ens seen from one side. But it has innumerable sides.[25]

1.63 The same central Unity is still more conspicuous in actions. Words are finite organs of the infinite mind. They cannot cover the dimensions of what is in truth. They break, chop, and impoverish it. An action is the perfection and publication of thought. A right action seems to fill the eye, and to be related to all nature. "The wise man, in doing one thing, does all; or, in the one thing he does rightly, he sees the likeness of all which is done rightly."

1.64 Words and actions are not the attributes of mute and brute nature. They introduce us to that singular form which predominates over all other forms. This is the human. All other organiz-

24 Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* (1798) depicts these animals and the green fields in music.

25 Latin: "Every truth agrees with every other truth." *Ens*: Latin for "being."

ations appear to be degradations of the human form. When this organization appears among so many that surround it, the spirit prefers it to all others. It says, 'From such as this have I drawn joy and knowledge. In such as this have I found and beheld myself. I will speak to it. It can speak back. It can yield me thought already formed and alive.' In fact, the eye—the mind—is always accompanied by these forms, male and female; and these are incomparably the richest sources of information about the power and order that lie at the heart of things. Unfortunately, every one of them bears the marks as of some injury; is marred and superficially defective. Nevertheless, far different from the deaf and mute nature around them, these all rest like fountain-pipes on the unfathomed sea of thought and virtue, to which they alone, of all organizations, are the entrances.

1.65 It would be a pleasant inquiry to follow into detail their ministry to our education, but where would it stop? We are associated in adolescent and adult life with some friends who, like skies and waters, are coextensive with our idea; who, answering each to a certain affection of the soul, satisfy our desire on that side; whom we lack power to put at such focal distance from us that we can mend or even analyze them. We cannot choose but love them. When much companionship with a friend has supplied us with a standard of excellence, and has increased our respect for the resources of God, who thus sends a real person to surpass our ideal; when he has, moreover, become an object of thought, and, while his character retains all its unconscious effect, is converted in the mind into solid and sweet wisdom—it is a sign to us that his office is closing, and he is commonly withdrawn from our sight in a short time.

CHAPTER VI: IDEALISM

Emerson asks whether nature exists outwardly at all, and how culture teaches us to see it as appearance.

1.66 Thus is the unspeakable but intelligible and practicable meaning of the world conveyed to man, the immortal pupil, in

every object of sense. To this one end of Discipline, all parts of nature conspire.

1.67 A noble doubt perpetually suggests itself: whether this end is not the Final Cause of the Universe, and whether nature outwardly exists. It is a sufficient account of that Appearance we call the World, that God will teach a human mind, and so makes it the receiver of a certain number of congruent sensations, which we call sun and moon, man and woman, house and trade. In my utter impotence to test the authenticity of the report of my senses, to know whether the impressions they make on me correspond with outlying objects, what difference does it make whether Orion is up there in heaven, or some god paints the image in the firmament of the soul? The relations of parts and the end of the whole remaining the same, what is the difference whether land and sea interact, and worlds revolve and intermingle without number or end—deep yawning under deep, and galaxy balancing galaxy, throughout absolute space—or whether, without relations of time and space, the same appearances are inscribed in the constant faith of man? Whether nature enjoys a substantial existence outside, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me. Be it what it may, it is ideal to me, so long as I cannot test the accuracy of my senses.

1.68 The frivolous make themselves merry with the Ideal theory, as if its consequences were burlesque; as if it affected the stability of nature. It surely does not. God never jests with us, and will not compromise the end of nature by permitting any inconsequence in its procession. Any distrust of the permanence of laws would paralyze the faculties of man. Their permanence is sacredly respected, and his faith therein is perfect. The wheels and springs of man are all set to the hypothesis of the permanence of nature. We are not built like a ship to be tossed, but like a house to stand. It is a natural consequence of this structure that, so long as the active powers predominate over the reflective, we resist with indignation any hint that nature is more short-lived or mutable than spirit. The broker, the wheel-

wright, the carpenter, the toll-keeper are much displeased at the suggestion.

1.69 But while we acquiesce entirely in the permanence of natural laws, the question of the absolute existence of nature still remains open. It is the uniform effect of culture on the human mind, not to shake our faith in the stability of particular phenomena, as of heat, water, nitrogen; but to lead us to regard nature as a phenomenon, not a substance; to attribute necessary existence to spirit; to esteem nature as an accident and an effect.

1.70 To the senses and the unrenewed understanding belongs a sort of instinctive belief in the absolute existence of nature. In their view, man and nature are indissolubly joined. Things are ultimates, and they never look beyond their sphere. The presence of Reason mars this faith. The first effort of thought tends to relax this despotism of the senses, which binds us to nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us nature aloof and, as it were, afloat. Until this higher agency intervenes, the animal eye sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces. When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added grace and expression. These proceed from imagination and affection, and abate something of the angular distinctness of objects. If the Reason is stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The best, the happiest moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, and the reverential withdrawing of nature before its God.

1.71 Let us proceed to indicate the effects of culture. 1. Our first instruction in the Ideal philosophy is a hint from nature herself.

1.72 Nature is made to conspire with spirit to emancipate us. Certain mechanical changes, a small alteration in our local position, apprise us of a dualism. We are strangely affected by seeing the shore from a moving ship, from a balloon, or through the tints of an unusual sky. The least change in our point of view gives the whole world a pictorial air. A man who seldom rides needs only to get into a coach and traverse his own town to turn

the street into a puppet show. The men, the women—talking, running, bartering, fighting—the earnest workman, the lounger, the beggar, the boys, the dogs, are unrealized at once, or, at least, wholly detached from all relation to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings. What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the railroad car! Indeed, the most familiar objects (make a very slight change in the point of vision) please us most. In a camera obscura, the butcher's cart, and the figure of one of our own family, amuse us. So a portrait of a well-known face gratifies us.[26] Turn the eyes upside down, by looking at the landscape through your legs, and how agreeable is the picture, though you have seen it any time in these twenty years!

1.73 In these cases, by mechanical means, the difference between the observer and the spectacle—between man and nature—is suggested. Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt, from the fact, probably, that man is hereby apprised that, while the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable.

THE POET AND THE PHILOSOPHER

Shakespeare bends nature to his passion; the philosopher and religion likewise subordinate matter to thought.

1.74 2. In a higher manner, the poet communicates the same pleasure. By a few strokes he delineates, as on air, the sun, the mountain, the camp, the city, the hero, the maiden, not different from what we know them, but only lifted from the ground and afloat before the eye. He unfixes the land and the sea, makes them revolve around the axis of his primary thought, and disposes them anew. Possessed himself by a heroic passion, he uses matter as symbols of it. The man of the senses conforms thoughts to things; the poet conforms things to his thoughts. The one esteems nature as rooted and fast; the other, as fluid,

26 Camera obscura: a darkened chamber or box in which a lens projects an image of the outside scene onto a surface.

and impresses his being upon it. To him, the refractory world is ductile and flexible; he invests dust and stones with humanity, and makes them the words of the Reason. The imagination may be defined as the use which the Reason makes of the material world. Shakespeare possesses the power of subordinating nature for the purposes of expression beyond all poets. His imperial muse tosses the creation like a bauble from hand to hand, to embody any capricious shade of thought that is uppermost in his mind. The remotest spaces of nature are visited, and the farthest sundered things are brought together, by a subtle spiritual connection. We are made aware that the magnitude of material things is merely relative, and all objects shrink and expand to serve the passion of the poet. Thus, in his sonnets, the lays of birds, the scents and dyes of flowers, he finds to be the *shadow* of his beloved; time, which keeps her from him, is his *chest*; the suspicion she has awakened is her *ornament*: The ornament of beauty is Suspect, / A crow which flies in heaven's sweetest air.[27]

1.75 His passion is not the fruit of chance; it swells, as he speaks, to a city, or a state.

1.76 No, it was builded far from accident;
It suffers not in smiling pomp, nor falls
Under the brow of thralling discontent;
It fears not policy, that heretic,
That works on leases of short numbered hours,
But all alone stands hugely politic.[28]

1.77 In the strength of his constancy, the Pyramids seem to him recent and transitory. And the freshness of youth and love dazzles him with its resemblance to morning.[29]

27 Shakespeare, Sonnets 98, 65 and 70; the verse is from Sonnet 70.
28 Shakespeare, Sonnet 124.
29 Alluding to Sonnet 123, where the "pyramids built up with newer might" are "nothing novel, nothing strange."

