

**CLASSICS TO GO**



# **ESSAYS**

**BY RALPH WALDO EMERSON**

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## **LIFE OF EMERSON**

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston, May 25, 1803. He was descended from a long line of New England ministers, men of refinement and education. As a school-boy he was quiet and retiring, reading a great deal, but not paying much attention to his lessons. He entered Harvard at the early age of fourteen, but never attained a high rank there, although he took a prize for an essay on Socrates, and was made class poet after several others had declined. Next to his reserve and the faultless propriety of his conduct, his contemporaries at college seemed most impressed by the great maturity of his mind. Emerson appears never to have been really a boy. He was always serene and thoughtful, impressing all who knew him with that spirituality which was his most distinguishing characteristic.

After graduating from college he taught school for a time, and then entered the Harvard Divinity School under Dr. Channing, the great Unitarian preacher. Although he was not strong enough to attend all the lectures of the divinity course, the college authorities deemed the name Emerson sufficient passport to the ministry. He was accordingly "approbated to preach" by the Middlesex Association of Ministers on October 10, 1826. As a preacher, Emerson was interesting, though not particularly original. His talent seems to have been in giving new meaning to the old truths of religion. One of his hearers has said: "In looking back on his preaching I find he has impressed truths to which I always assented in such a manner as to make them appear new, like a clearer revelation." Although his sermons were always couched in scriptural language, they were touched with the light of that genius which avoids the conventional

and commonplace. In his other pastoral duties Emerson was not quite so successful. It is characteristic of his deep humanity and his dislike for all fuss and commonplace that he appeared to least advantage at a funeral. A connoisseur in such matters, an old sexton, once remarked that on such occasions "he did not appear at ease at all. To tell the truth, in my opinion, that young man was not born to be a minister."

Emerson did not long remain a minister. In 1832 he preached a sermon in which he announced certain views in regard to the communion service which were disapproved by a large part of his congregation. He found it impossible to continue preaching, and, with the most friendly feelings on both sides, he parted from his congregation.

A few months later (1833) he went to Europe for a short year of travel. While abroad, he visited Walter Savage Landor, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle. This visit to Carlyle was to both men a most interesting experience. They parted feeling that they had much intellectually in common. This belief fostered a sympathy which, by the time they had discovered how different they really were, had grown so strong a habit that they always kept up their intimacy. This year of travel opened Emerson's eyes to many things of which he had previously been ignorant; he had profited by detachment from the concerns of a limited community and an isolated church.

After his return he began to find his true field of activity in the lecture-hall, and delivered a number of addresses in Boston and its vicinity. While thus coming before the open public on the lecture platform, he was all the time preparing the treatise which was to embody all the quintessential elements of his philosophical doctrine. This was the essay *Nature*, which was published in 1836. By its conception of external Nature as an incarnation of the Divine Mind it

struck the fundamental principle of Emerson's religious belief. The essay had a very small circulation at first, though later it became widely known.

In the winter of 1836 Emerson followed up his discourse on Nature by a course of twelve lectures on the "Philosophy of History," a considerable portion of which eventually became embodied in his essays. The next year (1837) was the year of the delivery of the *Man Thinking, or the American Scholar* address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge.

This society, composed of the first twenty-five men in each class graduating from college, has annual meetings which have called forth the best efforts of many distinguished scholars and thinkers. Emerson's address was listened to with the most profound interest. It declared a sort of intellectual independence for America. Henceforth we were to be emancipated from clogging foreign influences, and a national literature was to expand under the fostering care of the Republic.

These two discourses, *Nature* and *The American Scholar*, strike the keynote of Emerson's philosophical, poetical, and moral teachings. In fact he had, as every great teacher has, only a limited number of principles and theories to teach. These principles of life can all be enumerated in twenty words—self-reliance, culture, intellectual and moral independence, the divinity of nature and man, the necessity of labor, and high ideals.

Emerson spent the latter part of his life in lecturing and in literary work. His son, Dr. Edward Emerson, gave an interesting account of how these lectures were constructed. "All through his life he kept a journal. This book, he said, was his 'Savings Bank.' The thoughts thus received and garnered in his journals were indexed, and a great many of them appeared in his published works. They were religiously

set down just as they came, in no order except chronological, but later they were grouped, enlarged or pruned, illustrated, worked into a lecture or discourse, and, after having in this capacity undergone repeated testing and rearranging, were finally carefully sifted and more rigidly pruned, and were printed as essays."

Besides his essays and lectures Emerson left some poetry in which is embodied those thoughts which were to him too deep for prose expression. Oliver Wendell Holmes in speaking of this says: "Emerson wrote occasionally in verse from his school-days until he had reached the age which used to be known as the grand climacteric, sixty-three.... His poems are not and hardly can become popular; they are not meant to be liked by the many, but to be dearly loved and cherished by the few.... His occasional lawlessness in technical construction, his somewhat fantastic expressions, his enigmatic obscurities hardly detract from the pleasant surprise his verses so often bring with them.... The poetic license which we allow in the verse of Emerson is more than excused by the noble spirit which makes us forget its occasional blemishes, sometimes to be pleased with them as characteristic of the writer."

Emerson was always a striking figure in the intellectual life of America. His discourses were above all things inspiring. Through them many were induced to strive for a higher self-culture. His influence can be discerned in all the literary movements of the time. He was the central figure of the so-called transcendental school which was so prominent fifty years ago, although he always rather held aloof from any enthusiastic participation in the movement.

Emerson lived a quiet life in Concord, Massachusetts. "He was a first-rate neighbor and one who always kept his fences up." He traveled extensively on his lecturing tours, even going as far as England. In *English Traits* he has

recorded his impressions of what he saw of English life and manners.

Oliver Wendell Holmes has described him in this wise: "His personal appearance was that of the typical New Englander of college-bred ancestry. Tall, spare, slender, with sloping shoulders, slightly stooping in his later years, with light hair and eyes, the scholar's complexion, the prominent, somewhat arched nose which belongs to many of the New England sub-species, thin lips, suggestive of delicacy, but having nothing like primness, still less of the rigidity which is often noticeable in the generation succeeding next to that of the men in their shirt-sleeves, he would have been noticed anywhere as one evidently a scholarly thinker astray from the alcove or the study, which were his natural habitats. His voice was very sweet, and penetrating without any loudness or mark of effort. His enunciation was beautifully clear, but he often hesitated as if waiting for the right word to present itself. His manner was very quiet, his smile was pleasant, but he did not like explosive laughter any better than Hawthorne did. None who met him can fail to recall that serene and kindly presence, in which there was mingled a certain spiritual remoteness with the most benignant human welcome to all who were privileged to enjoy his companionship."

Emerson died April 27, 1882, after a few days' illness from pneumonia. Dr. Garnett in his excellent biography says: "Seldom had 'the reaper whose name is Death' gathered such illustrious harvest as between December 1880 and April 1882. In the first month of this period George Eliot passed away, in the ensuing February Carlyle followed; in April Lord Beaconsfield died, deplored by his party, nor unregretted by his country; in February of the following year Longfellow was carried to the tomb; in April Rossetti was laid to rest by the sea, and the pavement of Westminster Abbey

was disturbed to receive the dust of Darwin. And now Emerson lay down in death beside the painter of man and the searcher of nature, the English-Oriental statesman, the poet of the plain man and the poet of the artist, and the prophet whose name is indissolubly linked with his own. All these men passed into eternity laden with the spoils of Time, but of none of them could it be said, as of Emerson, that the most shining intellectual glory and the most potent intellectual force of a continent had departed along with him."



## CRITICAL OPINIONS OF EMERSON AND HIS WRITINGS.

**Matthew Arnold**, in an address on Emerson delivered in Boston, gave an excellent estimate of the rank we should accord to him in the great hierarchy of letters. Some, perhaps, will think that Arnold was unappreciative and cold, but dispassionate readers will be inclined to agree with his judgment of our great American.