1.78 Take those lips away
Which so sweetly were forsworn;
And those eyes,—the break of day,
Lights that do mislead the morn.[30]

1.79 The wild beauty of this hyperbole, I may say in passing, would not be easy to match in literature.

1.80 This transfiguration which all material objects undergo through the passion of the poet—this power which he exerts, at any moment, to magnify the small, to shrink the great—might be illustrated by a thousand examples from his plays. I have before me The Tempest, and will cite only these few lines.

1.81 Ariel. The strong based promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
The pine and cedar.[31]

1.82 Prospero calls for music to soothe the frantic Alonso and his companions: A solemn air, and the best comforter
To an unsettled fancy, cure thy brains
Now useless, boiled within thy skull.[32]

1.83 Again: The charm dissolves apace
And, as the morning steals upon the night,
Melting the darkness, so their rising senses
Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle
Their clearer reason.

1.84 Their understanding
Begins to swell: and the approaching tide
Will shortly fill the reasonable shores
That now lie foul and muddy.

1.85 The perception of real affinities between events (that is to say, of *ideal* affinities, for those only are real) enables the poet thus to make free with the most imposing forms and phenomena of the world, and to assert the predominance of the soul.

30 Song from Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, IV.i.
31 *The Tempest*, V.i. In Shakespeare these lines are spoken by Prospero, not Ariel.
32 *The Tempest*, V.i, as are the passages that follow.

1.86 3. While the poet thus delights us by animating nature, like a creator, with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only in this: that the one proposes Beauty as his main end, the other Truth. But the philosopher, no less than the poet, subordinates the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought. "The problem of philosophy," according to Plato, "is, for all that exists conditionally, to find a ground unconditioned and absolute." It proceeds on the faith that a law determines all phenomena, and that, once it is known, the phenomena can be predicted. That law, when in the mind, is an idea. Its beauty is infinite. The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty which is truth, and a truth which is beauty, is the aim of both. Is not the charm of one of Plato's or Aristotle's definitions strictly like that of the Antigone of Sophocles? It is, in both cases, that a spiritual life has been imparted to nature; that the solid-seeming block of matter has been pervaded and dissolved by a thought; that this feeble human being has penetrated the vast masses of nature with an informing soul, and recognized itself in their harmony, that is, seized their law. In physics, when this is attained, the memory disburdens itself of its cumbrous catalogues of particulars, and carries centuries of observation in a single formula.

1.87 Thus even in physics the material is ever degraded before the spiritual. The astronomer, the geometer, rely on their irrefutable analysis, and disdain the results of observation. The sublime remark of Euler on his law of arches, "This will be found contrary to all experience, yet is true," had already transferred nature into the mind, and left matter like an outcast corpse.[33]

1.88 4. Intellectual science has been observed invariably to beget a doubt of the existence of matter. Turgot said, "He that has never doubted the existence of matter may be assured he has no aptitude for metaphysical inquiries." It fastens the attention upon immortal, necessary, uncreated natures, that is, upon Ideas; and in their beautiful and majestic presence we feel that our outward being is a dream and a shade. While we wait in this

33 Leonhard Euler (1707–1783), Swiss mathematician.

Olympus of gods, we think of nature as an appendix to the soul. We ascend into their region, and know that these are the thoughts of the Supreme Being. "These are they who were set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.[34] When he prepared the heavens, they were there; when he established the clouds above, when he strengthened the fountains of the deep. Then they were by him, as one brought up with him. Of them took he counsel."[35]

1.89 Their influence is proportionate. As objects of science, they are accessible to few men. Yet all men are capable of being raised by piety or by passion into their region. And no man touches these divine natures without becoming, in some degree, himself divine. Like a new soul, they renew the body. We become physically nimble and light; we tread on air; life is no longer irksome, and we think it will never be so. No man fears age or misfortune or death in their serene company, for he is transported out of the district of change. While we behold unveiled the nature of Justice and Truth, we learn the difference between the absolute and the conditional or relative. We apprehend the absolute. As it were, for the first time, *we exist*. We become immortal, for we learn that time and space are relations of matter; that with a perception of truth, or a virtuous will, they have no affinity.

1.90 5. Finally, religion and ethics, which may fitly be called the practice of ideas, or the introduction of ideas into life, have an effect analogous to that of all lower culture, in degrading nature and suggesting its dependence on spirit. Ethics and religion differ in this: that the one is the system of human duties commencing from man; the other, from God. Religion includes the personality of God; Ethics does not. They are one for our present design. They both put nature under foot. The first and last lesson of religion is, "The things that are seen are temporal; the things that are unseen are eternal." It puts an affront upon nature. It does for the unschooled what philosophy does for

34 Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727–1781), French economist and statesman.
35 Adapted from Proverbs 8:23–30, where Wisdom speaks of herself.

Berkeley and Vyasa.[36] The uniform language that may be heard in the churches of the most ignorant sects is: 'Despise the unsubstantial shows of the world; they are vanities, dreams, shadows, unrealities; seek the realities of religion.' The devotee flouts nature. Some theosophists have arrived at a certain hostility and indignation toward matter, as the Manichaeans and Plotinus. They distrusted in themselves any looking back to these fleshpots of Egypt. Plotinus was ashamed of his body. In short, they might all better say of matter what Michelangelo said of external beauty: "it is the frail and weary weed, in which God dresses the soul, which he has called into time."[37]

1.91 It appears that motion, poetry, physical and intellectual science, and religion all tend to affect our convictions of the reality of the external world. But I admit there is something ungrateful in expanding too minutely the particulars of the general proposition that all culture tends to imbue us with idealism. I have no hostility to nature, but a child's love for it. I expand and live in the warm day like corn and melons. Let us speak kindly of her. I do not wish to fling stones at my beautiful mother, nor soil my gentle nest. I only wish to indicate the true position of nature in regard to man, in which all right education tends to establish man, as the ground whose attainment is the object of human life, that is, of man's connection with nature. Culture inverts the common views of nature, and brings the mind to call that apparent which it is used to calling real, and that real which it is used to calling visionary. Children, it is true, believe in the external world. The belief that it only appears is an afterthought, but with culture this faith will as surely arise in the mind as did the first.

1.92 The advantage of the ideal theory over the popular faith is this: that it presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind. It is, in fact, the view which Reason,

36 The quotation is from 2 Corinthians 4:18. George Berkeley (1685–1753), Irish idealist philosopher; Vyasa, legendary sage and compiler of the Vedas.
37 Manichaeans: followers of Mani (3rd century), who held matter to be evil. "Fleshpots of Egypt": Exodus 16:3. "Weed" here means garment.

both speculative and practical, that is, philosophy and virtue, takes. For, seen in the light of thought, the world always is phenomenal; and virtue subordinates it to the mind. Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture, which God paints on the instant eternity, for the contemplation of the soul. Therefore the soul holds itself off from a too trivial and microscopic study of the universal tablet. It respects the end too much to immerse itself in the means. It sees something more important in Christianity than the scandals of ecclesiastical history or the niceties of criticism; and, very incurious about persons or miracles, and not at all disturbed by chasms of historical evidence, it accepts from God the phenomenon, as it finds it, as the pure and awe-inspiring form of religion in the world. It is not hot and passionate at the appearance of what it calls its own good or bad fortune, at the union or opposition of other persons. No man is its enemy. It accepts whatever befalls as part of its lesson. It is a watcher more than a doer, and it is a doer only that it may the better watch.

CHAPTER VII: SPIRIT

Idealism answers only what matter is; spirit, present through us, explains where nature comes from and goes.

1.93 It is essential to a true theory of nature and of man that it should contain something progressive. Uses that are exhausted or that may be, and facts that end in the statement, cannot be all that is true of this brave lodging in which man is harbored, and in which all his faculties find fitting and endless exercise. And all the uses of nature can be summed up in one, which gives the activity of man an infinite scope. Through all its kingdoms, to the suburbs and outskirts of things, it is faithful to the cause from which it had its origin. It always speaks of Spirit. It sug-

gests the absolute. It is a perpetual effect. It is a great shadow pointing always to the sun behind us.

1.94 The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bowed head and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.

1.95 Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he who thinks most will say least. We can foresee God in the coarse and, as it were, distant phenomena of matter; but when we try to define and describe him in himself, both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and the untaught. That essence refuses to be recorded in propositions, but when man has worshipped him intellectually, the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the great organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead the individual back to it.