After a review of the poetical works of Emerson the English critic draws his conclusions as follows:

"I do not then place Emerson among the great poets. But I go farther, and say that I do not place him among the great writers, the great men of letters. Who are the great men of letters? They are men like Cicero, Plato, Bacon, Pascal, Swift, Voltaire—writers with, in the first place, a genius and instinct for style.... Brilliant and powerful passages in a man's writings do not prove his possession of it. Emerson has passages of noble and pathetic eloquence; he has passages of shrewd and felicitous wit; he has crisp epigram; he has passages of exquisitely touched observation of nature. Yet he is not a great writer.... Carlyle formulates perfectly the defects of his friend's poetic and literary productions when he says: 'For me it is too ethereal, speculative, theoretic; I will have all things condense themselves, take shape and body, if they are to have my sympathy.' ...

" .... Not with the Miltons and Grays, not with the Platos and Spinozas, not with the Swifts and Voltaires, not with the Montaignes and Addisons, can we rank Emerson. No man could see this clearer than Emerson himself. 'Alas, my

friend,' he writes in reply to Carlyle, who had exhorted him to creative work,—'Alas, my friend, I can do no such gay thing as you say. I do not belong to the poets, but only to a low department of literature,—the reporters; suburban men.' He deprecated his friend's praise; praise 'generous to a fault' he calls it; praise 'generous to the shaming of me,—cold, fastidious, ebbing person that I am.'"

After all this unfavorable criticism Arnold begins to praise. Quoting passages from the Essays, he adds:

"This is tonic indeed! And let no one object that it is too general; that more practical, positive direction is what we want.... Yes, truly, his insight is admirable; his truth is precious. Yet the secret of his effect is not even in these; it is in his temper. It is in the hopeful, serene, beautiful temper wherewith these, in Emerson, are indissolubly united; in which they work and have their being.... One can scarcely overrate the importance of holding fast to happiness and hope. It gives to Emerson's work an invaluable virtue. As Wordsworth's poetry is, in my judgment, the most important done in verse, in our language, during the present century, so Emerson's Essays are, I think, the most important work done in prose.... But by his conviction that in the life of the spirit is happiness, and by his hope that this life of the spirit will come more and more to be sanely understood, and to prevail, and to work for happiness,—by this conviction and hope Emerson was great, and he will surely prove in the end to have been right in them.... You cannot prize him too much, nor heed him too diligently."

**Herman Grimm**, a German critic of great influence in his own country, did much to obtain a hearing for Emerson's works in Germany. At first the Germans could not understand the unusual English, the unaccustomed turns of phrase which are so characteristic of Emerson's style.

"Macaulay gives them no difficulty; even Carlyle is comprehended. But in Emerson's writings the broad turnpike is suddenly changed into a hazardous sandy foot-path. His thoughts and his style are American. He is not writing for Berlin, but for the people of Massachusetts.... It is an art to rise above what we have been taught.... All great men are seen to possess this freedom. They derive their standard from their own natures, and their observations on life are so natural and spontaneous that it would seem as if the most illiterate person with a scrap of common-sense would have made the same.... We become wiser with them, and know not how the difficult appears easy and the involved plain.

"Emerson possesses this noble manner of communicating himself. He inspires me with courage and confidence. He has read and seen but conceals the labor. I meet in his works plenty of familiar facts, but he does not employ them to figure up anew the old worn-out problems: each stands on a new spot and serves for new combinations. From everything he sees the direct line issuing which connects it with the focus of life....

" .... Emerson's theory is that of the 'sovereignty of the individual.' To discover what a young man is good for, and to equip him for the path he is to strike out in life, regardless of any other consideration, is the great duty to which he calls attention. He makes men self-reliant. He reveals to the eyes of the idealist the magnificent results of practical activity, and unfolds before the realist the grandeur of the ideal world of thought. No man is to allow himself, through prejudice, to make a mistake in choosing the task to which he will devote his life. Emerson's essays are, as it were, printed sermons—all having this same text.... The wealth and harmony of his language overpowered and entranced me anew. But even now I cannot say wherein the secret of his influence lies. What he has written is like life itself—the

unbroken thread ever lengthened through the addition of the small events which make up each day's experience."

**Froude** in his famous "Life of Carlyle" gives an interesting description of Emerson's visit to the Carlyles in Scotland:

"The Carlyles were sitting alone at dinner on a Sunday afternoon at the end of August when a Dumfries carriage drove to the door, and there stepped out of it a young American then unknown to fame, but whose influence in his own country equals that of Carlyle in ours, and whose name stands connected with his wherever the English language is spoken. Emerson, the younger of the two, had just broken his Unitarian fetters, and was looking out around him like a young eagle longing for light. He had read Carlyle's articles and had discerned with the instinct of genius that here was a voice speaking real and fiery convictions, and no longer echoes and conventionalisms. He had come to Europe to study its social and spiritual phenomena; and to the young Emerson as to the old Goethe, the most important of them appeared to be Carlyle.... The acquaintance then begun to their mutual pleasure ripened into a deep friendship, which has remained unclouded in spite of wide divergences of opinion throughout their working lives."

**Carlyle** wrote to his mother after Emerson had left:

"Our third happiness was the arrival of a certain young unknown friend named Emerson, from Boston, in the United States, who turned aside so far from his British, French, and Italian travels to see me here! He had an introduction from Mill and a Frenchman (Baron d'Eichthal's nephew) whom John knew at Rome. Of course, we could do no other than welcome him; the rather as he seemed to be one of the most lovable creatures in himself we had ever looked on. He stayed till next day with us, and talked and heard to his heart's content, and left us all really sad to part with him."

In 1841 Carlyle wrote to John Sterling a few words apropos of the recent publication of Emerson's essays in England:

"I love Emerson's book, not for its detached opinions, not even for the scheme of the general world he has framed for himself, or any eminence of talent he has expressed that with, but simply because it is his own book; because there is a tone of veracity, an unmistakable air of its being *his*, and a real utterance of a human soul, not a mere echo of such. I consider it, in that sense, highly remarkable, rare, very rare, in these days of ours. Ach Gott! It is frightful to live among echoes. The few that read the book, I imagine, will get benefit of it. To America, I sometimes say that Emerson, such as he is, seems to me like a kind of New Era."

**John Morley**, the acute English critic, has made an analytic study of Emerson's style, which may reconcile the reader to some of its exasperating peculiarities.

"One of the traits that every critic notes in Emerson's writing is that it is so abrupt, so sudden in its transitions, so discontinuous, so inconsecutive. Dislike of a sentence that drags made him unconscious of the quality that French critics name *coulant*. Everything is thrown in just as it comes, and sometimes the pell-mell is enough to persuade us that Pope did not exaggerate when he said that no one qualification is so likely to make a good writer as the power of rejecting his own thoughts.... Apart from his difficult staccato, Emerson is not free from secondary faults. He uses words that are not only odd, but vicious in construction; he is sometimes oblique and he is often clumsy; and there is a visible feeling after epigrams that do not always come. When people say that Emerson's style must be good and admirable because it fits his thought, they forget that though it is well that a robe should fit, there is still something to be said about its cut and fashion.... Yet, as happens to all fine minds, there came to Emerson ways of

expression deeply marked with character. On every page there is set the strong stamp of sincerity, and the attraction of a certain artlessness; the most awkward sentence rings true; and there is often a pure and simple note that touches us more than if it were the perfection of elaborated melody. The uncouth procession of the periods discloses the travail of the thought, and that, too, is a kind of eloquence. An honest reader easily forgives the rude jolt or unexpected start when it shows a thinker faithfully working his way along arduous and unworn tracks. Even at the roughest, Emerson often interjects a delightful cadence. As he says of Landor, his sentences are cubes which will stand firm, place them how or where you will. He criticised Swedenborg for being superfluously explanatory, and having an exaggerated feeling of the ignorance of men. 'Men take truths of this nature,' said Emerson, 'very fast;' and his own style does no doubt very boldly take this capacity for granted in us. In 'choice and pith of diction,' again, of which Mr. Lowell speaks, he hits the mark with a felicity that is almost his own in this generation. He is terse, concentrated, and free from the important blunder of mistaking intellectual dawdling for meditation. Nor in fine does his abruptness ever impede a true urbanity. The accent is homely and the apparel plain, but his bearing has a friendliness, a courtesy, a hospitable humanity, which goes nearer to our hearts than either literary decoration or rhetorical unction. That modest and lenient fellow-feeling which gave such charm to his companionship breathes in his gravest writing, and prevents us from finding any page of it cold or hard or dry."