1.96 When we consider Spirit, we see that the views already presented do not include the whole circumference of man. We must add some related thoughts.

1.97 Nature puts three problems to the mind: What is matter? Where does it come from? And where is it going? The ideal theory answers only the first of these questions. Idealism says: matter is a phenomenon, not a substance. Idealism makes us aware of the total disparity between the evidence of our own being and the evidence of the world's being. The one is perfect; the other, incapable of any assurance. The mind is a part of the nature of things; the world is a divine dream, from which we may soon awake to the glories and certainties of day. Idealism is a hypothesis to account for nature by other principles than those of carpentry and chemistry. Yet if it only denies the existence of matter, it does not satisfy the demands of the spirit. It leaves God out of me. It leaves me in the splendid labyrinth of my perceptions, to wander without end. Then the heart resists it, because it balks the affections in denying substantial being to men and women. Nature is so pervaded with human life that there is something of humanity in all of it, and in every particu-

lar. But this theory makes nature foreign to me, and does not account for that kinship of blood which we acknowledge with it.

1.98 Let it stand, then, in the present state of our knowledge, merely as a useful introductory hypothesis, serving to make us aware of the eternal distinction between the soul and the world.

1.99 But when, following the invisible steps of thought, we come to inquire, Where does matter come from? And where is it going? many truths arise to us out of the recesses of consciousness. We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; that spirit is one and not compound; that spirit does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves. Therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant rests upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws, at his need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once breathe in the infinite, by being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, and is himself the creator in the finite. This view, which tells me where the sources of wisdom and power lie, and points to virtue as to "The golden key / Which opes the palace of eternity," carries upon its face the highest certificate of truth, because it animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul.[38]

1.100 The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious. But it differs from the body in one important respect: it is not, like the body, now subject to the human will. Its serene order cannot be violated by us. It is there-

38 The lines are from Milton's masque *Comus* (1634).

fore, to us, the present interpreter of the divine mind. It is a fixed point by which we may measure our departure. As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house becomes more evident. We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God. We do not understand the notes of birds. The fox and the deer run away from us; the bear and tiger tear us. We do not know the uses of more than a few plants, such as corn and the apple, the potato and the vine. Is not the landscape, every glimpse of which has a grandeur, a face of him? Yet this may show us what discord there is between man and nature, for you cannot freely admire a noble landscape if laborers are digging in the field close by. The poet finds something ridiculous in his delight until he is out of the sight of men.

CHAPTER VIII: PROSPECTS

Against narrow science Emerson calls for a fuller knowledge that joins reason and love.

1.101 In inquiries concerning the laws of the world and the frame of things, the highest reason is always the truest. What seems faintly possible—it is so refined—is often faint and dim because it is seated deepest in the mind among the eternal truths. Empirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and, by the very knowledge of functions and processes, to rob the student of the manly contemplation of the whole. The man of science becomes unpoetic. But the best-read naturalist who gives an entire and devout attention to truth will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. He will perceive that there are far more excellent qualities in the student than preciseness and infallibility; that a guess is often more fruitful than an indisputable affirmation; and that a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred planned experiments.

[1.102] For the problems to be solved are precisely those which the physiologist and the naturalist omit to state. It is not so pertinent to man to know all the individuals of the animal kingdom as it is to know where it comes from and where it is going, this tyrannizing unity in his constitution, which forever separates and classifies things, trying to reduce the most diverse to one form. When I behold a rich landscape, it is less to my purpose to recite correctly the order and superposition of the strata than to know why all thought of multitude is lost in a tranquil sense of unity. I cannot greatly honor minuteness in details so long as there is no hint to explain the relation between things and thoughts; no ray upon the *metaphysics* of conchology, of botany, of the arts, to show the relation of the forms of flowers, shells, animals, architecture, to the mind, and to build science upon ideas. In a natural-history collection, we become conscious of a certain hidden recognition and sympathy with regard to the most bizarre forms of beast, fish, and insect. The American who has been confined, in his own country, to the sight of buildings designed after foreign models, is surprised on entering York Minster or St. Peter's at Rome by the feeling that these structures are imitations also—faint copies of an invisible archetype. Nor does science have sufficient humanity, so long as the naturalist overlooks that wonderful congruity which exists between man and the world; of which he is lord, not because he is the most subtle inhabitant, but because he is its head and heart, and finds something of himself in every great and small thing, in every mountain stratum, in every new law of color, fact of astronomy, or atmospheric influence which observation or analysis lays open. A perception of this mystery inspires the muse of George Herbert, the beautiful psalmist of the seventeenth century. The following lines are part of his little poem on Man.

1.103 “Man is all symmetry,
Full of proportions, one limb to another,
And to all the world besides.
Each part may call the farthest, brother;
For head with foot hath private amity,
And both with moons and tides.
“Nothing hath got so far
But man hath caught and kept it as his prey;
His eyes dismount the highest star;
He is in little all the sphere.
Herbs gladly cure our flesh, because that they
Find their acquaintance there.

/ “For us, the winds do blow,
The earth doth rest, heaven move, and fountains flow;
Nothing we see, but means our good,
As our delight, or as our treasure;
The whole is either our cupboard of food,
Or cabinet of pleasure.
“The stars have us to bed:
Night draws the curtain; which the sun withdraws.
Music and light attend our head.

1.104 All things unto our flesh are kind,
In their descent and being; to our mind,
In their ascent and cause.
“More servants wait on man
Than he’ll take notice of. In every path,
He treads down that which doth befriend him
When sickness makes him pale and wan.
Oh mighty love! Man is one world, and hath
Another to attend him.”

1.105 The perception of this class of truths makes the eternal attraction which draws men to science, but the end is lost sight of in attention to the means. In view of this half-sight of science, we accept the sentence of Plato, that “poetry comes nearer to vital truth than history.” Every surmise and prophecy of the

mind is entitled to a certain respect, and we learn to prefer imperfect theories, and sentences which contain glimpses of truth, to digested systems which have not one valuable suggestion. A wise writer will feel that the ends of study and composition are best answered by announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit.[39]

1.106 I shall therefore conclude this essay with some traditions of man and nature which a certain poet sang to me; and which, as they have always been in the world, and perhaps reappear to every bard, may be both history and prophecy:

THE ORPHIC POET'S SONG

A poet's tradition: man is a god in ruins who once filled nature and can rebuild his own world.

1.107 'The foundations of man are not in matter, but in spirit. But the element of spirit is eternity. To it, therefore, the longest series of events, the oldest chronologies, are young and recent. In the cycle of the universal man, from whom the known individuals proceed, centuries are points, and all history is but the epoch of one degradation.

1.108 'We distrust and inwardly deny our sympathy with nature. We own and disown our relation to it by turns. We are, like Nebuchadnezzar, dethroned, bereft of reason, and eating grass like an ox. But who can set limits to the remedial force of spirit?[40]

1.109 'A man is a god in ruins. When men are innocent, life shall be longer, and shall pass into the immortal as gently as we awake from dreams. Now, the world would be insane and rabid if these disorganizations should last for hundreds of years. It is kept in check by death and infancy. Infancy is the perpetual

39 The thought is closer to Aristotle (*Poetics* 9), who calls poetry more philosophical than history.

40 Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, driven mad and made to eat grass "as oxen" (Daniel 4:33).

Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise.