**E.P. Whipple**, the well-known American critic, wrote soon after Emerson's death:

"But 'sweetness and light' are precious and inspiring only so far as they express the essential sweetness of the

disposition of the thinker, and the essential illuminating power of his intelligence. Emerson's greatness came from his character. Sweetness and light streamed from him because they were *in* him. In everything he thought, wrote, and did, we feel the presence of a personality as vigorous and brave as it was sweet, and the particular radical thought he at any time expressed derived its power to animate and illuminate other minds from the might of the manhood, which was felt to be within and behind it. To 'sweetness and light' he therefore added the prime quality of fearless manliness.

"If the force of Emerson's character was thus inextricably blended with the force of all his faculties of intellect and imagination, and the refinement of all his sentiments, we have still to account for the peculiarities of his genius, and to answer the question, why do we instinctively apply the epithet 'Emersonian' to every characteristic passage in his writings? We are told that he was the last in a long line of clergymen, his ancestors, and that the modern doctrine of heredity accounts for the impressive emphasis he laid on the moral sentiment; but that does not solve the puzzle why he unmistakably differed in his nature and genius from all other Emersons. An imaginary genealogical chart of descent connecting him with Confucius or Gautama would be more satisfactory.

"What distinguishes *the* Emerson was his exceptional genius and character, that something in him which separated him from all other Emersons, as it separated him from all other eminent men of letters, and impressed every intelligent reader with the feeling that he was not only 'original but aboriginal.' Some traits of his mind and character may be traced back to his ancestors, but what doctrine of heredity can give us the genesis of his genius? Indeed, the safest course to pursue is to quote his own words, and despairingly

confess that it is the nature of genius 'to spring, like the rainbow daughter of Wonder, from the invisible, to abolish the past, and refuse all history.'"



# THE AMERICAN SCHOLAR.

This address was delivered at Cambridge in 1837, before the Harvard Chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, a college fraternity composed of the first twenty-five men in each graduating class. The society has annual meetings, which have been the occasion for addresses from the most distinguished scholars and thinkers of the day.

MR. PRESIDENT AND GENTLEMEN,

I greet you on the recommencement of our literary year. Our anniversary is one of hope, and, perhaps, not enough of labor. We do not meet for games of strength<sup>[1]</sup> or skill, for the recitation of histories, tragedies, and odes, like the ancient Greeks; for parliaments of love and poesy, like the Troubadours;<sup>[2]</sup> nor for the advancement of science, like our co-temporaries in the British and European capitals. Thus far, our holiday has been simply a friendly sign of the survival of the love of letters amongst a people too busy to give to letters any more. As such it is precious as the sign of an indestructible instinct. Perhaps the time is already come when it ought to be, and will be, something else; when the sluggard intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill. Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions that around us are rushing into life cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests.<sup>[3]</sup> Events, actions arise that must be sung, that will sing themselves. Who can doubt that poetry will revive and lead in a new age, as the star in the

constellation Harp, which now flames in our zenith, astronomers announce, shall one day be the pole-star[4] for a thousand years?

In the light of this hope I accept the topic which not only usage but the nature of our association seem to prescribe to this day,—the AMERICAN SCHOLAR. Year by year we come up hither to read one more chapter of his biography. Let us inquire what new lights, new events, and more days have thrown on his character, his duties, and his hopes.

It is one of those fables which out of an unknown antiquity convey an unlooked-for wisdom, that the gods, in the beginning, divided Man into men, that he might be more helpful to himself; just as the hand was divided into fingers, the better to answer its end.[5]

The old fable covers a doctrine ever new and sublime; that there is One Man,—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man. Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint[6] of the joint work, whilst each other performs his. The fable implies that the individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. But, unfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things. The planter, who is Man sent out into the field to gather food, is seldom cheered by any idea of the true dignity of his ministry. He sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond, and sinks into the farmer, instead of Man on the farm. The tradesman scarcely ever gives an ideal worth to his work, but is ridden[7] by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars. The priest becomes a form; the attorney a statute-book; the mechanic a machine; the sailor a rope of the ship.

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

In this view of him, as Man Thinking, the whole theory of his office is contained. Him Nature solicits with all her placid, all her monitory pictures.[8] Him the past instructs. Him the future invites. Is not indeed every man a student, and do not all things exist for the student's behoof? And, finally, is not the true scholar the only true master? But as the old oracle said, "All things have two handles: Beware of the wrong one." [9] In life, too often, the scholar errs with mankind and forfeits his privilege. Let us see him in his school, and consider him in reference to the main influences he receives.

I. The first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature. Every day, the sun; [10] and, after sunset, Night and her stars. Ever the winds blow; ever the grass grows. Every day, men and women, conversing, beholding and beholden. [11] The scholar must needs stand wistful and admiring before this great spectacle. He must settle its value in his mind. What is nature to him? There is never a beginning, there is never an

end, to the inexplicable continuity of this web of God, but always circular power returning into itself.<sup>[12]</sup> Therein it resembles his own spirit, whose beginning, whose ending, he never can find,—so entire, so boundless. Far too as her splendors shine, system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without center, without circumference,—in the mass and in the particle, Nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind. Classification begins. To the young mind everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by it finds how to join two things and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so, tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running under ground whereby contrary and remote things cohere and flower out from one stem. It presently learns that since the dawn of history there has been a constant accumulation and classifying of facts. But what is classification but the perceiving that these objects are not chaotic, and are not foreign, but have a law which is also a law of the human mind? The astronomer discovers that geometry, a pure abstraction of the human mind, is the measure of planetary motion. The chemist finds proportions and intelligible method throughout matter; and science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts. The ambitious soul sits down before each refractory fact; one after another reduces all strange constitutions, all new powers, to their class and their law, and goes on forever to animate the last fiber of organization, the outskirts of nature, by insight.

Thus to him, to this school-boy under the bending dome of day, is suggested that he and it proceed from one Root; one is leaf and one is flower; relation, sympathy, stirring in every vein. And what is that root? Is not that the soul of his soul?—A thought too bold?—A dream too wild? Yet when this spiritual light shall have revealed the law of more earthly

natures,—when he has learned to worship the soul, and to see that the natural philosophy that now is, is only the first gropings of its gigantic hand,—he shall look forward to an ever-expanding knowledge as to a becoming creator.[13] He shall see that nature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, "Know thyself,"[14] and the modern precept, "Study nature," become at last one maxim.

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

The theory of books is noble. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him truth. It came to him short-lived actions; it went out from him immortal thoughts. It came to him business; it went from him poetry. It was dead fact; now, it is quick thought. It can stand, and it can go. It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires.[15] Precisely in proportion to the depth of mind from which it issued, so high does it soar, so long does it sing.

Or, I might say, it depends on how far the process had gone, of transmuting life into truth. In proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. But none is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect

vacuum,[16] so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the local, the perishable from his book, or write a book of pure thought, that shall be as efficient, in all respects, to a remote posterity, as to contemporaries, or rather to the second age. Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.

Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is instantly transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man. Henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit. Henceforward it is settled the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious. [17] The guide is a tyrant. We sought a brother, and lo, a governor. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, always slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking, by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke,[18] which Bacon,[19] have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books.

Hence, instead of Man Thinking, we have the bookworm. Hence the book-learned class, who value books, as such; not as related to nature and the human constitution, but as making a sort of Third Estate[20] with the world and soul. Hence the restorers of readings,[21] the emendators,[22] the bibliomaniacs[23] of all degrees. This is bad; this is worse than it seems.

Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst. What is the right use? What is the one end which all means go to effect? They are for nothing but to inspire.[24] I had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system. The one thing in the world of value is the active soul,—the soul, free, sovereign, active. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although in almost all men obstructed, and as yet unborn. The soul active sees absolute truth and utters truth, or creates. In this action it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man.[25] In its essence it is progressive. The book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind, stop with some past utterance of genius. This is good, say they,—let us hold by this. They pin me down.[26] They look backward and not forward. But genius always looks forward. The eyes of man are set in his forehead, not in his hindhead. Man hopes. Genius creates. To create,—to create,—is the proof of a divine presence. Whatever talents may be, if the man create not, the pure efflux of the Deity is not his;[27]—cinders and smoke there may be, but not yet flame. There are creative manners, there are creative actions, and creative words; manners, actions, words, that is, indicative of no custom or authority, but springing spontaneous from the mind's own sense of good and fair.