1.110 'Man is the dwarf of himself. Once he was permeated and dissolved by spirit. He filled nature with his overflowing currents. Out from him sprang the sun and moon; from man, the sun; from woman, the moon. The laws of his mind, the periods of his actions, externalized themselves into day and night, into the year and the seasons. But, having made for himself this huge shell, his waters retired; he no longer fills the veins and veinlets; he is shrunk to a drop. He sees that the structure still fits him, but fits him colossally. Say, rather, once it fitted him; now it corresponds to him from far and on high. He adores timidly his own work. Now is man the follower of the sun, and woman the follower of the moon. Yet sometimes he starts in his slumber, and wonders at himself and his house, and muses strangely at the resemblance between him and it. He perceives that if his law is still paramount, if he still has elemental power, "if his word is sterling yet in nature," it is not conscious power, it is not inferior but superior to his will. It is Instinct.' Thus my Orphic poet sang.[41]

1.111 At present, man applies to nature only half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. He lives in it, and masters it by a penny-wisdom; and he who works most in it is but a half-man, and while his arms are strong and his digestion good, his mind is brutalized and he is a selfish brute. His relation to nature, his power over it, is through the understanding: as by manure; the economic use of fire, wind, water, and the mariner's compass; steam, coal, chemical agriculture; the repairs of the human body by the dentist and the surgeon. This is such a resumption of power as if a banished king should buy back his territories inch by inch, instead of vaulting at once into his throne. Meanwhile, in the thick darkness, there are not lacking gleams of a better light—occasional examples of the action of man upon nature with his entire force—with reason as well as understanding. Such examples are: the traditions of miracles in

41 Echoes Shakespeare, *Richard II* IV.i: "if my word be sterling yet in England."

the earliest antiquity of all nations; the history of Jesus Christ; the achievements of a principle, as in religious and political revolutions, and in the abolition of the slave trade; the miracles of enthusiasm, such as those reported of Swedenborg, Hohenlohe, and the Shakers; many obscure and still contested facts, now arranged under the name of Animal Magnetism; prayer; eloquence; self-healing; and the wisdom of children. These are examples of Reason's momentary grasp of the scepter; the exertions of a power which exists not in time or space, but an instantaneous, in-streaming, causing power.[42] The difference between the actual and the ideal force of man is happily figured by the schoolmen, in saying that the knowledge of man is an evening knowledge, *vespertina cognitio*, but that of God is a morning knowledge, *matutina cognitio*.[43]

1.112 The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at nature is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is that man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand as perception. Indeed, neither can be perfect without the other. In the uttermost meaning of the words, thought is devout, and devotion is thought. Deep calls unto deep. But in actual life, the marriage is not celebrated. There are innocent men who worship God after the tradition of their fathers, but their sense of duty has not yet extended to the use of all their faculties. And there are patient naturalists, but they freeze their subject under the wintry light of the understanding. Is not prayer also a study of truth—a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite? No man ever prayed heartily without learning something. But when a

42 Prince Alexander Hohenlohe (1794–1849), priest reputed for healing cures; Animal Magnetism: Mesmer's theory of a healing force, then much discussed.
43 Latin: "evening knowledge" and "morning knowledge," terms from Augustine taken up by the scholastic philosophers (the "schoolmen").

faithful thinker, resolved to detach every object from personal relations and see it in the light of thought, shall, at the same time, kindle science with the fire of the holiest affections, then will God go forth anew into the creation.

1.113 When the mind is prepared for study, there will be no need to search for objects. The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common. What is a day? What is a year? What is summer? What is woman? What is a child? What is sleep? To our blindness, these things seem not to move us. We make fables to hide the baldness of the fact and conform it, as we say, to the higher law of the mind. But when the fact is seen under the light of an idea, the gaudy fable fades and shrivels. We behold the real higher law. To the wise, therefore, a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of fables. These wonders are brought to our own door. You also are a man. Man and woman, and their social life, poverty, labor, sleep, fear, fortune, are known to you. Learn that none of these things is superficial, but that each phenomenon has its roots in the faculties and affections of the mind. While the abstract question occupies your intellect, nature brings it in the concrete to be solved by your hands. It would be a wise inquiry for one's private study to compare, point by point, especially at remarkable crises in life, our daily history with the rise and progress of ideas in the mind.

1.114 So shall we come to look at the world with new eyes. It shall answer the endless inquiry of the intellect—What is truth? —and of the affections—What is good?—by yielding itself passive to the educated Will. Then shall come to pass what my poet said: 'Nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, molds, makes it. The immobility or bruteness of nature is the absence of spirit; to pure spirit, it is fluid, it is volatile, it is obedient. Every spirit builds itself a house; and beyond its house, a world; and beyond its world, a heaven. Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house heaven and earth; Caesar called his house Rome; you perhaps call yours a cobbler's trade, a hundred

acres of plowed land, or a scholar's garret. Yet line for line and point for point, your dominion is as great as theirs, though without fine names. Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A corresponding revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit. So fast will disagreeable appearances—swine, spiders, snakes, pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies—vanish; they are temporary and shall be no more seen. The squalor and filth of nature the sun shall dry up, and the wind blow away. As when the summer comes from the south the snowbanks melt, and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit create its ornaments along its path, and carry with it the beauty it visits, and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, and warm hearts, and wise discourse, and heroic acts around its way, until evil is no more seen. The kingdom of man over nature, which cometh not with observation—a dominion such as is now beyond his dream of God—he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight.'[44]

44 "Cometh not with observation": Luke 17:20, of the kingdom of God.

Self-Reliance

The 1841 essay: trust thyself; against conformity and a foolish consistency; self-reliance in prayer, culture, travel and society.

SELF-RELIANCE.

2.0 *Ne te quæsiveris extra. (Do not seek yourself outside yourself.)*[1]

"Man is his own star, and the soul that can
Render an honest and a perfect man,
Command all light, all influence, all fate,
Nothing to him falls early or too late.
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still."
Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher's Honest Man's Fortune.[2]

Cast the bantling on the rocks,
Suckle him with the she-wolf's teat:
Wintered with the hawk and fox,
Power and speed be hands and feet.[3]

1 From the Roman satirist Persius, *Satires* I.7.
2 *The Honest Man's Fortune* (c. 1613), a play attributed to the dramatists Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher.
3 Emerson's own quatrain; a "bantling" is a young child.

ESSAY II: SELF-RELIANCE

To believe your own thought is genius; trust thyself, for envy is ignorance and imitation is suicide.

2.1 I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction and it shall be the universal sense; for always the inmost becomes the outmost—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each of us, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men thought but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses his thought without notice, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility, most of all when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take our own opinion from another, with shame.

2.2 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 does one face, one character, one fact make much impression on him, and another none. It is not without preestablished harmony, this sculpture in the memory. The eye was placed where one ray should fall, that it might testify of that particular ray. Bravely let him speak the utmost syllable of his confession. We only half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents. It may be safely trusted as proportionate and of good issue, provided it is faithfully imparted; but God will not have his work made manifest by cowards. It takes a divine man to exhibit anything divine. A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope.

2.3 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 Eternal was stirring at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not pinched in a corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but redeemers and benefactors, pious aspirants to be noble clay plastic under the Almighty effort, let us advance and advance on Chaos and the Dark.

2.4 What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text in the face and behavior of children, babes, and even animals! That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose—these they do not have. Their mind being whole, their eye is as yet unconquered, and when we look in their faces, we are disconcerted. Infancy conforms to nobody: all conform to it, so

that one babe commonly makes four or five out of the adults who prattle and play to it. So God has armed youth and puberty and manhood no less with their own piquancy and charm, and made them enviable and gracious and their claims not to be put aside, if they will stand by themselves. Do not think the youth has no force because he cannot speak to you and me. Hark! in the next room, who spoke so clear and emphatic? Good Heaven! it is he! it is that very lump of bashfulness and stolidity which for weeks has done nothing but eat when you were by, that now rolls out these words like bell-strokes. It seems he knows how to speak to his contemporaries. Bashful or bold, then, he will know how to make us seniors very unnecessary.

2.5 The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say anything to win one over, is the healthy attitude of human nature. How a boy is the master of society! Independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly, eloquent, troublesome. He never troubles himself about consequences, about interests: he gives an independent, genuine verdict. You must court him: he does not court you. But the man is, as it were, clapped into jail by his consciousness. As soon as he has once acted or spoken with éclat, he is a committed person, watched by the sympathy or the hatred of hundreds whose affections must now enter into his account. There is no Lethe for this. Ah, that he could pass again into his neutral, godlike independence! Whoever can thus throw off all pledges and, having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, unbribable, unafraid innocence, must always be formidable, must always engage the poet's and the man's regard. The force of such an immortal youth would be felt. He would utter opinions on all passing affairs which, being seen to be not private but necessary, would sink like darts into the ears of men, and put them in fear.[4]

2.6 These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. 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 most in demand is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

2.7 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 whether it is goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world. I remember an answer which, when quite young, I was prompted to make to a valued adviser who used to press upon me the dear old doctrines of the church. On my saying, What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within? my friend suggested—"But these impulses may be from below, not from above." I replied, 'They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the devil's child, I will live then from the devil.' No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to this or that; the only right is what is in keeping with my constitution, the only wrong what is against it. A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he. I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions. Every decent and well-spoken individual affects and sways me more than is right. I ought to go upright and vital, and speak the rude truth in all ways. If malice and vanity wear the coat of philanthropy, shall that pass? If an angry bigot takes up this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his latest news from Barbados, why should I not say to him, 'Go love thy infant; love thy wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that

4 Lethe: in Greek myth, the river of forgetfulness in the underworld.

grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.' Rough and graceless would be such a greeting, but truth is handsomer than the affectation of love.[5] Your goodness must have some edge to it—else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached as the counteraction of the doctrine of love when that pules and whines. I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is something better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation. Expect me not to show cause why I seek or why I exclude company. Then, again, do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor?[6] I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong. There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold; for them I will go to prison, if need be; but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; the building of meeting-houses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to drunkards; and the thousandfold Relief Societies—though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

2.8 Virtues are, in the popular estimate, rather the exception than the rule. There is the man and his virtues. Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as they would pay a fine in expiation of daily non-appearance on parade. Their works are done as an apology or extenuation of their living in the world—as invalids and the insane pay a high rate for their board. Their virtues are penances. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is not an apology, but a life. It is for

5 Slavery was abolished in Barbados and the other British West Indies in 1834–38, a favorite topic of American abolitionists.

6 Echoes Jesus on leaving family (Matthew 10:37, Luke 14:26) and the command to write God's words on doorposts (Deuteronomy 6:9).

itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so long as it is genuine and equal, than that it should be glittering and unsteady. I wish it to be sound and sweet, and not to need diet and bleeding. My life should be unique; it should be an alms, a battle, a conquest, a medicine. I ask primary evidence that you are a man, and refuse this appeal from the man to his actions. I know that for myself it makes no difference whether I do or forbear those actions which are reckoned excellent. I cannot consent to pay for a privilege where I have intrinsic right. Few and mean as my gifts may be, I actually am, and do not need for my own assurance or the assurance of my fellows any secondary testimony.

2.9 What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness. It is the harder because you will always find those who think they know what your duty is better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.

2.10 The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible society, vote with a great party either for the Government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers—under all these screens I have difficulty in detecting the precise man you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your thing, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself. A man must consider what a game of blind-man's-buff this game of conformity is. If I know your sect, I anticipate your argument. I hear a preacher announce for his text and topic the expediency of one of the institutions of his church. Do I not know beforehand that he cannot possibly say a new and spontaneous word? Do I not know that, with all this ostentation of

examining the grounds of the institution, he will do no such thing? Do I not know that he is pledged to himself not to look but at one side—the permitted side—not as a man, but as a parish minister? He is a retained attorney, and these airs of the bench are the emptiest affectation. Well, most men have bound their eyes with one or another handkerchief, and attached themselves to some one of these communities of opinion. This conformity makes them not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four: so that every word they say chagrins us, and we do not know where to begin to set them right. Meanwhile nature is not slow to equip us in the prison uniform of the party to which we adhere. We come to wear one cut of face and figure, and acquire by degrees the gentlest asinine expression. There is one mortifying experience in particular which does not fail to wreak itself also in the general history; I mean "the foolish face of praise," the forced smile which we put on in company where we do not feel at ease, in answer to conversation which does not interest us. The muscles, not spontaneously moved, but moved by a low, usurping willfulness, grow tight about the outline of the face and make the most disagreeable sensation—a sensation of rebuke and warning which no brave young man will suffer twice.[7]

2.11 For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The bystanders look askance at him in the public street or in the friend's parlor. If this aversion had its origin in contempt and resistance like his own, he might well go home with a sad face; but the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause—they disguise no god, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs. Yet the discontent of the multitude is more formidable than that of the senate and the college. It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to endure the rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid, being very vulnerable them-

7 The quoted phrase is from Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735).

selves. But when to their soft rage the indignation of the people is added, 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 grimace, it takes the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike, as a trifle of no concern.

AGAINST CONSISTENCY

Fear of contradicting our past words keeps us from self-trust; to be great is to be misunderstood.

2.12 The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency: a reverence for our past act or word, because the eyes of others have no other data for computing our orbit than our past acts, and we are loath to disappoint them.

2.13 But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this monstrous corpse of your memory, lest you contradict something you have stated in this or that public place? Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then? It seems to be a rule of wisdom never to rely on your memory alone, scarcely even in acts of pure memory, but to bring the past for judgment into the thousand-eyed present, and live ever in a new day. Trust your emotion. In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity; yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color. Leave your theory as Joseph left his coat in the hand of the temptress, and flee.[8]

2.14 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. Away with your guarded lips! Sew them up with packthread, do. Else, if you would be a man, speak what you think today in words as hard as cannon balls, and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said today. Ah, then, exclaim the aged ladies, you shall be sure to be

8 Genesis 39:12: Joseph flees from Potiphar's wife, leaving his garment in her hand.

misunderstood. Misunderstood! That is a downright fool's word. Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.

2.15 I suppose no man can violate his nature. All the sallies of his will are rounded in by the law of his being, as the inequalities of the Andes and the Himalaya are insignificant in the curve of the sphere. Nor does it matter how you gauge and test him. A character is like an acrostic or Alexandrian stanza—read it forward, backward, or across, it still spells the same thing. In this pleasing, contrite wood-life which God allows me, let me record day by day my honest thought without prospect or retrospect, and, I cannot doubt, it will be found symmetrical, though I do not mean it and do not see it. My book should smell of pines and resound with the hum of insects. The swallow over my window should interweave that thread or straw he carries in his bill into my web also. We pass for what we are. Character teaches above our wills. Men imagine that they communicate their virtue or vice only by overt actions, and do not see that virtue or vice emits a breath every moment.

2.16 Never fear but that you will be consistent in whatever variety of actions, so long as they are each honest and natural in their hour. For if they come from one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of when seen at a little distance, at a little height of thought. One tendency unites them all. The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag line of a hundred tacks. This is only microscopic criticism. See the line from a sufficient distance, and it straightens itself to the average tendency. Your genuine action will explain itself and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing. Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now. Greatness always appeals to the future. If I can be great enough now to do right and scorn eyes, I must have done so much right before as to defend me now. Be it how it will, do right now. Always scorn

appearances, and you always may. The force of character is cumulative. All the foregone days of virtue work their health into this one. What makes the majesty of the heroes of the senate and the field, which so fills the imagination? The consciousness of a train of great days and victories behind. There they all stand and shed a united light on the advancing actor. He is attended as by a visible escort of angels to every man's eye. That is what throws thunder into Chatham's voice, and dignity into Washington's bearing, and America into Adams's eye. Honor is venerable to us because it is no creature of a day. It is always ancient virtue. We worship it today because it is not of today. We love it and pay it homage because it is not a trap for our love and homage, but is self-dependent, self-derived, and therefore of an old immaculate pedigree, even if shown in a young person.[9]

2.17 I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let the words be posted in the gazette and be ridiculous from now on. Instead of the gong for dinner, let us hear a whistle from the Spartan fife. Let us never bow and apologize again. A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him: I wish that he should wish to please me. I will stand here for humanity, and though I would make it kind, I would make it true. Let us affront and reprimand the smooth mediocrity and squalid contentment of the times, and hurl in the face of custom, and trade, and office, the fact which is the upshot of all history: that there is a great responsible Thinker and Actor moving wherever a man moves; that a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the center of things. Where he is, there is nature. He measures you, and all men, and all events. You are constrained to accept his standard. Ordinarily everybody in society reminds us of something else or of some other person. Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else. It takes the place of the whole creation. The man must be so much that he must make all circumstances indifferent—put

9 Chatham: William Pitt the Elder, Earl of Chatham, British statesman famed for his oratory. Adams: probably John or Samuel Adams, American revolutionary leaders.

all means into the shade. This all great men are and do. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; he requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his thought; and posterity seems to follow his steps as a procession. A man, Caesar, is born, and for ages after we have a Roman Empire. Christ is born, and millions of minds so grow and cleave to his genius that he is confounded with virtue and with what is possible for man. An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson.[10] Scipio, Milton called "the height of Rome"; and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons.[11]

2.18 Let a man, then, know his worth, and keep things under his feet. Let him not peep or steal, or skulk up and down with the air of a charity-boy, an illegitimate child, or an interloper, in the world which exists for him. But the man in the street, finding no worth in himself which corresponds to the force which built a tower or sculptured a marble god, feels poor when he looks on these. To him a palace, a statue, or a costly book has an alien and forbidding air, much like a showy carriage, and seems to say, as it does, 'Who are you, sir?' Yet they all are his, suitors for his notice, petitioners to his faculties that they will come out and take possession. The picture waits for my verdict: it is not to command me, but I am to settle its claims to praise. That popular fable of the drunkard who was picked up dead drunk in the street, carried to the duke's house, washed and dressed and laid in the duke's bed, and, on his waking, treated with all obsequious ceremony like the duke, and assured that he had been insane—owes its popularity to the fact that it symbolizes so well the state of man, who is in the world a sort of drunkard, but

10 George Fox founded the Quakers; John Wesley, Methodism; Thomas Clarkson was a leading British campaigner against the slave trade.