On the other part, instead of being its own seer, let it receive always from another mind its truth, though it were in torrents of light, without periods of solitude, inquest, and self-recovery; and a fatal disservice[28] is done. Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over-influence. [29] The literature of every nation bear me witness. The English dramatic poets have Shakespearized now for two hundred years.[30]



Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated. Man Thinking must not be subdued by his instruments. Books are for the scholar's idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings.[31] But when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must,—when the soul seeth not, when the sun is hid and the stars withdraw their shining,—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is.[32] We hear, that we may speak. The Arabian proverb says, "A fig-tree, looking on a fig-tree, becometh fruitful."

It is remarkable, the character of the pleasure we derive from the best books. They impress us ever with the conviction that one nature wrote and the same reads. We read the verses of one of the great English poets, of Chaucer,[33] of Marvell,[34] of Dryden,[35] with the most modern joy,—with a pleasure, I mean, which is in great part caused by the abstraction of all *time* from their verses. There is some awe mixed with the joy of our surprise, when this poet, who lived in some past world, two or three hundred years ago, says that which lies close to my own soul, that which I also had well-nigh thought and said. But for the evidence thence afforded to the philosophical doctrine of the identity of all minds, we should suppose some pre-established harmony, some foresight of souls that were to be, and some preparation of stores for their future wants, like the fact observed in insects, who lay up food before death for the young grub they shall never see.

I would not be hurried by any love of system, by any exaggeration of instincts, to underrate the Book. We all know that as the human body can be nourished on any food, though it were boiled grass and the broth of shoes, so the human mind can be fed by any knowledge. And great



and heroic men have existed who had almost no other information than by the printed page. I only would say that it needs a strong head to bear that diet. One must be an inventor to read well. As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion. Every sentence is doubly significant, and the sense of our author is as broad as the world. We then see, what is always true, that as the seer's hour of vision is short and rare among heavy days and months, so is its record, perchance, the least part of his volume. The discerning will read, in his Plato<sup>[36]</sup> or Shakespeare, only that least part,—only the authentic utterances of the oracle;—all the rest he rejects, were it never so many times Plato's and Shakespeare's.

Of course there is a portion of reading quite indispensable to a wise man. History and exact science he must learn by laborious reading. Colleges, in like manner, have their indispensable office,—to teach elements. But they can only highly serve us when they aim not to drill, but to create; when they gather from far every ray of various genius to their hospitable halls, and by the concentrated fires set the hearts of their youth on flame. Thought and knowledge are natures in which apparatus and pretension avail nothing. Gowns<sup>[37]</sup> and pecuniary foundations,<sup>[38]</sup> though of towns of gold, can never countervail the least sentence or syllable of wit.<sup>[39]</sup> Forget this, and our American colleges will recede in their public importance, whilst they grow richer every year.

III. There goes in the world a notion that the scholar should be a recluse, a valetudinarian,<sup>[40]</sup>—as unfit for any handiwork or public labor as a penknife for an axe. The so-called "practical men" sneer at speculative men, as if,

because they speculate or *see*, they could do nothing. I have heard it said that the clergy—who are always, more universally than any other class, the scholars of their day—are addressed as women; that the rough, spontaneous conversation of men they do not hear, but only a mincing<sup>[41]</sup> and diluted speech. They are often virtually disfranchised; and indeed there are advocates for their celibacy. As far as this is true of the studious classes, it is not just and wise. Action is with the scholar subordinate, but it is essential. Without it he is not yet man. Without it thought can never ripen into truth. Whilst the world hangs before the eye as a cloud of beauty, we cannot even see its beauty. Inaction is cowardice, but there can be no scholar without the heroic mind. The preamble<sup>[42]</sup> of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived. Instantly we know whose words are loaded with life, and whose not.

The world—this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around. Its attractions are the keys which unlock my thoughts and make me acquainted with myself. I launch eagerly into this resounding tumult. I grasp the hands of those next me, and take my place in the ring to suffer and to work, taught by an instinct that so shall the dumb abyss<sup>[43]</sup> be vocal with speech. I pierce its order; I dissipate its fear;<sup>[44]</sup> I dispose of it within the circuit of my expanding life. So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion. I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom. The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action passed by, as a loss of power.