11 Milton, *Paradise Lost* IX.510, of Scipio Africanus, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal.

now and then wakes up, exercises his reason, and finds himself a true prince.[12]

2.19 Our reading is beggarly and sycophantic. In history, our imagination makes fools of us, plays us false. Kingdom and lordship, power and estate are a gaudier vocabulary than private John and Edward in a small house and common day's work; but the things of life are the same to both; the sum total of both is the same. Why all this deference to Alfred, and Scanderbeg, and Gustavus? Suppose they were virtuous: did they wear out virtue? As great a stake depends on your private act today as followed their public and renowned steps. When private men shall act with vast views, the luster will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen.[13]

2.20 The world has indeed been instructed by its kings, who have so magnetized the eyes of nations. It has been taught by this colossal symbol the mutual reverence that is due from man to man. The joyful loyalty with which men have everywhere allowed the king, the noble, or the great proprietor to walk among them by a law of his own, make his own scale of men and things, and reverse theirs, pay for benefits not with money but with honor, and represent the Law in his person, was the hieroglyphic by which they obscurely signified their consciousness of their own right and dignity, the right of every man.

THE ABORIGINAL SELF

Self-trust rests on intuition, the source shared by all things, which needs no past texts or teachers.

2.21 The magnetism which all original action exerts is explained when we inquire the reason of self-trust. Who is the Trustee? What is the aboriginal Self on which a universal reliance may be grounded? What is the nature and power of that science-baffling

12 The tale appears in the *Arabian Nights* and, as Christopher Sly, in the Induction to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

13 Alfred the Great of Wessex; Scanderbeg, 15th-century Albanian leader against the Ottomans; Gustavus Adolphus, 17th-century king of Sweden.

star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appears? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, the essence of virtue, and the essence of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, while all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin. For the sense of being which in calm hours rises, we know not how, in the soul, is not diverse from things, from space, from light, from time, from man, but one with them, and proceeds obviously from the same source from which their life and being also proceed. We first share the life by which things exist, and afterwards see them as appearances in nature, and forget that we have shared their cause. Here is the fountain of action and the fountain of thought. Here are the lungs of that inspiration which gives man wisdom, of that inspiration of man which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us organs of its activity and receivers of its truth. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask where this comes from, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes—all metaphysics, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm. Every man distinguishes between the voluntary acts of his mind and his involuntary perceptions. And to his involuntary perceptions he knows a perfect respect is due. He may err in the expression of them, but he knows that these things are so, like day and night, not to be disputed. All my willful actions and acquisitions are but roving; the most trivial reverie, the faintest native emotion, are domestic and divine. Thoughtless people contradict the statement of perceptions as readily as that of opinions, or rather much more readily; for they do not distinguish between perception and notion. They fancy that I choose to see this or that thing. But perception is not whimsical, but fated. If I see a trait, my children will see it after me, and in course of time all

mankind—although it may chance that no one has seen it before me. For my perception of it is as much a fact as the sun.

2.22 The relations of the soul to the divine spirit are so pure that it is profane to seek to interpose helps. It must be that when God speaks, he should communicate not one thing, but all things; should fill the world with his voice; should scatter forth light, nature, time, souls, from the center of the present thought; and date anew and create anew the whole. Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, then old things pass away —means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now and absorbs past and future into the present hour. All things are made sacred by relation to it—one thing as much as another. All things are dissolved to their center by their cause, and in the universal miracle petty and particular miracles disappear. This is and must be. If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old moldered nation in another country, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fullness and completion? Is the parent better than the child into whom he has cast his ripened being? Whence, then, this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and majesty of the soul. Time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light; where it is, is day; where it was, is night; and history is an impertinence and an injury, if it is anything more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming.

2.23 Man is timid and apologetic. He is no longer upright. He dare not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more; in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied, and it satisfies nature, in all moments alike. There is no time to

it. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time.

2.24 This should be plain enough. Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speaks the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul. We shall not always set so great a price on a few texts, on a few lives. We are like children who repeat by rote the sentences of grandmothers and tutors, and, as they grow older, of the men of talents and character they chance to see—painfully recollecting the exact words they spoke; afterwards, when they come into the point of view which those had who uttered these sayings, they understand them, and are willing to let the words go; for, at any time, they can use words as good, when occasion comes. So was it with us, so will it be, if we proceed. If we live truly, we shall see truly. It is as easy for the strong man to be strong as it is for the weak to be weak. When we have new perception, we shall gladly disburden the memory of its hoarded treasures as old rubbish. When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as sweet as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn.

2.25 And now at last the highest truth on this subject remains unsaid; probably cannot be said; for all that we say is the far-off remembering of the intuition. That thought, as nearly as I can now come to saying it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself—it is not by any known or appointed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name; the way, the thought, the good shall be wholly strange and new. It shall exclude all other being. You take the way from man, not to man. All persons that ever existed are its fugitive ministers. There shall be no fear in it. Fear and hope are alike beneath it. It asks nothing. There is something low even in hope. We are then in vision. There is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy. The soul is raised over passion. It sees identity and

eternal causation. It is a perceiving that Truth and Right are. Hence it becomes a Tranquility out of the knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea; vast intervals of time, years, centuries, are of no account. This which I think and feel underlay that former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and will always underlie all circumstance, and what is called life, and what is called death.

2.26 Life only avails, not the having lived. Power ceases in the instant of repose; it resides in the moment of transition from a past to a new state; in the shooting of the gulf; in the darting to an aim. This one fact the world hates, that the soul *becomes;* for that forever degrades the past, turns all riches to poverty, all reputation to a shame, confounds the saint with the rogue, shoves Jesus and Judas equally aside. Why, then, do we prate of self-reliance? Inasmuch as the soul is present, there will be power, not confident but acting. To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is. Whoever has more soul than I masters me, though he should not raise a finger. Round him I must revolve by the gravitation of spirits; whoever has less, I rule with like ease. We fancy it rhetoric when we speak of eminent virtue. We do not yet see that virtue is Height, and that a man or a company of men plastic and permeable to principles must, by the law of nature, overpower and ride all cities, nations, kings, rich men, poets, who are not.

2.27 This is the ultimate fact which we so quickly reach on this as on every topic, the resolution of all into the ever blessed One. Virtue is the governor, the creator, the reality. All things real are so by so much of virtue as they contain. Hardship, husbandry, hunting, whaling, war, eloquence, personal weight, are something, and engage my respect as examples of the soul's presence and impure action. I see the same law working in nature for conservation and growth. The poise of a planet, the bent tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every plant and animal, are also demonstrations of the self-sufficing,

and therefore self-relying, soul. All history, from its highest to its trivial passages, is the various record of this power.

2.28 Thus all concentrates; let us not rove; let us sit at home with the cause. Let us stun and astonish the intruding rabble of men and books and institutions by a simple declaration of the divine fact. Bid them take the shoes from off their feet, for God is here within. Let our simplicity judge them, and our docility to our own law demonstrate the poverty of nature and fortune beside our native riches.[14]

STANDING ALONE

We must go alone, speak the truth to family and friends, and be a law to ourselves.

2.29 But now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man, nor is the soul admonished to stay at home, to put itself in communication with the internal ocean, but it goes abroad to beg a cup of water from the urns of men. We must go alone. Isolation must precede true society. I like the silent church before the service begins better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how chaste the persons look, each one girded with a precinct or sanctuary. So let us always sit. Why should we assume the faults of our friend, or wife, or father, or child, because they sit around our hearth, or are said to have the same blood? All men have my blood, and I have all men's. Not for that will I adopt their petulance or folly, even to the extent of being ashamed of it. But your isolation must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, it must be elevation. At times the whole world seems to be in conspiracy to importune you with emphatic trifles. Friend, client, child, sickness, fear, want, charity, all knock at once at thy closet door and say, 'Come out unto us.' Do not spill thy soul; do not all descend; keep thy state; stay at home in thine own heaven; come not for a moment into their facts, into their hubbub of conflicting appearances, but let in the light of thy law on their confusion. The power men possess to annoy me, I give them by a

14 Echoes Exodus 3:5, God to Moses at the burning bush.

weak curiosity. No man can come near me but through my act. "What we love that we have, but by desire we bereave ourselves of the love."

2.30 If we cannot at once rise to the sanctities of obedience and faith, let us at least resist our temptations; let us enter into the state of war, and wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy, in our Saxon breasts. This is to be done in our smooth times by speaking the truth. Check this lying hospitality and lying affection. Live no longer to the expectation of these deceived and deceiving people with whom we converse. Say to them, O father, O mother, O wife, O brother, O friend, I have lived with you by appearances until now. From now on I am the truth's. Be it known unto you that henceforward I obey no law less than the eternal law. I will have no covenants but proximities.[15] I shall endeavor to nourish my parents, to support my family, to be the chaste husband of one wife—but these relations I must fill in a new and unprecedented way. I appeal from your customs. I must be myself. I cannot break myself any longer for you, or you. If you can love me for what I am, we shall be the happier. If you cannot, I will still seek to deserve that you should. I must be myself. I will not hide my tastes or aversions. I will so trust that what is deep is holy, that I will do strongly before the sun and moon whatever inwardly rejoices me, and the heart appoints. If you are noble, I will love you; if you are not, I will not hurt you and myself by hypocritical attentions. If you are true, but not in the same truth with me, cleave to your companions; I will seek my own. I do this not selfishly, but humbly and truly. It is alike your interest and mine and all men's, however long we have dwelt in lies, to live in truth. Does this sound harsh today? You will soon love what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, and if we follow the truth, it will bring us out safe at last.—But so you may give these friends pain. Yes, but I cannot sell my liberty and my power to save their sensibility. Besides, all persons have

15 Thor and Woden (Odin): gods of the pagan Germanic peoples, ancestors of the Anglo-Saxons.

their moments of reason, when they look out into the region of absolute truth; then will they justify me and do the same thing.

2.31 The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes. But the law of consciousness abides. There are two confessionals, in one or the other of which we must be absolved. You may fulfill your round of duties by clearing yourself in the *direct*, or in the *reflex* way. Consider whether you have satisfied your relations to father, mother, cousin, neighbor, town, cat, and dog; whether any of these can upbraid you. But I may also neglect this reflex standard, and absolve me to myself. I have my own stern claims and perfect circle.[16] It denies the name of duty to many offices that are called duties. But if I can discharge its debts, it enables me to dispense with the popular code. If anyone imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandment one day.

2.32 And truly it demands something godlike in him who has cast off the common motives of humanity, and has ventured to trust himself for a taskmaster. High be his heart, faithful his will, clear his sight, that he may in good earnest be doctrine, society, law to himself, that a simple purpose may be to him as strong as iron necessity is to others.

2.33 If any man considers the present aspects of what is called by distinction *society*, he will see the need of these ethics. The sinew and heart of man seem to be drawn out, and we have become timorous, desponding whimperers. We are afraid of truth, afraid of fortune, afraid of death, and afraid of each other. Our age yields no great and perfect persons. We want men and women who shall renovate life and our social state, but we see that most natures are insolvent, cannot satisfy their own wants, have an ambition out of all proportion to their practical force, and so lean and beg day and night continually. Our housekeeping is beggarly; our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion we have not chosen, but society has chosen for us. We

16 Antinomianism: the doctrine that the saved are freed from the moral law.

are parlor soldiers. The rugged battle of fate, where strength is born, we shun.

2.34 If our young men miscarry in their first enterprises, they lose all heart. If the young merchant fails, men say he is *ruined*. If the finest genius studies at one of our colleges, and is not installed in an office within one year afterwards in the cities or suburbs of Boston or New York, it seems to his friends and to himself that he is right in being disheartened and in complaining the rest of his life. A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always, like a cat, falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days, and feels no shame in not 'studying a profession,' for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances.[17] Let a stoic arise who shall reveal the resources of man, and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves; that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear; that a man is the word made flesh, born to shed healing to the nations; that he should be ashamed of our compassion; and that the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out of the window, we pity him no more but thank and revere him—and that teacher shall restore the life of man to splendor, and make his name dear to all History.

2.35 It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance—a new respect for the divinity in man—must work a revolution in all the offices and relations of men: in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.

17 "Teams it": works as a teamster, driving a team of horses or oxen.

SELF-RELIANCE IN PRAYER AND CREEDS

Prayer for private ends and borrowed creeds are diseases of the will and of the intellect.

2.36 1. In what prayers do men allow themselves! That which they call a holy office is not so much as brave and manly. Prayer looks abroad and asks for some foreign addition to come through some foreign virtue, and loses itself in endless mazes of natural and supernatural, and mediatorial and miraculous. Prayer that craves a particular benefit—anything less than all good—is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is theft and meanness. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends. Caratach, in Fletcher's Bonduca, when admonished to inquire the mind of the god Audate, replies, "His hidden meaning lies in our endeavors, / Our valors are our best gods."[18]

2.37 Another sort of false prayers are our regrets. Discontent is the lack of self-reliance: it is infirmity of will. Regret calamities, if you can thereby help the sufferer; if not, attend to your own work, and already the evil begins to be repaired. Our sympathy is just as base. We come to those who weep foolishly, and sit down and cry for company, instead of imparting to them truth and health in rough electric shocks, putting them once more in communication with the soul. The secret of fortune is joy in our hands. Welcome evermore to gods and men is the self-helping man. For him all doors are flung wide. Him all tongues greet, all

18 *Bonduca* (c. 1613), a tragedy by John Fletcher about the British queen Boadicea; Caratach is her general.

honors crown, all eyes follow with desire. Our love goes out to him and embraces him, because he did not need it. We solicitously and apologetically caress and celebrate him, because he held on his way and scorned our disapproval. The gods love him because men hated him. "To the persevering mortal," said Zoroaster, "the blessed Immortals are swift."

2.38 As men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect. They say with those foolish Israelites, 'Let not God speak to us, lest we die. Speak thou, speak any man with us, and we will obey.' Everywhere I am deprived of meeting God in my brother, because he has shut his own temple doors, and recites fables merely of his brother's, or his brother's brother's God. Every new mind is a new classification. If it proves a mind of uncommon activity and power, a Locke, a Lavoisier, a Hutton, a Bentham, a Spurzheim, it imposes its classification on other men, and lo! a new system.[19] In proportion always to the depth of the thought, and so to the number of the objects it touches and brings within reach of the pupil, is his complacency. But this is chiefly apparent in creeds and churches, which are also classifications of some powerful mind acting on the great elemental thought of Duty, and man's relation to the Highest. Such are Calvinism, Quakerism, Swedenborgianism. The pupil takes the same delight in subordinating everything to the new terminology that a girl does who has just learned botany, in seeing a new earth and new seasons thereby. It will happen for a time that the pupil will feel a real debt to the teacher—will find his intellectual power has grown by the study of his writings. This will continue until he has exhausted his master's mind. But in all unbalanced minds the classification is idolized, passes for the end, and not for a speedily exhaustible means, so that the walls of the system blend to their eye in the remote horizon with the walls of the universe; the luminaries of heaven seem to them hung on the arch their master built. They cannot imagine how you aliens have any right to see—how you

19 Exodus 20:19. Lavoisier, founder of modern chemistry; James Hutton, geologist; Jeremy Bentham, utilitarian philosopher; J. G. Spurzheim, promoter of phrenology.

can see; 'It must be somehow that you stole the light from us.' They do not yet perceive that light, unsystematic, indomitable, will break into any cabin, even into theirs. Let them chirp awhile and call it their own. If they are honest and do well, presently their neat new pen will be too narrow and low, will crack, will lean, will rot and vanish, and the immortal light, all young and joyful, million-orbed, million-colored, will beam over the universe as on the first morning.

TRAVEL AND IMITATION

Travel and imitation are flights from the self; insist on yourself and never imitate.

2.39 2. It is for want of self-culture that the idol of Traveling, the idol of Italy, of England, of Egypt, remains for all educated Americans. They who made England, Italy, or Greece venerable in the imagination did so not by rambling round creation as a moth round a lamp, but by sticking fast where they were, like an axis of the earth. In manly hours we feel that duty is our place, and that the merry men of circumstance should follow as they may. The soul is no traveler: the wise man stays at home with the soul, and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still, and is not gadding abroad from himself, and shall make men sensible by the expression of his face that he goes as the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign, and not like an interloper or a valet.

2.40 I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe, for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence, so long as the man is first at home in himself, or does not go abroad with the hope of finding something greater than he knows. He who travels to be amused, or to get something which he does not carry, travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things. In Thebes, in Palmyra, his will and mind have become old and dilapidated as they. He carries ruins to ruins.

2.41 Traveling is a fool's paradise. We owe to our first journeys the discovery that place is nothing. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern Fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican, and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go.

2.42 3. But the rage for traveling is itself only a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action. The intellect is vagabond, and the universal system of education fosters restlessness. Our minds travel when our bodies are forced to stay at home. We imitate; and what is imitation but the traveling of the mind? Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our whole minds lean, and follow the Past and the Distant, as the eyes of a maid follow her mistress. The soul created the arts wherever they have flourished. It was in his own mind that the artist sought his model. It was an application of his own thought to the thing to be done and the conditions to be observed. And why need we copy the Doric or the Gothic model? Beauty, convenience, grandeur of thought, and quaint expression are as near to us as to any, and if the American artist will study with hope and love the precise thing to be done by him, considering the climate, the soil, the length of the day, the wants of the people, the habit and form of the government, he will create a house in which all these will find themselves fitted, and taste and sentiment will be satisfied also.

2.43 Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another you have only an extemporaneous, half possession. That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him. No man yet knows what it is, nor can, till that person has exhibited it. Where is the master who could have taught Shakespeare? Where is the master

who could have instructed Franklin, or Washington, or Bacon, or Newton? Every great man is a unique. The Scipionism of Scipio is precisely that part he could not borrow. If anybody will tell me whom the great man imitates in the original crisis when he performs a great act, I will tell him who else than himself can teach him. Shakespeare will never be made by the study of Shakespeare. Do that which is assigned thee, and thou canst not hope too much or dare too much. There is at this moment, there is for me, an utterance bare and grand as that of the colossal chisel of Phidias, or trowel of the Egyptians, or the pen of Moses, or Dante, but different from all these.[20] Not possibly will the soul, all rich, all eloquent, with thousand-cloven tongue, deign to repeat itself; but if I can hear what these patriarchs say, surely I can reply to them in the same pitch of voice: for the ear and the tongue are two organs of one nature. Dwell up there in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again.

SOCIETY AND PROPERTY

Society never advances, and reliance on property and numbers is a want of self-reliance.

2.44 4. As our Religion, our Education, our Art look abroad, so does our spirit of society. All men plume themselves on the improvement of society, and no man improves.

2.45 Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. Its progress is only apparent, like that of the workers on a treadmill. It undergoes continual changes: it is pre-civilized, it is civilized, it is Christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration. For everything that is given, something is taken. Society acquires new arts and loses old instincts. What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of

20 Phidias: the great Athenian sculptor of the 5th century BC.

a shed to sleep under. But compare the health of the two men, and you shall see that the white man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the traveler tells us truly, strike the tribesman with a broad axe, and in a day or two the flesh shall unite and heal as if you struck the blow into soft pitch, and the same blow shall send the white man to his grave.

2.46 The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but loses so much support of muscle. He has got a fine Geneva watch, but he has lost the skill to tell the hour by the sun. A Greenwich nautical almanac he has, and so, being sure of the information when he wants it, the man in the street does not know a star in the sky. The solstice he does not observe; the equinox he knows as little; and the whole bright calendar of the year is without a dial in his mind. His notebooks impair his memory; his libraries overload his wit; the insurance office increases the number of accidents; and it may be a question whether machinery does not encumber; whether we have not lost by refinement some energy, and by a Christianity entrenched in establishments and forms, some vigor of wild virtue. For every stoic was a stoic; but in Christendom where is the Christian?

2.47 There is no more deviation in the moral standard than in the standard of height or bulk. No greater men are now than ever were. A singular equality may be observed between the great men of the first and of the last ages; nor can all the science, art, religion, and philosophy of the nineteenth century avail to educate greater men than Plutarch's heroes, twenty-three or twenty-four centuries ago. Not in time is the race progressive. Phocion, Socrates, Anaxagoras, Diogenes, are great men, but they leave no class. He who is really of their class will not be called by their name, but will be wholly his own man, and in his turn the founder of a sect.[21] The arts and inventions of each period are only its costume, and do not invigorate men. The harm of the improved machinery may offset its good. Hudson

21 Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* portrays the great Greeks and Romans; Anaxagoras and Diogenes were Greek philosophers.

and Behring accomplished so much in their fishing-boats as to astonish Parry and Franklin, whose equipment exhausted the resources of science and art. Galileo, with an opera-glass, discovered a more splendid series of facts than anyone since. Columbus found the New World in an undecked boat. It is curious to see the periodical disuse and perishing of means and machinery which were introduced with loud praise a few years or centuries before. The great genius returns to essential man.[22] We reckoned the improvements of the art of war among the triumphs of science, and yet Napoleon conquered Europe by the Bivouac, which consisted of falling back on naked valor and disencumbering it of all aids. The Emperor held it impossible to make a perfect army, says Las Casas, "without abolishing our arms, magazines, commissaries, and carriages, until in imitation of the Roman custom, the soldier should receive his supply of corn, grind it in his hand-mill, and bake his bread himself."[23]

2.48 Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a nation today next year die, and their experience with them.

2.49 And so the reliance on Property, including the reliance on governments which protect it, is the want of self-reliance. Men have looked away from themselves and at things so long that they have come to esteem what they call the soul's progress, namely, the religious, learned, and civil institutions, as guards of property, and they deprecate assaults on these, because they feel them to be assaults on property. They measure their esteem of each other by what each has, and not by what each is. But a cultivated man becomes ashamed of his property, ashamed of what he has, out of new respect for his being. Especially he hates what he has, if he sees that it is accidental—came to him

22 Henry Hudson and Vitus Bering, earlier explorers; William Parry and John Franklin led well-equipped 19th-century Arctic expeditions.

23 Emmanuel de Las Cases recorded Napoleon's conversations on St. Helena in his *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène*.

by inheritance, or gift, or crime; then he feels that it is not having; it does not belong to him, has no root in him, and merely lies there because no revolution or no robber takes it away. But that which a man is, does always by necessity acquire, and what the man acquires is permanent and living property, which does not wait on the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolutions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man is put. "Thy lot or portion of life," said the Caliph Ali, "is seeking after thee; therefore be at rest from seeking after it." Our dependence on these foreign goods leads us to our slavish respect for numbers. The political parties meet in numerous conventions; the greater the crowd, and with each new uproar of announcement—The delegation from Essex! The Democrats from New Hampshire! The Whigs of Maine!—the young patriot feels himself stronger than before by a new thousand of eyes and arms. In like manner the reformers summon conventions, and vote and resolve in multitude. But not so, O friends! will the God deign to enter and inhabit you, but by a method precisely the reverse.[24] It is only as a man puts off from himself all external support, and stands alone, that I see him to be strong and to prevail. He is weaker by every recruit to his banner. Is not a man better than a town? Ask nothing of men, and in the endless mutation, thou only firm column must presently appear the upholder of all that surrounds thee. He who knows that power is in the soul, that he is weak only because he has looked for good outside himself and elsewhere, and, so perceiving, throws himself unhesitatingly on his thought, instantly rights himself, stands in the erect position, commands his limbs, works miracles; just as a man who stands on his feet is stronger than a man who stands on his head.

2.50 So use all that is called Fortune. Most men gamble with her, and gain all, and lose all, as her wheel rolls. But do thou leave as unlawful these winnings, and deal with Cause and Effect, the chancellors of God. In the Will work and acquire, and thou hast chained the wheel of Chance, and shalt always drag

24 Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and the fourth caliph.

her after thee. A political victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or some other quite external event, raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for you. Do not believe it. It can never be so. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles.