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**HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE GREAT MIGRATION; THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE**

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**APPENDIX A: PROSODY & POETIC TECHNIQUE**

**APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY OF POETIC TERMS**
Unit V - Emerson, Thoreau, & American Transcendentalism

Historical Context: American Transcendentalism

“\textit{I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.}”

- from Emerson’s “Nature”

\textbf{American Transcendentalism} was an important movement in philosophy and literature that emerged in New England and flourished during the early to middle years of the nineteenth century (about 1836-1860). Transcendentalism can in many ways be thought of as an offshoot of Romanticism, as it \textit{embraced many elements of American Romanticism}, such as:

- The worth of the individual and inherent goodness of humanity
- The pleasures of communion with nature
- Condemnation of society’s corrupting materialism
- Individual freedom of expression

Emerson’s 1836 essay “Nature” is considered the founding text and “gospel” of Transcendentalism. Other important literary Transcendentalists include: Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and William Ellery Channing.

Transcendentalism is tinged with a kind of mysticism, making it difficult to accurately summarize. We can, however, delineate some of the \textbf{major philosophies of transcendentalism}:

- Truth cannot be grasped through logic or laws of science but rather through intuition of man’s divine intellect (Emerson)
- Therefore each person, with his extra-intellectual ability, should follow the sway of his own beliefs and ideas, however divergent from the social norm
- Hence, man is inherently good, capable of making his own decisions
- Being close to nature is good, as is manual labor (Thoreau)

\textbf{Transcendentalism and Religion}: Ralph Waldo Emerson studied theology and aspired to be a Unitarian minister. By 1830, however, he (and other Transcendentalists) rebelled against his Unitarian background, especially the rationalism which he felt denied
the profound sense of mystery inherent in both nature and humanity. He didn’t like the idea of reducing God to a “watchmaker,” because this in turn reduced the individual to a mere cog in the universal clock or machine.

Various movements find their roots in Transcendentalism:

- Feminism
- Abolitionism
- Utopianism
- Communalism
- Labor Unionism

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Shortly before the poet Walt Whitman died, he honored a man whose ideas had influenced him profoundly throughout his own long and controversial career. “America in the future,” he wrote, “in her long train of poets and writers, while knowing more vehement and luxurious ones, will, I think, acknowledge nothing nearer [than] this man, the actual beginner of the whole procession.”

“This man” was Ralph Waldo Emerson. Better than anyone before him, Emerson expressed the advantages of a young land—its freedom from the old, corrupt, and moribund thought and customs of Europe; its access to higher laws directly through nature rather than indirectly through books and the teachings of the past; its energy; and its opportunity to reform the world. In “Self-Reliance,” Emerson called for a philosopher “who shall reveal the resources of man, and tell men ... that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear; that man is the word made flesh ... and that the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out the window—we pity him no more, but thank and revere him.” Emerson himself fit that description of the new philosopher very well.

Emerson was one of those rare writers who appealed both to intellectuals and to the general public. He helped open the door between the commonplace and “uncivilized” world of nineteenth-century America and the realm of philosophical and religious truth. In this way, he influenced contemporaries such as Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson, each of whom claimed a slightly different aspect of the crude and rich American experience for subject matter. His influence has continued into the twentieth century and can be seen, among other places, in Robert Frost’s simple nature lyrics and in Wallace Stevens’s philosophical poems. Both these poets, in their ways, emphasize the connections between humans, nature, and a higher order.

Emerson’s influence on the popular mind—spread through the thousands of lectures he gave throughout the United States during a long career—was equally strong. He had something of a reputation for being difficult to understand and, partly as a result of this,
was considered “good for you” in a cultural sense. In fact, though, Emerson’s lectures were usually quite understandable.

“I had heard of him as full of transcendalisms, myths, & oracular gibberish,” Melville wrote a friend after hearing Emerson lecture for the first time. “To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible.” Then Melville added wryly, “To say truth, they told me that that night he was unusually plain.”

Emerson’s work is often “plain” in the sense that he offers a perfectly understandable surface, though there is much substance beneath it. His essays sometimes appear to be collections of memorable sentences rather than organized expositions of thought. Such a style betrays Emerson’s habit of piecing together his lectures and essays from his journals.

But in some ways, this style was appropriate to a lecture. If one sentence was unclear, the listener need only wait for the next one, which might contain thought enough to consider for the entire evening.

Moreover, one of Emerson’s stirring sentences might satisfy the intellectual and emotional needs of many different people. “Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string.” No one had to delve deeply into Emerson’s philosophy to respond to such confident optimism. Whether or not Emerson intended it, that sentence served equally well as a motto for businessmen and as an encouragement to a young man to go off and live alone in the woods.

Oddly, despite his great influence, it is difficult even to classify what kind of writer Emerson was. Essayist is too limited; philosopher is too broad. The best term, perhaps, is poet, not in the sense of versifier, but in the sense Melville intended when he wrote that Benjamin Franklin was “everything but a poet.”

“I am a poet,” Emerson wrote to his fiancé, Lydia Jackson, in 1835, “of a low class without doubt but yet a poet. That is my nature & vocation. My singing be sure is very ‘husky,’ & is for the most part in prose. Still am I a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter. . . .”

This poet was born in Boston in 1803 to a family that was cultured, but poor. When he was only eight years old, his father, a Unitarian minister, died of tuberculosis. His mother was left with four growing boys to care for. A fifth son was mentally retarded and raised by relatives. Mrs. Emerson opened a boardinghouse and depended on the generosity of the Church.

The father’s place in the lives of the Emerson children was taken by their aunt. Mary Moody Emerson was a strict Calvinist whose rigid piety emphasized self-sacrifice and whose enormous energy drove the Emerson boys to achievement. “She had the misfortune,” Emerson later wrote, “of spinning with a greater velocity than any of the other tops.”
Despite Aunt Mary’s example of self-reliance in the family, every step of Emerson’s own life had been laid out for him from an early age. He was to go to Harvard and become a minister like his father and the seven generations of Emersons before him. Emerson uncomfortably obeyed. His life consisted of a series of attempts to establish his own identity against this background of expectation.

When he was fourteen, Emerson entered Harvard. He was an indifferent student, especially weak at science and mathematics, but he read widely in philosophy and theology. The most significant events of his college career occurred during his junior year. He dropped the name Ralph, a gesture toward establishing his identity, and he began keeping a journal. Eventually reaching monumental proportions (the published version consists of fourteen volumes), that journal would be the source of Emerson’s lectures and essays for the rest of his life.

Emerson’s academic record at Harvard was so weak that upon graduation he failed to get a teaching post in the prestigious Boston Public Latin School. Instead, he took a teaching job at a school run by his uncle, and he prepared himself, with many doubts, for the Unitarian ministry. In 1826, he was licensed to preach. Three years later, at the age of twenty-six, he accepted a post at Boston’s Second Church, which had been Cotton Mather’s church a century before. That year, he married Ellen Tucker, a beautiful but fragile seventeen-year-old already in the early stages of tuberculosis, that curse of nineteenth-century life. Sixteen months later Ellen died.

Emerson’s grief coincided with a growing disbelief in some of the central doctrines of his religion. As a result, he distrusted his own vocation as a minister. In June of 1832, he shocked his congregation by resigning the ministry and setting off for an extended tour of Europe.

Long influenced by European thinkers, Emerson had read the work of German philosopher Immanuel Kant and admired the writings of British historian Thomas Carlyle, who was in Scotland thundering out calls for individual greatness and denouncing the evils of modern society. Emerson had also read the Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. From Kant he would adopt the term *transcendentalism*; from Coleridge he would take up the crucial distinction between logical thought and intuition, a poetic form of thought that enables us to see the correspondences between the physical world and spiritual reality. In Europe Emerson met and conversed with Coleridge and Wordsworth, and he visited Carlyle at his remote farmhouse.

When he returned to America in 1834, Emerson settled in Concord, Massachusetts, and soon married Lydia Jackson. He began to supplement his meager income by giving lectures. In fact, he found in the lectern “a second pulpit,” as he wrote Carlyle. After a short time, the major works by which we have come to know Emerson’s thought began to appear.

The announced subject of Emerson’s first series of lectures was the philosophy of history. Emerson’s view was distinctively American, in that he denied the importance of the past. “The ancients are dead,” he said in one of these early lectures, “but for us the earth
is new today and heaven is raining influences. Let us unfetter ourselves of our historical associations and find a pure standard in the idea of man.”

The last phrase points to Emerson’s focus on the nature of our humanity—a subject that really interested him more in these lectures than any philosophy of history. Individual men and women were part of this “idea of man” in the same way that individual souls were part of a larger entity, which Emerson would later call the “Over-Soul.”

The idea of nature corresponded to the idea of man—both were part of a universal whole. “There is in nature,” he wrote in the “Humanity of Science,” “a parallel unity, which corresponds to this unity in the mind, and makes it available.... Not only man puts things in a row, but things belong in a row.”

In 1836, there occurred three major events in Emerson’s life: the publication of Nature, the most complete exposition of his philosophy; the birth of his son Waldo, who would become the center of Emerson’s life; and the first meeting of a conversation group of like-minded thinkers in Emerson’s drawing room, which would come to be called “The Transcendental Club.”

Over the following years, Emerson’s influence as a lecturer and an intellectual leader continued to grow. In 1837, he excited his student audience at Harvard with the lecture now known as “The American Scholar.” Oliver Wendell Holmes called this speech “our intellectual Declaration of Independence.” In the speech, Emerson demanded that American scholars free themselves from the shackles of the past. “Our day of dependence,” Emerson declared, “our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close.” He reminded scholars of the importance of the present and of things that were apparently insignificant. Since all things are part of a larger whole, even the commonest matters could open a door to the eternal.

A year later, in 1838, he was invited back to Harvard by a small group of divinity students to speak to them on the eve of their graduation. His speech—“The Divinity School Address”—called for a rejection of institutional religion in favor of a personal relation with God. Religious truth, Emerson said, was “an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand.” Like the scholar’s books, the pulpit was for inspiration, not indoctrination. Emerson called upon the young divinity students before him to “cast behind ... all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with the Deity.” This lecture so outraged Harvard authorities (who seized on what they thought was its denial of the divinity of Christ) that three decades passed before Emerson was allowed to speak there again.

By this time, Emerson’s life had settled into a consistent pattern: an ever-widening series of lecture tours, punctuated by the publication of his lectures in essay form. Essays appeared in 1841; Essays: Second Series in 1844; Representative Men in 1850. There was something for everyone in his lectures and essays, but especially for the legions of people who were disappointed with the narrowing material or spiritual condition of their lives.
It was to these people, perhaps, that Emerson spoke most intensely. Concord became a kind of Mecca to a rising class of disaffected and truth-seeking young. They sought out Emerson as a kind of guru. But Emerson’s genius was such that he appealed to a broad spectrum of American society. Intellectuals responded to his philosophy, his ideas about the relations between humanity, nature, and God; the young responded to his hope, his declarations that they were on the verge of a great new age; while society at large responded to his optimism, his claims that all was really for the best.

That optimism was dealt a severe blow in 1842 when Emerson’s son Waldo died at the age of six from scarlet fever. Emerson was profoundly moved. By nature a rather cold, restrained man, he had found in Waldo someone to whom he could demonstrate his love directly and unaffectedly. At the child’s death, Emerson shrank back into an emotional shell from which he never reemerged. “How can I hope for a friend,” he wrote in his journal during his middle years, “who have never been one?”

In his later years, Emerson suffered from a severe loss of memory and had difficulty recalling the most ordinary words. This affliction resulted in his increasing public silence, and when he did appear in public, he read from notes. Near the end of his life, agreeing to such a performance, he remarked, “A queer occasion it will be—a lecturer who has no idea of what he is lecturing about, and an audience who don’t know what he can mean.”

In the autumn of 1881, Walt Whitman paid Emerson a visit of respect and was asked to dinner. In Whitman’s report of this “blessed evening with Emerson,” he wrote that Emerson “seated himself in his chair, a trifle pushed back, and, though a listener and apparently an alert one, remained silent through the whole talk and discussion. A lady friend [Louisa May Alcott] quietly took a seat next to him, to give special attention. A good color in his face, eyes clear, with the well-known expression of sweetness, and the old clear-peering aspect quite the same.” Six months later, Emerson was dead.

**From Emerson’s “Nature”**

In his introduction to the book *Nature*, Emerson offers a clue to the underlying purpose of his work when he encourages us, his contemporaries, to look directly at Nature:

“Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres 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 we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should we not have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?”
TO go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst 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 separate between him and what he touches. 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 envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are inacces-
sible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort 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 the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably 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 warranty-deeds give no title.

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 retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse 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 maugre all his impertinent 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 cordial of incredible virtue. 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. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity
reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents 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 more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. 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 deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

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 tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as 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 hath sadness in it. Then, there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.
SELF-RELIANCE

“Ne te quaesiveris extra.”

“Man is his own star; and the soul that can Render an honest and a perfect man, Commands 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

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.

ESSAY II : Self-Reliance

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 instil 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 the inmost in due time 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, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men 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 lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, 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 then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow 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 with shame our own opinion from another.

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

Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events. Great men have always done so, and confided themselves childlike to the genius of their age, betraying their perception that the absolutely trustworthy was seated at their heart, working through their hands, predominating in all their being. And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark.

What pretty oracles nature yields us on this text, in the face and behaviour of children, babes, and even brutes! That divided and rebel mind, that distrust of a sentiment because our arithmetic has computed the strength and means opposed to our purpose, these have not. 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 its own piquancy and charm, and made it enviable and gracious and its claims not to be put by, if it will stand by itself. Do not think the youth has no force, because he cannot speak to you and me. Hark! in the next room his voice is sufficiently clear and emphatic. It seems he knows how to speak to his contemporaries. Bashful or bold, then, he will know how to make us seniors very unnecessary.

The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner, and would disdain as much as a lord to do or say aught to conciliate one, is the healthy attitude of human nature. A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; 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 cumbers himself never 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 eclat, 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 neutrality! Who can thus avoid all pledges, and having observed, observe again from the same unaffected, unbiased, un bribable, unafrighted innocence, must always be formidable. He would utter opinions on all passing affairs, which being seen to be not private, but necessary, would sink like darts into the ear of men, and put them in fear.

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 in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves
not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal
palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness.
Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. 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 was wont to importune me with 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 that
or this; the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it.
A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition, as if every thing 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 assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his
last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, ‘Go love thy infant; love thy
wood-chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that 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 greeting,
but truth is handsomer than the affectation of love. 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 somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explana-
tion. 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 to-day, of my obligation to put all poor men in good
situations. Are they _my_ poor? 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 sots; 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.

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 char-
iety, 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 board. Their virtues are penances. I do not wish to expiate, but to live. My life is for itself and not for a spectacle. I much prefer that it should be of a lower strain, so it be 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. 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.

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 is your duty 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.

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 to detect the precise man you are. And, of course, so much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself. A man must consider what a blindman’s-buff is this game of conformity. 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 not possibly can he 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 know not where to begin to set them right. Meantime 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 a 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 wilfulness, grow tight about the outline of the face with the most disagreeable sensation.
For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure. And therefore a man must know how to estimate a sour face. The by-standers look askance on him in the public street or in the friend’s parlour. If this aversion had its origin in contempt and resistance like his own, he might well go home with a sad countenance; but the sour faces of the multitude, like their sweet faces, have no deep cause, but are put on and off as the wind blows and a newspaper directs. Yet is the discontent of the multitude more formidable than that of the senate and the college. It is easy enough for a firm man who knows the world to brook the rage of the cultivated classes. Their rage is decorous and prudent, for they are timid as being very vulnerable themselves. But when to their feminine 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 mow, it needs the habit of magnanimity and religion to treat it godlike as a trifle of no concernment.

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.

But why should you keep your head over your shoulder? Why drag about this corpse of your memory, lest you contradict somewhat 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. 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 his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee.

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

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 Andes and Himmaleh are insignificant in the curve of the sphere. Nor does it matter how you gauge and try 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 mean it not, and see it not. 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 emit a breath every moment.

There will be an agreement in whatever variety of actions, so they be each honest and natural in their hour. For of one will, the actions will be harmonious, however unlike they seem. These varieties are lost sight of 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. 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 appeals to the future. If I can be firm enough to-day 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. 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. They shed an united light on the advancing actor. He is attended as by a visible escort of angels. That is it which throws thunder into Chatham’s voice, and dignity into Washington’s port, and America into Adams’s eye. Honor is venerable to us because it is no ephemeris. It is always ancient virtue. We worship it to-day because it is not of to-day. 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.

I hope in these days we have heard the last of conformity and consistency. Let the words be gazetted and ridiculous henceforward. Instead of the gong for dinner, let us hear a whistle from the Spartan fife. Let us never bow and apologize more. 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 working wherever a man works; that a true man belongs to no other time or place, but is the centre of things. Where he is, there is nature. He measures you, and all men, and all events. Ordinarily, every body in society reminds us of somewhat else, or of some other person. Character, reality, reminds you of nothing else; it takes place of the whole creation. The man must be so much, that he must make all circumstances indifferent. Every true man is a cause, a country, and an age; requires infinite spaces and numbers and time fully to accomplish his design; -- and posterity seem to follow his steps as a train of clients. 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 the possible of man. An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man; as, Monachism, of the Hermit Antony; the Reformation, of Luther; Quakerism, of Fox; Methodism, of Wesley; Abolition, of Clarkson. Scipio, Milton called “the height of Rome”; and all history resolves itself very easily into the biography of a few stout and earnest persons.
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, a bastard, 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 have an alien and forbidding air, much like a gay equipage, and seem to say like that, '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 sot 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 sot, but now and then wakes up, exercises his reason, and finds himself a true prince.

Our reading is mendicant and sycophantic. In history, our imagination 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 to-day, as followed their public and renowned steps. When private men shall act with original views, the lustre will be transferred from the actions of kings to those of gentlemen.

The world has 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 suffered 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 comeliness, the right of every man.

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 star, without parallax, without calculable elements, which shoots a ray of beauty even into trivial and impure actions, if the least mark of independence appear? The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst 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 whence 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 of thought. Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth
man wisdom, and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. We lie in the lap
of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity.
When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow
a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that
causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm. Every
man discriminates between the voluntary acts of his mind, and his involuntary percep-
tions, and knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith 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. My wilful actions and acquisitions are but roving; -- the idliest reverie, the faint-
est native emotion, command my curiosity and respect. Thoughtless people contradict as
readily the statement of perceptions as 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 fatal. 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.

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 speaketh 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 centre of the present thought; and new date and new create the
whole. Whenever a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, 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 as much as another. All
things are dissolved to their centre by their cause, and, in the universal miracle, petty and
particular miracles disappear. If, therefore, a man claims to know and speak of God, and
carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another coun-
try, in another world, believe him not. Is the acorn better than the oak which is its fulness
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 authority 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 be any thing more than a cheerful apologue or parable
of my being and becoming.

Man is timid and apologetic; he is no longer upright; he dares 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 to-day. 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. 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.
This should be plain enough. Yet see what strong intellects dare not yet hear God himself, unless he speak 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 grandames 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. 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.

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, by what I can now nearest approach to say it, is this. When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed 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 example and experience. You take the way from man, not to man. All persons that ever existed are its forgotten ministers. Fear and hope are alike beneath it. There is somewhat low even in hope. In the hour of vision, there is nothing that can be called gratitude, nor properly joy. The soul raised over passion beholds identity and eternal causation, perceives the self-existence of Truth and Right, and calms itself with knowing that all things go well. Vast spaces of nature, the Atlantic Ocean, the South Sea, -- long intervals of time, years, centuries, -- are of no account. This which I think and feel underlay every former state of life and circumstances, as it does underlie my present, and what is called life, and what is called death.

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 for ever 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 agent. To talk of reliance is a poor external way of speaking. Speak rather of that which relies, because it works and is. Who has more obedience than I masters me, though he should not raise his finger. Round him I must revolve by the gravitation of spirits. 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, by the law of nature must overpower and ride all cities, nations, kings, rich men, poets, who are not.

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. Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms. All things real are so by so much virtue as they contain. Commerce, hus-
bandry, hunting, whaling, war, eloquence, personal weight, are somewhat, and engage
my respect as examples of its presence and impure action. I see the same law working
in nature for conservation and growth. Power is in nature the essential measure of right.
Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself. The genesis
and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the
strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the
self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul.

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 the invaders 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.

But now we are a mob. Man does not stand in awe of man, nor is his genius admon-
ished to stay at home, to put itself in communication with the internal ocean, but it goes
abroad to beg a cup of water of the urns of other men. We must go alone. I like the silent
church before the service begins, better than any preaching. How far off, how cool, how
chaste the persons look, begirt each one 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,
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.’ But keep thy state; come not into their
confusion. The power men possess to annoy me, I give them by a weak curiosity. No
man can come near me but through my act. “What we love that we have, but by desire
bereave ourselves of the love.”

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 after appearances hitherto.
Henceforward 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. I shall endeavour to
nourish my parents, to support my family, to be the chaste husband of one wife, -- but
these relations I must fill after a new and unprecedented way. I appeal from your cus-
toms. 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 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 inly 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 to-day? 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 their moments of reason, when they look out into
the region of absolute truth; then will they justify me, and do the same thing.

The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all stan-
dard, 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 shriven. You may fulfil 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, neighbour, 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. 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 any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its command-
ment one day.

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!

If any man consider 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
are 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 propor-
tion to their practical force, and do lean and beg day and night continually. Our house-
keeping is mendicant, our arts, our occupations, our marriages, our religion, we have not
chosen, but society has chosen for us. We are parlour soldiers. We shun the rugged battle
of fate, where strength is born.

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 col-
leges, 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 profes-
sion,’ for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a
hundred chances. Let a Stoic open 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.

It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance 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.

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 commodity, -- any thing 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 meanness and theft. 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 endeavours; Our valors are our best gods.”

Another sort of false prayers are our regrets. Discontent is the want of self-reliance: it is infirmity of will. Regret calamities, if you can thereby help the sufferer; if not, attend your own work, and already the evil begins to be repaired. Our sympathy is just as base. We come to them 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 their own reason. 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 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 disapprobation. The gods love him because men hated him. “To the persevering mortal,” said Zoroaster, “the blessed Immortals are swift.”

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 hindered 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 prove a mind of uncommon activity and power, a Locke, a Lavoisier, a Hutton, a Bentham, a Fourier, it imposes its classification on other men, and lo! a new system. In proportion 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 chiefly is this apparent in creeds and churches, which are also classifications of some powerful mind acting on the elemental thought of duty, and man’s relation to the Highest. Such is Calvinism, Quakerism, Swedenborgism. The pupil takes the same delight in subordinating every thing to the new terminology, as a girl who has just learned botany in seeing a new earth and new seasons thereby. It will happen for a time, that the pupil will find his intellectual power has grown by the study of 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 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 pinfold will be too strait 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.

2. It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Travelling, whose idols are Italy, England, Egypt, retains its fascination for all educated Americans. They who made England, Italy, or Greece venerable in the imagination did so by sticking fast where they were, like an axis of the earth. In manly hours, we feel that duty is our place. The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home, and when his necessities, his duties, on any occasion call him from his house, or into foreign lands, he is at home still, and shall make men sensible by the expression of his countenance, that he goes the missionary of wisdom and virtue, and visits cities and men like a sovereign, and not like an interloper or a valet.

I have no churlish objection to the circumnavigation of the globe, for the purposes of art, of study, and benevolence, so that the man is first domesticated, or does not go abroad with the hope of finding somewhat greater than he knows. He who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat 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.

Travelling is a fool’s paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. 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.
3. But the rage of travelling is a symptom of a deeper unsoundness affecting the whole intellectual action. The intellect is vagabond, and our 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 travelling of the mind? Our houses are built with foreign taste; our shelves are garnished with foreign ornaments; our opinions, our tastes, our faculties, lean, and follow the Past and the Distant. 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.

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 Shakspeare? 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. Shakspeare will never be made by the study of Shakspeare. Do that which is assigned you, and you cannot hope too much or dare too much. There is at this moment for you an utterance brave 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. Not possibly will the soul all rich, all eloquent, with thousand-cloven tongue, deign to repeat itself; but if you can hear what these patriarchs say, surely you can reply to them in the same pitch of voice; for the ear and the tongue are two organs of one nature. Abide in the simple and noble regions of thy life, obey thy heart, and thou shalt reproduce the Foreworld again.

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.

Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given, something is taken. Society acquires new arts, and loses old instincts. What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing 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 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 traveller tell us truly, strike the savage 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 to his grave.
The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of 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 note-books 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, 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?

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, three or four and twenty 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 his own man, and, in his turn, the founder of a sect. The arts and inventions of each period are only its costume, and do not invigorate men. The harm of the improved machinery may compensate its good. Hudson 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 celestial phenomena than any one 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 laudation a few years or centuries before. The great genius returns to essential man. 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.”

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 to-day, next year die, and their experience with them.

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 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, out of new respect for his nature. Especially he hates what he has, if he see that it is accidental, -- came to him.
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 living property, which does not wait the beck of rulers, or mobs, or revolu-
tions, or fire, or storm, or bankruptcies, but perpetually renews itself wherever the man
breathes. “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 concourse, 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. Not so, O friends!
will the God deign to enter and inhabit you, but by a method precisely the reverse. It is
only as a man puts off all foreign 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
inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him 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.

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 sit hereafter out of fear from her rotations. A political
victory, a rise of rents, the recovery of your sick, or the return of your absent friend, or
some other favorable event, raises your spirits, and you think good days are preparing for
you. Do not believe it. Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you
peace but the triumph of principles.
THE OVER-SOUL

“But souls that of his own good life partake,
He loves as his own self; dear as his eye
They are to Him: He’ll never them forsake:
When they shall die, then God himself shall die:
They live, they live in blest eternity.”

*Henry More*

Space is ample, east and west,
But two cannot go abreast,
Cannot travel in it two:
Yonder masterful cuckoo
Crowds every egg out of the nest,
Quick or dead, except its own;
A spell is laid on sod and stone,
Night and Day ‘ve been tampered with,
Every quality and pith
Surcharged and sultry with a power
That works its will on age and hour.

ESSAY IX The Over-Soul

There is a difference between one and another hour of life, in their authority and subsequent effect. Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual. Yet there is a depth in those brief moments which constrains us to ascribe more reality to them than to all other experiences. For this reason, the argument which is always forthcoming to silence those who conceive extraordinary hopes of man, namely, the appeal to experience, is for ever invalid and vain. We give up the past to the objector, and yet we hope. He must explain this hope. We grant that human life is mean; but how did we find out that it was mean? What is the ground of this uneasiness of ours; of this old discontent? What is the universal sense of want and ignorance, but the fine inuendo by which the soul makes its enormous claim? Why do men feel that the natural history of man has never been written, but he is always leaving behind what you have said of him, and it becomes old, and books of metaphysics worthless? The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. Man is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence. The most exact calculator has no prescience that somewhat incalculable may not balk the very next moment. I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.
As with events, so is it with thoughts. When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner; not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water; that I desire and look up, and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.

The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present, and the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart, of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that overpowering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character; and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand, and become wisdom, and virtue, and power, and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read, and by falling back on our better thoughts, by yielding to the spirit of prophecy which is innate in every man, we can know what it saith. Every man's words, who speaks from that life, must sound vain to those who do not dwell in the same thought on their own part. I dare not speak for it. My words do not carry its august sense; they fall short and cold. Only itself can inspire whom it will, and behold! their speech shall be lyrical, and sweet, and universal as the rising of the wind. Yet I desire, even by profane words, if I may not use sacred, to indicate the heaven of this deity, and to report what hints I have collected of the transcendent simplicity and energy of the Highest Law.

If we consider what happens in conversation, in reveries, in remorse, in times of passion, in surprises, in the instructions of dreams, wherein often we see ourselves in masquerade, — the droll disguises only magnifying and enhancing a real element, and forcing it on our distinct notice, — we shall catch many hints that will broaden and lighten into knowledge of the secret of nature. All goes to show that the soul in man is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will, but the master of the intellect and the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, — an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed. From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting
man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breathes through his intellect, it is genius; when it breathes through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affection, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins, when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins, when the individual would be something of himself. All reform aims, in some one particular, to let the soul have its way through us; in other words, to engage us to obey.

Of this pure nature every man is at some time sensible. Language cannot paint it with his colors. It is too subtile. It is undefinable, unmeasurable, but we know that it pervades and contains us. We know that all spiritual being is in man. A wise old proverb says, “God comes to see us without bell”; that is, as there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul where man, the effect, ceases, and God, the cause, begins. The walls are taken away. We lie open on one side to the deeps of spiritual nature, to the attributes of God. Justice we see and know, Love, Freedom, Power. These natures no man ever got above, but they tower over us, and most in the moment when our interests tempt us to wound them.

The sovereignty of this nature whereof we speak is made known by its independency of those limitations which circumscribe us on every hand. The soul circumscribes all things. As I have said, it contradicts all experience. In like manner it abolishes time and space. The influence of the senses has, in most men, overpowered the mind to that degree, that the walls of time and space have come to look real and insurmountable; and to speak with levity of these limits is, in the world, the sign of insanity. Yet time and space are but inverse measures of the force of the soul. The spirit sports with time, —

“Can crowd eternity into an hour,
Or stretch an hour to eternity.”

We are often made to feel that there is another youth and age than that which is measured from the year of our natural birth. Some thoughts always find us young, and keep us so. Such a thought is the love of the universal and eternal beauty. Every man parts from that contemplation with the feeling that it rather belongs to ages than to mortal life. The least activity of the intellectual powers redeems us in a degree from the conditions of time. In sickness, in languor, give us a strain of poetry, or a profound sentence, and we are refreshed; or produce a volume of Plato, or Shakspeare, or remind us of their names, and instantly we come into a feeling of longevity. See how the deep, divine thought reduces centuries, and millenniums, and makes itself present through all ages. Is the teaching of Christ less effective now than it was when first his mouth was opened? The emphasis of facts and persons in my thought has nothing to do with time. And so, always, the soul's scale is one; the scale of the senses and the understanding is another. Before the revelations of the soul, Time, Space, and Nature shrink away. In common speech, we refer all things to
time, as we habitually refer the immensely sundered stars to one concave sphere. And so we say that the Judgment is distant or near; that the Millennium approaches, that a day of certain political, moral, social reforms is at hand, and the like, when we mean, that, in the nature of things, one of the facts we contemplate is external and fugitive, and the other is permanent and connate with the soul. The things we now esteem fixed shall, one by one, detach themselves, like ripe fruit, from our experience, and fall. The wind shall blow them none knows whither. The landscape, the figures, Boston, London, are facts as fugitive as any institution past, or any whiff of mist or smoke, and so is society, and so is the world. The soul looketh steadily forwards, creating a world before her, leaving worlds behind her. She has no dates, nor rites, nor persons, nor specialties, nor men. The soul knows only the soul; the web of events is the flowing robe in which she is clothed.

After its own law and not by arithmetic is the rate of its progress to be computed. The soul's advances are not made by gradation, such as can be represented by motion in a straight line; but rather by ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis, — from the egg to the worm, from the worm to the fly. The growths of genius are of a certain total character, that does not advance the elect individual first over John, then Adam, then Richard, and give to each the pain of discovered inferiority, but by every throe of growth the man expands there where he works, passing, at each pulsation, classes, populations, of men. With each divine impulse the mind rends the thin rinds of the visible and finite, and comes out into eternity, and inspires and expires its air. It converses with truths that have always been spoken in the world, and becomes conscious of a closer sympathy with Zeno and Arrian, than with persons in the house.

This is the law of moral and of mental gain. The simple rise as by specific levity, not into a particular virtue, but into the region of all the virtues. They are in the spirit which contains them all. The soul requires purity, but purity is not it; requires justice, but justice is not that; requires beneficence, but is somewhat better; so that there is a kind of descent and accommodation felt when we leave speaking of moral nature, to urge a virtue which it enjoins. To the well-born child, all the virtues are natural, and not painfully acquired. Speak to his heart, and the man becomes suddenly virtuous.

Within the same sentiment is the germ of intellectual growth, which obeys the same law. Those who are capable of humility, of justice, of love, of aspiration, stand already on a platform that commands the sciences and arts, speech and poetry, action and grace. For whose dwells in this moral beatitude already anticipates those special powers which men prize so highly. The lover has no talent, no skill, which passes for quite nothing with his enamoured maiden, however little she may possess of related faculty; and the heart which abandons itself to the Supreme Mind finds itself related to all its works, and will travel a royal road to particular knowledges and powers. In ascending to this primary and aboriginal sentiment, we have come from our remote station on the circumference instantaneously to the centre
of the world, where, as in the closet of God, we see causes, and anticipate the universe, which is but a slow effect.

One mode of the divine teaching is the incarnation of the spirit in a form, — in forms, like my own. I live in society; with persons who answer to thoughts in my own mind, or express a certain obedience to the great instincts to which I live. I see its presence to them. I am certified of a common nature; and these other souls, these separated selves, draw me as nothing else can. They stir in me the new emotions we call passion; of love, hatred, fear, admiration, pity; thence comes conversation, competition, persuasion, cities, and war. Persons are supplementary to the primary teaching of the soul. In youth we are mad for persons. Childhood and youth see all the world in them. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all. Persons themselves acquaint us with the impersonal. In all conversation between two persons, tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God. And so in groups where debate is earnest, and especially on high questions, the company become aware that the thought rises to an equal level in all bosoms, that all have a spiritual property in what was said, as well as the sayer. They all become wiser than they were. It arches over them like a temple, this unity of thought, in which every heart beats with nobler sense of power and duty, and thinks and acts with unusual solemnity. All are conscious of attaining to a higher self-possession. It shines for all. There is a certain wisdom of humanity which is common to the greatest men with the lowest, and which our ordinary education often labors to silence and obstruct. The mind is one, and the best minds, who love truth for its own sake, think much less of property in truth. They accept it thankfully everywhere, and do not label or stamp it with any man’s name, for it is theirs long beforehand, and from eternity. The learned and the studious of thought have no monopoly of wisdom. Their violence of direction in some degree disqualifies them to think truly. We owe many valuable observations to people who are not very acute or profound, and who say the thing without effort, which we want and have long been hunting in vain. The action of the soul is oftener in that which is felt and left unsaid, than in that which is said in any conversation. It broods over every society, and they unconsciously seek for it in each other. We know better than we do. We do not yet possess ourselves, and we know at the same time that we are much more. I feel the same truth how often in my trivial conversation with my neighbours, that somewhat higher in each of us overlooks this by-play, and Jove nods to Jove from behind each of us.

Men descend to meet. In their habitual and mean service to the world, for which they forsake their native nobleness, they resemble those Arabian sheiks, who dwell in mean houses, and affect an external poverty, to escape the rapacity of the Pacha, and reserve all their display of wealth for their interior and guarded retirements.

As it is present in all persons, so it is in every period of life. It is adult already in the infant man. In my dealing with my child, my Latin and Greek, my accomplishments and my money stead me nothing; but as much soul as I have avails. If I am wilful, he
sets his will against mine, one for one, and leaves me, if I please, the degradation of
beating him by my superiority of strength. But if I renounce my will, and act for the
soul, setting that up as umpire between us two, out of his young eyes looks the same
soul; he reveres and loves with me.

The soul is the perceiver and revealer of truth. We know truth when we see it, let
skeptic and scoffer say what they choose. Foolish people ask you, when you have
spoken what they do not wish to hear, ‘How do you know it is truth, and not an er-
ror of your own?’ We know truth when we see it, from opinion, as we know when
we are awake that we are awake. It was a grand sentence of Emanuel Swedenborg,
which would alone indicate the greatness of that man’s perception, — “It is no proof
of a man’s understanding to be able to confirm whatever he pleases; but to be able
to discern that what is true is true, and that what is false is false, this is the mark
and character of intelligence.” In the book I read, the good thought returns to me,
as every truth will, the image of the whole soul. To the bad thought which I find in
it, the same soul becomes a discerning, separating sword, and lops it away. We are
wiser than we know. If we will not interfere with our thought, but will act entirely,
or see how the thing stands in God, we know the particular thing, and every thing,
and every man. For the Maker of all things and all persons stands behind us, and
casts his dread omniscience through us over things.

But beyond this recognition of its own in particular passages of the individual’s
experience, it also reveals truth. And here we should seek to reinforce ourselves by
its very presence, and to speak with a worthier, loftier strain of that advent. For the
soul’s communication of truth is the highest event in nature, since it then does not
give somewhat from itself, but it gives itself, or passes into and becomes that man
whom it enlightens; or, in proportion to that truth he receives, it takes him to itself.

We distinguish the announcements of the soul, its manifestations of its own na-
ture, by the term Revelation. These are always attended by the emotion of the sub-
lime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an
ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of the sea of life. Every distinct
apprehension of this central commandment agitates men with awe and delight. A
thrill passes through all men at the reception of new truth, or at the performance of
a great action, which comes out of the heart of nature. In these communications, the
power to see is not separated from the will to do, but the insight proceeds from obe-
dience, and the obedience proceeds from a joyful perception. Every moment when
the individual feels himself invaded by it is memorable. By the necessity of our con-
stitution, a certain enthusiasm attends the individual’s consciousness of that divine
presence. The character and duration of this enthusiasm varies with the state of
the individual, from an ecstasy and trance and prophetic inspiration, — which is
its rarer appearance, — to the faintest glow of virtuous emotion, in which form it
warms, like our household fires, all the families and associations of men, and makes
society possible. A certain tendency to insanity has always attended the opening
of the religious sense in men, as if they had been “blasted with excess of light.” The
trances of Socrates, the “union” of Plotinus, the vision of Porphyry, the conversion of
Paul, the aurora of Behmen, the convulsions of George Fox and his Quakers, the illumination of Swedenborg, are of this kind. What was in the case of these remarkable persons a ravishment has, in innumerable instances in common life, been exhibited in less striking manner. Everywhere the history of religion betrays a tendency to enthusiasm. The rapture of the Moravian and Quietist; the opening of the internal sense of the Word, in the language of the New Jerusalem Church; the revival of the Calvinistic churches; the experiences of the Methodists, are varying forms of that shudder of awe and delight with which the individual soul always mingles with the universal soul.

The nature of these revelations is the same; they are perceptions of the absolute law. They are solutions of the soul’s own questions. They do not answer the questions which the understanding asks. The soul answers never by words, but by the thing itself that is inquired after.

Revelation is the disclosure of the soul. The popular notion of a revelation is, that it is a telling of fortunes. In past oracles of the soul, the understanding seeks to find answers to sensual questions, and undertakes to tell from God how long men shall exist, what their hands shall do, and who shall be their company, adding names, and dates, and places. But we must pick no locks. We must check this low curiosity. An answer in words is delusive; it is really no answer to the questions you ask. Do not require a description of the countries towards which you sail. The description does not describe them to you, and to-morrow you arrive there, and know them by inhabiting them. Men ask concerning the immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven, the state of the sinner, and so forth. They even dream that Jesus has left replies to precisely these interrogatories. Never a moment did that sublime spirit speak in their patois. To truth, justice, love, the attributes of the soul, the idea of immutableness is essentially associated. Jesus, living in these moral sentiments, heedless of sensual fortunes, heeding only the manifestations of these, never made the separation of the idea of duration from the essence of these attributes, nor uttered a syllable concerning the duration of the soul. It was left to his disciples to sever duration from the moral elements, and to teach the immortality of the soul as a doctrine, and maintain it by evidences. The moment the doctrine of the immortality is separately taught, man is already fallen. In the flowing of love, in the adoration of humility, there is no question of continuance. No inspired man ever asks this question, or condescends to these evidences. For the soul is true to itself, and the man in whom it is shed abroad cannot wander from the present, which is infinite, to a future which would be finite.

These questions which we lust to ask about the future are a confession of sin. God has no answer for them. No answer in words can reply to a question of things. It is not in an arbitrary “decree of God,” but in the nature of man, that a veil shuts down on the facts of to-morrow; for the soul will not have us read any other cipher than that of cause and effect. By this veil, which curtains events, it instructs the children of men to live in to-day. The only mode of obtaining an answer to these questions of the senses is to forego all low curiosity, and, accepting the tide of being which
floats us into the secret of nature, work and live, work and live, and all unawares the advancing soul has built and forged for itself a new condition, and the question and the answer are one.

By the same fire, vital, consecrating, celestial, which burns until it shall dissolve all things into the waves and surges of an ocean of light, we see and know each other; and what spirit each is of. Who can tell the grounds of his knowledge of the character of the several individuals in his circle of friends? No man. Yet their acts and words do not disappoint him. In that man, though he knew no ill of him, he put no trust. In that other, though they had seldom met, authentic signs had yet passed, to signify that he might be trusted as one who had an interest in his own character. We know each other very well, — which of us has been just to himself, and whether that which we teach or behold is only an aspiration, or is our honest effort also.

We are all discerners of spirits. That diagnosis lies aloft in our life or unconscious power. The intercourse of society, — its trade, its religion, its friendships, its quarrels,— is one wide, judicial investigation of character. In full court, or in small committee, or confronted face to face, accuser and accused, men offer themselves to be judged. Against their will they exhibit those decisive trifles by which character is read. But who judges? and what? Not our understanding. We do not read them by learning or craft. No; the wisdom of the wise man consists herein, that he does not judge them; he lets them judge themselves, and merely reads and records their own verdict.

By virtue of this inevitable nature, private will is overpowered, and, maugre our efforts or our imperfections, your genius will speak from you, and mine from me. That which we are, we shall teach, not voluntarily, but involuntarily. Thoughts come into our minds by avenues which we never left open, and thoughts go out of our minds through avenues which we never voluntarily opened. Character teaches over our head. The infallible index of true progress is found in the tone the man takes. Neither his age, nor his breeding, nor company, nor books, nor actions, nor talents, nor all together, can hinder him from being deferential to a higher spirit than his own. If he have not found his home in God, his manners, his forms of speech, the turn of his sentences, the build, shall I say, of all his opinions, will involuntarily confess it, let him brave it out how he will. If he have found his centre, the Deity will shine through him, through all the disguises of ignorance, of ungenial temperament, of unfavorable circumstance. The tone of seeking is one, and the tone of having is another.

The great distinction between teachers sacred or literary, — between poets like Herbert, and poets like Pope, — between philosophers like Spinoza, Kant, and Coleridge, and philosophers like Locke, Paley, Mackintosh, and Stewart, — between men of the world, who are reckoned accomplished talkers, and here and there a fervent mystic, prophesying, half insane under the infinitude of his thought, — is, that one class speak from within, or from experience, as parties and possessors of the fact; and the other class, from without, as spectators merely, or perhaps as acquaint-
ed with the fact on the evidence of third persons. It is of no use to preach to me from without. I can do that too easily myself. Jesus speaks always from within, and in a degree that transcends all others. In that is the miracle. I believe beforehand that it ought so to be. All men stand continually in the expectation of the appearance of such a teacher. But if a man do not speak from within the veil, where the word is one with that it tells of, let him lowly confess it.

The same Omniscience flows into the intellect, and makes what we call genius. Much of the wisdom of the world is not wisdom, and the most illuminated class of men are no doubt superior to literary fame, and are not writers. Among the multitude of scholars and authors, we feel no hallowing presence; we are sensible of a knack and skill rather than of inspiration; they have a light, and know not whence it comes, and call it their own; their talent is some exaggerated faculty, some overgrown member; so that their strength is a disease. In these instances the intellectual gifts do not make the impression of virtue, but almost of vice; and we feel that a man's talents stand in the way of his advancement in truth. But genius is religious. It is a larger imbibing of the common heart. It is not anomalous, but more like, and not less like other men. There is, in all great poets, a wisdom of humanity which is superior to any talents they exercise. The author, the wit, the partisan, the fine gentleman, does not take place of the man. Humanity shines in Homer; in Chaucer; in Spenser; in Shakspeare, in Milton. They are content with truth. They use the positive degree. They seem frigid and phlegmatic to those who have been spiced with the frantic passion and violent coloring of inferior, but popular writers. For they are poets by the free course which they allow to the informing soul, which through their eyes beholds again, and blesses the things which it hath made. The soul is superior to its knowledge; wiser than any of its works. The great poet makes us feel our own wealth, and then we think less of his compositions. His best communication to our mind is to teach us to despise all he has done. Shakspeare carries us to such a lofty strain of intelligent activity, as to suggest a wealth which beggars his own; and we then feel that the splendid works which he has created, and which in other hours we extol as a sort of self-existent poetry, take no stronger hold of real nature than the shadow of a passing traveller on the rock. The inspiration which uttered itself in Hamlet and Lear could utter things as good from day to day, for ever. Why, then, should I make account of Hamlet and Lear, as if we had not the soul from which they fell as syllables from the tongue?

This energy does not descend into individual life on any other condition than entire possession. It comes to the lowly and simple; it comes to whomsoever will put off what is foreign and proud; it comes as insight; it comes as serenity and grandeur. When we see those whom it inhabits, we are apprized of new degrees of greatness. From that inspiration the man comes back with a changed tone. He does not talk with men with an eye to their opinion. He tries them. It requires of us to be plain and true. The vain traveller attempts to embellish his life by quoting my lord, and the prince, and the countess, who thus said or did to him. The ambitious vulgar show you their spoons, and brooches, and rings, and preserve their cards and com-
pliments. The more cultivated, in their account of their own experience, cull out the pleasing, poetic circumstance, — the visit to Rome, the man of genius they saw, the brilliant friend they know; still further on, perhaps, the gorgeous landscape, the mountain lights, the mountain thoughts, they enjoyed yesterday, — and so seek to throw a romantic color over their life. But the soul that ascends to worship the great God is plain and true; has no rose-color, no fine friends, no chivalry, no adventures; does not want admiration; dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience of the common day, — by reason of the present moment and the mere trifle having become porous to thought, and bibulous of the sea of light.

Converse with a mind that is grandly simple, and literature looks like word-catching. The simplest utterances are worthiest to be written, yet are they so cheap, and so things of course, that, in the infinite riches of the soul, it is like gathering a few pebbles off the ground, or bottling a little air in a phial, when the whole earth and the whole atmosphere are ours. Nothing can pass there, or make you one of the circle, but the casting aside your trappings, and dealing man to man in naked truth, plain confession, and omniscient affirmation.

Souls such as these treat you as gods would; walk as gods in the earth, accepting without any admiration your wit, your bounty, your virtue even, — say rather your act of duty, for your virtue they own as their proper blood, royal as themselves, and over-royal, and the father of the gods. But what rebuke their plain fraternal bearing casts on the mutual flattery with which authors solace each other and wound themselves! These flatter not. I do not wonder that these men go to see Cromwell, and Christina, and Charles the Second, and James the First, and the Grand Turk. For they are, in their own elevation, the fellows of kings, and must feel the servile tone of conversation in the world. They must always be a godsend to princes, for they confront them, a king to a king, without ducking or concession, and give a high nature the refreshment and satisfaction of resistance, of plain humanity, of even companionship, and of new ideas. They leave them wiser and superior men. Souls like these make us feel that sincerity is more excellent than flattery. Deal so plainly with man and woman, as to constrain the utmost sincerity, and destroy all hope of trifling with you. It is the highest compliment you can pay. Their “highest praising,” said Milton, “is not flattery, and their plainest advice is a kind of praising.”

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment. How dear, how soothing to man, arises the idea of God, peopling the lonely place, effacing the scars of our mistakes and disappointments! When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence. It is the doubling of the heart itself, nay, the infinite enlargement of the heart with a power of growth to a new infinity on every side. It inspires in man an infallible trust. He has not the conviction, but the sight, that the best is the true, and may in that thought easily dismiss all particular uncertainties and fears, and adjourn to the sure revelation of time, the solution of his private riddles. He is
sure that his welfare is dear to the heart of being. In the presence of law to his mind, he is overflowed with a reliance so universal, that it sweeps away all cherished hopes and the most stable projects of mortal condition in its flood. He believes that he cannot escape from his good. The things that are really for thee gravitate to thee. You are running to seek your friend. Let your feet run, but your mind need not. If you do not find him, will you not acquiesce that it is best you should not find him? for there is a power, which, as it is in you, is in him also, and could therefore very well bring you together; if it were for the best. You are preparing with eagerness to go and render a service to which your talent and your taste invite you, the love of men and the hope of fame. Has it not occurred to you, that you have no right to go, unless you are equally willing to be prevented from going? O, believe, as thou livest, that every sound that is spoken over the round world, which thou oughtest to hear, will vibrate on thine ear! Every proverb, every book, every byword that belongs to thee for aid or comfort, shall surely come home through open or winding passages. Every friend whom not thy fantastic will, but the great and tender heart in thee craveth, shall lock thee in his embrace. And this, because the heart in thee is the heart of all; not a valve, not a wall, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and, truly seen, its tide is one.

Let man, then, learn the revelation of all nature and all thought to his heart; this, namely; that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there. But if he would know what the great God speaketh, he must ‘go into his closet and shut the door,’ as Jesus said. God will not make himself manifest to cowards. He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men’s devotion. Even their prayers are hurtful to him, until he have made his own. Our religion vulgarly stands on numbers of believers. Whenever the appeal is made — no matter how indirectly — to numbers, proclamation is then and there made, that religion is not. He that finds God a sweet, enveloping thought to him never counts his company. When I sit in that presence, who shall dare to come in? When I rest in perfect humility, when I burn with pure love, what can Calvin or Swedenborg say?

It makes no difference whether the appeal is to numbers or to one. The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul. The position men have given to Jesus, now for many centuries of history, is a position of authority. It characterizes themselves. It cannot alter the eternal facts. Great is the soul, and plain. It is no flatterer, it is no follower; it never appeals from itself. It believes in itself. Before the immense possibilities of man, all mere experience, all past biography, however spotless and sainted, shrinks away. Before that heaven which our presentiments foreshow us, we cannot easily praise any form of life we have seen or read of. We not only affirm that we have few great men, but, absolutely speaking, that we have none; that we have no history, no record of any character or mode of living, that entirely contents us. The saints and demigods whom history worships we are constrained to accept with a
grain of allowance. Though in our lonely hours we draw a new strength out of their memory, yet, pressed on our attention, as they are by the thoughtless and customary, they fatigue and invade. The soul gives itself, alone, original, and pure, to the Lonely, Original, and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads, and speaks through it. Then is it glad, young, and nimble. It is not wise, but it sees through all things. It is not called religious, but it is innocent. It calls the light its own, and feels that the grass grows and the stone falls by a law inferior to, and dependent on, its nature. Behold, it saith, I am born into the great, the universal mind. I, the imperfect, adore my own Perfect. I am somehow receptive of the great soul, and thereby I do overlook the sun and the stars, and feel them to be the fair accidents and effects which change and pass. More and more the surges of everlasting nature enter into me, and I become public and human in my regards and actions. So come I to live in thoughts, and act with energies, which are immortal. Thus revering the soul, and learning, as the ancient said, that “its beauty is immense,” man will come to see that the world is the perennial miracle which the soul worketh, and be less astonished at particular wonders; he will learn that there is no profane history; that all history is sacred; that the universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time. He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity. He will cease from what is base and frivolous in his life, and be content with all places and with any service he can render. He will calmly front the morrow in the negligency of that trust which carries God with it, and so hath already the whole future in the bottom of the heart.
Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

On July 4, 1845 (the date was deliberately chosen), a young man ended a three-year stay at the house of a friend and moved to a cabin on the shores of Walden Pond in Massachusetts. He was twenty-eight years old and, to all appearances, a failure. He had lasted only two weeks as a schoolteacher (he refused to whip a child, then a mandatory form of punishment); his public lectures had been uninspiring; the woman to whom he had proposed marriage had turned him down; he had little interest in the family business. Despite his impressive Harvard education, he had not realized his literary ambitions.

The pattern of his life had been, and would continue to be, precisely the opposite of the great American success story of the self-made man. If ever a person looked like a self-unmade man, a man who had squandered the advantages of intelligence, education, and the friendship of brilliant and successful people, it was Henry David Thoreau. On top of all his other problems, Thoreau was difficult to get along with. He was admired, but from a distance, for he kept people at a distance. Three days before Thoreau went to Walden, Hawthorne wrote to a New York publisher that Thoreau was “tedious, tiresome, and intolerable.” And yet, Hawthorne added, “he has great qualities of intellect and character.”

Even his closest friends had doubts about Thoreau. “He seemed born for great enterprise and for command,” Emerson said years later at Thoreau’s funeral, “and I so much regret the loss of his rare powers of action, that I cannot help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting [lacking] this, instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry party.”

What Emerson failed to see, and what Thoreau knew (or at least hoped) all along, was that by leading a berry-picking party on a jaunt in the woods he could “engineer for all America” in the most profound way. This paradox is at the center of Thoreau’s life and work.

He was born David Henry Thoreau in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1817. (He changed the order of his names after graduating from college.) His father was a moderately successful manufacturer of pencils. His mother took in boarders, among them the sister of Emerson’s wife, thus establishing the relationship between the two families. As a boy, Thoreau tramped the woods and fields around Concord, often with a fishing rod, seldom with a gun. No one knew Concord as well as he did, and his attachment to this region was established early in his life.

Thoreau entered Harvard in 1833 and graduated four years later (without any literary distinction). Independent and eccentric even then, he attended chapel in a green coat, “because,” he wrote, “the rules required black.” He never ranked higher than the middle of his class, but he was extremely well read. At Harvard, mostly on his own, he became thoroughly familiar with English literature and with the German philosophers who provided much of the underpinnings of transcendentalism.
After graduation, Thoreau went to New York, but he pined after his hometown. (“Am I not made of Concord dust?” he wrote to Emerson’s wife.) After a year of struggling, he gave up and came home. Thoreau appeared to be floundering. But, in fact, he knew what he was doing; at least he knew that internally he was heading in the right direction, even if his external navigation looked aimless. A friend proposed that Henry and he sail to Europe and work their way across the continent, but Henry turned him down emphatically:

I have been surprised when one has with confidence proposed to me, a grown man, to em- bark in some enterprise of his, as if I had absolutely nothing to do, my life having been a complete failure hitherto. What a doubtful compliment this to pay me! As if he had met me halfway across the ocean beating up against the wind, but bound nowhere, and proposed to me to go along with him! ... No, no! I am not without employment at this stage of the voyage. To tell the truth, I saw an advertisement for able-bodied seamen, when I was a boy, sauntering in my native port, and as soon as I came of age I embarked.

That last sentence, in what would become Thoreau’s typically metaphoric style, expressed the real truth: Thoreau knew where he was going. His voyage would be inward, and it would depart from Walden Pond, where Emerson had offered him the use of some land.

The experiment at Walden Pond was an attempt to rediscover the grandeur and heroism inherent in a simple life led close to Nature. The fact that Thoreau’s cabin was only two miles from town— that he had really only set himself up in the suburbs of Concord, to which he commuted almost daily—was not really the point. Walden offered a focus for his contemplative urge. “I wish to meet the facts of life,” he wrote in his journal, “the vital facts, which the phenomena or actuality the gods meant to show us … and so I came down here.”

This private confrontation was to Thoreau’s mind the truly heroic enterprise of his time, “I am glad to remember as I sit by my door tonight,” he wrote on the evening of July 7, “that I too am at least a remote descendant of that heroic race of men of whom there is a tradition. I too sit here on the shore of my Ithaca, a fellow wanderer and survivor of ‘Ulysses.’ Again and again in Walden, Thoreau would return to these same images drawn from the Greek and Latin epics, asserting the essential brotherhood between the adventurers of the mythic past and the truth-seeking voyager of present.

“The mass of men—” as one of the most famous sentences in Walden puts it—“lead lives of quiet desperation.” When he looked toward town, Thoreau saw his prosperous fellow citizens so caught up in the material pursuits of making a living that they had become one-dimensional. When he looked along the site of the Fitchburg railway under construction within view of his cabin, he saw Irish railway workers in shanties living desperately poor lives, materially and spiritually. He hoped to wake them all up and show them that the heroic enterprise of confronting the “vital facts of life” lay literally in their own back yards.
Walden--one of the greatest works ever produced in America--owes much of its artistic success to Thoreau’s successful blending of style and content. He looked to Nature, rather than to the stylists of the past, for a model. His style would be simple--at least on the surface. “Nature never indulges in exclamations,” he wrote, “never says ah! or alas! She is not French. She is a plain writer, uses few gestures, does not add to her verbs, uses few adverbs, no expletives.”

For Thoreau, as for Emerson and the Romantics who had preceded them, Nature itself was a form of language; behind its outward appearance, Nature contained spiritual reality. Nature spoke to us, if we could but understand the messages about those “vital facts” which “the gods meant to show us.” A style that imitated Nature would also speak fundamental truths. Thoreau wished to write sentences “which lie like boulders on the page, up and down or across, which contain the seed of other sentences, not mere repetition, but creation; which a man might sell his grounds and castles to build.”

Such a style rewards careful reading. Its paradoxes are not mere playfulness, but point to what Thoreau sees as a higher truth. A phrase like “I have traveled a good deal in Concord” contains in its apparent paradox the seeds of much of the book.

It was while he was at Walden that Thoreau’s other famous act took place. As a protest against the Mexican War, which he and many others saw as an attempt to extend American slave-owning territory, Thoreau refused to pay his poll tax. He then spent a night in jail before someone paid the tax for him. Thoreau was vocally and radically opposed to slavery. While at Walden, and again in 1851 (after the Fugitive Slave Act had been passed), he helped fugitive slaves make their way to Canada. Near the end of his life, in 1859, he was one of the first defenders of John Brown, the radical abolitionist who staged a famous raid on the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in Virginia.

Thoreau remained at Walden for a little more than two years. In 1847, he left the cabin and moved back into the Emerson’s house, where he had received room and board before, in exchange for a few hours a day of odd jobs and gardening. During the next few years, he worked on Walden and “Resistance to Civil Government,” which was delivered as a lecture in 1848 and published in 1849. Later called “Civil Disobedience,” this essay asserted the primacy of the individual conscience and the need for action in keeping with that conscience. It had little immediate influence, but few essays have had such an overwhelming, long-range effect on human history. It was especially important in helping to inspire the form of passive resistance used by Mahatma Gandhi in India and, later, by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States.

Thoreau moved back into his father’s house in 1849 and lived there the rest of his life. He supported himself by making pencils, taking odd jobs— he was an excellent carpenter, mason, and gardener— and doing survey work on the land around Concord that he knew so well. He became a kind of Concord recordkeeper, a fount
of local knowledge about the amount of rainfall and snowfall and the first days of frost. He could predict to the day when each wildflower in the area would bloom.

*Walden* was published in 1854 and was well enough received to expand Thoreau’s reputation. His most widely read works, though, were his antislavery tract, “Slavery in Massachusetts,” and “A Plea for Captain John Brown” (1860).

In 1861, Thoreau caught a cold, and it soon became clear that beneath the cold lay incurable tuberculosis. He traveled that year to the Midwest in hopes that the change of air would help, but it did not. When he returned to Concord, he began working feverishly to put his work in final shape. He faced his coming death with great calm. The town constable, Sam Staples (who had jailed him for refusing to pay his poll tax), told Emerson that he “never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace.”

“Henry, have you made your peace with God?” his aunt is said to have asked him toward his end. “Why, Aunt,” he replied, “I didn’t know we had ever quarreled.”

**Excerpts from *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854)**

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”

*Walden*, Thoreau’s masterpiece, is part personal declaration of independence, social experiment, voyage of spiritual discovery, satire, and manual for self reliance.

Published in 1854, it details Thoreau’s experiences over the course of two years in a cabin he built near Walden Pond, amidst woodland owned by his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, near Concord, Massachusetts.

Thoreau did not intend to live as a hermit, for he received visitors regularly, and returned their visits. Rather, he hoped to isolate himself from society to gain a more objective understanding of it. Simple living and self-sufficiency were Thoreau’s other goals, and the whole project was inspired by transcendentalist philosophy, a central theme of the American Romantic Period. As Thoreau made clear in his book, his cabin was not in wilderness but at the edge of town, about two miles (3 km) from his family home.
Our anthology includes the chapters titled “Economy,” “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” “Solitude,” “The Bean Field,” “Brute Neighbors,” and “Conclusion.” Below is a synopsis of the full text.

Synopsis

**Economy:** In this first and longest chapter, Thoreau outlines his project: a two-year, two-month, and two-day stay at a cozy, “tightly shingled and plastered,” English-style 10' × 15' cottage in the woods near Walden Pond. He does this, he says, to illustrate the spiritual benefits of a simplified lifestyle. He easily supplies the four necessities of life (food, shelter, clothing, and fuel) with the help of family and friends, particularly his mother, his best friend, and Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Waldo Emerson. The latter provided Thoreau with a work exchange – he could build a small house and plant a garden if he cleared some land on the woodlot and did other chores while there. Thoreau meticulously records his expenditures and earnings, demonstrating his understanding of “economy,” as he builds his house and buys and grows food. For a home and freedom, he spent a mere $28.12½, in 1845. At the end of this chapter, Thoreau inserts a poem, “The Pretensions of Poverty,” by seventeenth-century English poet Thomas Carew. The poem criticizes those who think that their poverty gives them unearned moral and intellectual superiority.

**Where I Lived, and What I Lived For:** After playing with the idea of buying a farm, Thoreau describes his house’s location. Then he explains that he took up his abode at Walden Woods so as to “live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” Although he criticizes the dedication of his neighbors to working, he himself is quite busy at Walden – building and maintaining his house, raising thousands of bean plants and other vegetables, making bread, clearing land, chopping wood, making repairs for the Emersons, going into town, and writing every day. His time at Walden was his most productive as a writer.

**Reading:** Thoreau discusses the benefits of classical literature (preferably in the original Greek or Latin), and bemoans the lack of sophistication in Concord, evident in the popularity of unsophisticated literature. He also loved to read books by world travelers. He yearns for a utopian time when each New England village supports “wise men” to educate and thereby ennoble the population.

**Sounds:** Thoreau opens this chapter by warning against relying too much on literature as a means of transcendence. Instead, one should experience life for oneself. Thus, after describing his house’s beautiful natural surroundings and his casual housekeeping habits, Thoreau goes on to criticize the train whistle that interrupts his reverie. To him, the railroad symbolizes the destruction of the pastoral way of life. Following is a description of the sounds audible from his cabin: the church bells
ringing, carriages rattling and rumbling, cows lowing, whip-poor-wills singing,
owls hooting, frogs croaking, and cockerels crowing.

**Solitude:** Thoreau rhapsodizes about the beneficial effects of living solitary and close to nature. He claims to love being alone, saying “I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.”

**Visitors:** Thoreau writes about the visitors to his house. Among the 25 or 30 visitors is a young French-Canadian woodchopper, Alec Therien, whom Thoreau idealizes as approaching the ideal man, and a runaway slave, whom Thoreau helps on his journey to freedom in Canada.

**The Bean-Field:** Thoreau relates his efforts to cultivate 2.5 acres (10,000 m²) of beans. He plants in June and spends his summer mornings weeding the field with a hoe. He sells most of the crop, and his small profit of $8.71 covers his needs that were not provided by friends and family.

**The Village:** Thoreau visits the small town of Concord every day or two to hear the news, which he finds “as refreshing in its way as the rustle of the leaves.” Nevertheless, he fondly but rather contemptuously compares Concord to a gopher colony. In late summer, he is arrested for refusing to pay federal taxes, but is released the next day. He explains that he refuses to pay taxes to a government that supports slavery.

**The Ponds:** In autumn, Thoreau discusses the countryside and writes down his observations about the geography of Walden Pond and its neighbors: Flint’s Pond (or Sandy Pond), White Pond, and Goose Pond. Although Flint’s is the largest, Thoreau’s favorites are Walden and White ponds, which he describes as lovelier than diamonds.

**Baker Farm:** While on an afternoon ramble in the woods, Thoreau gets caught in a rainstorm and takes shelter in the dirty, dismal hut of John Field, a penniless but hard-working Irish farmhand, and his wife and children. Thoreau urges Field to live a simple but independent and fulfilling life in the woods, thereby freeing himself of employers and creditors. But the Irishman won’t give up his aspirations of luxury and the quest for the American dream.

**Higher Laws:** Thoreau discusses whether hunting wild animals and eating meat is good. He concludes that the primitive, animal side of humans drives them to kill and eat animals, and that a person who transcends this propensity is superior to those who don’t. (Thoreau eats fish and occasionally salt pork and woodchuck.) In addition to vegetarianism, he lauds chastity, work, and teetotalism. He also recognizes that Indians need to hunt and kill moose for survival in “The Maine Woods,” and ate moose on a trip to Maine while he was living at Walden. Here is a list of the laws that he mentions:
• One must love that of the wild just as much as one loves that of the good.
• What men already know instinctively is true humanity.
• The hunter is the greatest friend of the animal which is hunted.
• No human older than an adolescent would wantonly murder any creature which reveres its own life as much as the killer.
• If the day and the night make one joyful, one is successful.
• The highest form of self-restraint is when one can subsist not on other animals, but of plants and crops cultivated from the earth.

**Brute Neighbors:** Thoreau briefly discusses the many wild animals that are his neighbors at Walden. A description of the nesting habits of partridges is followed by a fascinating account of a massive battle between red and black ants. Three of the combatants he takes into his cabin and examines under a microscope as the black ant kills the two smaller red ones. Later, Thoreau takes his boat and tries to follow a teasing loon about the pond. He also collects animal specimens and ships them to Harvard College for study.

**House-Warming:** After picking November berries in the woods, Thoreau adds a chimney, and finally plasters the walls of his sturdy house to stave off the cold of the oncoming winter. He also lays in a good supply of firewood, and expresses affection for wood and fire.

**Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors:** Thoreau relates the stories of people who formerly lived in the vicinity of Walden Pond. Then he talks about a few of the visitors he receives during the winter: a farmer, a woodchopper, and his best friend, the poet Ellery Channing.

**Winter Animals:** Thoreau amuses himself by watching wildlife during the winter. He relates his observations of owls, hares, red squirrels, mice, and various birds as they hunt, sing, and eat the scraps and corn he put out for them. He also describes a fox hunt that passes by.

**The Pond in Winter:** Thoreau describes Walden Pond as it appears during the winter. He claims to have sounded its depths and located an underground outlet. Then he recounts how 100 laborers came to cut great blocks of ice from the pond, the ice to be shipped to the Carolinas.

**Spring:** As spring arrives, Walden and the other ponds melt with stentorian thundering and rumbling. Thoreau enjoys watching the thaw, and grows ecstatic as he witnesses the green rebirth of nature. He watches the geese winging their way north, and a hawk playing by itself in the sky. As nature is reborn, the narrator implies, so is he. He departs Walden on September 6, 1847.

**Conclusion:** This final chapter is more passionate and urgent than its predecessors. In it, he criticizes conformity: "If a man does not keep pace with his compan-
ions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.” By doing so, men may find happiness and self-fulfillment. “I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.”

(adapted from Wikipedia)
ECONOMY

WHEN I WROTE the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again.

I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent, but, considering the circumstances, very natural and pertinent. Some have asked what I got to eat; if I did not feel lonesome; if I was not afraid; and the like. Others have been curious to learn what portion of my income I devoted to charitable purposes; and some, who have large families, how many poor children I maintained. I will therefore ask those of my readers who feel no particular interest in me to pardon me if I undertake to answer some of these questions in this book. In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were anybody else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. Moreover, I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life, and not merely what he has heard of other men's lives; some such account as he would send to his kindred from a distant land; for if he has lived sincerely, it must have been in a distant land to me. Perhaps these pages are more particularly addressed to poor students. As for the rest of my readers, they will accept such portions as apply to them. I trust that none will stretch the seams in putting on the coat, for it may do good service to him whom it fits.

I would fain say something, not so much concerning the Chinese and Sandwich Islanders as you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England; something about your condition, especially your outward condition or circumstances in this world, in this town, what it is, whether it is necessary that it be as bad as it is, whether it cannot be improved as well as not. I have travelled a good deal in Concord; and everywhere, in shops, and offices, and fields, the inhabitants have appeared to me to be doing penance in a thousand remarkable ways. What I have heard of Bramins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their heads downward, over flames; or looking at the heavens over their shoulders “until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach”; or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the tops of pillars- even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. The twelve labors
of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbors have undertaken; for they were only twelve, and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor. They have no friend Iolaus to burn with a hot iron the root of the hydra’s head, but as soon as one head is crushed, two spring up.

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. Better if they had been born in the open pasture and suckled by a wolf, that they might have seen with clearer eyes what field they were called to labor in. Who made them serfs of the soil? Why should they eat their sixty acres, when man is condemned to eat only his peck of dirt? Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? They have got to live a man’s life, pushing all these things before them, and get on as well as they can. How many a poor immortal soul have I met well-nigh crushed and smothered under its load, creeping down the road of life, pushing before it a barn seventy-five feet by forty, its Augean stables never cleansed, and one hundred acres of land, tillage, mowing, pasture, and woodlot! The portionless, who struggle with no such unnecessary inherited encumbrances, find it labor enough to subdue and cultivate a few cubic feet of flesh.

But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool’s life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before. It is said that Deucalion and Pyrrha created men by throwing stones over their heads behind them:

Inde genus durum sumus, experiensque laborum, Et documenta damus qua simus origine nati.

Or, as Raleigh rhymes it in his sonorous way,

“From thence our kind hard-hearted is, enduring pain and care, Approving that our bodies of a stony nature are.”

So much for a blind obedience to a blundering oracle, throwing the stones over their heads behind them, and not seeing where they fell.

Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them. Their fingers, from excessive toil, are too clumsy and tremble too much for that. Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labor would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. How can he remember well his ignorance— which his growth requires— who has so often to use his knowledge? We should feed and clothe him gratuitously sometimes, and recruit him with our cordials, before we judge of
him. The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling. Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another thus tenderly.

Some of you, we all know, are poor; find it hard to live, are sometimes, as it were, gasping for breath. I have no doubt that some of you who read this book are unable to pay for all the dinners which you have actually eaten, or for the coats and shoes which are fast wearing or are already worn out, and have come to this page to spend borrowed or stolen time, robbing your creditors of an hour. It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live, for my sight has been whetted by experience; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough, called by the Latins aes alienum, another’s brass, for some of their coins were made of brass; still living, and dying, and buried by this other’s brass; always promising to pay, promising to pay, tomorrow, and dying today, insolvent; seeking to curry favor; to get custom, by how many modes, only not state-prison offences; lying, flattering, voting, contracting yourselves into a nutshell of civility or dilating into an atmosphere of thin and vaporous generosity, that you may persuade your neighbor to let you make his shoes, or his hat, or his coat, or his carriage, or import his groceries for him; making yourselves sick, that you may lay up something against a sick day, something to be tucked away in an old chest, or in a stocking behind the plastering, or, more safely, in the brick bank; no matter where, no matter how much or how little.

I sometimes wonder that we can be so frivolous, I may almost say, as to attend to the gross but somewhat foreign form of servitude called Negro Slavery, there are so many keen and subtle masters that enslave both North and South. It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself. Talk of a divinity in man! Look at the teamster on the highway, wending to market by day or night; does any divinity stir within him? His highest duty to fodder and water his horses! What is his destiny to him compared with the shipping interests? Does not he drive for Squire Make-a-stir? How godlike, how immortal, is he? See how he cowers and sneaks, how vaguely all the day he fears, not being immortal nor divine, but the slave and prisoner of his own opinion of himself, a fame won by his own deeds. Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate. Self-emancipation even in the West Indian provinces of the fancy and imagination- what Wilberforce is there to bring that about? Think, also, of the ladies of the land weaving toilet cushions against the last day, not to betray too green an interest in their fates! As if you could kill time without injuring eternity.

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and
amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessaries and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left. But alert and healthy natures remember that the sun rose clear. It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true today may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion, which some had trusted for a cloud that would sprinkle fertilizing rain on their fields. What old people say you cannot do, you try and find that you can. Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new. Old people did not know enough once, perchance, to fetch fresh fuel to keep the fire a-going; new people put a little dry wood under a pot, and are whirled round the globe with the speed of birds, in a way to kill old people, as the phrase is. Age is no better; hardly so well, qualified for an instructor as youth, for it has not profited so much as it has lost. One may almost doubt if the wisest man has learned anything of absolute value by living. Practically, the old have no very important advice to give the young, their own experience has been so partial, and their lives have been such miserable failures, for private reasons, as they must believe; and it may be that they have some faith left which belies that experience, and they are only less young than they were. I have lived some thirty years on this planet, and I have yet to hear the first syllable of valuable or even earnest advice from my seniors. They have told me nothing, and probably cannot tell me anything to the purpose. Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untired by me; but it does not avail me that they have tried it. If I have any experience which I think valuable, I am sure to reflect that this my Mentors said nothing about.

One farmer says to me, “You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with”; and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of bones; walking all the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plow along in spite of every obstacle. Some things are really necessaries of life in some circles, the most helpless and diseased, which in others are luxuries merely, and in others still are entirely unknown.

The whole ground of human life seems to some to have been gone over by their predecessors, both the heights and the valleys, and all things to have been cared for. According to Evelyn, “the wise Solomon prescribed ordinances for the very distances of trees; and the Roman praetors have decided how often you may go into your neighbor’s land to gather the acorns which fall on it without trespass, and what share belongs to that neighbor.” Hippocrates has even left directions how we should cut our nails; that is, even with the ends of the fingers, neither shorter nor longer. Undoubtedly the very tedium and ennui which presume to have exhausted the variety and the joys of life are as old as Adam. But man’s capacities have never...
been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. Whatever have been thy failures hitherto, “be not afflicted, my child, for who shall assign to thee what thou hast left undone?”

We might try our lives by a thousand simple tests; as, for instance, that the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours. If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology!- I know of no reading of another’s experience so startling and informing as this would be.

The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well? You may say the wisest thing you can, old man- you who have lived seventy years, not without honor of a kind- I hear an irresistible voice which invites me away from all that. One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels.

I think that we may safely trust a good deal more than we do. We may waive just so much care of ourselves as we honestly bestow elsewhere. Nature is as well adapted to our weakness as to our strength. The incessant anxiety and strain of some is a well-nigh incurable form of disease. We are made to exaggerate the importance of what work we do; and yet how much is not done by us! or, what if we had been taken sick? How vigilant we are! determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre. All change is a miracle to contemplate; but it is a miracle which is taking place every instant. Confucius said, “To know that we know what we know, and that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge.” When one man has reduced a fact of the imagination to be a fact to his understanding, I foresee that all men at length establish their lives on that basis.

Let us consider for a moment what most of the trouble and anxiety which I have referred to is about, and how much it is necessary that we be troubled, or at least careful. It would be some advantage to live a primitive and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessaries of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them; or even to look over the old day-books of the merchants, to see what it was that men most commonly bought at the stores, what they stored, that is, what are the grossest groceries.
For the improvements of ages have had but little influence on the essential laws of man’s existence: as our skeletons, probably, are not to be distinguished from those of our ancestors.

By the words, necessary of life, I mean whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it. To many creatures there is in this sense but one necessary of life, Food. To the bison of the prairie it is a few inches of palatable grass, with water to drink; unless he seeks the Shelter of the forest or the mountain’s shadow. None of the brute creation requires more than Food and Shelter. The necessaries of life for man in this climate may, accurately enough, be distributed under the several heads of Food, Shelter, Clothing, and Fuel; for not till we have secured these are we prepared to entertain the true problems of life with freedom and a prospect of success. Man has invented, not only houses, but clothes and cooked food; and possibly from the accidental discovery of the warmth of fire, and the consequent use of it, at first a luxury, arose the present necessity to sit by it. We observe cats and dogs acquiring the same second nature. By proper Shelter and Clothing we legitimately retain our own internal heat; but with an excess of these, or of Fuel, that is, with an external heat greater than our own internal, may not cookery properly be said to begin? Darwin, the naturalist, says of the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, that while his own party, who were well clothed and sitting close to a fire, were far from too warm, these naked savages, who were farther off, were observed, to his great surprise, “to be streaming with perspiration at undergoing such a roasting.” So, we are told, the New Hollander goes naked with impunity, while the European shivers in his clothes. Is it impossible to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man? According to Liebig, man’s body is a stove, and food the fuel which keeps up the internal combustion in the lungs. In cold weather we eat more, in warm less. The animal heat is the result of a slow combustion, and disease and death take place when this is too rapid; or for want of fuel, or from some defect in the draught, the fire goes out. Of course the vital heat is not to be confounded with fire; but so much for analogy. It appears, therefore, from the above list, that the expression, animal life, is nearly synonymous with the expression, animal heat; for while Food may be regarded as the Fuel which keeps up the fire within us- and Fuel serves only to prepare that Food or to increase the warmth of our bodies by addition from without- Shelter and Clothing also serve only to retain the heat thus generated and absorbed.

The grand necessity, then, for our bodies, is to keep warm, to keep the vital heat in us. What pains we accordingly take, not only with our Food, and Clothing, and Shelter, but with our beds, which are our night-clothes, robbing the nests and breasts of birds to prepare this shelter within a shelter, as the mole has its bed of grass and leaves at the end of its burrow! The poor man is wont to complain that this is a cold world; and to cold, no less physical than social, we refer directly a great part of our ails. The summer, in some climates, makes possible to man a sort of Elysian life.
Fuel, except to cook his food, is then unnecessary; the sun is his fire, and many of
the fruits are sufficiently cooked by its rays; while food generally is more various,
and more easily obtained, and clothing and shelter are wholly or half unnecessary.
At the present day, and in this country, as I find by my own experience, a few imple-
mements, a knife, an axe, a spade, a wheelbarrow, etc., and for the studious, lamplight,
stationery, and access to a few books, rank next to necessaries, and can all be ob-
tained at a trifling cost. Yet some, not wise, go to the other side of the globe, to bar-
barous and unhealthy regions, and devote themselves to trade for ten or twenty
years, in order that they may live— that is, keep comfortably warm— and die in New
England at last. The luxuriously rich are not simply kept comfortably warm, but un-
naturally hot; as I implied before, they are cooked, of course a la mode.

Most of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not
indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind. With respect
to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life
than the poor: The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were
a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward.
We know not much about them. It is remarkable that we know so much of them
as we do. The same is true of the more modern reformers and benefactors of their
race. None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the van-
tage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty. Of a life of luxury the fruit is
luxury, whether in agriculture, or commerce, or literature, or art. There are now-
days professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess
because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have
subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live accord-
ing to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to
solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically. The success
of great scholars and thinkers is commonly a courtier-like success, not kingly, not
manly. They make shift to live merely by conformity, practically as their fathers did,
and are in no sense the progenitors of a noble race of men. But why do men degen-
erate ever? What makes families run out? What is the nature of the luxury which
enervates and destroys nations? Are we sure that there is none of it in our own
lives? The philosopher is in advance of his age even in the outward form of his life.
He is not fed, sheltered, clothed, warmed, like his contemporaries. How can a man
be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men?

When a man is warmed by the several modes which I have described, what does
he want next? Surely not more warmth of the same kind, as more and richer food,
larger and more splendid houses, finer and more abundant clothing, more numer-
ous, incessant, and hotter fires, and the like. When he has obtained those things
which are necessary to life, there is another alternative than to obtain the super-
fluities; and that is, to adventure on life now, his vacation from humbler toil hav-
ing commenced. The soil, it appears, is suited to the seed, for it has sent its radicle
downward, and it may now send its shoot upward also with confidence. Why has
man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same pro-
portion into the heavens above?—for the nobler plants are valued for the fruit they
bear at last in the air and light, far from the ground, and are not treated like the
humbler esculents, which, though they may be biennials, are cultivated only till
they have perfected their root, and often cut down at top for this purpose, so that
most would not know them in their flowering season.

I do not mean to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their
own affairs whether in heaven or hell, and perchance build more magnificently and
spend more lavishly than the richest, without ever impoverishing themselves, not
knowing how they live— if, indeed, there are any such, as has been dreamed; nor to
those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present con-
dition of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers— and,
to some extent, I reckon myself in this number; I do not speak to those who are
well employed, in whatever circumstances, and they know whether they are well
employed or not;—but mainly to the mass of men who are discontented, and idly
complaining of the hardness of their lot or of the times, when they might improve
them. There are some who complain most energetically and inconsolably of any,
because they are, as they say, doing their duty. I also have in my mind that seemingly
wealthy, but most terribly impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross,
but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden
or silver fetters.

If I should attempt to tell how I have desired to spend my life in years past, it
would probably surprise those of my readers who are somewhat acquainted with
its actual history; it would certainly astonish those who know nothing about it. I
will only hint at some of the enterprises which I have cherished.

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the
nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities,
the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line. You will
pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's,
and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell
all that I know about it, and never paint “No Admittance” on my gate.

I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle-dove, and am still on their trail.
Many are the travellers I have spoken concerning them, describing their tracks and
what calls they answered to. I have met one or two who had heard the hound, and
the tramp of the horse, and even seen the dove disappear behind a cloud, and they
seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves.

To anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature her-
self! How many mornings, summer and winter, before yet any neighbor was stirring
about his business, have I been about mine! No doubt, many of my townsmen have
met me returning from this enterprise, farmers starting for Boston in the twilight,
or woodchoppers going to their work. It is true, I never assisted the sun materially
in his rising, but, doubt not, it was of the last importance only to be present at it.
So many autumn, ay, and winter days, spent outside the town, trying to hear what was in the wind, to hear and carry it express! I well-nigh sunk all my capital in it, and lost my own breath into the bargain, running in the face of it. If it had concerned either of the political parties, depend upon it, it would have appeared in the Gazette with the earliest intelligence. At other times watching from the observatory of some cliff or tree, to telegraph any new arrival; or waiting at evening on the hill-tops for the sky to fall, that I might catch something, though I never caught much, and that, manna-wise, would dissolve again in the sun. For a long time I was reporter to a journal, of no very wide circulation, whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of my contributions, and, as is too common with writers, I got only my labor for my pains. However, in this case my pains were their own reward.

For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow-storms and rain-storms, and did my duty faithfully; surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths and all across-lot routes, keeping them open, and ravines bridged and passable at all seasons, where the public heel had testified to their utility.

I have looked after the wild stock of the town, which give a faithful herdsman a good deal of trouble by leaping fences; and I have had an eye to the unfrequented nooks and corners of the farm; though I did not always know whether Jonas or Solomon worked in a particular field today; that was none of my business. I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle-tree, the red pine and the black ash, the white grape and the yellow violet, which might have withered else in dry seasons.

In short, I went on thus for a long time (I may say it without boasting), faithfully minding my business, till it became more and more evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of town officers, nor make my place a sinecure with a moderate allowance. My accounts, which I can swear to have kept faithfully, I have, indeed, never got audited, still less accepted, still less paid and settled. However, I have not set my heart on that.

Not long since, a strolling Indian went to sell baskets at the house of a well-known lawyer in my neighborhood. “Do you wish to buy any baskets?” he asked. “No, we do not want any,” was the reply. “What!” exclaimed the Indian as he went out the gate, “do you mean to starve us?” Having seen his industrious white neighbors so well off- that the lawyer had only to weave arguments, and, by some magic, wealth and standing followed- he had said to himself: I will go into business; I will weave baskets; it is a thing which I can do. Thinking that when he had made the baskets he would have done his part, and then it would be the white man’s to buy them. He had not discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other’s while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so, or to make something else which it would be worth his while to buy. I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture, but I had not made it worth any one’s while to buy them. Yet not the less, in my case, did I think it worth my while to weave them, and instead of studying how to make it worth men’s while to buy my baskets, I studied rather
how to avoid the necessity of selling them. The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?

Finding that my fellow-citizens were not likely to offer me any room in the court house, or any curacy or living anywhere else, but I must shift for myself, I turned my face more exclusively than ever to the woods, where I was better known. I determined to go into business at once, and not wait to acquire the usual capital, using such slender means as I had already got. My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply nor to live dearly there, but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish.

I have always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to every man. If your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country affords, purely native products, much ice and pine timber and a little granite, always in native bottoms. These will be good ventures. To oversee all the details yourself in person; to be at once pilot and captain, and owner and underwriter; to buy and sell and keep the accounts; to read every letter received, and write or read every letter sent; to superintend the discharge of imports night and day; to be upon many parts of the coast almost at the same time- often the richest freight will be discharged upon a Jersey shore;- to be your own telegraph, unweariedly sweeping the horizon, speaking all passing vessels bound coastwise; to keep up a steady despatch of commodities, for the supply of such a distant and exorbitant market; to keep yourself informed of the state of the markets, prospects of war and peace everywhere, and anticipate the tendencies of trade and civilization- taking advantage of the results of all exploring expeditions, using new passages and all improvements in navigation;- charts to be studied, the position of reefs and new lights and buoys to be ascertained, and ever, and ever, the logarithmic tables to be corrected, for by the error of some calculator the vessel often splits upon a rock that should have reached a friendly pier- there is the untold fate of La Perouse;- universal science to be kept pace with, studying the lives of all great discoverers and navigators, great adventurers and merchants, from Hanno and the Phoenicians down to our day; in fine, account of stock to be taken from time to time, to know how you stand. It is a labor to task the faculties of a man- such problems of profit and loss, of interest, of tare and tret, and gauging of all kinds in it, as demand a universal knowledge.

I have thought that Walden Pond would be a good place for business, not solely on account of the railroad and the ice trade; it offers advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good port and a good foundation. No Neva marshes to be filled; though you must everywhere build on piles of your own driving. It is said that a flood-tide, with a westerly wind, and ice in the Neva, would sweep St. Petersburg from the face of the earth.
As this business was to be entered into without the usual capital, it may not be
easy to conjecture where those means, that will still be indispensable to every such
undertaking, were to be obtained. As for Clothing, to come at once to the practical
part of the question, perhaps we are led oftener by the love of novelty and a re-
gard for the opinions of men, in procuring it, than by a true utility. Let him who has
work to do recollect that the object of clothing is, first, to retain the vital heat, and
secondly, in this state of society, to cover nakedness, and he may judge how much
of any necessary or important work may be accomplished without adding to his
wardrobe. Kings and queens who wear a suit but once, though made by some tailor
or dressmaker to their majesties, cannot know the comfort of wearing a suit that
fits. They are no better than wooden horses to hang the clean clothes on. Every day
our garments become more assimilated to ourselves, receiving the impress of the
wearer's character, until we hesitate to lay them aside without such delay and med-
ical appliances and some such solemnity even as our bodies. No man ever stood the
lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there
is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched
clothes, than to have a sound conscience. But even if the rent is not mended, per-
haps the worst vice betrayed is improvidence. I sometimes try my acquaintances
by such tests as this- Who could wear a patch, or two extra seams only, over the
knee? Most behave as if they believed that their prospects for life would be ruined
if they should do it. It would be easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg
than with a broken pantaloon. Often if an accident happens to a gentleman's legs,
they can be mended; but if a similar accident happens to the legs of his pantaloons,
there is no help for it; for he considers, not what is truly respectable, but what is
respected. We know but few men, a great many coats and breeches. Dress a scare-
crow in your last shift, you standing shiftless by, who would not soonest salute the
scarecrow? Passing a cornfield the other day, close by a hat and coat on a stake, I
recognized the owner of the farm. He was only a little more weather-beaten than
when I saw him last. I have heard of a dog that barked at every stranger who ap-
proached his master's premises with clothes on, but was easily quieted by a naked
thief. It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if
they were divested of their clothes. Could you, in such a case, tell surely of any com-
pany of civilized men which belonged to the most respected class? When Madam
Pfeiffer, in her adventurous travels round the world, from east to west, had got so
near home as Asiatic Russia, she says that she felt the necessity of wearing other
than a travelling dress, when she went to meet the authorities, for she “was now in
a civilized country, where... people are judged of by their clothes.” Even in our demo-
ocratic New England towns the accidental possession of wealth, and its manifesta-
tion in dress and equipage alone, obtain for the possessor almost universal respect.
But they yield such respect, numerous as they are, are so far heathen, and need to
have a missionary sent to them. Beside, clothes introduced sewing, a kind of work
which you may call endless; a woman's dress, at least, is never done.

A man who has at length found something to do will not need to get a new suit to
do it in; for him the old will do, that has lain dusty in the garret for an indeterminate
period. Old shoes will serve a hero longer than they have served his valet—if a hero ever has a valet—bare feet are older than shoes, and he can make them do. Only they who go to soirees and legislative balls must have new coats, coats to change as often as the man changes in them. But if my jacket and trousers, my hat and shoes, are fit to worship God in, they will do; will they not? Who ever saw his old clothes—his old coat, actually worn out, resolved into its primitive elements, so that it was not a deed of charity to bestow it on some poor boy, by him perchance to be bestowed on some poorer still, or shall we say richer, who could do with less? I say, beware of all enterprises that require new clothes, and not rather a new wearer of clothes. If there is not a new man, how can the new clothes be made to fit? If you have any enterprise before you, try it in your old clothes. All men want, not something to do with, but something to do, or rather something to be. Perhaps we should never procure a new suit, however ragged or dirty the old, until we have so conducted, so enterprised or sailed in some way, that we feel like new men in the old, and that to retain it would be like keeping new wine in old bottles. Our moulting season, like that of the fowls, must be a crisis in our lives. The loon retires to solitary ponds to spend it. Thus also the snake casts its slough, and the caterpillar its wormy coat, by an internal industry and expansion; for clothes are but our outmost cuticle and mortal coil. Otherwise we shall be found sailing under false colors, and be inevitably cashiered at last by our own opinion, as well as that of mankind.

We don garment after garment, as if we grew like exogenous plants by addition without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are our epidermis, or false skin, which partakes not of our life, and may be stripped off here and there without fatal injury; our thicker garments, constantly worn, are our cellular integument, or cortex; but our shirts are our liber, or true bark, which cannot be removed without girdling and so destroying the man. I believe that all races at some seasons wear something equivalent to the shirt. It is desirable that a man be clad so simply that he can lay his hands on himself in the dark, and that he live in all respects so compactly and preparedly that, if an enemy take the town, he can, like the old philosopher, walk out the gate empty-handed without anxiety. While one thick garment is, for most purposes, as good as three thin ones, and cheap clothing can be obtained at prices really to suit customers; while a thick coat can be bought for five dollars, which will last as many years, thick pantaloons for two dollars, cowhide boots for a dollar and a half a pair, a summer hat for a quarter of a dollar, and a winter cap for sixty-two and a half cents, or a better be made at home at a nominal cost, where is he so poor that, clad in such a suit, of his own earning, there will not be found wise men to do him reverence?

When I ask for a garment of a particular form, my tailoress tells me gravely, “They do not make them so now,” not emphasizing the “They” at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash. When I hear this oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it, that I may find
out by what degree of consanguinity 'They' are related to me, and what authority
they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly; and, finally, I am inclined
to answer her with equal mystery, and without any more emphasis of the "they"-
"It is true, they did not make them so recently, but they do now." Of what use this
measuring of me if she does not measure my character, but only the breadth of my
shoulders, as it were a peg to bang the coat on? We worship not the Graces, nor the
Parcee, but Fashion. She spins and weaves and cuts with full authority. The head
monkey at Paris puts on a traveller’s cap, and all the monkeys in America do the
same. I sometimes despair of getting anything quite simple and honest done in this
world by the help of men. They would have to be passed through a powerful press
first, to squeeze their old notions out of them, so that they would not soon get upon
their legs again; and then there would be some one in the company with a maggot
in his head, hatched from an egg deposited there nobody knows when, for not even
fire kills these things, and you would have lost your labor: Nevertheless, we will not
forget that some Egyptian wheat was handed down to us by a mummy.

On the whole, I think that it cannot be maintained that dressing has in this or
any country risen to the dignity of an art. At present men make shift to wear what
they can get. Like shipwrecked sailors, they put on what they can find on the beach,
and at a little distance, whether of space or time, laugh at each other’s masquerade.
Every generation laughs at the old fashions, but follows religiously the new. We are
amused at beholding the costume of Henry VIII, or Queen Elizabeth, as much as
if it was that of the King and Queen of the Cannibal Islands. All costume off a man
is pitiful or grotesque. It is only the serious eye peering from and the sincere life
passed within it which restrain laughter and consecrate the costume of any people.
Let Harlequin be taken with a fit of the colic and his trappings will have to serve that
mood too. When the soldier is hit by a cannon-ball, rags are as becoming as purple.

The childish and savage taste of men and women for new patterns keeps how
many shaking and squinting through kaleidoscopes that they may discover the
particular figure which this generation requires today. The manufacturers have
learned that this taste is merely whimsical. Of two patterns which differ only by a
few threads more or less of a particular color; the one will be sold readily, the other
lie on the shelf, though it frequently happens that after the lapse of a season the
latter becomes the most fashionable. Comparatively, tattooing is not the hideous
custom which it is called. It is not barbarous merely because the printing is skin-
deep and unalterable.

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get
clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of
the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed,
the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, un-
questionably, that corporations may be enriched. In the long run men hit only what
they aim at. Therefore, though they should fail immediately, they had better aim at
something high.
As for a Shelter, I will not deny that this is now a necessary of life, though there are instances of men having done without it for long periods in colder countries than this. Samuel Laing says that “the Laplander in his skin dress, and in a skin bag which he puts over his head and shoulders, will sleep night after night on the snow... in a degree of cold which would extinguish the life of one exposed to it in any woollen clothing.” He had seen them asleep thus. Yet he adds, “They are not harder than other people.” But, probably, man did not live long on the earth without discovering the convenience which there is in a house, the domestic comforts, which phrase may have originally signified the satisfactions of the house more than of the family; though these must be extremely partial and occasional in those climates where the house is associated in our thoughts with winter or the rainy season chiefly, and two thirds of the year, except for a parasol, is unnecessary. In our climate, in the summer, it was formerly almost solely a covering at night. In the Indian gazettes a wigwam was the symbol of a day’s march, and a row of them cut or painted on the bark of a tree signified that so many times they had camped. Man was not made so large limbed and robust but that he must seek to narrow his world and wall in a space such as fitted him. He was at first bare and out of doors; but though this was pleasant enough in serene and warm weather, by daylight, the rainy season and the winter, to say nothing of the torrid sun, would perhaps have nipped his race in the bud if he had not made haste to clothe himself with the shelter of a house. Adam and Eve, according to the fable, wore the bower before other clothes. Man wanted a home, a place of warmth, or comfort, first of warmth, then the warmth of the affections.

We may imagine a time when, in the infancy of the human race, some enterprising mortal crept into a hollow in a rock for shelter. Every child begins the world again, to some extent, and loves to stay outdoors, even in wet and cold. It plays house, as well as horse, having an instinct for it. Who does not remember the interest with which, when young, he looked at shelving rocks, or any approach to a cave? It was the natural yearning of that portion, any portion of our most primitive ancestor which still survived in us. From the cave we have advanced to roofs of palm leaves, of bark and boughs, of linen woven and stretched, of grass and straw, of boards and shingles, of stones and tiles. At last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more senses than we think. From the hearth the field is a great distance. It would be well, perhaps, if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, if the poet did not speak so much from under a roof, or the saint dwell there so long. Birds do not sing in caves, nor do doves cherish their innocence in dovecots.

However, if one designs to construct a dwelling-house, it behooves him to exercise a little Yankee shrewdness, lest after all he find himself in a workhouse, a labyrinth without a clue, a museum, an almshouse, a prison, or a splendid mausoleum instead. Consider first how slight a shelter is absolutely necessary. I have seen Penobscot Indians, in this town, living in tents of thin cotton cloth, while the snow was nearly a foot deep around them, and I thought that they would be glad to have it deeper to keep out the wind. Formerly, when how to get my living honestly, with
freedom left for my proper pursuits, was a question which vexed me even more than it does now, for unfortunately I am become somewhat callous, I used to see a large box by the railroad, six feet long by three wide, in which the laborers locked up their tools at night; and it suggested to me that every man who was hard pushed might get such a one for a dollar, and, having bored a few auger holes in it, to admit the air at least, get into it when it rained and at night, and hook down the lid, and so have freedom in his love, and in his soul be free. This did not appear the worst, nor by any means a despicable alternative. You could sit up as late as you pleased, and, whenever you got up, go abroad without any landlord or house-lord dogging you for rent. Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box who would not have frozen to death in such a box as this. I am far from jesting. Economy is a subject which admits of being treated with levity, but it cannot so be disposed of. A comfortable house for a rude and hardy race, that lived mostly out of doors, was once made here almost entirely of such materials as Nature furnished ready to their hands. Gookin, who was superintendent of the Indians subject to the Massachusetts Colony, writing in 1674, says, “The best of their houses are covered very neatly, tight and warm, with barks of trees, slipped from their bodies at those seasons when the sap is up, and made into great flakes, with pressure of weighty timber, when they are green.... The meaner sort are covered with mats which they make of a kind of bulrush, and are also indifferently tight and warm, but not so good as the former.... Some I have seen, sixty or a hundred feet long and thirty feet broad.... I have often lodged in their wigwams, and found them as warm as the best English houses.” He adds that they were commonly carpeted and lined within with well-wrought embroidered mats, and were furnished with various utensils. The Indians had advanced so far as to regulate the effect of the wind by a mat suspended over the hole in the roof and moved by a string. Such a lodge was in the first instance constructed in a day or two at most, and taken down and put up in a few hours; and every family owned one, or its apartment in one.

In the savage state every family owns a shelter as good as the best, and sufficient for its coarser and simpler wants; but I think that I speak within bounds when I say that, though the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams, in modern civilized society not more than one half the families own a shelter. In the large towns and cities, where civilization especially prevails, the number of those who own a shelter is a very small fraction of the whole. The rest pay an annual tax for this outside garment of all, become indispensable summer and winter, which would buy a village of Indian wigwams, but now helps to keep them poor as long as they live. I do not mean to insist here on the disadvantage of hiring compared with owning, but it is evident that the savage owns his shelter because it costs so little, while the civilized man hires his commonly because he cannot afford to own it; nor can he, in the long run, any better afford to hire. But, answers one, by merely paying this tax, the poor civilized man secures an abode which is a palace compared with the savage’s. An annual rent of from twenty-five to a hundred dollars (these are the country rates) entitles him to the benefit of the improvements of centuries, spacious apartments, clean paint and paper, Rumford
fireplace, back plastering, Venetian blinds, copper pump, spring lock, a commodi-
ous cellar, and many other things. But how happens it that he who is said to enjoy
these things is so commonly a poor civilized man, while the savage, who has them
not, is rich as a savage? If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condi-
tion of man- and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages- it
must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more
costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required
to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run. An average house in this
neighborhood costs perhaps eight hundred dollars, and to lay up this sum will take
from ten to fifteen years of the laborer’s life, even if he is not encumbered with a
family- estimating the pecuniary value of every man’s labor at one dollar a day, for if
some receive more, others receive less;—so that he must have spent more than half
his life commonly before his wigwam will be earned. If we suppose him to pay a
rent instead, this is but a doubtful choice of evils. Would the savage have been wise
to exchange his wigwam for a palace on these terms?

It may be guessed that I reduce almost the whole advantage of holding this su-
perfluous property as a fund in store against the future, so far as the individual is
concerned, mainly to the defraying of funeral expenses. But perhaps a man is not
required to bury himself. Nevertheless this points to an important distinction be-
tween the civilized man and the savage; and, no doubt, they have designs on us for
our benefit, in making the life of a civilized people an institution, in which the life of
the individual is to a great extent absorbed, in order to preserve and perfect that of
the race. But I wish to show at what a sacrifice this advantage is at present obtained,
and to suggest that we may possibly so live as to secure all the advantage without
suffering any of the disadvantage. What mean ye by saying that the poor ye have
always with you, or that the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth
are set on edge?

“As I live, saith the Lord God, ye shall not have occasion any more to use this pro-
verb in Israel.

“Behold all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is
mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.”

When I consider my neighbors, the farmers of Concord, who are at least as well
off as the other classes, I find that for the most part they have been toiling twenty,
thirty, or forty years, that they may become the real owners of their farms, which
commonly they have inherited with encumbrances, or else bought with hired mon-
ey- and we may regard one third of that toil as the cost of their houses- but com-
monly they have not paid for them yet. It is true, the encumbrances sometimes out-
weigh the value of the farm, so that the farm itself becomes one great encumbrance,
and still a man is found to inherit it, being well acquainted with it, as he says. On
applying to the assessors, I am surprised to learn that they cannot at once name a
dozen in the town who own their farms free and clear. If you would know the his-
tory of these homesteads, inquire at the bank where they are mortgaged. The man
who has actually paid for his farm with labor on it is so rare that every neighbor can point to him. I doubt if there are three such men in Concord. What has been said of the merchants, that a very large majority, even ninety-seven in a hundred, are sure to fail, is equally true of the farmers. With regard to the merchants, however, one of them says pertinently that a great part of their failures are not genuine pecuniary failures, but merely failures to fulfil their engagements, because it is inconvenient; that is, it is the moral character that breaks down. But this puts an infinitely worse face on the matter; and suggests, beside, that probably not even the other three succeed in saving their souls, but are perchance bankrupt in a worse sense than they who fail honestly. Bankruptcy and repudiation are the springboards from which much of our civilization vaults and turns its somersets, but the savage stands on the unelastic plank of famine. Yet the Middlesex Cattle Show goes off here with eclat annually, as if all the joints of the agricultural machine were suent.

The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair springe to catch comfort and independence, and then, as he turned away, got his own leg into it. This is the reason he is poor; and for a similar reason we are all poor in respect to a thousand savage comforts, though surrounded by luxuries. As Chapman sings,

“The false society of men--for earthly greatness All heavenly comforts rarefies to air.”

And when the farmer has got his house, he may not be the richer but the poorer for it, and it be the house that has got him. As I understand it, that was a valid objection urged by Momus against the house which Minerva made, that she “had not made it movable, by which means a bad neighborhood might be avoided”; and it may still be urged, for our houses are such unwieldy property that we are often imprisoned rather than housed in them; and the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own scurvy selves. I know one or two families, at least, in this town, who, for nearly a generation, have been wishing to sell their houses in the outskirts and move into the village, but have not been able to accomplish it, and only death will set them free.

Granted that the majority are able at last either to own or hire the modern house with all its improvements. While civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them. It has created palaces, but it was not so easy to create noblemen and kings. And if the civilized man's pursuits are no worthier than the savage's, if he is employed the greater part of his life in obtaining gross necessaries and comforts merely, why should he have a better dwelling than the former?

But how do the poor minority fare? Perhaps it will be found that just in proportion as some have been placed in outward circumstances above the savage, others have been degraded below him. The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the
indigence of another. On the one side is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and “silent poor.” The myriads who built the pyramids to be the tombs of the Pharaohs were fed on garlic, and it may be were not decently buried themselves. The mason who finishes the cornice of the palace returns at night perchance to a hut not so good as a wigwam. It is a mistake to suppose that, in a country where the usual evidences of civilization exist, the condition of a very large body of the inhabitants may not be as degraded as that of savages. I refer to the degraded poor; not now to the degraded rich. To know this I should not need to look farther than to the shanties which everywhere border our railroads, that last improvement in civilization; where I see in my daily walks human beings living in sties, and all winter with an open door, for the sake of light, without any visible, often imaginable, wood-pile, and the forms of both old and young are permanently contracted by the long habit of shrinking from cold and misery, and the development of all their limbs and faculties is checked. It certainly is fair to look at that class by whose labor the works which distinguish this generation are accomplished. Such too, to a greater or less extent, is the condition of the operatives of every denomination in England, which is the great workhouse of the world. Or I could refer you to Ireland, which is marked as one of the white or enlightened spots on the map. Contrast the physical condition of the Irish with that of the North American Indian, or the South Sea Islander, or any other savage race before it was degraded by contact with the civilized man. Yet I have no doubt that that people’s rulers are as wise as the average of civilized rulers. Their condition only proves what squalidness may consist with civilization. I hardly need refer now to the laborers in our Southern States who produce the staple exports of this country, and are themselves a staple production of the South. But to confine myself to those who are said to be in moderate circumstances.

Most men appear never to have considered what a house is, and are actually though needlessly poor all their lives because they think that they must have such a one as their neighbors have. As if one were to wear any sort of coat which the tailor might cut out for him, or, gradually leaving off palm-leaf hat or cap of woodchuck skin, complain of hard times because he could not afford to buy him a crown! It is possible to invent a house still more convenient and luxurious than we have, which yet all would admit that man could not afford to pay for. Shall we always study to obtain more of these things, and not sometimes to be content with less? Shall the respectable citizen thus gravely teach, by precept and example, the necessity of the young man’s providing a certain number of superfluous glow-shoes, and umbrellas, and empty guest chambers for empty guests, before he dies? Why should not our furniture be as simple as the Arab’s or the Indian’s? When I think of the benefactors of the race, whom we have apotheosized as messengers from heaven, bearers of divine gifts to man, I do not see in my mind any retinue at their heels, any carload of fashionable furniture. Or what if I were to allow—would it not be a singular allowance—that our furniture should be more complex than the Arab’s, in proportion as we are morally and intellectually his superiors! At present our houses are cluttered and defiled with it, and a good housewife would sweep out the greater part into the dust hole, and not leave her morning’s work undone. Morning work! By the blushes
of Aurora and the music of Memnon, what should be man's morning work in this world? I had three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and threw them out the window in disgust. How, then, could I have a furnished house? I would rather sit in the open air, for no dust gathers on the grass, unless where man has broken ground.

It is the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow. The traveller who stops at the best houses, so called, soon discovers this, for the publicans presume him to be a Sardanapalus, and if he resigned himself to their tender mercies he would soon be completely emasculated. I think that in the railroad car we are inclined to spend more on luxury than on safety and convenience, and it threatens without attaining these to become no better than a modern drawing-room, with its divans, and ottomans, and sun-shades, and a hundred other oriental things, which we are taking west with us, invented for the ladies of the harem and the effeminate natives of the Celestial Empire, which Jonathan should be ashamed to know the names of. I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion. I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart, with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a malaria all the way.

The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage, at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature. When he was refreshed with food and sleep, he contemplated his journey again. He dwelt, as it were, in a tent in this world, and was either threading the valleys, or crossing the plains, or climbing the mountain-tops. But lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper. We now no longer camp as for a night, but have settled down on earth and forgotten heaven. We have adopted Christianity merely as an improved method of agriculture. We have built for this world a family mansion, and for the next a family tomb. The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten. There is actually no place in this village for a work of fine art, if any had come down to us, to stand, for our lives, our houses and streets, furnish no proper pedestal for it. There is not a nail to hang a picture on, nor a shelf to receive the bust of a hero or a saint. When I consider how our houses are built and paid for, or not paid for, and their internal economy managed and sustained, I wonder that the floor does not give way under the visitor while he is admiring the gewgaws upon the mantelpiece, and let him through into the cellar, to some solid and honest though earthy foundation. I cannot but perceive that this so-called rich and refined life is a thing jumped at, and I do not get on in the enjoyment of the fine arts which adorn it, my attention being wholly occupied with the jump; for I remember that the greatest genuine leap, due to human muscles alone, on record, is that of certain wandering Arabs, who are said to have cleared twenty-five feet on
level ground. Without factitious support, man is sure to come to earth again beyond that distance. The first question which I am tempted to put to the proprietor of such great impropriety is, Who bolsters you? Are you one of the ninety-seven who fail, or the three who succeed? Answer me these questions, and then perhaps I may look at your bawbles and find them ornamental. The cart before the horse is neither beautiful nor useful. Before we can adorn our houses with beautiful objects the walls must be stripped, and our lives must be stripped, and beautiful housekeeping and beautiful living be laid for a foundation: now, a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper.

Old Johnson, in his “Wonder-Working Providence,” speaking of the first settlers of this town, with whom he was contemporary, tells us that “they burrow themselves in the earth for their first shelter under some hillside, and, casting the soil aloft upon timber, they make a smoky fire against the earth, at the highest side.” They did not “provide them houses,” says he, “till the earth, by the Lord’s blessing, brought forth bread to feed them,” and the first year’s crop was so light that “they were forced to cut their bread very thin for a long season.” The secretary of the Province of New Netherland, writing in Dutch, in 1650, for the information of those who wished to take up land there, states more particularly that “those in New Netherland, and especially in New England, who have no means to build farmhouses at first according to their wishes, dig a square pit in the ground, cellar fashion, six or seven feet deep, as long and as broad as they think proper, case the earth inside with wood all round the wall, and line the wood with the bark of trees or something else to prevent the caving in of the earth; floor this cellar with plank, and wainscot it overhead for a ceiling, raise a roof of spars clear up, and cover the spars with bark or green sods, so that they can live dry and warm in these houses with their entire families for two, three, and four years, it being understood that partitions are run through those cellars which are adapted to the size of the family. The wealthy and principal men in New England, in the beginning of the colonies, commenced their first dwelling-houses in this fashion for two reasons: firstly, in order not to waste time in building, and not to want food the next season; secondly, in order not to discourage poor laboring people whom they brought over in numbers from Fatherland. In the course of three or four years, when the country became adapted to agriculture, they built themselves handsome houses, spending on them several thousands.”

In this course which our ancestors took there was a show of prudence at least, as if their principle were to satisfy the more pressing wants first. But are the more pressing wants satisfied now? When I think of acquiring for myself one of our luxurious dwellings, I am deterred, for, so to speak, the country is not yet adapted to human culture, and we are still forced to cut our spiritual bread far thinner than our forefathers did their wheaten. Not that all architectural ornament is to be neglected even in the rudest periods; but let our houses first be lined with beauty, where they come in contact with our lives, like the tenement of the shellfish, and not overlaid with it. But, alas! I have been inside one or two of them, and know what they are lined with.
Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam or wear skins today, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer. In such a neighborhood as this, boards and shingles, lime and bricks, are cheaper and more easily obtained than suitable caves, or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities, or even well-tempered clay or flat stones. I speak understandingly on this subject, for I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically and practically. With a little more wit we might use these materials so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing. The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage. But to make haste to my own experiment.

Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down some tall, arrowy white pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise. The owner of the axe, as he released his hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it. It was a pleasant hillside where I worked, covered with pine woods, through which I looked out on the pond, and a small open field in the woods where pines and hickories were springing up. The ice in the pond was not yet dissolved, though there were some open spaces, and it was all dark-colored and saturated with water. There were some slight flurries of snow during the days that I worked there; but for the most part when I came out on to the railroad, on my way home, its yellow sand-heap stretched away gleaming in the hazy atmosphere, and the rails shone in the spring sun, and I heard the lark and pewee and other birds already come to commence another year with us. They were pleasant spring days, in which the winter of man’s discontent was thawing as well as the earth, and the life that had lain torpid began to stretch itself. One day, when my axe had come off and I had cut a green hickory for a wedge, driving it with a stone, and had placed the whole to soak in a pond-hole in order to swell the wood, I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on the bottom, apparently without inconvenience, as long as I stayed there, or more than a quarter of an hour; perhaps because he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life. I had previously seen the snakes in frosty mornings in my path with portions of their bodies still numb and inflexible, waiting for the sun to thaw them. On the 1st of April it rained and melted the ice, and in the early part of the day, which was very foggy, I heard a stray goose groping about over the pond and cackling as if lost, or like the spirit of the fog.

So I went on for some days cutting and hewing timber; and also studs and rafters, all with my narrow axe, not having many communicable or scholar-like thoughts, singing to myself,
Men say they know many things; But lo! they have taken wings- The arts and sciences, And a thousand appliances; The wind that blows Is all that anybody knows.

I hewed the main timbers six inches square, most of the studs on two sides only, and the rafters and floor timbers on one side, leaving the rest of the bark on, so that they were just as straight and much stronger than sawed ones. Each stick was carefully mortised or tenoned by its stump, for I had borrowed other tools by this time. My days in the woods were not very long ones; yet I usually carried my dinner of bread and butter, and read the newspaper in which it was wrapped, at noon, sitting amid the green pine boughs which I had cut off, and to my bread was imparted some of their fragrance, for my hands were covered with a thick coat of pitch. Before I had done I was more the friend than the foe of the pine tree, though I had cut down some of them, having become better acquainted with it. Sometimes a rambler in the wood was attracted by the sound of my axe, and we chatted pleasantly over the chips which I had made.

By the middle of April, for I made no haste in my work, but rather made the most of it, my house was framed and ready for the raising. I had already bought the shanty of James Collins, an Irishman who worked on the Fitchburg Railroad, for boards. James Collins' shanty was considered an uncommonly fine one. When I called to see it he was not at home. I walked about the outside, at first unobserved from within, the window was so deep and high. It was of small dimensions, with a peaked cottage roof, and not much else to be seen, the dirt being raised five feet all around as if it were a compost heap. The roof was the soundest part, though a good deal warped and made brittle by the sun. Doorsill there was none, but a perennial passage for the hens under the door-board. Mrs. C. came to the door and asked me to view it from the inside. The hens were driven in by my approach. It was dark, and had a dirt floor for the most part, dank, clammy, and aguish, only here a board and there a board which would not bear removal. She lighted a lamp to show me the inside of the roof and the walls, and also that the board floor extended under the bed, warning me not to step into the cellar, a sort of dust hole two feet deep. In her own words, they were good boards overhead, good boards all around, and a good window'- of two whole squares originally, only the cat had passed out that way lately. There was a stove, a bed, and a place to sit, an infant in the house where it was born, a silk parasol, gilt-framed looking-glass, and a patent new coffee-mill nailed to an oak sapling, all told. The bargain was soon concluded, for James had in the meanwhile returned. I to pay four dollars and twenty-five cents tonight, he to vacate at five tomorrow morning, selling to nobody else meanwhile: I to take possession at six. It were well, he said, to be there early, and anticipate certain indistinct but wholly unjust claims on the score of ground rent and fuel. This he assured me was the only encumbrance. At six I passed him and his family on the road. One large bundle held their all- bed, coffee-mill, looking-glass, hens- all but the cat; she took to the woods and became a wild cat, and, as I learned afterward, trod in a trap set for woodchucks, and so became a dead cat at last.
I took down this dwelling the same morning, drawing the nails, and removed it to the pond-side by small cartloads, spreading the boards on the grass there to bleach and warp back again in the sun. One early thrush gave me a note or two as I drove along the woodland path. I was informed treacherously by a young Patrick that neighbor Seeley, an Irishman, in the intervals of the carting, transferred the still tolerable, straight, and drivable nails, staples, and spikes to his pocket, and then stood when I came back to pass the time of day, and look freshly up, unconcerned, with spring thoughts, at the devastation; there being a dearth of work, as he said. He was there to represent spectatordom, and help make this seemingly insignificant event one with the removal of the gods of Troy.

I dug my cellar in the side of a hill sloping to the south, where a woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow, down through sumach and blackberry roots, and the lowest stain of vegetation, six feet square by seven deep, to a fine sand where potatoes would not freeze in any winter. The sides were left shelving, and not stoned; but the sun having never shone on them, the sand still keeps its place. It was but two hours’ work. I took particular pleasure in this breaking of ground, for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable temperature. Under the most splendid house in the city is still to be found the cellar where they store their roots as of old, and long after the superstructure has disappeared posterity remark its dent in the earth. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow.

At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house. No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I. They are destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one day. I began to occupy my house on the 4th of July, as soon as it was boarded and roofed, for the boards were carefully feather-edged and lapped, so that it was perfectly impervious to rain, but before boarding I laid the foundation of a chimney at one end, bringing two cartloads of stones up the hill from the pond in my arms. I built the chimney after my hoeing in the fall, before a fire became necessary for warmth, doing my cooking in the meanwhile out of doors on the ground, early in the morning: which mode I still think is in some respects more convenient and agreeable than the usual one. When it stormed before my bread was baked, I fixed a few boards over the fire, and sat under them to watch my loaf, and passed some pleasant hours in that way. In those days, when my hands were much employed, I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the Iliad.

It would be worth the while to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never raising any superstructure until we found a better reason for it than our temporal necessities even. There is some of the same
fitness in a man’s building his own house that there is in a bird’s building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes. Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men? I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house. We belong to the community. It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant, and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself.

True, there are architects so called in this country, and I have heard of one at least possessed with the idea of making architectural ornaments have a core of truth, a necessity, and hence a beauty, as if it were a revelation to him. All very well perhaps from his point of view, but only a little better than the common dilettantism. A sentimental reformer in architecture, he began at the cornice, not at the foundation. It was only how to put a core of truth within the ornaments, that every sugarplum, in fact, might have an almond or caraway seed in it—though I hold that almonds are most wholesome without the sugar—and not how the inhabitant, the indweller, might build truly within and without, and let the ornaments take care of themselves. What reasonable man ever supposed that ornaments were something outward and in the skin merely— that the tortoise got his spotted shell, or the shell-fish its mother-′o′-pearl tints, by such a contract as the inhabitants of Broadway their Trinity Church? But a man has no more to do with the style of architecture of his house than a tortoise with that of its shell: nor need the soldier be so idle as to try to paint the precise color of his virtue on his standard. The enemy will find it out. He may turn pale when the trial comes. This man seemed to me to lean over the cornice, and timidly whisper his half truth to the rude occupants who really knew it better than he. What of architectural beauty I now see, I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life. The most interesting dwellings in this country, as the painter knows, are the most unpretending, humble log huts and cottages of the poor commonly; it is the life of the inhabitants whose shells they are, and not any peculiarity in their surfaces merely, which makes them picturesque; and equally interesting will be the citizen′s suburban box, when his life shall be as simple and as agreeable to the imagination, and there is as little straining after effect in the style of his dwelling. A great proportion of architectural ornaments are literally hollow, and a September gale would strip them off, like borrowed plumes, without injury to the substantial. They can do without architec-
ture who have no olives nor wines in the cellar. What if an equal ado were made about the ornaments of style in literature, and the architects of our bibles spent as much time about their cornices as the architects of our churches do? So are made the belles-lettres and the beaux-arts and their professors. Much it concerns a man, forsooth, how a few sticks are slanted over him or under him, and what colors are daubed upon his box. It would signify somewhat, if, in any earnest sense, he slanted them and daubed it; but the spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is of a piece with constructing his own coffin- the architecture of the grave- and “carpenter” is but another name for “coffin-maker.” One man says, in his despair or indifference to life, take up a handful of the earth at your feet, and paint your house that color. Is he thinking of his last and narrow house? Toss up a copper for it as well. What an abundance of leisure be must have! Why do you take up a handful of dirt? Better paint your house your own complexion; let it turn pale or blush for you. An enterprise to improve the style of cottage architecture! When you have got my ornaments ready, I will wear them.

Before winter I built a chimney, and shingled the sides of my house, which were already impervious to rain, with imperfect and sappy shingles made of the first slice of the log, whose edges I was obliged to straighten with a plane.

I have thus a tight shingled and plastered house, ten feet wide by fifteen long, and eight-feet posts, with a garret and a closet, a large window on each side, two trap-doors, one door at the end, and a brick fireplace opposite. The exact cost of my house, paying the usual price for such materials as I used, but not counting the work, all of which was done by myself, was as follows; and I give the details because very few are able to tell exactly what their houses cost, and fewer still, if any, the separate cost of the various materials which compose them:

Boards...................................$8.03 1/2, (mostly shanty boards.)
Refuse shingles for roof and sides.... 4.00
Laths................................. 1.25
Two second-hand windows with glass.... 2.43
One thousand old brick.............. 4.00
Two casks of lime..................... 2.40 (That was high.)
Hair............................... 0.31 (More than I needed.)
Mantle-tree iron...................... 0.15
Nails................................. 3.90
Hinges and screws................... 0.14
Latch................................. 0.10
Chalk..................................... 0.01
Transportation........................ 1.40 (I carried a good part on my back.)

----- In all................................$ 28.12 1/2

These are all the materials, excepting the timber, stones, and sand, which I claimed by squatter’s right. I have also a small woodshed adjoining, made chiefly of the stuff which was left after building the house.

I intend to build me a house which will surpass any on the main street in Concord in grandeur and luxury, as soon as it pleases me as much and will cost me no more than my present one.

I thus found that the student who wishes for a shelter can obtain one for a lifetime at an expense not greater than the rent which he now pays annually. If I seem to boast more than is becoming, my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement. Notwithstanding much cant and hypocrisy- chaff which I find it difficult to separate from my wheat, but for which I am as sorry as any man- I will breathe freely and stretch myself in this respect, it is such a relief to both the moral and physical system; and I am resolved that I will not through humility become the devil’s attorney. I will endeavor to speak a good word for the truth. At Cambridge College the mere rent of a student’s room, which is only a little larger than my own, is thirty dollars each year, though the corporation had the advantage of building thirty-two side by side and under one roof, and the occupant suffers the inconvenience of many and noisy neighbors, and perhaps a residence in the fourth story. I cannot but think that if we had more true wisdom in these respects, not only less education would be needed, because, forsooth, more would already have been acquired, but the pecuniary expense of getting an education would in a great measure vanish. Those conveniences which the student requires at Cambridge or elsewhere cost him or somebody else ten times as great a sacrifice of life as they would with proper management on both sides. Those things for which the most money is demanded are never the things which the student most wants. Tuition, for instance, is an important item in the term bill, while for the far more valuable education which he gets by associating with the most cultivated of his contemporaries no charge is made. The mode of founding a college is, commonly, to get up a subscription of dollars and cents, and then, following blindly the principles of a division of labor to its extreme- a principle which should never be followed but with circumspection- to call in a contractor who makes this a subject of speculation, and he employs Irishmen or other operatives actually to lay the foundations, while the students that are to be are said to be fitting themselves for it; and for these oversights successive generations have to pay. I think that it would be better than this, for the students, or those who desire to be benefited by it, even to lay the foundation themselves. The student who secures his coveted leisure and retirement by systematically shirking...
any labor necessary to man obtains but an ignoble and unprofitable leisure, defrauding himself of the experience which alone can make leisure fruitful. “But,” says one, “you do not mean that the students should go to work with their hands instead of their heads?” I do not mean that exactly, but I mean something which he might think a good deal like that; I mean that they should not play life, or study it merely, while the community supports them at this expensive game, but earnestly live it from beginning to end. How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experiment of living? Methinks this would exercise their minds as much as mathematics. If I wished a boy to know something about the arts and sciences, for instance, I would not pursue the common course, which is merely to send him into the neighborhood of some professor, where anything is professed and practised but the art of life; to survey the world through a telescope or a microscope, and never with his natural eye; to study chemistry, and not learn how his bread is made, or mechanics, and not learn how it is earned; to discover new satellites to Neptune, and not detect the motes in his eyes, or to what vagabond he is a satellite himself; or to be devoured by the monsters that swarm all around him, while contemplating the monsters in a drop of vinegar. Which would have advanced the most at the end of a month- the boy who had made his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted, reading as much as would be necessary for this- or the boy who had attended the lectures on metallurgy at the Institute in the meanwhile, and had received a Rodgers penknife from his father? Which would be most likely to cut his fingers?... To my astonishment I was informed on leaving college that I had studied navigation!- why, if I had taken one turn down the harbor I should have known more about it. Even the poor student studies and is taught only political economy, while that economy of living which is synonymous with philosophy is not even sincerely professed in our colleges. The consequence is, that while he is reading Adam Smith, Ricardo, and Say, he runs his father in debt irretrievably.

As with our colleges, so with a hundred “modern improvements”; there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly. We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the Old World some weeks nearer to the New; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that the Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough. After all, the man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not carry the most important messages; he is not an evangelist, nor
does he come round eating locusts and wild honey. I doubt if Flying Childers ever carried a peck of corn to mill.

One says to me, “I wonder that you do not lay up money; you love to travel; you might take the cars and go to Fitchburg today and see the country.” But I am wiser than that. I have learned that the swiftest traveller is he that goes afoot. I say to my friend, Suppose we try who will get there first. The distance is thirty miles; the fare ninety cents. That is almost a day’s wages. I remember when wages were sixty cents a day for laborers on this very road. Well, I start now on foot, and get there before night; I have travelled at that rate by the week together. You will in the meanwhile have earned your fare, and arrive there some time tomorrow, or possibly this evening, if you are lucky enough to get a job in season. Instead of going to Fitchburg, you will be working here the greater part of the day. And so, if the railroad reached round the world, I think that I should keep ahead of you; and as for seeing the country and getting experience of that kind, I should have to cut your acquaintance altogether.

Such is the universal law, which no man can ever outwit, and with regard to the railroad even we may say it is as broad as it is long. To make a railroad round the world available to all mankind is equivalent to grading the whole surface of the planet. Men have an indistinct notion that if they keep up this activity of joint stocks and spades long enough all will at length ride somewhere, in next to no time, and for nothing; but though a crowd rushes to the depot, and the conductor shouts “All aboard!” when the smoke is blown away and the vapor condensed, it will be perceived that a few are riding, but the rest are run over—and it will be, “A melancholy accident.” No doubt they can ride at last who shall have earned their fare, that is, if they survive so long, but they will probably have lost their elasticity and desire to travel by that time. This spending of the best part of one’s life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once. “What!” exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, “is not this railroad which we have built a good thing?” Yes, I answer, comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have spent your time better than digging in this dirt.

Before I finished my house, wishing to earn ten or twelve dollars by some honest and agreeable method, in order to meet my unusual expenses, I planted about two acres and a half of light and sandy soil near it chiefly with beans, but also a small part with potatoes, corn, peas, and turnips. The whole lot contains eleven acres, mostly growing up to pines and hickories, and was sold the preceding season for eight dollars and eight cents an acre. One farmer said that it was “good for nothing but to raise cheeping squirrels on.” I put no manure whatever on this land, not being the owner, but merely a squatter; and not expecting to cultivate so much again, and I did not quite hoe it all once. I got out several cords of stumps in plowing, which
supplied me with fuel for a long time, and left small circles of virgin mould, easily distinguishable through the summer by the greater luxuriance of the beans there. The dead and for the most part unmerchantable wood behind my house, and the driftwood from the pond, have supplied the remainder of my fuel. I was obliged to hire a team and a man for the plowing, though I held the plow myself. My farm outgoes for the first season were, for implements, seed, work, etc., $14.72 1/2. The seed corn was given me. This never costs anything to speak of, unless you plant more than enough. I got twelve bushels of beans, and eighteen bushels of potatoes, beside some peas and sweet corn. The yellow corn and turnips were too late to come to anything. My whole income from the farm was

$ 23.44 Deducting the outgoes......... 14.72 1/2

----- There are left...............$ 8.71 1/2

beside produce consumed and on hand at the time this estimate was made of the value of $4.50- the amount on hand much more than balancing a little grass which I did not raise. All things considered, that is, considering the importance of a man’s soul and of today, notwithstanding the short time occupied by my experiment, nay, partly even because of its transient character, I believe that that was doing better than any farmer in Concord did that year.

The next year I did better still, for I spaded up all the land which I required, about a third of an acre, and I learned from the experience of both years, not being in the least awed by many celebrated works on husbandry, Arthur Young among the rest, that if one would live simply and eat only the crop which he raised, and raise no more than he ate, and not exchange it for an insufficient quantity of more luxurious and expensive things, he would need to cultivate only a few rods of ground, and that it would be cheaper to spade up that than to use oxen to plow it, and to select a fresh spot from time to time than to manure the old, and he could do all his necessary farm work as it were with his left hand at odd hours in the summer; and thus he would not be tied to an ox, or horse, or cow, or pig, as at present. I desire to speak impartially on this point, and as one not interested in the success or failure of the present economical and social arrangements. I was more independent than any farmer in Concord, for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius, which is a very crooked one, every moment. Beside being better off than they already, if my house had been burned or my crops had failed, I should have been nearly as well off as before.

I am wont to think that men are not so much the keepers of herds as herds are the keepers of men, the former are so much the freer. Men and oxen exchange work; but if we consider necessary work only, the oxen will be seen to have greatly the advantage, their farm is so much the larger. Man does some of his part of the exchange work in his six weeks of haying, and it is no boy’s play. Certainly no nation that lived simply in all respects, that is, no nation of philosophers, would commit so great a blunder as to use the labor of animals. True, there never was and is not likely soon
to be a nation of philosophers, nor am I certain it is desirable that there should be. However, I should never have broken a horse or bull and taken him to board for any work he might do for me, for fear I should become a horseman or a herdsman merely; and if society seems to be the gainer by so doing, are we certain that what is one man's gain is not another's loss, and that the stable-boy has equal cause with his master to be satisfied? Granted that some public works would not have been constructed without this aid, and let man share the glory of such with the ox and horse; does it follow that he could not have accomplished works yet more worthy of himself in that case? When men begin to do, not merely unnecessary or artistic, but luxurious and idle work, with their assistance, it is inevitable that a few do all the exchange work with the oxen, or, in other words, become the slaves of the strongest. Man thus not only works for the animal within him, but, for a symbol of this, he works for the animal without him. Though we have many substantial houses of brick or stone, the prosperity of the farmer is still measured by the degree to which the barn overshadows the house. This town is said to have the largest houses for oxen, cows, and horses hereabouts, and it is not behindhand in its public buildings; but there are very few halls for free worship or free speech in this county. It should not be by their architecture, but why not even by their power of abstract thought, that nations should seek to commemorate themselves? How much more admirable the Bhagvat-Geeta than all the ruins of the East! Towers and temples are the luxury of princes. A simple and independent mind does not toil at the bidding of any prince. Genius is not a retainer to any emperor, nor is its material silver, or gold, or marble, except to a trifling extent. To what end, pray, is so much stone hammered? In Arcadia, when I was there, I did not see any hammering stone. Nations are possessed with an insane ambition to perpetuate the memory of themselves by the amount of hammered stone they leave. What if equal pains were taken to smooth and polish their manners? One piece of good sense would be more memorable than a monument as high as the moon. I love better to see stones in place. The grandeur of Thebes was a vulgar grandeur. More sensible is a rod of stone wall that bounds an honest man's field than a hundred-gated Thebes that has wandered farther from the true end of life. The religion and civilization which are barbaric and heathenish build splendid temples; but what you might call Christianity does not. Most of the stone a nation hammers goes toward its tomb only. It buries itself alive. As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs. I might possibly invent some excuse for them and him, but I have no time for it. As for the religion and love of art of the builders, it is much the same all the world over, whether the building be an Egyptian temple or the United States Bank. It costs more than it comes to. The mainspring is vanity, assisted by the love of garlic and bread and butter. Mr. Balcom, a promising young architect, designs it on the back of his Vitruvius, with hard pencil and ruler, and the job is let out to Dobson & Sons, stonecutters. When the thirty centuries begin to look down on it, mankind begin to look up at it. As for your high towers and monuments, there was a crazy fellow once in this town who undertook
to dig through to China, and he got so far that, as he said, he heard the Chinese pots and kettles rattle; but I think that I shall not go out of my way to admire the hole which he made. Many are concerned about the monuments of the West and the East- to know who built them. For my part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them- who were above such trifling. But to proceed with my statistics.

By surveying, carpentry, and day-labor of various other kinds in the village in the meanwhile, for I have as many trades as fingers, I had earned $13.34. The expense of food for eight months, namely, from July 4th to March 1st, the time when these estimates were made, though I lived there more than two years- not counting potatoes, a little green corn, and some peas, which I had raised, nor considering the value of what was on hand at the last date- was

Rice......................$ 1.73 1/2
Molasses................. 1.73 (Cheapest form of the saccharine.)
Rye meal............... 1.04 3/4
Indian meal............. 0.99 3/4 (Cheaper than rye.)
Pork...................... 0.22
(All Experiments Which Failed)
Flour..................... 0.88 (Costs more than Indian meal, both money and trouble.)
Sugar..................... 0.80
Lard...................... 0.65
Apples............... 0.25
Dried apple........... 0.22
Sweet potatoes......... 0.10
One pumpkin........... 0.06
One watermelon........ 0.02
Salt...................... 0.03

Yes, I did eat $8.74, all told; but I should not thus unblushingly publish my guilt, if I did not know that most of my readers were equally guilty with myself, and that their deeds would look no better in print. The next year I sometimes caught a mess of fish for my dinner, and once I went so far as to slaughter a woodchuck which ravaged my bean-field- effect his transmigration, as a Tartar would say- and devour him, partly for experiment’s sake; but though it afforded me a momentary enjoyment, notwithstanding a musky flavor, I saw that the longest use would not
make that a good practice, however it might seem to have your woodchucks ready dressed by the village butcher.

Clothing and some incidental expenses within the same dates, though little can be inferred from this item, amounted to

$ 8.40 3/4

Oil and some household utensils........ 2.00

So that all the pecuniary outgoes, excepting for washing and mending, which for the most part were done out of the house, and their bills have not yet been received-and these are all and more than all the ways by which money necessarily goes out in this part of the world- were

House...................................$ 28.12 1/2

Farm one year......................... 14.72 1/2

Food eight months...................... 8.74

Clothing, etc., eight months.......... 8.40 3/4

Oil, etc., eight months............... 2.00

----- In all.................................$ 61.99 ¾

I address myself now to those of my readers who have a living to get. And to meet this I have for farm produce sold

$ 23.44

Earned by day-labor.................... 13.34

----- In all.................................$ 36.78

which subtracted from the sum of the outgoes leaves a balance of $25.21 3/4 on the one side- this being very nearly the means with which I started, and the measure of expenses to be incurred- and on the other, beside the leisure and independence and health thus secured, a comfortable house for me as long as I choose to occupy it.

These statistics, however accidental and therefore uninstructive they may appear, as they have a certain completeness, have a certain value also. Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account. It appears from the above estimate, that my food alone cost me in money about twenty-seven cents a week. It was, for nearly two years after this, rye and Indian meal without yeast, potatoes, rice, a very little salt pork, molasses, and salt; and my drink, water. It was fit that I should live on rice, mainly, who love so well the philosophy of India. To meet the objections of
some inveterate cavillers, I may as well state, that if I dined out occasionally, as I always had done, and I trust shall have opportunities to do again, it was frequently to the detriment of my domestic arrangements. But the dining out, being, as I have stated, a constant element, does not in the least affect a comparative statement like this.

I learned from my two years’ experience that it would cost incredibly little trouble to obtain one’s necessary food, even in this latitude; that a man may use as simple a diet as the animals, and yet retain health and strength. I have made a satisfactory dinner, satisfactory on several accounts, simply off a dish of purslane (Portulaca oleracea) which I gathered in my cornfield, boiled and salted. I give the Latin on account of the savoriness of the trivial name. And pray what more can a reasonable man desire, in peaceful times, in ordinary noons, than a sufficient number of ears of green sweet corn boiled, with the addition of salt? Even the little variety which I used was a yielding to the demands of appetite, and not of health. Yet men have come to such a pass that they frequently starve, not for want of necessaries, but for want of luxuries; and I know a good woman who thinks that her son lost his life because he took to drinking water only.

The reader will perceive that I am treating the subject rather from an economic than a dietetic point of view, and he will not venture to put my abstemiousness to the test unless he has a well-stocked larder.

Bread I at first made of pure Indian meal and salt, genuine hoe-cakes, which I baked before my fire out of doors on a shingle or the end of a stick of timber sawed off in building my house; but it was wont to get smoked and to have a piny flavor; I tried flour also; but have at last found a mixture of rye and Indian meal most convenient and agreeable. In cold weather it was no little amusement to bake several small loaves of this in succession, tending and turning them as carefully as an Egyptian his hatching eggs. They were a real cereal fruit which I ripened, and they had to my senses a fragrance like that of other noble fruits, which I kept in as long as possible by wrapping them in cloths. I made a study of the ancient and indispensable art of bread-making, consulting such authorities as offered, going back to the primitive days and first invention of the unleavened kind, when from the wildness of nuts and meats men first reached the mildness and refinement of this diet, and travelling gradually down in my studies through that accidental souring of the dough which, it is supposed, taught the leavening process, and through the various fermentations thereafter, till I came to “good, sweet, wholesome bread,” the staff of life. Leaven, which some deem the soul of bread, the spiritus which fills its cellular tissue, which is religiously preserved like the vestal fire- some precious bottleful, I suppose, first brought over in the Mayflower, did the business for America, and its influence is still rising, swelling, spreading, in cerealian billows over the land- this seed I regularly and faithfully procured from the village, till at length one morning I forgot the rules, and scalded my yeast; by which accident I discovered that even this was not indispensable- for my discoveries were not by the synthetic but analytic process- and I have gladly omitted it since, though most housewives earnestly
assured me that safe and wholesome bread without yeast might not be, and elderly people prophesied a speedy decay of the vital forces. Yet I find it not to be an essential ingredient, and after going without it for a year am still in the land of the living; and I am glad to escape the trivialness of carrying a bottleful in my pocket, which would sometimes pop and discharge its contents to my discomfiture. It is simpler and more respectable to omit it. Man is an animal who more than any other can adapt himself to all climates and circumstances. Neither did I put any sal-soda, or other acid or alkali, into my bread. It would seem that I made it according to the recipe which Marcus Porcius Cato gave about two centuries before Christ. “Panem depesticium sic facito. Manus mortariumque bene lavato. Farinam in mortarium indito, aquae paulatim addito, subigitoque pulchre. Ubi bene subegeris, defingito, coquitoque sub testu.” Which I take to mean,- “Make kneaded bread thus. Wash your hands and trough well. Put the meal into the trough, add water gradually, and knead it thoroughly. When you have kneaded it well, mould it, and bake it under a cover,” that is, in a baking-kettle. Not a word about leaven. But I did not always use this staff of life. At one time, owing to the emptiness of my purse, I saw none of it for more than a month.

Every New Englander might easily raise all his own breadstuffs in this land of rye and Indian corn, and not depend on distant and fluctuating markets for them. Yet so far are we from simplicity and independence that, in Concord, fresh and sweet meal is rarely sold in the shops, and hominy and corn in a still coarser form are hardly used by any. For the most part the farmer gives to his cattle and hogs the grain of his own producing, and buys flour, which is at least no more wholesome, at a greater cost, at the store. I saw that I could easily raise my bushel or two of rye and Indian corn, for the former will grow on the poorest land, and the latter does not require the best, and grind them in a hand-mill, and so do without rice and pork; and if I must have some concentrated sweet, I found by experiment that I could make a very good molasses either of pumpkins or beets, and I knew that I needed only to set out a few maples to obtain it more easily still, and while these were growing I could use various substitutes beside those which I have named. “For,” as the Forefathers sang,

“we can make liquor to sweeten our lips Of pumpkins and parsnips and walnut-tree chips.”

Finally, as for salt, that grossest of groceries, to obtain this might be a fit occasion for a visit to the seashore, or, if I did without it altogether, I should probably drink the less water. I do not learn that the Indians ever troubled themselves to go after it. Thus I could avoid all trade and barter; so far as my food was concerned, and having a shelter already, it would only remain to get clothing and fuel. The pantaloons which I now wear were woven in a farmer’s family- thank Heaven there is so much virtue still in man; for I think the fall from the farmer to the operative as great and memorable as that from the man to the farmer; and in a new country, fuel is an encumbrance. As for a habitat, if I were not permitted still to squat, I might purchase one acre at the same price for which the land I cultivated was sold- namely, eight
dollars and eight cents. But as it was, I considered that I enhanced the value of the land by squatting on it.

There is a certain class of unbelievers who sometimes ask me such questions as, if I think that I can live on vegetable food alone; and to strike at the root of the matter at once- for the root is faith- I am accustomed to answer such, that I can live on board nails. If they cannot understand that, they cannot understand much that I have to say. For my part, I am glad to bear of experiments of this kind being tried; as that a young man tried for a fortnight to live on hard, raw corn on the ear, using his teeth for all mortar. The squirrel tribe tried the same and succeeded. The human race is interested in these experiments, though a few old women who are incapacitated for them, or who own their thirds in mills, may be alarmed.

My furniture, part of which I made myself- and the rest cost me nothing of which I have not rendered an account- consisted of a bed, a table, a desk, three chairs, a looking-glass three inches in diameter; a pair of tongs and andirons, a kettle, a skillet, and a frying-pan, a dipper; a wash-bowl, two knives and forks, three plates, one cup, one spoon, a jug for oil, a jug for molasses, and a japanned lamp. None is so poor that he need sit on a pumpkin. That is shiftlessness. There is a plenty of such chairs as I like best in the village garrets to be had for taking them away. Furniture! Thank God, I can sit and I can stand without the aid of a furniture warehouse. What man but a philosopher would not be ashamed to see his furniture packed in a cart and going up country exposed to the light of heaven and the eyes of men, a beggarly account of empty boxes? That is Spaulding’s furniture. I could never tell from inspecting such a load whether it belonged to a so-called rich man or a poor one; the owner always seemed poverty-stricken. Indeed, the more you have of such things the poorer you are. Each load looks as if it contained the contents of a dozen shanties; and if one shanty is poor, this is a dozen times as poor. Pray, for what do we move ever but to get rid of our furniture, our exuviae; at last to go from this world to another newly furnished, and leave this to be burned? It is the same as if all these traps were buckled to a man’s belt, and he could not move over the rough country where our lines are cast without dragging them- dragging his trap. He was a lucky fox that left his tail in the trap. The muskrat will gnaw his third leg off to be free. No wonder man has lost his elasticity. How often he is at a dead set! “Sir, if I may be so bold, what do you mean by a dead set?” If you are a seer, whenever you meet a man you will see all that he owns, ay, and much that he pretends to disown, behind him, even to his kitchen furniture and all the trumpery which he saves and will not burn, and he will appear to be harnessed to it and making what headway he can. I think that the man is at a dead set who has got through a knot-hole or gateway where his sledge load of furniture cannot follow him. I cannot but feel compassion when I hear some trig, compact-looking man, seemingly free, all girded and ready, speak of his “furniture,” as whether it is insured or not. “But what shall I do with my furniture?”- My gay butterfly is entangled in a spider’s web then. Even those who seem for a long while not to have any, if you inquire more narrowly you will find have some stored in somebody’s barn. I look upon England today as an old gentleman
who is travelling with a great deal of baggage, trumpery which has accumulated from long housekeeping, which he has not the courage to burn; great trunk, little trunk, bandbox, and bundle. Throw away the first three at least. It would surpass the powers of a well man nowadays to take up his bed and walk, and I should certainly advise a sick one to lay down his bed and run. When I have met an immigrant tottering under a bundle which contained his all- looking like an enormous well which had grown out of the nape of his neck- I have pitied him, not because that was his all, but because he had all that to carry. If I have got to drag my trap, I will take care that it be a light one and do not nip me in a vital part. But perchance it would be wisest never to put one's paw into it.

I would observe, by the way, that it costs me nothing for curtains, for I have no gazers to shut out but the sun and moon, and I am willing that they should look in. The moon will not sour milk nor taint meat of mine, nor will the sun injure my furniture or fade my carpet; and if he is sometimes too warm a friend, I find it still better economy to retreat behind some curtain which nature has provided, than to add a single item to the details of housekeeping. A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door. It is best to avoid the beginnings of evil.

Not long since I was present at the auction of a deacon's effects, for his life had not been ineffectual:

“The evil that men do lives after them.”

As usual, a great proportion was trumpery which had begun to accumulate in his father's day. Among the rest was a dried tapeworm. And now, after lying half a century in his garret and other dust holes, these things were not burned; instead of a bonfire, or purifying destruction of them, there was an auction, or increasing of them. The neighbors eagerly collected to view them, bought them all, and carefully transported them to their garrets and dust holes, to lie there till their estates are settled, when they will start again. When a man dies he kicks the dust.

The customs of some savage nations might, perchance, be profitably imitated by us, for they at least go through the semblance of casting their slough annually; they have the idea of the thing, whether they have the reality or not. Would it not be well if we were to celebrate such a "busk," or "feast of first fruits," as Bartram describes to have been the custom of the Mucclasse Indians? "When a town celebrates the busk," says he, "having previously provided themselves with new clothes, new pots, pans, and other household utensils and furniture, they collect all their worn out clothes and other despicable things, sweep and cleanse their houses, squares, and the whole town of their filth, which with all the remaining grain and other old provisions they cast together into one common heap, and consume it with fire. After having taken medicine, and fasted for three days, all the fire in the town is extinguished. During this fast they abstain from the gratification of every appetite and
passion whatever. A general amnesty is proclaimed; all malefactors may return to their town.”

“On the fourth morning, the high priest, by rubbing dry wood together, produces new fire in the public square, from whence every habitation in the town is supplied with the new and pure flame.” They then feast on the new corn and fruits, and dance and sing for three days, “and the four following days they receive visits and rejoice with their friends from neighboring towns who have in like manner purified and prepared themselves.”

The Mexicans also practised a similar purification at the end of every fifty-two years, in the belief that it was time for the world to come to an end.

I have scarcely heard of a truer sacrament, that is, as the dictionary defines it, - outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace,” than this, and I have no doubt that they were originally inspired directly from Heaven to do thus, though they have no Biblical record of the revelation.

For more than five years I maintained myself thus solely by the labor of my hands, and I found that, by working about six weeks in a year; I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear for study. I have thoroughly tried school-keeping, and found that my expenses were in proportion, or rather out of proportion, to my income, for I was obliged to dress and train, not to say think and believe, accordingly, and I lost my time into the bargain. As I did not teach for the good of my fellow-men, but simply for a livelihood, this was a failure. I have tried trade; but I found that it would take ten years to get under way in that, and that then I should probably be on my way to the devil. I was actually afraid that I might by that time be doing what is called a good business. When formerly I was looking about to see what I could do for a living, some sad experience in conforming to the wishes of friends being fresh in my mind to tax my ingenuity, I thought often and seriously of picking huckleberries; that surely I could do, and its small profits might suffice- for my greatest skill has been to want but little- so little capital it required, so little distraction from my wonted moods, I foolishly thought. While my acquaintances went unhesitatingly into trade or the professions, I contemplated this occupation as most like theirs; ranging the hills all summer to pick the berries which came in my way, and thereafter carelessly dispose of them; so, to keep the flocks of Admetus. I also dreamed that I might gather the wild herbs, or carry evergreens to such villagers as loved to be reminded of the woods, even to the city, by hay-cart loads. But I have since learned that trade curses everything it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business.

As I preferred some things to others, and especially valued my freedom, as I could fare hard and yet succeed well, I did not wish to spend my time in earning rich carpets or other fine furniture, or delicate cookery, or a house in the Grecian or the Gothic style just yet. If there are any to whom it is no interruption to acquire these
things, and who know how to use them when acquired, I relinquish to them the pur-
suit. Some are “industrious;” and appear to love labor for its own sake, or perhaps
because it keeps them out of worse mischief; to such I have at present nothing to
say. Those who would not know what to do with more leisure than they now enjoy,
I might advise to work twice as hard as they do- work till they pay for themselves,
and get their free papers. For myself I found that the occupation of a day-laborer
was the most independent of any, especially as it required only thirty or forty days
in a year to support one. The laborer’s day ends with the going down of the sun, and
he is then free to devote himself to his chosen pursuit, independent of his labor; but
his employer, who speculates from month to month, has no respite from one end of
the year to the other. In short, I am convinced, both by faith and experience, that to
maintain one’s self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live sim-
ply and wisely; as the pursuits of the simpler nations are still the sports of the more
artificial. It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his
brow, unless he sweats easier than I do. One young man of my acquaintance, who
has inherited some acres, told me that he thought he should live as I did, if he had
the means. I would not have any one adopt my mode of living on any account; for,
beside that before he has fairly learned it I may have found out another for myself,
I desire that there may be as many different persons in the world as possible; but
I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue his own way, and not
his father’s or his mother’s or his neighbor’s instead. The youth may build or plant
or sail, only let him not be hindered from doing that which he tells me he would like
to do. It is by a mathematical point only that we are wise, as the sailor or the fugitive
slave keeps the polestar in his eye; but that is sufficient guidance for all our life. We
may not arrive at our port within a calculable period, but we would preserve the
true course.

Undoubtedly, in this case, what is true for one is truer still for a thousand, as a
large house is not proportionally more expensive than a small one, since one roof
may cover; one cellar underlie, and one wall separate several apartments. But for
my part, I preferred the solitary dwelling. Moreover, it will commonly be cheaper
to build the whole yourself than to convince another of the advantage of the com-
mon wall; and when you have done this, the common partition, to be much cheaper;
must be a thin one, and that other may prove a bad neighbor, and also not keep
his side in repair. The only cooperation which is commonly possible is exceed-
ingly partial and superficial; and what little true cooperation there is, is as if it were
not, being a harmony inaudible to men. If a man has faith, he will cooperate with
equal faith everywhere; if he has not faith, he will continue to live like the rest of the
world, whatever company he is joined to. To cooperate in the highest as well as the
lowest sense, means to get our living together. I heard it proposed lately that two
young men should travel together over the world, the one without money, earning
his means as he went, before the mast and behind the plow, the other carrying a bill
of exchange in his pocket. It was easy to see that they could not long be compan-
ions or cooperate, since one would not operate at all. They would part at the first
interesting crisis in their adventures. Above all, as I have implied, the man who goes
alone can start today; but he who travels with another must wait till that other is ready, and it may be a long time before they get off.

But all this is very selfish, I have heard some of my townsmen say. I confess that I have hither- to indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises. I have made some sacrifices to a sense of duty, and among others have sacrificed this pleasure also. There are those who have used all their arts to persuade me to undertake the support of some poor family in the town; and if I had nothing to do- for the devil finds employment for the idle- I might try my hand at some such pastime as that. However, when I have thought to indulge myself in this respect, and lay their Heaven under an obligation by maintaining certain poor persons in all respects as comfortably as I maintain myself, and have even ventured so far as to make them the offer, they have one and all unhesitatingly preferred to remain poor. While my townsmen and women are devoted in so many ways to the good of their fellows, I trust that one at least may be spared to other and less humane pursuits. You must have a genius for charity as well as for anything else. As for Doing-good, that is one of the professions which are full. Moreover, I have tried it fairly, and, strange as it may seem, am satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution. Probably I should not consciously and deliberately forsake my particular calling to do the good which society demands of me, to save the universe from annihilation; and I believe that a like but infinitely greater steadfastness elsewhere is all that now preserves it. But I would not stand between any man and his genius; and to him who does this work, which I decline, with his whole heart and soul and life, I would say, Persevere, even if the world call it doing evil, as it is most likely they will.

I am far from supposing that my case is a peculiar one; no doubt many of my readers would make a similar defence. At doing something- I will not engage that my neighbors shall pronounce it good- I do not hesitate to say that I should be a capital fellow to hire; but what that is, it is for my employer to find out. What good I do, in the common sense of that word, must be aside from my main path, and for the most part wholly unintended. Men say, practically, Begin where you are and such as you are, without aiming mainly to become of more worth, and with kindness aforethought go about doing good. If I were to preach at all in this strain, I should say rather, Set about being good. As if the sun should stop when he had kindled his fires up to the splendor of a moon or a star of the sixth magnitude, and go about like a Robin Goodfellow, peeping in at every cottage window, inspiring lunatics, and tainting meats, and making darkness visible, instead of steadily increasing his genial heat and beneficence till he is of such brightness that no mortal can look him in the face, and then, and in the meanwhile too, going about the world in his own orbit, doing it good, or rather, as a truer philosophy has discovered, the world going about him getting good. When Phaeton, wishing to prove his heavenly birth by his beneficence, had the sun’s chariot but one day, and drove out of the beaten track, he burned several blocks of houses in the lower streets of heaven, and scorched the surface of the earth, and dried up every spring, and made the great desert of Sahara,
till at length Jupiter hurled him headlong to the earth with a thunderbolt, and the
sun, through grief at his death, did not shine for a year.

There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it
is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with
the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry
and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth
and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should
get some of his good done to me—some of its virus mingled with my blood. No— in
this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way. A man is not a good man to me
because he will feed me if I should be starving, or warm me if I should be freezing,
or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland
dog that will do as much. Philanthropy is not love for one’s fellow-man in the broad-
est sense. Howard was no doubt an exceedingly kind and worthy man in his way,
and has his reward; but, comparatively speaking, what are a hundred Howards to
us, if their philanthropy do not help us in our best estate, when we are most worthy
to be helped? I never heard of a philanthropic meeting in which it was sincerely
proposed to do any good to me, or the like of me.

The Jesuits were quite balked by those indians who, being burned at the stake,
suggested new modes of torture to their tormentors. Being superior to physical suf-
fering, it sometimes chanced that they were superior to any consolation which the
missionaries could offer; and the law to do as you would be done by fell with less
persuasiveness on the ears of those who, for their part, did not care how they were
done by, who loved their enemies after a new fashion, and came very near freely
forgiving them all they did.

Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example
which leaves them far behind. If you give money, spend yourself with it, and do
not merely abandon it to them. We make curious mistakes sometimes. Often the
poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly
his taste, and not merely his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps
buy more rags with it. I was wont to pity the clumsy Irish laborers who cut ice on
the pond, in such mean and ragged clothes, while I shivered in my more tidy and
somewhat more fashionable garments, till, one bitter cold day, one who had slipped
into the water came to my house to warm him, and I saw him strip off three pairs of
pants and two pairs of stockings ere he got down to the skin, though they were dirty
and ragged enough, it is true, and that he could afford to refuse the extra garments
which I offered him, he had so many intra ones. This ducking was the very thing he
needed. Then I began to pity myself, and I saw that it would be a greater charity to
bestow on me a flannel shirt than a whole slop-shop on him. There are a thousand
hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root, and it may be that
he who bestows the largest amount of time and money on the needy is doing the
most by his mode of life to produce that misery which he strives in vain to relieve.
It is the pious slave-breeder devoting the proceeds of every tenth slave to buy a Sun-
day’s liberty for the rest. Some show their kindness to the poor by employing them
in their kitchens. Would they not be kinder if they employed themselves there? You boast of spending a tenth part of your income in charity; maybe you should spend the nine tenths so, and done with it. Society recovers only a tenth part of the property then. Is this owing to the generosity of him in whose possession it is found, or to the remissness of the officers of justice?

Philanthropy is almost the only virtue which is sufficiently appreciated by mankind. Nay, it is greatly overrated; and it is our selfishness which overrates it. A robust poor man, one sunny day here in Concord, praised a fellow-townsmen to me, because, as he said, he was kind to the poor; meaning himself. The kind uncles and aunts of the race are more esteemed than its true spiritual fathers and mothers. I once heard a reverend lecturer on England, a man of learning and intelligence, after enumerating her scientific, literary, and political worthies, Shakespeare, Bacon, Cromwell, Milton, Newton, and others, speak next of her Christian heroes, whom, as if his profession required it of him, he elevated to a place far above all the rest, as the greatest of the great. They were Penn, Howard, and Mrs. Fry. Every one must feel the falsehood and cant of this. The last were not England’s best men and women; only, perhaps, her best philanthropists.

I would not subtract anything from the praise that is due to philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind. I do not value chiefly a man’s uprightness and benevolence, which are, as it were, his stem and leaves. Those plants of whose greenness withered we make herb tea for the sick serve but a humble use, and are most employed by quacks. I want the flower and fruit of a man; that some fragrance be wafted over from him to me, and some ripeness flavor our intercourse. His goodness must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious. This is a charity that hides a multitude of sins. The philanthropist too often surrounds mankind with the remembrance of his own castoff griefs as an atmosphere, and calls it sympathy. We should impart our courage, and not our despair; our health and ease, and not our disease, and take care that this does not spread by contagion. From what southern plains comes up the voice of wailing? Under what latitudes reside the heathen to whom we would send light? Who is that intemperate and brutal man whom we would redeem? If anything ail a man, so that he does not perform his functions, if he have a pain in his bowels even for that is the seat of sympathy he forthwith sets about reforming the world. Being a microcosm himself, he discovers and it is a true discovery, and he is the man to make it that the world has been eating green apples; to his eyes, in fact, the globe itself is a great green apple, which there is danger awful to think of that the children of men will nibble before it is ripe; and straightway his drastic philanthropy seeks out the Esquimaux and the Patagonian, and embraces the populous Indian and Chinese villages; and thus, by a few years of philanthropic activity, the powers in the meanwhile using him for their own ends, no doubt, he cures himself of his dyspepsia, the globe acquires a faint blush on one or both of its cheeks, as if it were beginning to be ripe, and life loses its crudity and is once more sweet and wholesome to live. I never
dreamed of any enormity greater than I have committed. I never knew, and never shall know, a worse man than myself.

I believe that what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress, but, though he be the holiest son of God, is his private ail. Let this be righted, let the spring come to him, the morning rise over his couch, and he will forsake his generous companions without apology. My excuse for not lecturing against the use of tobacco is, that I never chewed it, that is a penalty which reformed tobacco-chewers have to pay; though there are things enough I have chewed which I could lecture against. If you should ever be betrayed into any of these philanthropies, do not let your left hand know what your right hand does, for it is not worth knowing. Rescue the drowning and tie your shoestrings. Take your time, and set about some free labor.

Our manners have been corrupted by communication with the saints. Our hymn-books resound with a melodious cursing of God and enduring Him forever. One would say that even the prophets and redeemers had rather consoled the fears than confirmed the hopes of man. There is nowhere recorded a simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life, any memorable praise of God. All health and success does me good, however far off and withdrawn it may appear; all disease and failure helps to make me sad and does me evil, however much sympathy it may have with me or I with it. If, then, we would indeed restore mankind by truly Indian, botanic, magnetic, or natural means, let us first be as simple and well as Nature ourselves, dispel the clouds which hang over our own brows, and take up a little life into our pores. Do not stay to be an overseer of the poor, but endeavor to become one of the worthies of the world.

I read in the Gulistan, or Flower Garden, of Sheik Sadi of Shiraz, that “they asked a wise man, saying: Of the many celebrated trees which the Most High God has created lofty and umbrageous, they call none azad, or free, excepting the cypress, which bears no fruit; what mystery is there in this? He replied: Each has its appropriate produce, and appointed season, during the continuance of which it is fresh and blooming, and during their absence dry and withered; to neither of which states is the cypress exposed, being always flourishing; and of this nature are the azads, or independent.- Fix not thy heart on that which is transitory; for the Dijlah, or Tigris, will continue to flow through Bagdad after the race of caliphs is extinct: if thy hand has plenty, be liberal as the date tree; but if it affords nothing to give away, be an azad, or free man, like the cypress.”

COMPLEMENTAL VERSES.

The Pretensions of Poverty.

*Thou dost presume too much, poor needy wretch,*
*To claim a station in the firmament*
Because thy humble cottage, or thy tub,
Nurses some lazy or pedantic virtue
In the cheap sunshine or by shady springs,
With roots and pot-herbs; where thy right hand,
Tearing those humane passions from the mind,
Upon whose stocks fair blooming virtues flourish,
Degradeth nature, and benumbeth sense,
And, Gorgon-like, turns active men to stone.
We not require the dull society
Of your necessitated temperance,
Or that unnatural stupidity
That knows nor joy nor sorrow; nor your forc’d
Falsely exalted passive fortitude
Above the active. This low abject brood,
That fix their seats in mediocrity,
Become your servile minds; but we advance
Such virtues only as admit excess,
Brave, bounteous acts, regal magnificence,
All-seeing prudence, magnanimity
That knows no bound, and that heroic virtue
For which antiquity hath left no name,
But patterns only, such as Hercules,
Achilles, Theseus. Back to thy loath’d cell;
And when thou seest the new enlightened sphere,
Study to know but what those worthies were.
WHERE I LIVED, AND WHAT I LIVED FOR.

AT A CERTAIN season of our life we are accustomed to consider every spot as
the possible site of a house. I have thus surveyed the country on every side within
a dozen miles of where I live. In imagination I have bought all the farms in succes-
sion, for all were to be bought, and I knew their price. I walked over each farmer’s
premises, tasted his wild apples, discoursed on husbandry with him, took his farm
at his price, at any price, mortgaging it to him in my mind; even put a higher price
on it- took everything but a deed of it-took his word for his deed, for I dearly love
to talk- cultivated it, and him too to some extent, I trust, and withdrew when I had
enjoyed it long enough, leaving him to carry it on. This experience entitled me to
be regarded as a sort of real-estate broker by my friends. Wherever I sat, there I
might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a
sedes, a seat?-better if a country seat. I discovered many a site for a house not likely
to be soon improved, which some might have thought too far from the village, but
to my eyes the village was too far from it. Well, there I might live, I said; and there I
did live, for an hour, a summer and a winter life; saw how I could let the years run
off, buffet the winter through, and see the spring come in. The future inhabitants
of this region, wherever they may place their houses, may be sure that they have
been anticipated. An afternoon sufficed to lay out the land into orchard, wood-lot,
and pasture, and to decide what fine oaks or pines should be left to stand before the
door, and whence each blasted tree could be seen to the best advantage; and then
I let it lie, fallow, perchance, for a man is rich in proportion to the number of things
which he can afford to let alone.

My imagination carried me so far that I even had the refusal of several farms-
the refusal was all I wanted- but I never got my fingers burned by actual posses-
sion. The nearest that I came to actual possession was when I bought the Hollowell
place, and had begun to sort my seeds, and collected materials with which to make
a wheelbarrow to carry it on or off with; but before the owner gave me a deed of it,
his wife- every man has such a wife- changed her mind and wished to keep it, and
he offered me ten dollars to release him. Now, to speak the truth, I had but ten cents
in the world, and it surpassed my arithmetic to tell, if I was that man who had ten
cents, or who had a farm, or ten dollars, or all together. However, I let him keep the
ten dollars and the farm too, for I had carried it far enough; or rather, to be generous,
I sold him the farm for just what I gave for it, and, as he was not a rich man, made
him a present of ten dollars, and still had my ten cents, and seeds, and materials for
a wheelbarrow left. I found thus that I had been a rich man without any damage to
my poverty. But I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what
it yielded without a wheelbarrow. With respect to landscapes,

“I am monarch of all I survey. My right there is none to dispute.”

I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part
of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only.
Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk.

The real attractions of the Hollowell farm, to me, were: its complete retirement, being, about two miles from the village, half a mile from the nearest neighbor, and separated from the highway by abroad field; its bounding on the river, which the owner said protected it by its fogs from frosts in the spring, though that was nothing tame; the gray color and ruinous state of the house and barn, and the dilapidated fences, which put such an interval between me and the last occupant; the hollow and lichen-covered apple trees, nawned by rabbits, showing what kind of neighbors I should have; but above all, the recollection I had of it from my earliest voyages up the river, when the house was concealed behind a dense grove of red maples, through which I heard the house-dog bark. I was in haste to buy it, before the proprietor finished getting out some rocks, cutting down the hollow apple trees, and grubbing up some young birches which had sprung up in the pasture, or, in short, had made any more of his improvements. To enjoy these advantages I was ready to carry it on; like Atlas, to take the world on my shoulders- I never heard what compensation he received for that- and do all those things which had no other motive or excuse but that I might pay for it and be unmolested in my possession of it; for I knew all the while that it would yield the most abundant crop of the kind I wanted, if I could only afford to let it alone. But it turned out as I have said.

All that I could say, then, with respect to farming on a large scale- I have always cultivated a garden- was, that I had had my seeds ready. Many think that seeds improve with age. I have no doubt that time discriminates between the good and the bad; and when at last I shall plant, I shall be less likely to be disappointed. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.

Old Cato, whose “De Re Rustica” is my “Cultivator,” says- and the only translation I have seen makes sheer nonsense of the passage-"When you think of getting a farm turn it thus in your mind, not to buy greedily; nor spare your pains to look at it, and do not think it enough to go round it once. The oftener you go there the more it will please you, if it is good.” I think I shall not buy greedily, but go round and round it as long as I live, and be buried in it first, that it may please me the more at last.

The present was my next experiment of this kind, which I purpose to describe more at length, for convenience putting the experience of two years into one. As I have said, I do not propose to write anode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.

When first I took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as days there, which, by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain, without plastering or chimney, the walls being of rough, weather-stained
boards, with wide chinks, which made it cool at night. The upright white hewn studs and freshly planed door and windowcasings gave it a clean and airy look, especially in the morning, when its timbers were saturated with dew, so that I fancied that by noon some sweet gum would exude from them. To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited a year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere.

The only house I had been the owner of before, if I except a boat, was a tent, which I used occasionally when making excursions in the summer, and this is still rolled up in my garret; but the boat, after passing from hand to hand, has gone down the stream of time. With this more substantial shelter about me, I had made some progress toward settling in the world. This frame, so slightly clad, was a sort of crystallization around me, and reacted on the builder. It was suggestive somewhat as a picture in outlines. I did not need to go outdoors to take the air; for the atmosphere within had lost none of its freshness. It was not so much within doors as behind a door where I sat, even in the rainiest weather. The Harivansa says, “An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning.” Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. I was not only nearer to some of those which commonly frequent the garden and the orchard, but to those smaller and more thrilling songsters of the forest which never, or rarely, serenade a villager—the wood thrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager, the field sparrow, the whip-poor-will, and many others.

I was seated by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln, and about two miles south of that our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground; but I was so low in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, covered with wood, was my most distant horizon. For the first week, whenever I looked out on the pond it impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom far above the surface of other lakes, and, as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle. The very dew seemed to hang upon the trees later into the day than usual, as on the sides of mountains.

This small lake was of most value as a neighbor in the intervals of a gentle rainstorm in August, when, both air and water being perfectly still, but the sky overcast, mid-afternoon had all the serenity of evening, and the wood thrush sang around, and was heard from shore to shore. A lake like this is never smoother than at such a time; and the clear portion of the air above it being, shallow and darkened by clouds,
the water, full of light and reflections, becomes a lower heaven itself so much the more important. From a hill-top near by, where the wood had been recently cut off, there was a pleasing vista southward across the pond, through a wide indentation in the hills which form the shore there, where their opposite sides sloping toward each other suggested a stream flowing out in that direction through a wooded valley, but stream there was none. That way I looked between and over the near green hills to some distant and higher ones in the horizon, tinged with blue. Indeed, by standing on tiptoe I could catch a glimpse of some of the peaks of the still bluer and more distant mountain ranges in the northwest, those true-blue coins from heaven's own mint, and also of some portion of the village. But in other directions, even from this point, I could not see over or beyond the woods which surrounded me. It is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular. This is as important as that it keeps butter cool. When I looked across the pond from this peak toward the Sudbury meadows, which in time of flood I distinguished elevated perhaps by a mirage in their seething valley, like a coin in a basin, all the earth beyond the pond appeared like a thin crust insulated and floated even by this small sheet of interverting water, and I was reminded that this on which I dwelt was but dry land.

Though the view from my door was still more contracted, I did not feel crowded or confined in the least. There was pasture enough for my imagination. The low shrub oak plateau to which the opposite shore arose stretched away toward the prairies of the West and the steppes of Tartary, affording ample room for all the roving families of men. “There are none happy in the world but beings who enjoy freely a vast horizon”- said Damodara, when his herds required new and larger pastures.

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe. If it were worth the while to settle in those parts near to the Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair, then I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind, dwindled and twinkling with as fine a ray to my nearest neighbor, and to be seen only in moonless nights by him. Such was that part of creation where I had squatted;

“There was a shepherd that did live, And held his thoughts as high As were the mounts whereon his flocks Did hourly feed him by.”

What should we think of the shepherd's life if his flocks always wandered to higher pastures than his thoughts?
Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself. I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraved on the bathing tub of King Tching-thang to this effect: "Renew thyself completely each day; do it again, and again, and forever again." I can understand that. Morning brings back the heroic ages. I was as much affected by the faint burn of a mosquito making its invisible and unimaginable tour through my apartment at earliest dawn, when I was sailing with door and windows open, as I could be by any trumpet that ever sang of fame. It was Homer’s requiem; itself an Iliad and Odyssey in the air, singing its own wrath and wanderings. There was something cosmical about it; a standing advertisement, till forbidden, of the everlasting vigor and fertility of the world. The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, but by the mechanical nudgings of some servitor, are not awakened by our own newly acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance filling the air— to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bear its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light. That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred, and auroral hour than he has yet profaned, has despair’d of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation of his sensuous life, the soul of man, or its organs rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make. All memorable events, I should say, transpire in morning time and in a morning atmosphere. The Vedas say, “All intelligences awake with the morning.” Poetry and art, and the faire stand most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. All poets and heroes, like Memnon, are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise. To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning. It matters not what the clocks say or the attitudes and labors of men. Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep. Why is it that men give so poor an account of their day if they have not been slumbering? They are not such poor calculators. If they had not been overcome with drowsiness, they would have performed something. The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him in the face?

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it
is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour. If we refused, or rather used up, such paltry information as we get, the oracles would distinctly inform us how this might be done.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have somewhat hastily concluded that it is the chief end of man here to “glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

Still we live meanly, like ants; though the fable tells us that we were long ago changed into men; like pygmies we fight with cranes; it is error upon error, and clout upon clout, and our best virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable wretchedness. Our life is frittered away by detail. An honest man has hardly need to count more than his ten fingers, or in extreme cases he may add his ten toes, and lump the rest. Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail. In the midst of this chopping sea of civilized life, such are the clouds and storms and quicksands and thousand-and-one items to be allowed for, that a man has to live, if he would not founder and go to the bottom and not make his port at all, by dead reckoning, and he must be a great calculator indeed who succeeds. Simplify, simplify. Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one; instead of a hundred dishes, five; and reduce other things in proportion. Our life is like a German Confederacy, made up of petty states, with its boundary forever fluctuating, so that even a German cannot tell you how it is bounded at any moment. The nation itself, with all its so-called internal improvements, which, by the way are all external and superficial, is just such an unwieldy and overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture and tripped up by its own traps, ruined by luxury and heedless expense, by want of calculation and a worthy aim, as the million households in the land; and the only cure for it, as for them, is in a rigid economy, a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life and elevation of purpose. It lives too fast. Men think that it is essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride thirty miles an hour; without a doubt, whether they do or not; but whether we should live like baboons or like men, is a little uncertain. If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and
devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads? We do not ride on the railroad: it rides upon us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over: so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. And when they run over a man that is walking in his sleep, a supernumerary sleeper in the wrong position, and wake him up, they suddenly stop the cars, and make a hue and cry about it, as if this were an exception. I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again.

Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. Men say that a stitch in time saves nine, and so they take a thousand stitches today to save nine tomorrow. As for work, we haven’t any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus’ dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still. If I should only give a few pulls at the parish bell-rope, as for a fire, that is, without setting the bell, there is hardly a man on his farm in the outskirts of Concord, notwithstanding that press of engagements which was his excuse so many times this morning, nor a boy, nor a woman, I might almost say, I would almost say, but would forsake all and follow that sound, not mainly to save property from the flames, but, if we will confess the truth, much more to see it burn, since burn it must, and we, be it known, did not set it on fire- or to see it put out, and have a hand in it, if that is done as handsomely; yes, even if it were the parish church itself. Hardly a man takes a half-hour’s nap after dinner, but when he wakes he holds up his head and asks, “What’s the news?” as if the rest of mankind had stood his sentinels. Some give directions to be waked every half-hour; doubtless for no other purpose; and then, to pay for it, they tell what they have dreamed. After a night’s sleep the news is as indispensable as the breakfast. “Pray tell me anything new that has happened to a man anywhere on this globe”- and he reads it over his coffee and rolls, that a man has had his eyes gouged out this morning on the Wachito River; never dreaming the while that he lives in the dark unfathomed mammoth cave of this world, and has but the rudiment of an eye himself.

For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important communications made through it. To speak critically, I never received more than one or two letters in my life- I wrote this some years ago- that were worth the postage. The penny-post is, commonly, an institution through which you seriously offer a man that penny for his thoughts which is so often safely offered in jest. And I am sure that I never read any memorable news in a newspaper. If we read of one man robbed, or murdered, or killed by accident, or one house burned, or one vessel wrecked, or one steamboat blown up, or one cow run over on the
Western Railroad, or one mad dog killed, or one lot of grasshoppers in the winter-we never need read of another. One is enough. If you are acquainted with the principle, what do you care for a myriad instances and applications? To a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea. Yet not a few are greedy after this gossip. There was such a rush, as I hear, the other day at one of the offices to learn the foreign news by the last arrival, that several large squares of plate glass belonging to the establishment were broken by the pressure-news which I seriously think a ready wit might write a twelve-month, or twelve years, beforehand with sufficient accuracy. As for Spain, for instance, if you know how to throw in Don Carlos and the Infanta, and Don Pedro and Seville and Granada, from time to time in the right proportions-they may have changed the names a little since I saw the papers-and serve up a bull-fight when other entertainments fail, it will be true to the letter, and give us as good an idea of the exact state or ruin of things in Spain as the most succinct and lucid reports under this head in the newspapers: and as for England, almost the last significant scrap of news from that quarter was the revolution of 1649; and if you have learned the history of her crops for an average year, you never need attend to that thing again, unless your speculations are of a merely pecuniary character. If one may judge who rarely looks into the newspapers, nothing new does ever happen in foreign parts, a French revolution not excepted.

What news! how much more important to know what that is which was never old! "Kieou-he-yu (great dignitary of the state of Wei) sent a man to Khoung-tseu to know his news. Khoung-tseu caused the messenger to be seated near him, and questioned him in these terms: What is your master doing? The messenger answered with respect: My master desires to diminish the number of his faults, but he cannot come to the end of them. The messenger being gone, the philosopher remarked: What a worthy messenger! What a worthy messenger!" The preacher, instead of vexing the ears of drowsy farmers on their day of rest at the end of the week-for Sunday is the fit conclusion of an ill-spent week, and not the fresh and brave beginning of a new one-with this one other draggle-tail of a sermon, should shout with thundering voice, “Pause! Avast! Why so seeming fast, but deadly slow?”

Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence, that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which still is built on purely illusory foundations. Children, who play life, discern its true law and relations more clearly than men, who fail to live it worthily, but who think that they are wiser by experi-
ence, that is, by failure. I have read in a Hindoo book, that “there was a king’s son, who, being expelled in infancy from his native city, was brought up by a forester, and, growing up to maturity in that state, imagined himself to belong to the barbarous race with which he lived. One of his father’s ministers having discovered him, revealed to him what he was, and the misconception of his character was removed, and he knew himself to be a prince. So soul,” continues the Hindoo philosopher, “from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be Brahme.” I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life that we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that that is which appears to be. If a man should walk through this town and see only the reality, where, think you, would the “Mill-dam” go to? If he should give us an account of the realities he beheld there, we should not recognize the place in his description. Look at a meeting-house, or a court-house, or a jail, or a shop, or a dwelling-house, and say what that thing really is before a true gaze, and they would all go to pieces in your account of them. Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then. The poet or the artist never yet had so fair and noble a design but some of his posterity at least could accomplish it.

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito’s wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry—determined to make a day of it. Why should we knock under and go with the stream? Let us not be upset and overwhelmed in that terrible rapid and whirlpool called a dinner, situated in the meridian shallows. Weather this danger and you are safe, for the rest of the way is down hill. With unrelaxed nerves, with morning vigor, sail by it, looking another way, tied to the mast like Ulysses. If the engine whistles, let it whistle till it is hoarse for its pains. If the bell rings, why should we run? We will consider what kind of music they are like. Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d’appui, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state, or set a lamp-post safely, or perhaps a gauge, not a Nilometer, but a Realometer; that future ages might know how deep a freshet of shams and appearances had gath-
ered from time to time. If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will
see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet
dge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude
your mortal career. Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let
us hear the rattle in our throats and feel cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let
us go about our business.

Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the
sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity
remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars.
I cannot count one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been
regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born. The intellect is a cleaver;
it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things. I do not wish to be any more
busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best
culties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for bur-
rowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine
and burrow my way through these hills. I think that the richest vein is somewhere
hereabouts; so by the divining-rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will
begin to mine.
THIS IS A delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt-sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whip-poor-will is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the mind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature’s watchmen—links which connect the days of animated life.

When I return to my house I find that visitors have been there and left their cards, either a bunch of flowers, or a wreath of evergreen, or a name in pencil on a yellow walnut leaf or a chip. They who come rarely to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way, which they leave, either intentionally or accidentally. One has peeled a willow wand, woven it into a ring, and dropped it on my table. I could always tell if visitors had called in my absence, either by the bended twigs or grass, or the print of their shoes, and generally of what sex or age or quality they were by some slight trace left, as a flower dropped, or a bunch of grass plucked and thrown away, even as far off as the railroad, half a mile distant, or by the lingering odor of a cigar or pipe. Nay, I was frequently notified of the passage of a traveller along the highway sixty rods off by the scent of his pipe.

There is commonly sufficient space about us. Our horizon is never quite at our elbows. The thick wood is not just at our door, nor the pond, but somewhat is always clearing, familiar and worn by us, appropriated and fenced in some way, and reclaimed from Nature. For what reason have I this vast range and circuit, some square miles of unfrequented forest, for my privacy, abandoned to me by men? My nearest neighbor is a mile distant, and no house is visible from any place but the hill-tops within half a mile of my own. I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself; a distant view of the railroad where it touches the pond on the one hand, and of the fence which skirts the woodland road on the other. But for the most part it is as solitary where I live as on the prairies. It is as much Asia or Africa as New England. I have, as it were, my own sun and moon and stars, and a little world all to myself. At night there was never a traveller passed my house, or knocked at my door, more than if I were the first or last man; unless it were in the spring, when at long intervals some came from the village to fish for pouts— they plainly fished much more in the Walden Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with
darkness— but they soon retreated, usually with light baskets, and left “the world to
darkness and to me,” and the black kernel of the night was never profaned by any
human neighborhood. I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark,
though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced.

Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent
and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor mis-
anthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him
who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such
a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly
compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of
the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. The gentle rain which
waters my beans and keeps me in the house today is not drear and melancholy, but
good for me too. Though it prevents my hoeing them, it is of far more worth than
my hoeing. If it should continue so long as to cause the seeds to rot in the ground
and destroy the potatoes in the low lands, it would still be good for the grass on the
uplands, and, being good for the grass, it would be good for me. Sometimes, when I
compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by the gods than
they, beyond any deserts that I am conscious of; as if I had a warrant and surety at
their hands which my fellows have not, and were especially guided and guarded. I
do not flatter myself, but if it be possible they flatter me. I have never felt lonesome,
or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks
after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of
man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something un-
pleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and
seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts
prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature,
in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house,
an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustain-
ing me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and
I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled
with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence
of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild
and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person
nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.

“Mourning untimely consumes the sad;

Few are their days in the land of the living,

Beautiful daughter of Toscar”

Some of my pleasantest hours were during the long rain-storms in the spring
or fall, which confined me to the house for the afternoon as well as the forenoon,
soothed by their ceaseless roar and pelting; when an early twilight ushered in a
long evening in which many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves.
In those driving northeast rains which tried the village houses so, when the maids stood ready with mop and pail in front entries to keep the deluge out, I sat behind my door in my little house, which was all entry, and thoroughly enjoyed its protection. In one heavy thunder-shower the lightning struck a large pitch pine across the pond, making a very conspicuous and perfectly regular spiral groove from top to bottom, an inch or more deep, and four or five inches wide, as you would groove a walking-stick. I passed it again the other day, and was struck with awe on looking up and beholding that mark, now more distinct than ever, where a terrific and resistless bolt came down out of the harmless sky eight years ago. Men frequently say to me, “I should think you would feel lonesome down there, and want to be nearer to folks, rainy and snowy days and nights especially.” I am tempted to reply to such. This whole earth which we inhabit is but a point in space. How far apart, think you, dwell the two most distant inhabitants of yonder star, the breadth of whose disk cannot be appreciated by our instruments? Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? This which you put seems to me not to be the most important question. What sort of space is it which separates a man from his fellows and makes him solitary? I have found that no exertion of the legs can bring two minds much nearer to one another. What do we want most to dwell near to? Not to many men surely, the depot, the post-office, the bar-room, the meeting-house, the school-house, the grocery, Beacon Hill, or the Five Points, where men most congregate, but to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experience we have found that to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction. This will vary with different natures, but this is the place where a wise man will dig his cellar. I one evening overtook one of my townsmen, who has accumulated what is called “a handsome property”—though I never got a fair view of it—on the Walden road, driving a pair of cattle to market, who inquired of me how I could bring my mind to give up so many of the comforts of life. I answered that I was very sure I liked it passably well; I was not joking. And so I went home to my bed, and left him to pick his way through the darkness and the mud to Brighton—or Bright-town—which place he would reach some time in the morning.

Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses. For the most part we allow only outlying and transient circumstances to make our occasions. They are, in fact, the cause of our distraction. Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are.

“How vast and profound is the influence of the subtile powers of Heaven and of Earth!”

“We seek to perceive them, and we do not see them; we seek to hear them, and we do not hear them; identified with the substance of things, they cannot be separated from them.”
“They cause that in all the universe men purify and sanctify their hearts, and clothe themselves in their holiday garments to offer sacrifices and oblations to their ancestors. It is an ocean of subtile intelligences. They are everywhere, above us, on our left, on our right; they environ us on all sides.”

We are the subjects of an experiment which is not a little interesting to me. Can we not do without the society of our gossips a little while under these circumstances—have our own thoughts to cheer us? Confucius says truly, “Virtue does not remain as an abandoned orphan; it must of necessity have neighbors.”

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. I may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes.

I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon wearisome and dissipating. I love to be alone. I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude. We are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers. A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will. Solitude is not measured by the miles of space that intervene between a man and his fellows. The really diligent student in one of the crowded hives of Cambridge College is as solitary as a dervis in the desert. The farmer can work alone in the field or the woods all day, hoeing or chopping, and not feel lonesome, because he is employed; but when he comes home at night he cannot sit down in a room alone, at the mercy of his thoughts, but must be where he can “see the folks,” and recreate, and, as he thinks, remunerate himself for his day’s solitude; and hence he wonders how the student can sit alone in the house all night and most of the day without ennui and “the blues”; but he does not realize that the student, though in the house, is still at work in his field, and chopping in his woods, as the farmer in his, and in turn seeks the same recreation and society that the latter does, though it may be a more condensed form of it.

Society is commonly too cheap. We meet at very short intervals, not having had time to acquire any new value for each other. We meet at meals three times a day, and give each other a new taste of that old musty cheese that we are. We have had
to agree on a certain set of rules, called etiquette and politeness, to make this frequent meeting tolerable and that we need not come to open war. We meet at the post-office, and at the sociable, and about the fireside every night; we live thick and are in each other’s way, and stumble over one another, and I think that we thus lose some respect for one another. Certainly less frequency would suffice for all important and hearty communications. Consider the girls in a factory—never alone, hardly in their dreams. It would be better if there were but one inhabitant to a square mile, as where I live. The value of a man is not in his skin, that we should touch him.

I have heard of a man lost in the woods and dying of famine and exhaustion at the foot of a tree, whose loneliness was relieved by the grotesque visions with which, owing to bodily weakness, his diseased imagination surrounded him, and which he believed to be real. So also, owing to bodily and mental health and strength, we may be continually cheered by a like but more normal and natural society, and come to know that we are never alone.

I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls. Let me suggest a few comparisons, that some one may convey an idea of my situation. I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself. What company has that lonely lake, I pray? And yet it has not the blue devils, but the blue angels in it, in the azure tint of its waters. The sun is alone, except in thick weather, when there sometimes appear to be two, but one is a mock sun. God is alone—but the devil, he is far from being alone; he sees a great deal of company; he is legion. I am no more lonely than a single mullein or dandelion in a pasture, or a bean leaf, or sorrel, or a horse-fly, or a bumblebee. I am no more lonely than the Mill Brook, or a weathercock, or the north star, or the south wind, or an April shower, or a January thaw, or the first spider in a new house.

I have occasional visits in the long winter evenings, when the snow falls fast and the wind howls in the wood, from an old settler and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods; who tells me stories of old time and of new eternity; and between us we manage to pass a cheerful evening with social mirth and pleasant views of things, even without apples or cider—a most wise and humorous friend, whom I love much, who keeps himself more secret than ever did Goffe or Whalley; and though he is thought to be dead, none can show where he is buried. An elderly dame, too, dwells in my neighborhood, invisible to most persons, in whose odorous herb garden I love to stroll sometimes, gathering simples and listening to her fables; for she has a genius of unequalled fertility, and her memory runs back farther than mythology, and she can tell me the original of every fable, and on what fact every one is founded, for the incidents occurred when she was young. A ruddy and lusty old dame, who delights in all weathers and seasons, and is likely to outlive all her children yet.

The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature—of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter—such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the
sun’s brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?

What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented? Not my or thy great-grandfather’s, but our great-grandmother Nature’s universal, vegetable, botanic medicines, by which she has kept herself young always, outlived so many old Parrs in her day, and fed her health with their decaying fatness. For my panacea, instead of one of those quack vials of a mixture dipped from Acheron and the Dead Sea, which come out of those long shallow black-schooner looking wagons which we sometimes see made to carry bottles, let me have a draught of undiluted morning air. Morning air! If men will not drink of this at the fountainhead of the day, why, then, we must even bottle up some and sell it in the shops, for the benefit of those who have lost their subscription ticket to morning time in this world. But remember; it will not keep quite till noonday even in the coolest cellar, but drive out the stopples long ere that and follow westward the steps of Aurora. I am no worshipper of Hygeia, who was the daughter of that old herb-doctor Esculapius, and who is represented on monuments holding a serpent in one hand, and in the other a cup out of which the serpent sometimes drinks; but rather of Hebe, cup-bearer to Jupiter, who was the daughter of Juno and wild lettuce, and who had the power of restoring gods and men to the vigor of youth. She was probably the only thoroughly sound-conditioned, healthy, and robust young lady that ever walked the globe, and wherever she came it was spring.
THE BEAN FIELD

MEANWHILE MY beans, the length of whose rows, added together, was seven miles already planted, were impatient to be hoed, for the earliest had grown considerably before the latest were in the ground; indeed they were not easily to be put off. What was the meaning of this so steady and self-respecting, this small Her- culean labor, I knew not. I came to love my rows, my beans, though so many more than I wanted. They attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus. But why should I raise them? Only Heaven knows. This was my curious labor all summer- to make this portion of the earth's surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like, before, sweet wild fruits and pleasant flowers, produce instead this pulse. What shall I learn of beans or beans of me? I cherish them, I hoe them, early and late I have an eye to them; and this is my day's work. It is a fine broad leaf to look on. My auxiliaries are the dews and rains which water this dry soil, and what fertility is in the soil itself, which for the most part is lean and effete. My enemies are worms, cool days, and most of all woodchucks. The last have nibbled for me a quarter of an acre clean. But what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden? Soon, however, the remaining beans will be too tough for them, and go forward to meet new foes.

When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory. And now tonight my flute has waked the echoes over that very water: The pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes. Almost the same johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture, and even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my infant dreams, and one of the results of my presence and influence is seen in these bean leaves, corn blades, and potato vines.

I planted about two acres and a half of upland; and as it was only about fifteen years since the land was cleared, and I myself had got out two or three cords of stumps, I did not give it any manure; but in the course of the summer it appeared by the arrowheads which I turned up in hoeing, that an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here and planted corn and beans ere white men came to clear the land, and so, to some extent, had exhausted the soil for this very crop.

Before yet any woodchuck or squirrel had run across the road, or the sun had got above the shrub oaks, while all the dew was on, though the farmers warned me against it- I would advise you to do all your work if possible while the dew is on- I began to level the ranks of haughty weeds in my bean-field and throw dust upon their heads. Early in the morning I worked barefooted, dabbling like a plastic artist in the dewy and crumbling sand, but later in the day the sun blistered my feet. There the sun lighted me to hoe beans, pacing slowly backward and forward over that yellow
gravelly upland, between the long green rows, fifteen rods, the one end terminating in a shrub oak copse where I could rest in the shade, the other in a blackberry field where the green berries deepened their tints by the time I had made another bout. Removing the weeds, putting fresh soil about the bean stems, and encouraging this weed which I had sown, making the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass—this was my daily work. As I had little aid from horses or cattle, or hired men or boys, or improved implements of husbandry, I was much slower, and became much more intimate with my beans than usual. But labor of the hands, even when pursued to the verge of drudgery, is perhaps never the worst form of idleness. It has a constant and imperishable moral, and to the scholar it yields a classic result. A very agricola laboriosus was I to travellers bound westward through Lincoln and Wayland to nobody knows where; they sitting at their ease in gigs, with elbows on knees, and reins loosely hanging in festoons; I the home-staying, laborious native of the soil. But soon my homestead was out of their sight and thought. It was the only open and cultivated field for a great distance on either side of the road, so they made the most of it; and sometimes the man in the field heard more of travellers’ gossip and comment than was meant for his ear: “Beans so late! peas so late!”—for I continued to plant when others had begun to hoe— the ministerial husbandman had not suspected it. “Corn, my boy, for fodder; corn for fodder.” “Does he live there?” asks the black bonnet of the gray coat; and the hard-featured farmer reins up his grateful dobbin to inquire what you are doing where he sees no manure in the furrow, and recommends a little chip dirt, or any little waste stuff, or it may be ashes or plaster. But here were two acres and a half of furrows, and only a hoe for cart and two hands to draw it—there being an aversion to other carts and horses—and chip dirt far away. Fellow-travellers as they rattled by compared it aloud with the fields which they had passed, so that I came to know how I stood in the agricultural world. This was one field not in Mr. Colman’s report. And, by the way, who estimates the value of the crop which nature yields in the still wilder fields unimproved by man? The crop of English hay is carefully weighed, the moisture calculated, the silicates and the potash; but in all dells and pond-holes in the woods and pastures and swamps grows a rich and various crop only unreaped by man. Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field. They were beans cheerfully returning to their wild and primitive state that I cultivated, and my hoe played the Ranzdes Vaches for them.

Near at hand, upon the topmost spray of a birch, sings the brown thrasher— or red mavis, as some love to call him— all the morning, glad of your society, that would find out another farmer’s field if yours were not here. While you are planting the seed, he cries—”Drop it, drop it— cover it up, cover it up— pull it up, pull it up, pull it up.” But this was not corn, and so it was safe from such enemies as he. You may wonder what his rigmarole, his amateur Paganini performances on one string or on twenty,
have to do with your planting, and yet prefer it to leached ashes or plaster. It was a cheap sort of top dressing in which I had entire faith.

As I drew a still fresher soil about the rows with my hoe, I disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day. They lay mingled with other natural stones, some of which bore the marks of having been burned by Indian fires, and some by the sun, and also bits of pottery and glass brought hither by the recent cultivators of the soil. When my hoe tinkled against the stones, that music echoed to the woods and the sky, and was an accompaniment to my labor which yielded an instant and immeasurable crop. It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans; and I remembered with as much pity as pride, if I remembered at all, my acquaintances who had gone to the city to attend the oratorios. The nighthawk circled overhead in the sunny afternoons- for I sometimes made a day of it- like a mote in the eye, or in heaven's eye, falling from time to time with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent, torn at last to very rags and tatters, and yet a seamless cope remained; small imps that fill the air and lay their eggs on the ground on bare sand or rocks on the tops of hills, where few have found them; graceful and slender like ripples caught up from the pond, as leaves are raised by the wind to float in the heavens; such kindredship is in nature. The hawk is aerial brother of the wave which he sails over and surveys, those his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the elemental unfledged pinions of the sea. Or sometimes I watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and descending, approaching, and leaving one another, as if they were the embodiment of my own thoughts, Or I was attracted by the passage of wild pigeons from this wood to that, with a slight quivering winnowing sound and carrier haste; or from under a rotten stump my hoe turned up a sluggish portentous and outlandish spotted salamander, a trace of Egypt and the Nile, yet our contemporary. When I paused to lean on my hoe, these sounds and sights I heard and saw anywhere in the row, a part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers.

On gala days the town fires its great guns, which echo like popguns to these woods, and some waifs of martial music occasionally penetrate thus far. To me, away there in my bean-field at the other end of the town, the big guns sounded as if a puffball had burst; and when there was a military turnout of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon, either scarlatina or canker-rash, until at length some more favorable puff of wind, making haste over the fields and up the Wayland road, brought me information of the “trainers.” It seemed by the distant hum as if somebody’s bees had swarmed, and that the neighbors, according to Virgil’s advice, by a faint tintinnabulum upon the most sonorous of their domestic utensils, were endeavoring to call them down into the hive again. And when the sound died quite away, and the hum had ceased, and the most favorable breezes told no tale, I knew that they had got the last drone of them all safely into
the Middlesex hive, and that now their minds were bent on the honey with which it was smeared.

I felt proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland were in such safe keeping; and as I turned to my hoeing again I was filled with an inexpressible confidence, and pursued my labor cheerfully with a calm trust in the future.

When there were several bands of musicians, it sounded as if all the village was a vast bellows and all the buildings expanded and collapsed alternately with a din. But sometimes it was a really noble and inspiring strain that reached these woods, and the trumpet that sings of fame, and I felt as if I could spit a Mexican with a good relish- for why should we always stand for trifles?- and looked round for a woodchuck or a skunk to exercise my chivalry upon. These martial strains seemed as far away as Palestine, and reminded me of a march of crusaders in the horizon, with a slight tantivy and tremulous motion of the elm tree tops which overhang the village. This was one of the great days; though the sky had from my clearing only the same everlastingly great look that it wears daily, and I saw no difference in it.

It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoeing, and harvesting, and threshing, and picking over and selling them- the last was the hardest of all- I might add eating, for I did taste. I was determined to know beans. When they were growing, I used to hoe from five o’clock in the morning till noon, and commonly spent the rest of the day about other affairs. Consider the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds- it will bear some iteration in the account, for there was no little iteration in the labor- disturbing their delicate organizations so ruthlessly, and making such invidious distinctions with his hoe, levelling whole ranks of one species, and sedulously cultivating another. That’s Roman wormwood- that’s pigweed- that’s sorrel- that’s piper-grass- have at him, chop him up, turn his roots upward to the sun, don’t let him have a fibre in the shade, if you do he’ll turn himself t’other side up and be as green as a leek in two days. A long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side. Daily the beans saw me come to their rescue armed with a hoe, and thin the ranks of their enemies, filling up the trenches with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest- waving Hector, that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust.

Those summer days which some of my contemporaries devoted to the fine arts in Boston or Rome, and others to contemplation in India, and others to trade in London or New York, I thus, with the other farmers of New England, devoted to husbandry. Not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day. It was on the whole a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation. Though
I gave them no manure, and did not hoe them all once, I hoed them unusually well as far as I went, and was paid for it in the end, “there being in truth,” as Evelyn says, “no compost or laetation whatsoever comparable to this continual motion, repastination, and turning of the mould with the spade.” “The earth,” he adds elsewhere, “especially if fresh, has a certain magnetism in it, by which it attracts the salt, power, or virtue (call it either) which gives it life, and is the logic of all the labor and stir we keep about it, to sustain us; all dungings and other sordid temperings being but the vicars succedaneous to this improvement.” Moreover, this being one of those “worn-out and exhausted lay fields which enjoy their sabbath,” had perchance, as Sir Kenelm Digby thinks likely, attracted “vital spirits” from the air. I harvested twelve bushels of beans.

But to be more particular, for it is complained that Mr. Colman has reported chiefly the expensive experiments of gentlemen farmers, my outgoes were,

For a hoe.....................................$ 0.54 Plowing, harrowing, and furrowing......... 7.50 (Too much.) Beans for seed............................. 3.12 1/2 Potatoes for seed.............................. 1.33 Peas for seed................................. 0.40 Turnip seed................................. 0.06 White line for crow fence..................... 0.02 Horse cultivator and boy three hours..... 1.00 Horse and cart to get crop.................... 0.75 ----- In all.......................................$ 14.72 ½

My income was (patremfamilias vendacem, non emacem esse oportet), from

Nine bushels and twelve quarts of beans sold..$ 16.94 Five bushels large potatoes........ 2.50 Nine bushels small potatoes.............2.25 Grass............................................. 1.00 Stalks............................................. 0.75 ----- In all......................................$ 23.44 Leaving a pecuniary profit, as I have elsewhere said, of.............$ 8.71 ½

This is the result of my experience in raising beans: Plant the common small white bush bean about the first of June, in rows three feet by eighteen inches apart, being careful to select fresh round and unmixed seed. First look out for worms, and supply vacancies by planting anew. Then look out for woodchucks, if it is an exposed place, for they will nibble off the earliest tender leaves almost clean as they go; and again, when the young tendrils make their appearance, they have notice of it, and will shear them off with both buds and young pods, sitting erect like a squirrel. But above all harvest as early as possible, if you would escape frosts and have a fair and salable crop; you may save much loss by this means.

This further experience also I gained: I said to myself, I will not plant beans and corn with so much industry another summer, but such seeds, if the seed is not lost, as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like, and see if they will not grow in this soil, even with less toil and manuance, and sustain me, for surely it has not been exhausted for these crops. Alas! I said this to myself; but now another summer is gone, and another, and another; and I am obliged to say to you, Reader, that the seeds which I planted, if indeed they were the seeds of those virtues, were worm-eaten or had lost their vitality, and so did not come up. Commonly men will only be brave as their fathers were brave, or timid. This generation is very sure to
plant corn and beans each new year precisely as the Indians did centuries ago and taught the first settlers to do, as if there were a fate in it. I saw an old man the other day, to my astonishment, making the holes with a hoe for the seventieth time at least, and not for himself to lie down in! But why should not the New Englander try new adventures, and not lay so much stress on his grain, his potato and grass crop, and his orchards—raise other crops than these? Why concern ourselves so much about our beans for seed, and not be concerned at all about a new generation of men? We should really be fed and cheered if when we met a man we were sure to see that some of the qualities which I have named, which we all prize more than those other productions, but which are for the most part broadcast and floating in the air, had taken root and grown in him. Here comes such a subtle and ineffable quality, for instance, as truth or justice, though the slightest amount or new variety of it, along the road. Our ambassadors should be instructed to send home such seeds as these, and Congress help to distribute them over all the land. We should never stand upon ceremony with sincerity. We should never cheat and insult and banish one another by our meanness, if there were present the kernel of worth and friendliness. We should not meet thus in haste. Most men I do not meet at all, for they seem not to have time; they are busy about their beans. We would not deal with a man thus plodding ever, leaning on a hoe or a spade as a staff between his work, not as a mushroom, but partially risen out of the earth, something more than erect, like swallows alighted and walking on the ground:

“And as he spake, his wings would now and then Spread, as he meant to fly, then close again—”

so that we should suspect that we might be conversing with an angel. Bread may not always nourish us; but it always does us good, it even takes stiffness out of our joints, and makes us supple and buoyant, when we knew not what ailed us, to recognize any generosity in man or Nature, to share any unmixed and heroic joy.

Ancient poetry and mythology suggest, at least, that husbandry was once a sacred art; but it is pursued with irreverent haste and heedlessness by us, our object being to have large farms and large crops merely. We have no festival, nor procession, nor ceremony, not excepting our cattle-shows and so-called Thanksgivings, by which the farmer expresses a sense of the sacredness of his calling, or is reminded of its sacred origin. It is the premium and the feast which tempt him. He sacrifices not to Ceres and the Terrestrial Jove, but to the infernal Plutus rather. By avarice and selfishness, and a grovelling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber. Cato says that the profits of agriculture are particularly pious or just (maximeque pia quaestus), and according to Varro the old Romans “called the same earth Mother and Ceres, and thought that they who cultivated it led a pious and useful life, and that they alone were left of the race of King Saturn.”
We are wont to forget that the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction. They all reflect and absorb his rays alike, and the former make but a small part of the glorious picture which he beholds in his daily course. In his view the earth is all equally cultivated like a garden. Therefore we should receive the benefit of his light and beat with a corresponding trust and magnanimity. What though I value the seed of these beans, and harvest that in the fall of the year? This broadfield which I have looked at so long looks not to me as the principal cultivator, but away from me to influences more genial toil, which water and make it green. These beans have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? The ear of wheat (in Latin spica, obsoletely speca, from spe, hope) should not be the only hope of the husbandman; its kernel or grain (granum from gerendo, bearing) is not all that it bears. How, then, can our harvest fail? Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds? It matters little comparatively whether the fields fill the farmer’s barns. The true husbandman will cease from anxiety, as the squirrels manifest no concern whether the woods will bear chestnuts this year or not, and finish his labor with every day, relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields, and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also.
BRUTE NEIGHBORS

SOMETIMES I had a companion in my fishing, who came through the village to my house from the other side of the town, and the catching of the dinner was as much a social exercise as the eating of it.

Hermit. I wonder what the world is doing now. I have not heard so much as a locust over the sweet-fern these three hours. The pigeons are all asleep upon their roosts—no flutter from them. Was that a farmer’s noon horn which sounded from beyond the woods just now? The hands are coming in to boiled salt beef and cider and Indian bread. Why will men worry themselves so? He that does not eat need not work. I wonder how much they have reaped. Who would live there where a body can never think for the barking of Bose? And oh, the housekeeping! to keep bright the devil’s door-knobs, and scour his tubs this bright day! Better not keep a house. Say, some hollow ware; and then for morning calls and dinner-parties! Only a woodpecker tapping. Oh, they swarm; the sun is too warm there; they are born too far into life for me. I have water from the spring, and a loaf of brown bread on the shelf. Hark! I hear a rustling of the leaves. Is it some ill-fed village bound yielding to the instinct of the chase? or the lost pig which is said to be in these woods, whose tracks I saw after the rain? It comes on apace; my sumachs and sweetbriers tremble. Eh, Mr. Poet, is it you? How do you like the world today?

Poet. See those clouds; how they hang! That’s the greatest thing I have seen today. There’s nothing like it in old paintings, nothing like it in foreign lands—unless when we were off the coast of Spain. That’s a true Mediterranean sky. I thought, as I have my living to get, and have not eaten today, that I might go a-fishing. That’s the true industry for poets. It is the only trade I have learned. Come, let’s along.

Hermit. I cannot resist. My brown bread will soon be gone. I will go with you gladly soon, but I am just concluding a serious meditation. I think that I am near the end of it. Leave me alone, then, for a while. But that we may not be delayed, you shall be digging the bait meanwhile. Angleworms are rarely to be met with in these parts, where the soil was never fattened with manure; the race is nearly extinct. The sport of digging the bait is nearly equal to that of catching the fish, when one’s appetite is not too keen; and this you may have all to yourself today. I would advise you to set in the spade down yonder among the groundnuts, where you see the johnswort waving. I think that I may warrant you one worm to every three sods you turn up, if you look well in among the roots of the grass, as if you were weeding. Or, if you choose to go farther, it will not be unwise, for I have found the increase of fair bait to be very nearly as the squares of the distances.

Hermit alone. Let me see; where was I? Methinks I was nearly in this frame of mind; the world lay about at this angle. Shall I go to heaven or a-fishing? If I should soon bring this meditation to an end, would another so sweet occasion be likely to offer? I was as near being resolved into the essence of things as ever I was in my
life. I fear my thoughts will not come back to me. If it would do any good, I would
whistle for them. When they make us an offer, is it wise to say, We will think of it?
My thoughts have left no track, and I cannot find the path again. What was it that I
was thinking of? It was a very hazy day. I will just try these three sentences of Con-
fucious- see; they may fetch that state about again. I know not whether it was the
dumps or a budding ecstasy. Mem. There never is but one opportunity of a kind.

Poet. How now, Hermit, is it too soon? I have got just thirteen whole ones, beside
several which are imperfect or undersized; but they will do for the smaller fry; they
do not cover up the hook so much. Those village worms are quite too large; a shiner
may make a meal off one without finding the skewer.

Hermit. Well, then, let’s be off. Shall we to the Concord? There’s good sport there
if the water be not too high.

Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world? Why has man
just these species of animals for his neighbors; as if nothing but a mouse could have
filled this crevice? I suspect that Pilpay & Co. have put animals to their best use, for
they are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts.

The mice which haunted my house were not the common ones, which are said
to have been introduced into the country, but a wild native kind not found in the
village. I sent one to a distinguished naturalist, and it interested him much. When
I was building, one of these had its nest underneath the house, and before I had
laid the second floor; and swept out the shavings, would come out regularly at
lunch time and pick up the crumbs at my feet. It probably had never seen a man
before; and it soon became quite familiar, and would run over my shoes and up my
clothes. It could readily ascend the sides of the room by short impulses, like a squirrel, which it resembled in its motions. At length, as I leaned with my elbow on the
bench one day, it ran up my clothes, and along my sleeve, and round and round the
paper which held my dinner, while I kept the latter close, and dodged and played
at bo peep with it; and when at last I held still a piece of cheese between my thumb
and finger, it came and nibbled it, sitting in my hand, and afterward cleaned its face
and paws, like a fly, and walked away.

A phoebe soon built in my shed, and a robin for protection in a pine which grew
against the house. In June the partridge (Tetrao umbellus), which is so shy a bird, led
her brood past my windows, from the woods in the rear to the front of my house,
clicking and calling to them like a hen, and in all her behavior proving herself the
hen of the woods. The young suddenly disperse on your approach, at a signal from
the mother, as if a whirlwind had swept them away, and they so exactly resemble
the dried leaves and twigs that many a traveler has placed his foot in the midst of
a brood, and heard the whir of the old bird as she flew off, and her anxious calls
and mewing, or seen her trail her wings to attract his attention, without suspecting
their neighborhood. The parent will sometimes roll and spin round before you in
such a dishabille, that you cannot, for a few moments, detect what kind of creature
The young squat still and flat, often running their heads under a leaf, and mind only their mother’s directions given from a distance, nor will your approach make them run again and betray themselves. You may even tread on them, or have your eyes on them for a minute, without discovering them. I have held them in my open hand at such a time, and still their only care, obedient to their mother and their instinct, was to squat there without fear or trembling. So perfect is this instinct, that once, when I had laid them on the leaves again, and one accidentally fell on its side, it was found with the rest in exactly the same position ten minutes afterward. They are not callow like the young of most birds, but more perfectly developed and precocious even than chickens. The remarkably adult yet innocent expression of their open and serene eyes is very memorable. All intelligence seems reflected in them. They suggest not merely the purity of infancy, but a wisdom clarified by experience. Such an eye was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects. The woods do not yield another such a gem. The traveller does not often look into such a limpid well. The ignorant or reckless sportsman often shoots the parent at such a time, and leaves these innocents to fall a prey to some prowling beast or bird, or gradually mingle with the decaying leaves which they so much resemble. It is said that when hatched by a hen they will directly disperse on some alarm, and so are lost, for they never hear the mother’s call which gathers them again. These were my hens and chickens.

It is remarkable how many creatures live wild and free though secret in the woods, and still sustain themselves in the neighborhood of towns, suspected by hunters only. How retired the otter manages to live here! He grows to be four feet long, as big as a small boy, perhaps without any human being getting a glimpse of him. I formerly saw the raccoon in the woods behind where my house is built, and probably still heard their whinnering at night. Commonly I rested an hour or two in the shade at noon, after planting, and ate my lunch, and read a little by a spring which was the source of a swamp and of a brook, oozing from under Brister’s Hill, half a mile from my field. The approach to this was through a succession of descending grassy hollows, full of young pitch pines, into a larger wood about the swamp. There, in a very secluded and shaded spot, under a spreading white pine, there was yet a clean, firm sward to sit on. I had dug out the spring and made a well of clear gray water, where I could dip up a pailful without roiling it, and thither I went for this purpose almost every day in midsummer, when the pond was warmest. Thither, too, the woodcock led her brood, to probe the mud for worms, flying but afoot above them down the bank, while they ran in a troop beneath; but at last, spying me, she would leave her young and circle round and round me, nearer and nearer till within four or five feet, pretending broken wings and legs, to attract my attention, and get off her young, who would already have taken up their march, with faint, wiry peep, single file through the swamp, as she directed. Or I heard the peep of the young when I could not see the parent bird. There too the turtle doves sat over the spring, or fluttered from bough to bough of the soft white pines over my head; or the red squirrel, coursing down the nearest bough, was particularly familiar and inquisi-
tive. You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns.

I was witness to events of a less peaceful character. One day when I went out to my wood-pile, or rather my pile of stumps, I observed two large ants, the one red, the other much larger, nearly half an inch long, and black, fiercely contending with one another. Having once got hold they never let go, but struggled and wrestled and rolled on the chips incessantly. Looking farther, I was surprised to find that the chips were covered with such combatants, that it was not a duellum, but a bellum, a war between two races of ants, the red always pitted against the black, and frequently two red ones to one black. The legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my woodyard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black. It was the only battle which I have ever witnessed, the only battle-field I ever trod while the battle was raging; internecine war; the red republicans on the one hand, and the black imperialists on the other. On every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear; human soldiers never fought so resolutely. I watched a couple that were fast locked in each other’s embraces, in a little sunny valley amid the chips, now at noonday prepared to fight till the sun went down, or life went out. The smaller red champion had fastened himself like a vice to his adversary’s front, and through all the tumblings on that field never for an instant ceased to gnaw at one of his feelers near the root, having already caused the other to go by the board; while the stronger black one dashed him from side to side, and, as I saw on looking nearer, had already divested him of several of his members. They fought with more pertinacity than bulldogs. Neither manifested the least disposition to retreat. It was evident that their battle-cry was “Conquer or die.” In the meanwhile there came along a single redant on the hillside of this valley, evidently full of excitement, who either had despatched his foe, or had not yet taken part in the battle; probably the latter, for he had lost none of his limbs; whose mother had charged him to return with his shield or upon it. Or perchance he was some Achilles, who had nourished his wrath apart, and had now come to avenge or rescue his Patroclus. He saw this unequal combat from afar—for the blacks were nearly twice the size of the red- he drew near with rapid pace till be stood on his guard within half an inch of the combatants; then, watching his opportunity, he sprang upon the black warrior, and commenced his operations near the root of his right fore leg, leaving the foe to select among his own members; and so there were three united for life, as if a new kind of attraction had been invented which put all other locks and cements to shame. I should not have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants. I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference. And certainly there is not the fight recorded in Concord history, at least, if in the history of America, that will bear a moment’s comparison with this, whether for the numbers engaged in it, or for the patriotism and heroism displayed. For numbers and for carnage it was an Austerlitz or Dresden. Concord Fight! Two killed on the patriots’ side, and Luther Blanchard
wounded! Why here every ant was a Buttrick- “Fire! for God’s sake fire!” - and thou-
sands shared the fate of Davis and Hosmer. There was not one hireling there. I have
no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not
to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea; and the results of this battle will be as im-
portant and memorable to those whom it concerns as those of the battle of Bunker
Hill, at least.

I took up the chip oil which the three I have particularly described were strug-
gling, carried it into my house, and placed it under a tumbler on my window-sill, in
order to see the issue. Holding a microscope to the first-mentioned red ant, I saw
that, though he was assiduously gnawing at the near fore leg of his enemy, having
severed his remaining feeler, his own breast was all torn away, exposing what vitals
he had there to the jaws of the black warrior, whose breastplate was apparently too
thick for him to pierce; and the dark carbuncles of the sufferer’s eyes shone with
ferocity such as war only could excite. They struggled half an hour longer under
the tumbler, and when I looked again the black soldier had severed the heads of his
foes from their bodies, and the still living heads were hanging on either side of him
like ghastly trophies at his saddle-bow, still apparently as firmly fastened as ever,
and he was endeavoring with feeble struggles, being without feelers and with only
the remnant of a leg, and I know not how many other wounds, to divest himself of
them; which at length, after half an hour more, he accomplished. I raised the glass,
and he went off over the window-sill in that crippled state. Whether he finally sur-
vived that combat, and spent the remainder of his days in some Hotel des Invalides,
I do not know; but I thought that his industry would not be worth much thereafter. I
never learned which party was victorious, nor the cause of the war; but I felt for the
rest of that day as if I had had my feelings excited and harrowed by witnessing the
struggle, the ferocity and carnage, of a human battle before my door.

Kirby and Spence tell us that the battles of ants have long been celebrated and the
date of them recorded, though they say that Huber is the only modern author who
appears to have witnessed them. “Aeneas Sylvius,” say they, “after giving a very cir-
cumstantial account of one contested with great obstinacy by a great and small spe-
cies on the trunk of a pear tree,” adds that “this action was fought in the pontificate
of Eugenius the Fourth, in the presence of Nicholas Pistoriensis, an eminent lawyer;
who related the whole, history of the battle with the greatest fidelity.’ A similar en-
gagement between great and small ants is recorded by Olaus Magnus, in which the
small ones, being victorious, are said to have buried the bodies of their own sol-
diers, but left those of their giant enemies a prey to the birds. This event happened
previous to the expulsion of the tyrant Christiern the Second from Sweden.” The
battle which I witnessed took place in the Presidency of Polk, five years before the
passage of Webster’s Fugitive-Slave Bill.

Many a village Bose, fit only to course a mud-turtle in a victualling cellar, sported
his heavy quarters in the woods, without the knowledge of his master; and ineffec-
tually smelled at old fox burrows and woodchucks’ holes; led perchance by some
slight cur which nimbly threaded the wood, and might still inspire a natural terror
in its denizens;—now far behind his guide, barking like a canine bull toward some small squirrel which had treed itself for scrutiny, then, cantering off, bending the bushes with his weight, imagining that he is on the track of some stray member of the jerbilla family. Once I was surprised to see a cat walking along the stony shore of the pond, for they rarely wander so far from home. The surprise was mutual. Nevertheless the most domestic cat, which has sling on a rug all her days, appears quite at home in the woods, and, by her sly and stealthy behavior, proves herself more native there than the regular inhabitants. Once, when berrying, I met with a cat with young kittens in the woods, quite wild, and they all, like their mother, had their backs up and were fiercely spitting at me. A few years before I lived in the woods there was what was called a “winged cat” in one of the farm-houses in Lincoln nearest the pond, Mr. Gilian Baker’s. When I called to see her in June, 1842, she was gone a-hunting in the woods, as was her wont (I am not sure whether it was a male or female, and so use the more common pronoun), but her mistress told me that she came into the neighborhood a little more than a year before, in April, and was finally taken into their house; that she was of a dark brownish-gray color; with a white spot on her throat, and white feet, and had a large bushy tail like a fox; that in the winter the fur grew thick and flatted out along her sides, forming stripes ten or twelve inches long by two and a half wide, and under her chin like a muff, the upper side loose, the under matted like felt, and in the spring these appendages dropped off. They gave me a pair of her “wings,” which I keep still. There is no appearance of a membrane about them. Some thought it was part flying squirrel or some other wild animal, which is not impossible, for; according to naturalists, prolific hybrids have been produced by the union of the marten and domestic cat. This would have been the right kind of cat for me to keep, if I had kept any; for why should not a poet’s cat be winged as well as his horse?

In the fall the loon (Colymbus glacialis) came, as usual, to moult and bathe in the pond, making the woods ring with his wild laughter before I had risen. At rumor of his arrival all the Mill-dam sportsmen are on the alert, in gigs and on foot, two by two and three by three, with patent rifles and conical balls and spy-glasses. They come rustling through the woods like autumn leaves, at least ten men to one loon. Some station themselves on this side of the pond, some on that, for the poor bird cannot be omnipresent; if he dive here he must come up there. But now the kind October wind rises, rustling the leaves and rippling the surface of the water; so that no loon can be heard or seen, though his foes sweep the pond with spy-glasses, and make the woods resound with their discharges. The waves generously rise and dash angrily, taking sides with all water-fowl, and our sportsmen must beat a retreat to town and shop and unfinished jobs. But they were too often successful. When I went to get a pail of water early in the morning I frequently saw this stately bird sailing out of my cove within a few rods. If I endeavored to overtake him in a boat, in order to see how he would manoeuvre, he would dive and be completely lost, so that I did not discover him again, sometimes, till the latter part of the day. But I was more than a match for him on the surface. He commonly went off in a rain.
As I was paddling along the north shore one very calm October afternoon, for such days especially they settle on to the lakes, like the milkweed down, having looked in vain over the pond for a loon, suddenly one, sailing out from the shore toward the middle a few rods in front of me, set up his mild laugh and betrayed himself. I pursued with a paddle and he dived, but when he came up I was nearer than before. He dived again, but I miscalculated the direction he would take, and we were fifty rods apart when he came to the surface this time, for I had helped to widen the interval; and again he laughed long and loud, and with more reason than before. He manoeuvred so cunningly that I could not get within half a dozen rods of him. Each time, when he came to the surface, turning his head this way and that, he coolly surveyed the water and the land, and apparently chose his course so that he might come up where there was the widest expanse of water and at the greatest distance from the boat. It was surprising how quickly he made up his mind and put his resolve into execution. He led me at once to the widest part of the pond, and could not be driven from it. While he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine. It was a pretty game, played on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon. Suddenly your adversary’s checker disappears beneath the board, and the problem is to place yours nearest to where his will appear again. Sometimes he would come up unexpectedly on the opposite side of me, having apparently passed directly under the boat. So long-winded was he and so unweariable, that when he had swum farthest he would immediately plunge again, nevertheless; and then no wit could divine where in the deep pond, beneath the smooth surface, he might be speeding his way like a fish, for he had time and ability to visit the bottom of the pond in its deepest part. It is said that loons have been caught in the New York lakes eighty feet beneath the surface, with hooks set for trout—though Walden is deeper than that. How surprised must the fishes be to see this ungainly visitor from another sphere speeding his way amid their schools! Yet he appeared to know his course as surely under water as on the surface, and swam much faster there. Once or twice I saw a ripple where he approached the surface, just put his head out to reconnoitre, and instantly dived again. I found that it was as well for me to rest on my oars and wait his reappearing as to endeavor to calculate where he would rise; for again and again, when I was straining my eyes over the surface one way, I would suddenly be startled by his unearthly laugh behind me. But why, after displaying so much cunning, did he invariably betray himself the moment he came up by that loud laugh? Did not his white breast enough betray him? He was indeed a silly loon, I thought. I could commonly hear the splash of the water when he came up, and so also detected him. But after an hour he seemed a fresh as ever, dived as willingly, and swam yet farther than at first. It was surprising to see how serenely he sailed off with unruffled breast when he came to the surface, doing all the work with his webbed feet beneath. His usual note was this demoniac laughter, yet somewhat like that of a water-fowl; but occasionally, when he had balked me most successfully and come up a long way off, he uttered along-drawn unearthly howl, probably more like that of a wolf than any bird; as when a beast puts his muzzle to the ground and deliberately howls. This was his looning—perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here, making the woods ring far and wide. I concluded that
he laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources. Though the sky was by this time overcast, the pond was so smooth that I could see where he broke the surface when I did not hear him. His white breast, the stillness of the air, and the smoothness of the water were all against him. At length having come up fifty rods off, he uttered one of those prolonged howls, as if calling on the god of loons to aid him, and immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface.

For hours, in fall days, I watched the ducks cunningly tack and veer and hold the middle of the pond, far from the sportsman; tricks which they will have less need to practise in Louisiana bayous. When compelled to rise they would sometimes circle round and round and over the pond at a considerable height, from which they could easily see too their ponds and the river, like black motes in the sky; and, when I thought they had gone off thither long since, they would settle down by a slanting flight of a quarter of a mile on to a distant part which was left free; but what beside safety they got by sailing in the middle of Walden I do not know, unless they love its water for the same reason that I do.
CONCLUSION.

TO THE sick the doctors wisely recommend a change of air and scenery. Thank Heaven, here is not all the world. The buckeye does not grow in New England, and the mockingbird is rarely heard here. The wild goose is more of a cosmopolite than we; he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a luncheon in the Ohio, and plumes himself for the night in a southern bayou. Even the bison, to some extent, keeps pace with the seasons cropping the pastures of the Colorado only till a greener and sweeter grass awaits him by the Yellowstone. Yet we think that if rail fences are pulled down, and stone walls piled up on our farms, bounds are henceforth set to our lives and our fates decided. If you are chosen town clerk, forsooth, you cannot go to Tierra del Fuego this summer: but you may go to the land of infernal fire nevertheless. The universe is wider than our views of it.

Yet we should oftener look over the tafferel of our craft, like curious passengers, and not make the voyage like stupid sailors picking oakum. The other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent. Our voyaging is only great-circle sailing, and the doctors prescribe for diseases of the skin merely. One hastens to southern Africa to chase the giraffe; but surely that is not the game he would be after. How long, pray, would a man hunt giraffes if he could? Snipes and woodcocks also may afford rare sport; but I trust it would be nobler game to shoot one's self.

"Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find A thousand regions in your mind. Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be Expert in home-cosmography."

What does Africa- what does the West stand for? Is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when discovered. Is it the source of the Nile, or the Niger, or the Mississippi, or a Northwest Passage around this continent, that we would find? Are these the problems which most concern mankind? Is Franklin the only man who is lost, that his wife should be so earnest to find him? Does Mr. Grinnell know where he himself is? Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes- with shiploads of preserved meats to support you, if they be necessary; and pile the empty cans sky-high for a sign. Were preserved meats invented to preserve meat merely? Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice. Yet some can be patriotic who have no self-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads. What was the meaning of that South-Sea Exploring Expedition, with all its parade and expense, but an indirect recognition of the fact that there are continents and seas in the moral world to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles
through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private seal the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one’s being alone.

“Erret, et extremos alter scrutetur Iberos. Plus habet hic vitae, plus habet ille viae.”

Let them wander and scrutinize the outlandish Australians. I have more of God, they more of the road.

It is not worth the while to go round the world to count the cats in Zanzibar. Yet do this even till you can do better; and you may perhaps find some “Symmes’ Hole” by which to get at the inside at last. England and France, Spain and Portugal, Gold Coast and Slave Coast, all front on this private sea; but no bark from them has ventured out of sight of land, though it is without doubt the direct way to India. If you would learn to speak all tongues and conform to the customs of all nations, if you would travel farther than all travellers, be naturalized in all climes, and cause the Sphinx to dash her bead against a stone, even obey the precept of the old philosopher, and Explore thyself. Herein are demanded the eye and the nerve. Only the defeated and deserters go to the wars, cowards that run away and enlist. Start now on that farthest western way, which does not pause at the Mississippi or the Pacific, nor conduct toward a worn out China or Japan, but leads on direct, a tangent to this sphere, summer and winter; day and night, sun down, moon down, and at last earth down too.

It is said that Mirabeau took to highway robbery “to ascertain what degree of resolution was necessary in order to place one’s self in formal opposition to the most sacred laws of society.” He declared that “a soldier who fights in the ranks does not require half so much courage as a foot-pad”- “that honor and religion have never stood in the way of a well-considered and a firm resolve.” This was manly, as the world goes; and yet it was idle, if not desperate. A saner man would have found himself often enough “in formal opposition “to what are deemed “the most sacred laws of society,” through obedience to yet more sacred laws, and so have tested his resolution without going out of his way. It is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself through obedience to the laws of his being, which will never be one of opposition to a just government, if he should chance to meet with such.

I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves. I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond-side; and though it is Eve or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct. It is true, I fear, that others may have fallen into it, and so helped to keep it open. The surface of the earth is soft and impressible by the feet of men; and so with the paths which the mind travels. How worn and dusty, then, must be the Highways of the world, how deep the ruts of tradition and conformity! I did not
wish to take a cabin passage, but rather to go before the mast and on the deck of the
world, for there I could best see the moonlight amid the mountains. I do not wish
to go below now.

I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the
direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he
will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things
behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will
begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded,
and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license
of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the
universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty
poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need
not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you shall speak
so that they can understand you. Neither men nor toadstools grow so. As if that
were important, and there were not enough to understand you without them. As if
Nature could support but one order of understandings, could not sustain birds as
well as quadrupeds, flying as well as creeping things, and hush and whoa, which
Bright can understand, were the best English. As if there were safety in stupidity
alone. I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extra-vagant enough, may not
wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be
adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. Extra vagance! it depends on
how you are yarded. The migrating buffalo, which seeks new pastures in another
latitude, is not extravagant like the cow which kicks over the pail, leaps the cow
yard fence, and runs after her calf, in milking time. I desire to speak somewhere
without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments;
for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of
a true expression. Who that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he should
speak extravagantly any more forever? In view of the future or possible, we should
live quite laxly and undefined in front our outlines dim and misty on that side; as
our shadows reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun. The volatile truth
of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement.
Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains. The words
which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fra-
grant like frankincense to superior natures.

Why level downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as com-
mon sense? The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express
by snoring. Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once-and-a-half-wit-
ted with the half-witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit. Some
would find fault with the morning red, if they ever got up early enough. “They pre-
tend,” as I hear, “that the verses of Kabir have four different senses; illusion, spirit,
intellect, and the exoteric doctrine of the Vedas”; but in this part of the world it is
considered a ground for complaint if a man’s writings admit of more than one inter-
pretation. While England endeavors to cure the potato-rot, will not any endeavor to
cure the brain-rot, which prevails so much more widely and fatally?

I do not suppose that I have attained to obscurity, but I should be proud if no more
fatal fault were found with my pages on this score than was found with the Walden
ice. Southern customers objected to its blue color; which is the evidence of its purity,
as if it were muddy, and preferred the Cambridge ice, which is white, but tastes of
weeds. The purity men love is like the mists which envelop the earth, and not like
the azure ether beyond.

Some are dinning in our ears that we Americans, and moderns generally, are in-
tellectual dwarfs compared with the ancients, or even the Elizabethan men. But
what is that to the purpose? A living dog is better than a dead lion. Shall a man go
and hang himself because he belongs to the race of pygmies, and not be the biggest
pygmy that he can? Let every one mind his own business, and endeavor to be what
he was made.

Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed and in such desperate en-
terprises? If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because
he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however
measured or far away. It is not important that he should mature as soon as an ap-
ple tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer? If the condition of things
which we were made for is not yet, what were any reality which we can substitute?
We will not be shipwrecked on a vain reality. Shall we with pains erect a heaven of
blue glass over ourselves, though when it is done we shall be sure to gaze still at the
true ethereal heaven far above, as if the former were not?

There was an artist in the city of Kouroo who was disposed to strive after perfe-
tion. One day it came into his mind to make a staff. Having considered that in an
imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter; he
said to himself, It shall be perfect in all respects, though I should do nothing else in
my life. He proceeded instantly to the forest for wood, being resolved that it should
not be made of unsuitable material; and as he searched for and rejected stick after
stick, his friends gradually deserted him, for they grew old in their works and died,
but he grew not older by a moment. His singleness of purpose and resolution, and
his elevated piety, endowed him, without his knowledge, with perennial youth. As
he made no compromise with Time, Time kept out of his way, and only sighed at a
distance because he could not overcome him. Before he had found a stock in all re-
spects suitable the city of Kouroo was a hoary ruin, and he sat on one of its mounds
to peel the stick. Before he had given it the proper shape the dynasty of the Can-
dahars was at an end, and with the point of the stick he wrote the name of the last
of that race in the sand, and then resumed his work. By the time he had smoothed
and polished the staff Kalpa was no longer the pole-star; and ere he had put on the
ferule and the head adorned with precious stones, Brahma had awoke and slum-
bered many times. But why do I stay to mention these things? When the finishing
stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished
artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in
making a staff, a world with fun and fair proportions; in which, though the old cit-
ies and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their
places. And now he saw by the heap of shavings still fresh at his feet, that, for him
and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion, and that no more time
had elapsed than is required for a single scintillation from the brain of Brahma to
fall on and inflame the tinder of a mortal brain. The material was pure, and his art
was pure; how could the result be other than wonderful?

No face which we can give to a matter will stead us so well at last as the truth. This
alone wears well. For the most part, we are not where we are, but in a false posi-
tion. Through an infinity of our natures, we suppose a case, and put ourselves into
it, and hence are in two cases at the same time, and it is doubly difficult to get out.
In sane moments we regard only the facts, the case that is. Say what you have to say,
not what you ought. Any truth is better than make-believe. Tom Hyde, the tinker,
standing on the gallows, was asked if he had anything to say. “Tell the tailors,” said
he, “to remember to make a knot in their thread before they take the first stitch.” His
companion’s prayer is forgotten.

However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names.
It is not so bad as you are. It looks poorest when you are richest. The fault-finder
will find faults even in paradise. Love your life, poor as it is. You may perhaps have
some pleasant, thrilling, glorious hours, even in a poor-house. The setting sun is
reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man’s
abode; the snow melts before its door as early in the spring. I do not see but a quiet
mind may live as contentedly there, and have as cheering thoughts, as in a palace.
The town’s poor seem to me often to live the most independent lives of any. Maybe
they are simply great enough to receive without misgiving. Most think that they are
above being supported by the town; but it oftener happens that they are not above
supporting themselves by dishonest means, which should be more disreputable.
Cultivate poverty like a garden herb, like sage. Do not trouble yourself much to get
new things, whether clothes or friends. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not
change; we change. Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you
do not want society. If I were confined to a corner of a garret all my days, like a spi-
der, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts about me. The
philosopher said: “From an army of three divisions one can take away its general,
and put it in disorder; from the man the most abject and vulgar one cannot take
away his thought.” Do not seek so anxiously to be developed, to subject yourself
to many influences to be played on; it is all dissipation. Humility like darkness re-
veals the heavenly lights. The shadows of poverty and meanness gather around us,
“and lo! Creation widens to our view.” We are often reminded that if there were be-
stowed on us the wealth of Croesus, our aims must still be the same, and our means
essentially the same. Moreover, if you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you
cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most
significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which
yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest. You are defended from being a trifler. No man loses ever on a lower level by magnanimity on a higher. Superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only. Money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul.

I live in the angle of a leaden wall, into whose composition was poured a little alloy of bell-metal. Often, in the repose of my mid-day, there reaches my ears a confused tintinnabulum from without. It is the noise of my contemporaries. My neighbors tell me of their adventures with famous gentlemen and ladies, what not abilities they met at the dinner-table; but I am no more interested in such things than in the contents of the Daily Times. The interest and the conversation are about costume and manners chiefly; but a goose is a goose still, dress it as you will. They tell me of California and Texas, of England and the Indies, of the Hon. Mr.-- of Georgia or of Massachusetts, all transient and fleeting phenomena, till I am ready to leap from their court-yard like the Mameluke bey. I delight to come to my bearings- not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may- not to live in this restless, nervous, bustling trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully while it goes by. What are men celebrating? They are all on a committee of arrangements, and hourly expect a speech from somebody. God is only the president of the day, and Webster is his orator. I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me; not hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less- not suppose a case, but take the case that is; to travel the only path I can, and that on which no power can resist me. It affords me no satisfaction to commerce to spring an arch before I have got a solid foundation. Let us not play at kittly-benders. There is a solid bottom everywhere. We read that the traveller asked the boy if the swamp before him had a hard bottom. The boy replied that it had. But presently the traveller’s horse sank in up to the girths, and he observed to the boy, “I thought you said that this bog had a hard bottom.” “So it has,” answered the latter, “but you have not got half way to it yet.” So it is with the bogs and quicksands of society; but he is an old boy that knows it. Only what is thought, said, or done at a certain rare coincidence is good. I would not be one of those who will foolishly drive a nail into mere lath and plastering; such a deed would keep me awake nights. Give me a hammer, and let me feel for the furring. Do not depend on the putty. Drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction- a work at which you would not be ashamed to invoke the Muse. So will help you God, and so only. Every nail driven should be as another rivet in the machine of the universe, you carrying on the work.

Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices. I thought that there was no need of ice to freeze them. They talked to me of the age of the wine and the fame of the vintage; but I thought of an older, a newer, and purer wine, of a more glorious vintage, which they had not
got, and could not buy. The style, the house and grounds and “entertainment” pass for nothing with me. I called on the king, but he made me wait in his hall, and conducted like a man incapacitated for hospitality. There was a man in my neighborhood who lived in a hollow tree. His manners were truly regal. I should have done better had I called on him.

How long shall we sit in our porticoes practising idle and musty virtues, which any work would make impertinent? As if one were to begin the day with long-suffering, and hire a man to hoe his potatoes; and in the afternoon go forth to practise Christian meekness and charity with goodness aforethought! Consider the China pride and stagnant self-complacency of mankind. This generation inclines a little to congratulate itself on being the last of an illustrious line; and in Boston and London and Paris and Rome, thinking of its long descent, it speaks of its progress in art and science and literature with satisfaction. There are the Records of the Philosophical Societies, and the public Eulogies of Great Men! It is the good Adam contemplating his own virtue. “Yes, we have done great deeds, and sung divine songs, which shall never die”- that is, as long as we can remember them. The learned societies and great men of Assyria- where are they? What youthful philosophers and experimentals we are! There is not one of my readers who has yet lived a whole human life. These may be but the spring months in the life of the race. If we have had the seven-years’ itch, we have not seen the seventeen-year locust yet in Concord. We are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most have not delved six feet beneath the surface, nor leaped as many above it. We know not where we are. Beside, we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface. Truly, we are deep thinkers, we are ambitious spirits! As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest floor, and endeavoring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and bide its head from me who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me the human insect.

There is an incessant influx of novelty into the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dulness. I need only suggest what kind of sermons are still listened to in the most enlightened countries. There are such words as joy and sorrow, but they are only the burden of a psalm, sung with a nasal twang, while we believe in the ordinary and mean. We think that we can change our clothes only. It is said that the British Empire is very large and respectable, and that the United States are a first-rate power. We do not believe that a tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip, if he should ever harbor it in his mind. Who knows what sort of seventeen-year locust will next come out of the ground? The government of the world I live in was not framed, like that of Britain, in after-dinner conversations over the wine.

The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it, and flood the parched uplands; even this may be the eventful year, which will drown out all our muskrats. It was not always dry land where we dwell.
I see far inland the banks which the stream anciently washed, before science began to record its freshets. Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer’s kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts— from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society, deposited at first in the alburnum of the green and living tree, which has been gradually converted into the semblance of its well-seasoned tomb—heard perchance gnawing out now for years by the astonished family of man, as they sat round the festive board—may unexpectedly come forth from amidst society’s most trivial and hand sold furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last!

I do not say that John or Jonathan will realize all this; but such is the character of that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn. The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.

THE END
ON THE DUTY OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

(original title: Resistance to Civil Government)

I heartily accept the motto, “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe—“That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient. The objections which have been brought against a standing army, and they are many and weighty, and deserve to prevail, may also at last be brought against a standing government. The standing army is only an arm of the standing government. The government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it. Witness the present Mexican war; the work of comparatively a few individuals using the standing government as their tool; for in the outset, the people would not have consented to this measure.

This American government—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? It has not the vitality and force of a single living man; for a single man can bend it to his will. It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves. But it is not the less necessary for this; for the people must have some complicated machinery or other, and hear its din, to satisfy that idea of government which they have. Governments show thus how successfully men can be imposed upon, even impose on themselves, for their own advantage. It is excellent, we must all allow. Yet this government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of its way. It does not keep the country free. It does not settle the West. It does not educate. The character inherent in the American people has done all that has been accomplished; and it would have done somewhat more, if the government had not sometimes got in its way. For government is an expedient, by which men would fain succeed in letting one another alone; and, as has been said, when it is most expedient, the governed are most let alone by it. Trade and commerce, if they were not made of india-rubber, would never manage to bounce over obstacles which legislators are continually putting in their way; and if one were to judge these men wholly by the effects of their actions and not partly by their intentions, they would deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads.

But, to speak practically and as a citizen, unlike those who call themselves no-government men, I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government. Let every man make known what kind of government would command his respect, and that will be one step toward obtaining it.
After all, the practical reason why, when the power is once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right, nor because this seems fairest to the minority, but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases can not be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which the majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide only those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right. It is truly enough said that a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience. Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents on injustice. A common and natural result of an undue respect for the law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart. They have no doubt that it is a damnable business in which they are concerned; they are all peaceably inclined. Now, what are they? Men at all? or small movable forts and magazines, at the service of some unscrupulous man in power? Visit the Navy Yard, and behold a marine, such a man as an American government can make, or such as it can make a man with its black arts—a mere shadow and reminiscence of humanity, a man laid out alive and standing, and already, as one may say, buried under arms with funeral accompaniment, though it may be,

“Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried;
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O’er the grave where our hero was buried.”

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies. They are the standing army, and the militia, jailers, constables, posse comitatus, etc. In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of the judgement or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. Such command no more respect than men of straw or a lump of dirt. They have the same sort of worth only as horses and dogs. Yet such as these even are commonly esteemed good citizens. Others—as most legislators, politicians, lawyers, ministers, and office-holders—serve the state chiefly with their heads; and, as they rarely make any moral distinctions, they are as likely to serve the devil, without intending it, as God. A very few—as heroes, patriots, martyrs, reformers in the great sense, and men—serve the state with their consciences also, and so neces-
sarily resist it for the most part; and they are commonly treated as enemies by it. A wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be “clay,” and “stop a hole to keep the wind away,” but leave that office to his dust at least:

“I am too high born to be propertied,
To be a second at control,
Or useful serving-man and instrument
To any sovereign state throughout the world.”

He who gives himself entirely to his fellow men appears to them useless and selfish; but he who gives himself partially to them is pronounced a benefactor and philanthropist.

How does it become a man to behave toward the American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as my government which is the slave’s government also.

All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable. But almost all say that such is not the case now. But such was the case, they think, in the Revolution of ’75. If one were to tell me that this was a bad government because it taxed certain foreign commodities brought to its ports, it is most probable that I should not make an ado about it, for I can do without them. All machines have their friction; and possibly this does enough good to counterbalance the evil. At any rate, it is a great evil to make a stir about it. But when the friction comes to have its machine, and oppression and robbery are organized, I say, let us not have such a machine any longer. In other words, when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is that fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

Paley, a common authority with many on moral questions, in his chapter on the “Duty of Submission to Civil Government,” resolves all civil obligation into expediency; and he proceeds to say that “so long as the interest of the whole society requires it, that is, so long as the established government cannot be resisted or changed without public inconvenience, it is the will of God . . . that the established government be obeyed—and no longer. This principle being admitted, the justice of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and of the probability and expense of redressing it on the other.’ Of this, he says, every man shall judge for himself. But Paley appears never to have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may. If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to
him though I drown myself. This, according to Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

In their practice, nations agree with Paley; but does anyone think that Massachusetts does exactly what is right at the present crisis?

“A drab of stat,
a cloth-o’-silver slut,
To have her train borne up,
and her soul trail in the dirt.”

Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, cost what it may. I quarrel not with far-off foes, but with those who, near at home, co-operate with, and do the bidding of, those far away, and without whom the latter would be harmless. We are accustomed to say, that the mass of men are unprepared; but improvement is slow, because the few are not as materially wiser or better than the many. It is not so important that many should be good as you, as that there be some absolute goodness somewhere; for that will leaven the whole lump. There are thousands who are in opinion opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who, even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both. What is the price-current of an honest man and patriot today? They hesitate, and they regret, and sometimes they petition; but they do nothing in earnest and with effect. They will wait, well disposed, for other to remedy the evil, that they may no longer have it to regret. At most, they give up only a cheap vote, and a feeble countenance and Godspeed, to the right, as it goes by them. There are nine hundred and ninety-nine patrons of virtue to one virtuous man. But it is easier to deal with the real possessor of a thing than with the temporary guardian of it.

All voting is a sort of gaming, like checkers or backgammon, with a slight moral tinge to it, a playing with right and wrong, with moral questions; and betting naturally accompanies it. The character of the voters is not staked. I cast my vote, perchance, as I think right; but I am not vitally concerned that that right should prevail. I am willing to leave it to the majority. Its obligation, therefore, never exceeds that of expediency. Even voting for the right is doing nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail. A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or
because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote. *They* will then be the only slaves. Only his vote can hasten the abolition of slavery who asserts his own freedom by his vote.

I hear of a convention to be held at Baltimore, or elsewhere, for the selection of a candidate for the Presidency, made up chiefly of editors, and men who are politicians by profession; but I think, what is it to any independent, intelligent, and respectable man what decision they may come to? Shall we not have the advantage of this wisdom and honesty, nevertheless? Can we not count upon some independent votes? Are there not many individuals in the country who do not attend conventions? But no: I find that the respectable man, so called, has immediately drifted from his position, and despairs of his country, when his country has more reasons to despair of him. He forthwith adopts one of the candidates thus selected as the only *available* one, thus proving that he is himself *available* for any purposes of the demagogue. His vote is of no more worth than that of any unprincipled foreigner or hireling native, who may have been bought. O for a man who is a man, and, as my neighbor says, has a bone in his back which you cannot pass your hand through! Our statistics are at fault: the population has been returned too large. How many *men* are there to a square thousand miles in the country? Hardly one. Does not America offer any inducement for men to settle here? The American has dwindled into an Odd Fellow—one who may be known by the development of his organ of gregariousness, and a manifest lack of intellect and cheerful self-reliance; whose first and chief concern, on coming into the world, is to see that the almshouses are in good repair; and, before yet he has lawfully donned the virile garb, to collect a fund to the support of the widows and orphans that may be; who, in short, ventures to live only by the aid of the Mutual Insurance company, which has promised to bury him decently.

It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even to most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too. See what gross inconsistency is tolerated. I have heard some of my townsmen say, “I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico—see if I would go”; and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute. The soldier is applauded who refuses to serve in an unjust war by those who do not refuse to sustain the unjust government which makes the war; is applauded by those whose own act and authority he disregards and sets at naught; as if the state were penitent to that degree that it hired one to scourge it while it sinned, but not to that degree that it left off sinning for a moment. Thus, under the name of Order and Civil Government, we are all made at last to pay homage to and support our own meanness. After the first blush of sin comes its
indifference; and from immoral it becomes, as it were, unmoral, and not quite unnecessary to that life which we have made.

The broadest and most prevalent error requires the most disinterested virtue to sustain it. The slight reproach to which the virtue of patriotism is commonly liable, the noble are most likely to incur: Those who, while they disapprove of the character and measures of a government, yield to it their allegiance and support are undoubtedly its most conscientious supporters, and so frequently the most serious obstacles to reform. Some are petitioning the State to dissolve the Union, to disregard the requisitions of the President. Why do they not dissolve it themselves—the union between themselves and the State—and refuse to pay their quota into its treasury? Do not they stand in same relation to the State that the State does to the Union? And have not the same reasons prevented the State from resisting the Union which have prevented them from resisting the State?

How can a man be satisfied to entertain an opinion merely, and enjoy it? Is there any enjoyment in it, if his opinion is that he is aggrieved? If you are cheated out of a single dollar by your neighbor, you do not rest satisfied with knowing you are cheated, or with saying that you are cheated, or even with petitioning him to pay you your due; but you take effectual steps at once to obtain the full amount, and see to it that you are never cheated again. Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divided States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.

Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men, generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to put out its faults, and do better than it would have them? Why does it always crucify Christ and excommunicate Copernicus and Luther, and pronounce Washington and Franklin rebels?

One would think, that a deliberate and practical denial of its authority was the only offense never contemplated by its government; else, why has it not assigned its definite, its suitable and proportionate, penalty? If a man who has no property refuses but once to earn nine shillings for the State, he is put in prison for a period unlimited by any law that I know, and determined only by the discretion of those who put him there; but if he should steal ninety times nine shillings from the State, he is soon permitted to go at large again.
If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter-friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.

As for adopting the ways of the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know not of such ways. They take too much time, and a man’s life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world, not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad. A man has not everything to do, but something; and because he cannot do everything, it is not necessary that he should be doing something wrong. It is not my business to be petitioning the Governor or the Legislature any more than it is theirs to petition me; and if they should not hear my petition, what should I do then? But in this case the State has provided no way: its very Constitution is the evil. This may seem to be harsh and stubborn and unconciliatory; but it is to treat with the utmost kindness and consideration the only spirit that can appreciate or deserves it. So is all change for the better, like birth and death, which convulse the body.

I do not hesitate to say, that those who call themselves Abolitionists should at once effectually withdraw their support, both in person and property, from the government of Massachusetts, and not wait till they constitute a majority of one, before they suffer the right to prevail through them. I think that it is enough if they have God on their side, without waiting for that other one. Moreover, any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already.

I meet this American government, or its representative, the State government, directly, and face to face, once a year—no more—in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, Recognize me; and the simplest, the most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the indispensablest mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then. My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with—for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I quarrel—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well that he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he will treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to his neighborlines without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action. I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name—if ten honest men only—ay, if one honest man, in this State of Massachusetts, ceasing to hold slaves, were actually to withdraw from this co-partnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would
be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever. But we love better to talk about it: that we say is our mission. Reform keeps many scores of newspapers in its service, but not one man. If my esteemed neighbor, the State’s ambassador, who will devote his days to the settlement of the question of human rights in the Council Chamber, instead of being threatened with the prisons of Carolina, were to sit down the prisoner of Massachusetts, that State which is so anxious to foist the sin of slavery upon her sister—though at present she can discover only an act of inhospitality to be the ground of a quarrel with her—the Legislature would not wholly waive the subject of the following winter.

Under a government which imprisons unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison. The proper place today, the only place which Massachusetts has provided for her freer and less despondent spirits, is in her prisons, to be put out and locked out of the State by her own act, as they have already put themselves out by their principles. It is there that the fugitive slave, and the Mexican prisoner on parole, and the Indian come to plead the wrongs of his race should find them; on that separate but more free and honorable ground, where the State places those who are not with her, but against her—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor. If any think that their influence would be lost there, and their voices no longer afflict the ear of the State, that they would not be as an enemy within its walls, they do not know by how much truth is stronger than error, nor how much more eloquently and effectively he can combat injustice who has experienced a little in his own person. Cast your whole vote, not a strip of paper merely, but your whole influence. A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight. If the alternative is to keep all just men in prison, or give up war and slavery, the State will not hesitate which to choose. If a thousand men were not to pay their tax bills this year, that would not be a violent and bloody measure, as it would be to pay them, and enable the State to commit violence and shed innocent blood. This is, in fact, the definition of a peaceable revolution, if any such is possible. If the tax-gatherer, or any other public officer, asks me, as one has done, “But what shall I do?” my answer is, “If you really wish to do anything, resign your office.” When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned from office, then the revolution is accomplished. But even suppose blood should flow. Is there not a sort of blood shed when the conscience is wounded? Through this wound a man’s real manhood and immortality flow out, and he bleeds to an everlasting death. I see this blood flowing now.

I have contemplated the imprisonment of the offender, rather than the seizure of his goods—though both will serve the same purpose—because they who assert the purest right, and consequently are most dangerous to a corrupt State, commonly have not spent much time in accumulating property. To such the State renders comparatively small service, and a slight tax is wont to appear exorbitant, particularly if they are obliged to earn it by special labor with their hands. If there were one who
lived wholly without the use of money, the State itself would hesitate to demand it of him. But the rich man—not to make any invidious comparison—is always sold to the institution which makes him rich. Absolutely speaking, the more money, the less virtue; for money comes between a man and his objects, and obtains them for him; it was certainly no great virtue to obtain it. It puts to rest many questions which he would otherwise be taxed to answer; while the only new question which it puts is the hard but superfluous one, how to spend it. Thus his moral ground is taken from under his feet. The opportunities of living are diminished in proportion as that are called the “means” are increased. The best thing a man can do for his culture when he is rich is to endeavor to carry out those schemes which he entertained when he was poor. Christ answered the Herodians according to their condition. “Show me the tribute-money,” said he—and one took a penny out of his pocket—if you use money which has the image of Caesar on it, and which he has made current and valuable, that is, if you are men of the State, and gladly enjoy the advantages of Caesar’s government, then pay him back some of his own when he demands it. “Render therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God those things which are God’s”—leaving them no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.

When I converse with the freest of my neighbors, I perceive that, whatever they may say about the magnitude and seriousness of the question, and their regard for the public tranquillity, the long and the short of the matter is, that they cannot spare the protection of the existing government, and they dread the consequences to their property and families of disobedience to it. For my own part, I should not like to think that I ever rely on the protection of the State. But, if I deny the authority of the State when it presents its tax bill, it will soon take and waste all my property, and so harass me and my children without end. This is hard. This makes it impossible for a man to live honestly, and at the same time comfortably, in outward respects. It will not be worth the while to accumulate property; that would be sure to go again. You must hire or squat somewhere, and raise but a small crop, and eat that soon. You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start, and not have many affairs. A man may grow rich in Turkey even, if he will be in all respects a good subject of the Turkish government. Confucius said: “If a state is governed by the principles of reason, poverty and misery are subjects of shame; if a state is not governed by the principles of reason, riches and honors are subjects of shame.” No: until I want the protection of Massachusetts to be extended to me in some distant Southern port, where my liberty is endangered, or until I am bent solely on building up an estate at home by peaceful enterprise, I can afford to refuse allegiance to Massachusetts, and her right to my property and life. It costs me less in every sense to incur the penalty of disobedience to the State than it would to obey. I should feel as if I were worth less in that case.

Some years ago, the State met me in behalf of the Church, and commanded me to pay a certain sum toward the support of a clergyman whose preaching my father attended, but never I myself. “Pay,” it said, “or be locked up in the jail.” I declined to
pay. But, unfortunately, another man saw fit to pay it. I did not see why the school-master should be taxed to support the priest, and not the priest the school-master; for I was not the State’s schoolmaster, but I supported myself by voluntary subscription. I did not see why the lyceum should not present its tax bill, and have the State to back its demand, as well as the Church. However, at the request of the selectmen, I condescended to make some such statement as this in writing: “Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined.” This I gave to the town clerk; and he has it. The State, having thus learned that I did not wish to be regarded as a member of that church, has never made a like demand on me since; though it said that it must adhere to its original presumption that time. If I had known how to name them, I should then have signed off in detail from all the societies which I never signed on to; but I did not know where to find such a complete list.

I have paid no poll tax for six years. I was put into a jail once on this account, for one night; and, as I stood considering the walls of solid stone, two or three feet thick, the door of wood and iron, a foot thick, and the iron grating which strained the light, I could not help being struck with the foolishness of that institution which treated me as if I were mere flesh and blood and bones, to be locked up. I wondered that it should have concluded at length that this was the best use it could put me to, and had never thought to avail itself of my services in some way. I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax. They plainly did not know how to treat me, but behaved like persons who are underbred. In every threat and in every compliment there was a blunder; for they thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous. As they could not reach me, they had resolved to punish my body; just as boys, if they cannot come at some person against whom they have a spite, will abuse his dog. I saw that the State was half-witted, that it was timid as a lone woman with her silver spoons, and that it did not know its friends from its foes, and I lost all my remaining respect for it, and pitied it.

Thus the state never intentionally confronts a man’s sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses. It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength. I was not born to be forced. I will breathe after my own fashion. Let us see who is the strongest. What force has a multitude? They only can force me who obey a higher law than I. They force me to become like themselves. I do not hear of men being forced to live this way or that by masses of men. What sort of life were that to live? When I meet a government which says to me, “Your money or your life,” why should I be in haste to give it my money? It may be in a great strait, and not know what to do: I cannot help that. It must help itself; do as I do. It is not
worth the while to snivel about it. I am not responsible for the successful working of 
the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer: I perceive that, when an 
acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for 
the other; but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best 
they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot 
live according to nature, it dies; and so a man.

The night in prison was novel and interesting enough. The prisoners in their shirt- 
sleeves were enjoying a chat and the evening air in the doorway, when I entered. But 
the jailer said, “Come, boys, it is time to lock up”; and so they dispersed, and I heard 
the sound of their steps returning into the hollow apartments. My room-mate was 
introduced to me by the jailer as “a first-rate fellow and clever man.” When the door 
was locked, he showed me where to hang my hat, and how he managed matters 
there. The rooms were whitewashed once a month; and this one, at least, was the 
whitest, most simply furnished, and probably neatest apartment in town. He natu-
really wanted to know where I came from, and what brought me there; and, when 
I had told him, I asked him in my turn how he came there, presuming him to be an 
honest man, of course; and as the world goes, I believe he was. “Why,” said he, “they 
accuse me of burning a barn; but I never did it.” As near as I could discover, he had 
probably gone to bed in a barn when drunk, and smoked his pipe there; and so a 
barn was burnt. He had the reputation of being a clever man, had been there some 
three months waiting for his trial to come on, and would have to wait as much lon-
ger; but he was quite domesticated and contented, since he got his board for noth-
ing, and thought that he was well treated.

He occupied one window, and I the other; and I saw that if one stayed there long, 
his principal business would be to look out the window. I had soon read all the 
tracts that were left there, and examined where former prisoners had broken out, 
and where a grate had been sawed off, and heard the history of the various oc-
cupants of that room; for I found that even there there was a history and a gossip 
which never circulated beyond the walls of the jail. Probably this is the only house 
in the town where verses are composed, which are afterward printed in a circular 
form, but not published. I was shown quite a long list of young men who had been 
detected in an attempt to escape, who avenged themselves by singing them.

I pumped my fellow-prisoner as dry as I could, for fear I should never see him 
again; but at length he showed me which was my bed, and left me to blow out the 
lamp.

It was like travelling into a far country, such as I had never expected to behold, to 
lie there for one night. It seemed to me that I never had heard the town clock strike 
before, not the evening sounds of the village; for we slept with the windows open, 
which were inside the grating. It was to see my native village in the light of the Mid-
le Ages, and our Concord was turned into a Rhine stream, and visions of knights 
and castles passed before me. They were the voices of old burghers that I heard in 
the streets. I was an involuntary spectator and auditor of whatever was done and
said in the kitchen of the adjacent village inn—a wholly new and rare experience to me. It was a closer view of my native town. I was fairly inside of it. I never had seen its institutions before. This is one of its peculiar institutions; for it is a shire town. I began to comprehend what its inhabitants were about.

In the morning, our breakfasts were put through the hole in the door, in small oblong-square tin pans, made to fit, and holding a pint of chocolate, with brown bread, and an iron spoon. When they called for the vessels again, I was green enough to return what bread I had left, but my comrade seized it, and said that I should lay that up for lunch or dinner. Soon after he was let out to work at haying in a neighboring field, whither he went every day, and would not be back till noon; so he bade me good day, saying that he doubted if he should see me again.

When I came out of prison—for some one interfered, and paid that tax—I did not perceive that great changes had taken place on the common, such as he observed who went in a youth and emerged a gray-headed man; and yet a change had come to my eyes come over the scene—the town, and State, and country, greater than any that mere time could effect. I saw yet more distinctly the State in which I lived. I saw to what extent the people among whom I lived could be trusted as good neighbors and friends; that their friendship was for summer weather only; that they did not greatly propose to do right; that they were a distinct race from me by their prejudices and superstitions, as the Chinamen and Malays are; that in their sacrifices to humanity they ran no risks, not even to their property; that after all they were not so noble but they treated the thief as he had treated them, and hoped, by a certain outward observance and a few prayers, and by walking in a particular straight though useless path from time to time, to save their souls. This may be to judge my neighbors harshly; for I believe that many of them are not aware that they have such an institution as the jail in their village.

It was formerly the custom in our village, when a poor debtor came out of jail, for his acquaintances to salute him, looking through their fingers, which were crossed to represent the jail window, “How do ye do?” My neighbors did not thus salute me, but first looked at me, and then at one another, as if I had returned from a long journey. I was put into jail as I was going to the shoemaker’s to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and, having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party, who were impatient to put themselves under my conduct; and in half an hour—for the horse was soon tackled—was in the midst of a huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills, two miles off, and then the State was nowhere to be seen.

This is the whole history of “My Prisons.”

I have never declined paying the highway tax, because I am as desirous of being a good neighbor as I am of being a bad subject; and as for supporting schools, I am doing my part to educate my fellow countrymen now. It is for no particular item in the tax bill that I refuse to pay it. I simply wish to refuse allegiance to the State,
to withdraw and stand aloof from it effectually. I do not care to trace the course of my dollar, if I could, till it buys a man or a musket to shoot one with—the dollar is innocent—but I am concerned to trace the effects of my allegiance. In fact, I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make use and get what advantages of her I can, as is usual in such cases.

If others pay the tax which is demanded of me, from a sympathy with the State, they do but what they have already done in their own case, or rather they abet injustice to a greater extent than the State requires. If they pay the tax from a mistaken interest in the individual taxed, to save his property, or prevent his going to jail, it is because they have not considered wisely how far they let their private feelings interfere with the public good.

This, then, is my position at present. But one cannot be too much on his guard in such a case, lest his actions be biased by obstinacy or an undue regard for the opinions of men. Let him see that he does only what belongs to himself and to the hour.

I think sometimes, Why, this people mean well, they are only ignorant; they would do better if they knew how: why give your neighbors this pain to treat you as they are not inclined to? But I think again, This is no reason why I should do as they do, or permit others to suffer much greater pain of a different kind. Again, I sometimes say to myself, When many millions of men, without heat, without ill will, without personal feelings of any kind, demand of you a few shillings only, without the possibility, such is their constitution, of retracting or altering their present demand, and without the possibility, on your side, of appeal to any other millions, why expose yourself to this overwhelming brute force? You do not resist cold and hunger, the winds and the waves, thus obstinately; you quietly submit to a thousand similar necessities. You do not put your head into the fire. But just in proportion as I regard this as not wholly a brute force, but partly a human force, and consider that I have relations to those millions as to so many millions of men, and not of mere brute or inanimate things, I see that appeal is possible, first and instantaneously, from them to the Maker of them, and, secondly, from them to themselves. But if I put my head deliberately into the fire, there is no appeal to fire or to the Maker of fire, and I have only myself to blame. If I could convince myself that I have any right to be satisfied with men as they are, and to treat them accordingly, and not according, in some respects, to my requisitions and expectations of what they and I ought to be, then, like a good Mussulman and fatalist, I should endeavor to be satisfied with things as they are, and say it is the will of God. And, above all, there is this difference between resisting this and a purely brute or natural force, that I can resist this with some effect; but I cannot expect, like Orpheus, to change the nature of the rocks and trees and beasts.

I do not wish to quarrel with any man or nation. I do not wish to split hairs, to make fine distinctions, or set myself up as better than my neighbors. I seek rather, I may say, even an excuse for conforming to the laws of the land. I am but too ready to conform to them. Indeed, I have reason to suspect myself on this head; and each
year, as the tax-gatherer comes round, I find myself disposed to review the acts and position of the general and State governments, and the spirit of the people to discover a pretext for conformity.

“We must affect our country as our parents,
And if at any time we alienate
Our love or industry from doing it honor,
We must respect effects and teach the soul
Matter of conscience and religion,
And not desire of rule or benefit.”

I believe that the State will soon be able to take all my work of this sort out of my hands, and then I shall be no better patriot than my fellow-countrymen. Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution, with all its faults, is very good; the law and the courts are very respectable; even this State and this American government are, in many respects, very admirable, and rare things, to be thankful for; such as a great many have described them; seen from a higher still, and the highest, who shall say what they are, or that they are worth looking at or thinking of at all?

However, the government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free, fancy-free, imagination-free, that which is not never for a long time appearing to be to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him.

I know that most men think differently from myself; but those whose lives are by profession devoted to the study of these or kindred subjects content me as little as any. Statesmen and legislators, standing so completely within the institution, never distinctly and nakedly behold it. They speak of moving society, but have no resting-place without it. They may be men of a certain experience and discrimination, and have no doubt invented ingenious and even useful systems, for which we sincerely thank them; but all their wit and usefulness lie within certain not very wide limits. They are wont to forget that the world is not governed by policy and expediency. Webster never goes behind government, and so cannot speak with authority about it. His words are wisdom to those legislators who contemplate no essential reform in the existing government; but for thinkers, and those who legislate for all time, he never once glances at the subject. I know of those whose serene and wise speculations on this theme would soon reveal the limits of his mind’s range and hospitality. Yet, compared with the cheap professions of most reformers, and the still cheaper wisdom an eloquence of politicians in general, his are almost the only sensible and valuable words, and we thank Heaven for him. Comparatively, he is always strong, original, and, above all, practical. Still, his quality is not wisdom, but prudence. The lawyer’s truth is not Truth, but consistency or a consistent expediency. Truth is always in harmony with herself, and is not concerned chiefly to reveal the justice that may consist with wrong-doing. He well deserves to be called, as he has been called, the Defender of the Constitution. There are really no blows to be given him but de-
fensive ones. He is not a leader, but a follower. His leaders are the men of '87. "I have never made an effort," he says, "and never propose to make an effort; I have never countenanced an effort, and never mean to countenance an effort, to disturb the arrangement as originally made, by which various States came into the Union." Still thinking of the sanction which the Constitution gives to slavery, he says, "Because it was part of the original compact—let it stand." Notwithstanding his special acuteness and ability, he is unable to take a fact out of its merely political relations, and beheld it as it lies absolutely to be disposed of by the intellect—what, for instance, it behooves a man to do here in American today with regard to slavery—but ventures, or is driven, to make some such desperate answer to the following, while professing to speak absolutely, and as a private man—from which what new and singular of social duties might be inferred? "The manner," says he, "in which the governments of the States where slavery exists are to regulate it is for their own consideration, under the responsibility to their constituents, to the general laws of propriety, humanity, and justice, and to God. Associations formed elsewhere, springing from a feeling of humanity, or any other cause, have nothing whatever to do with it. They have never received any encouragement from me and they never will." [These extracts have been inserted since the lecture was read -HDT]

They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humanity; but they who behold where it comes trickling into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountainhead.

No man with a genius for legislation has appeared in America. They are rare in the history of the world. There are orators, politicians, and eloquent men, by the thousand; but the speaker has not yet opened his mouth to speak who is capable of settling the much-vexed questions of the day. We love eloquence for its own sake, and not for any truth which it may utter, or any heroism it may inspire. Our legislators have not yet learned the comparative value of free trade and of freedom, of union, and of rectitude, to a nation. They have no genius or talent for comparatively humble questions of taxation and finance, commerce and manufactures and agriculture. If we were left solely to the wordy wit of legislators in Congress for our guidance, uncorrected by the seasonable experience and the effectual complaints of the people, America would not long retain her rank among the nations. For eighteen hundred years, though perchance I have no right to say it, the New Testament has been written; yet where is the legislator who has wisdom and practical talent enough to avail himself of the light which it sheds on the science of legislation.

The authority of government, even such as I am willing to submit to—for I will cheerfully obey those who know and can do better than I, and in many things even those who neither know nor can do so well—is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed. It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it. The progress from an absolute to a limited monarchy, from a limited monarchy to a democracy, is a progress
toward a true respect for the individual. Even the Chinese philosopher was wise
enough to regard the individual as the basis of the empire. Is a democracy, such as
we know it, the last improvement possible in government? Is it not possible to take
a step further towards recognizing and organizing the rights of man? There will
never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the
individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and
authority are derived, and treats him accordingly. I please myself with imagining a
State at last which can afford to be just to all men, and to treat the individual with
respect as a neighbor; which even would not think it inconsistent with its own re-
pose if a few were to live aloof from it, not meddling with it, nor embraced by it, who
fulfilled all the duties of neighbors and fellow men. A State which bore this kind of
fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still
more perfect and glorious State, which I have also imagined, but not yet anywhere
seen.
Unit VI- 19th Century African-American Literature: Slave Narratives

Historical Background

Because of the practice of slavery in the South and the persistence of bigotry and oppression in the country writ large which deprived African-Americans of access to education and/or publishing venues, a scarcity of texts by pre-20th Century African-American poets and writers have survived to be studied. Nevertheless, the African-American literary tradition has roots dating back to the mid-17th Century. Spurred by the universal humanist rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence, writers such as Phyllis Wheatley, a slave from childhood to a family in Boston, began publishing poems meant to disprove the widespread belief that Africans were intellectually inferior to whites of European descent. Her first published poem appeared in 1767, and her first collection in 1773. Wheatley’s poems were acclaimed on both sides of the Atlantic. She was emancipated in late 1773, but ceased publishing poetry after her marriage in 1778, and died in poverty while working as a servant.

Black voices found their first wide audiences through the Slave Narrative genre, promoted by members of the Abolitionist movement and pro-abolitionist periodicals and publishing houses in the urban Northeast. The first slave narrative to appear in the United States was Olaudah Equiano’s two-volume autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in 1789. Equiano, a British citizen born in slavery in the Carolinas, is credited as the founder or father of the Slave Narrative genre. By far the most famous slave narrative, however, remains *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, first published in 1845. Douglass’ narrative was praised both for the elegance of its prose and for the Emersonian philosophy of self-reliance implicit in Douglass’ account of his relentless pursuit of knowledge and freedom. Douglass was also a charismatic, mesmerizing orator who drew large audiences with his spellbinding accounts of his experiences under the yoke of slavery in Maryland and his risky escape from bondage. Douglass went on to publish several more autobiographical works and to become a leading activist in the Abolitionist movement and one of the most influential figures in 19th Century American history.
Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), the first autobiography by a formerly enslaved African American woman, candidly describes her experience of the sexual exploitation that made slavery especially oppressive for black women. Jacobs wrote frankly about her personal experiences of persistent sexual harassment by her master and opened a window into the reality of widespread miscegenation through rape. Unlike Douglass, however, Jacobs changed both her own name and the names of her former owners to protect herself and her children, leading to questions about its authenticity. Furthermore, after the commencement of the Civil War, Jacobs’ narrative did not reach as wide an audience as Douglass’s due to the preoccupation of the public with the war effort. Rediscovered during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Jacobs’s autobiography was officially authenticated in 1981 and has gone on to become a seminal text on the experience of enslaved women.
Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897)

Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, in 1813. Her father was Elijah Knox, an enslaved biracial house carpenter owned by Andrew Knox. Elijah was said to be the son of Athena Knox, who was enslaved, and a white farmer, Henry Jacobs. Harriet’s mother was Delilah Horniblow, an enslaved black woman held by John Horniblow, a tavern owner. Under the principle of partus sequitur ventrem, both Harriet and her brother John were born into slavery, as their mother was enslaved. Their likely European-American paternity did not alter their status. Harriet lived with her mother until Delilah’s death around 1819, when Harriet was six. Then she lived with her mother’s mistress, Margaret Horniblow, who taught Harriet to read, write and sew.

Three months before she died in 1825, Jacobs’ mistress Margaret Horniblow had signed a will leaving her slaves to her mother. Dr. James Norcom and a man named Henry Flury witnessed a later codicil to the will directing that the girl Harriet be left to Norcom’s daughter Mary Matilda, Horniblow’s five-year-old niece. The codicil was not signed by Margaret Horniblow. Norcom became Harriet’s de facto master.

Norcom sexually harassed Harriet when she came of age. He refused to allow her to marry, regardless of the man’s status. Hoping to escape his attentions, Jacobs took Samuel Sawyer, a free white lawyer, as a consensual lover. Sawyer was later elected as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. With Sawyer, she had two children, Joseph and Louisa. Because she was enslaved, their biracial children were born into slavery and Norcom was their master. Harriet later wrote that Norcom threatened to sell her children if she refused his sexual advances, but she continued to evade him.

By 1835 her domestic situation had become unbearable, and Jacobs managed to escape. She hid in the home of a slaveowner in Edenton to keep an eye on her children. After a short stay, she took refuge in a swamp called Cabarrus Pocosin. She next hid in a crawl space above the ceiling of her grandmother Molly’s shack. Jacobs lived for seven years in her grandmother’s attic before escaping in 1842 to the North by boat to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Sawyer had purchased their two children from Norcom. He let them live with Jacobs’ grandmother but he did not free them. The state had made manumission difficult following the Nat Turner slave rebellion of 1831. While in hiding, Jacobs had glimpses of her children from the attic and could hear their voices.

Jacobs escaped to the North in 1842, where she was taken in by anti-slavery friends from the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee. They helped her get to New York in September 1845. There she found work as a nursemaid in the home of Nathaniel Parker Willis and made a new life. She was also able to reunite with her daughter,
Louisa, who had been sent to New York at a young age to work as a “waiting-maid.” By 1827, the last slaves had been freed in New York under its gradual abolition law.

In 1845, Jacobs’ employer Mary Stace Willis died. Jacobs continued to care for Mary’s daughter Imogen and to assist the widower Nathaniel Willis. In January she traveled to England with him and his daughter. In letters home, Jacobs claimed there was no prejudice against people of color in England. After returning from England, Jacobs left her employment with the Willises. She moved to Boston to visit with her daughter, son and brother for ten months. In 1849, her brother, John S. Jacobs, who had also escaped and was part of the anti-slavery movement, decided to open an anti-slavery reading room in Rochester, New York. The black abolitionist Frederick Douglass was active in Rochester and it was a center of anti-slavery activities among whites as well. John Jacobs found a school for Louisa, and by November 1849, she was attending the Young Ladies Domestic Seminary School located in Clinton, New York. The school was founded in 1832 by abolitionist Hiram Huntington Kellogg. In 1849 Jacobs joined her brother in Rochester, where she met Quaker Amy Post. Amy and her husband Isaac Post were staunch abolitionists. As Jacobs became part of the American Anti-Slavery Society, she became very politicized. She helped support the Anti-Slavery Reading Room by speaking to audiences in Rochester to educate people and to raise money.

Following Congressional passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, both John and Harriet Jacobs feared for each other’s safety, as legally they were still escaped slaves. The new law increased pressure to capture escaped slaves and required cooperation from officials and citizens of free states. The Jacobs’ siblings left Rochester and returned to New York City. On February 29, 1852, Harriet Jacobs was informed that Daniel Messmore, the husband of her young legal mistress Mary Matilda (Norcom) Messmore, had checked into a hotel in New York. To avert the risk of Jacobs being kidnapped, Cornelia Grinnell Willis (Willis’ second wife) took Harriet and the Willis baby to a friend’s house where they hid. Cornelia Willis encouraged Jacobs to take the baby and go to Willis relatives in Massachusetts. Without Jacobs’ knowledge, Cornelia Willis paid $300 to Messmore for the rights to Harriet and gave Jacobs her freedom. Jacobs returned to New York with the Willis child.

In late 1852 or early 1853, Amy Post suggested that Jacobs should write her life story. She also suggested that Jacobs contact the author Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was working on *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. When Stowe wanted to use Jacobs’ history in her own book, Jacobs decided to write her own account. She wrote secretly at night, in a nursery in the Willis’ Idlewild estate.

Former First Lady Julia Tyler wrote a defense of slavery titled “The Women of England vs. the Women of America’, in response to the “Stafford House Address” petition against slavery which the Duchess of Sutherland had helped to organize. In response to “The Women of England vs. the Women of America”, Jacobs wrote a letter to the New York Tribune which was her first published writing; it was published in 1853 and signed “Fugitive”.

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Over the next several years, Jacobs continued to write her memoir, as well as letters to newspapers. In 1854, as Nathaniel Parker Willis was downstairs writing *Out-doors at Idlewild; Or, The Shaping of a Home on the Banks of the Hudson*, Jacobs was upstairs completing her own manuscript. Jacobs changed the names of all the people she depicted, including her own, to conceal their true identities and protect them from any adverse reaction. The slave owner “Dr. Flint” was based on Jacobs’ former master, Dr. James Norcom.

In 1860 Jacobs signed an agreement with the Thayer and Eldridge publishing house, which requested a preface by Lydia Maria Child. Child also became involved in editing the manuscript, and the company introduced her to Jacobs. The two women remained in contact for much of their lives. Thayer and Eldridge published the book in 1861.

Jacobs shaped her slave narrative to appeal to middle-class white Christian women in the North, focusing on the detrimental effect of slavery on women’s chastity and sexual virtues. She insisted on showing that black slaves were women and mothers, too, challenging the white middle-class cult of womanhood as too narrowly construed. Slave women had often been blamed when white men used them sexually, and Jacobs wanted to show how they were abused by the impossible power relationships. Christian women could perceive how slavery was a temptation to masculine lusts. The latter part of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was devoted to Jacobs’ struggle to free her two children after she escaped.

Starting in January, 1861, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas all seceded from the Union. The first six were the states that had the highest percentage of slaves to the total population among the 15 slave-holding states. In February, representatives from the southern states elected Jefferson Davis as President of the Confederacy. At this time, Harriet Jacobs and her editor, Lydia Maria Child, were trying to sell *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. They wrote to authors and editors of newspapers, to bookstore owners and to friends or frequent correspondents; they wanted anyone to advertise or sell Jacobs’ narrative. As the war continued, both *A True Tale of Slavery* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* became more popular among abolitionists. Both books sold more copies in England than in the United States. The narratives encouraged the war as a fight against slavery.

During the war years, Jacobs remained active in the Abolitionist cause, traveling widely to lecture and promote *Incidents*. In the post-war years, she returned to the South to assist in establishing schools for freed slaves and traveled widely raising funds to assist impoverished families. She died in 1897 in Washington, DC. and was buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Her headstone reads: “Patient in tribulation, fervent in spirit serving the Lord.”

-adapted from Wikipedia
I. Childhood

I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded.

In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment. I had one brother, William, who was two years younger than myself — a bright, affectionate child.

I had also a great treasure in my maternal grandmother, who was a remarkable woman in many respects. She was the daughter of a planter in South Carolina, who, at his death, left her mother and his three children free, with money to go to St. Augustine, where they had relatives. It was during the Revolutionary War; and they were captured on their passage, carried back, and sold to different purchasers. Such was the story my grandmother used to tell me; but I do not remember all the particulars. She was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel.

I have often heard her tell how hard she fared during childhood. But as she grew older she evinced so much intelligence, and was so faithful, that her master and mistress could not help seeing it was for their interest to take care of such a valuable piece of property. She became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress. She was much praised for her cooking; and her nice crackers became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them.

In consequence of numerous requests of this kind, she asked permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done; and she obtained leave to do it, provided she would clothe herself and her children from the profits. Upon these terms, after working hard all day for her mistress, she began her midnight bakings, assisted by her two oldest children. The business proved profitable; and each year she laid by a little, which was saved for a fund to purchase her children. Her master died, and the property was divided among his heirs.
The widow had her dower in the hotel, which she continued to keep open. My grandmother remained in her service as a slave; but her children were divided among her master’s children. As she had five, Benjamin, the youngest one, was sold, in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents. There was so little difference in our ages that he seemed more like my brother than my uncle. He was a bright, handsome lad, nearly white; for he inherited the complexion my grandmother had derived from Anglo-Saxon ancestors. Though only ten years old, seven hundred and twenty dollars were paid for him. His sale was a terrible blow to my grandmother; but she was naturally hopeful, and she went to work with renewed energy, trusting in time to be able to purchase some of her children. She had laid up three hundred dollars, which her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon. The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, being property, can hold no property. When my grandmother lent her hard earnings to her mistress, she trusted solely to her honor. The honor of a slaveholder to a slave!

To this good grandmother I was indebted for many comforts. My brother Willie and I often received portions of the crackers, cakes, and preserves, she made to sell; and after we ceased to be children we were indebted to her for many more important services.

Such were the unusually fortunate circumstances of my early childhood. When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave. My mother’s mistress was the daughter of my grandmother’s mistress. She was the foster sister of my mother; they were both nourished at my grandmother’s breast. In fact, my mother had been weaned at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food. They played together as children; and, when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter foster sister. On her death-bed her mistress promised that her children should never suffer for anything; and during her lifetime she kept her word.

They all spoke kindly of my dead mother, who had been a slave merely in name, but in nature was noble and womanly. I grieved for her, and my young mind was troubled with the thought who would now take care of me and my little brother. I was told that my home was now to be with her mistress; and I found it a happy one. No toilsome or disagreeable duties were imposed upon me. My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit. I would sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as that of any free-born white child. When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, to gather berries or flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days — too happy to last. The slave child had no thought for the morrow; but there came that blight, which too surely waits on every human being born to be a chattel.
When I was nearly twelve years old, my kind mistress sickened and died. As I saw the cheek grow paler, and the eye more glassy, how earnestly I prayed in my heart that she might live! I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me. My prayers were not answered. She died, and they buried her in the little churchyard, where, day after day, my tears fell upon her grave.

I was sent to spend a week with my grandmother. I was now old enough to begin to think of the future; and again and again I asked myself what they would do with me. I felt sure I should never find another mistress so kind as the one who was gone. She had promised my dying mother that her children should never suffer for any thing; and when I remembered that, and recalled her many proofs of attachment to me, I could not help having some hopes that she had left me free. My friends were almost certain it would be so. They thought she would be sure to do it, on account of my mother’s love and faithful service. But, alas! we all know that the memory of a faithful slave does not avail much to save her children from the auction block.

After a brief period of suspense, the will of my mistress was read, and we learned that she had bequeathed me to her sister’s daughter, a child of five years old. So vanished our hopes. My mistress had taught me the precepts of God’s Word: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” “Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.” But I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor. I would give much to blot out from my memory that one great wrong. As a child, I loved my mistress; and, looking back on the happy days I spent with her, I try to think with less bitterness of this act of injustice. While I was with her, she taught me to read and spell; and for this privilege, which so rarely falls to the lot of a slave, I bless her memory.

She possessed but few slaves; and at her death those were all distributed among her relatives. Five of them were my grandmother’s children, and had shared the same milk that nourished her mother’s children. Notwithstanding my grandmother’s long and faithful service to her owners, not one of her children escaped the auction block. These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend.

V. The trials of girlhood

I once saw two beautiful children playing together. One was a fair white child; the other was her slave, and also her sister. When I saw them embracing each other, and heard their joyous laughter, I turned sadly away from the lovely sight. I foresaw the inevitable blight that would fall on the little slave’s heart. I knew how soon her laughter would be changed to sighs. The fair child grew up to be a still fairer woman. From childhood to womanhood her pathway was blooming with flowers, and overarched by a sunny sky. Scarcely one day of her life had been clouded when the sun rose on her happy bridal morning.
How had those years dealt with her slave sister, the little playmate of her childhood? She, also, was very beautiful; but the flowers and sunshine of love were not for her. She drank the cup of sin, and shame, and misery, whereof her persecuted race are compelled to drink.

In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? Would that I had more ability! But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak! There are noble men and women who plead for us, striving to help those who cannot help themselves. God bless them! God give them strength and courage to go on! God bless those, every where, who are laboring to advance the cause of humanity!

XIII. The Church and Slavery.

After the alarm caused by Nat Turner’s insurrection had subsided, the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters. The Episcopal clergyman offered to hold a separate service on Sundays for their benefit. His colored members were very few, and also very respectable — a fact which I presume had some weight with him. The difficulty was to decide on a suitable place for them to worship. The Methodist and Baptist churches admitted them in the afternoon, but their carpets and cushions were not so costly as those at the Episcopal church. It was at last decided that they should meet at the house of a free colored man, who was a member.

I was invited to attend, because I could read. Sunday evening came, and, trusting to the cover of night, I ventured out. I rarely ventured out by daylight, for I always went with fear; expecting at every turn to encounter Dr. Flint, who was sure to turn me back, or order me to his office to inquire where I got my bonnet, or some other article of dress. When the Rev. Mr. Pike came, there were some twenty persons present. The reverend gentleman knelt in prayer, then seated himself, and requested all present, who could read, to open their books, while he gave out the portions he wished them to repeat or respond to.

His text was, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”

Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones, began: “Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. ‘Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don’t forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master’s back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work.
God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your master’s substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag. Your masters may not find you out, but God sees you, and will punish you. O, the depravity of your hearts! When your master’s work is done, are you quietly together, thinking of the goodness of God to such sinful creatures? No; you are quarrelling, and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the door-steps to poison each other with. God sees you. You men steal away to every grog shop to sell your master’s corn, that you may buy rum to drink. God sees you. You sneak into the back streets, or among the bushes, to pitch coppers. Although your masters may not find you out, God sees you; and he will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master — your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God’s commandments. When you go from here, don’t stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come.”

The benediction was pronounced. We went home, highly amused at brother Pike’s gospel teaching, and we determined to hear him again. I went the next Sabbath evening, and heard pretty much a repetition of the last discourse. At the close of the meeting, Mr. Pike informed us that he found it very inconvenient to meet at the friend’s house, and he should be glad to see us, every Sunday evening, at his own kitchen.

I went home with the feeling that I had heard the Reverend Mr. Pike for the last time. Some of his members repaired to his house, and found that the kitchen sported two tallow candles; the first time, I am sure, since its present occupant owned it, for the servants never had any thing but pine knots. It was so long before the reverend gentleman descended from his comfortable parlor that the slaves left, and went to enjoy a Methodist shout. They never seem so happy as when shouting and singing at religious meetings. Many of them are sincere, and nearer to the gate of heaven than sanctimonious Mr. Pike, and other long-faced Christians, who see wounded Samaritans, and pass by on the other side.

XVII. The Flight.

Mr. Flint was hard pushed for house servants, and rather than lose me he had restrained his malice. I did my work faithfully, though not, of course, with a willing mind. They were evidently afraid I should leave them. Mr. Flint wished that I should sleep in the great house instead of the servants’ quarters. His wife agreed to the proposition, but said I mustn’t bring my bed into the house, because it would scatter feathers on her carpet. I knew when I went there that they would never think of such a thing as furnishing a bed of any kind for me and my little one. I therefore carried my own bed, and now I was forbidden to use it. I did as I was ordered. But
now that I was certain my children were to be put in their power, in order to give
them a stronger hold on me, I resolved to leave them that night. I remembered the
grief this step would bring upon my dear old grandmother; and nothing less than
the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice. I went
about my evening work with trembling steps. Mr. Flint twice called from his cham-
ber door to inquire why the house was not locked up. I replied that I had not done
my work. “You have had time enough to do it,” said he. “Take care how you answer
me!”

I shut all the windows, locked all the doors, and went up to the third story, to wait
till midnight. How long those hours seemed, and how fervently I prayed that God
would not forsake me in this hour of utmost need! I was about to risk every thing
on the throw of a die; and if I failed, O what would become of me and my poor chil-
dren? They would be made to suffer for my fault.

At half past twelve I stole softly down stairs. I stopped on the second floor, think-
ing I heard a noise. I felt my way down into the parlor, and looked out of the window.
The night was so intensely dark that I could see nothing. I raised the window very
softly and jumped out. Large drops of rain were falling, and the darkness bewil-
dered me. I dropped on my knees, and breathed a short prayer to God for guidance
and protection. I groped my way to the road, and rushed towards the town with
almost lightning speed. I arrived at my grandmother’s house, but dared not see her.
She would say, “Linda, you are killing me;” and I knew that would unnerv e me.

I tapped softly at the window of a room, occupied by a woman, who had lived
in the house several years. I knew she was a faithful friend, and could be trusted
with my secret. I tapped several times before she heard me. At last she raised the
window, and I whispered, “Sally, I have run away. Let me in, quick.” She opened the
door softly, and said in low tones, “For God’s sake, don’t. Your grandmother is trying
to buy you and de chillern. Mr. Sands was here last week. He tole her he was going
away on business, but he wanted her to go ahead about buying you and de chillern,
and he would help her all he could. Don’t run away, Linda. Your grandmother is all
bowed down wid trouble now.”

I replied, “Sally, they are going to carry my children to the plantation to-morrow;
and they will never sell them to any body so long as they have me in their power.
Now, would you advise me to go back?”

“No, chile, no,” answered she. “When dey finds you is gone, dey won’t want de
plague ob de chillern; but where is you going to hide? Dey knows ebery inch ob dis
house.”

I told her I had a hiding-place, and that was all it was best for her to know. I asked
her to go into my room as soon as it was light, and take all my clothes out of my
trunk, and pack them in hers; for I knew Mr. Flint and the constable would be there
early to search my room. I feared the sight of my children would be too much for
my full heart; but I could not go out into the uncertain future without one last look. I
bent over the bed where lay my little Benny and baby Ellen. Poor little ones! fatherless and motherless! Memories of their father came over me. He wanted to be kind to them; but they were not all to him, as they were to my womanly heart. I knelt and prayed for the innocent little sleepers. I kissed them lightly, and turned away.

As I was about to open the street door, Sally laid her hand on my shoulder, and said, “Linda, is you gwine all alone? Let me call your uncle.”

“No Sally,” I replied, “I want no one to be brought into trouble on my account.”

I went forth into the darkness and rain. I ran on till I came to the house of the friend who was to conceal me.

Early the next morning Mr. Flint was at my grandmother’s inquiring for me. She told him she had not seen me, and supposed I was at the plantation. He watched her face narrowly, and said, “Don’t you know anything about her running off?” She assured him that she did not. He went on to say, “Last night she ran off without the least provocation. We had treated her very kindly. My wife liked her. She will soon be found and brought back. Are her children with you?” When told that they were, he said, “I am very glad to hear that. If they are here, she cannot be far off. If I find out that any of my niggers have had anything to do with this damned business, I’ll give ’em five hundred lashes.” As he started to go to his father’s, he turned round and added, persuasively, “Let her be brought back, and she shall have her children to live with her.”

The tidings made the old doctor rave and storm at a furious rate. It was a busy day for them. My grandmother’s house was searched from top to bottom. As my trunk was empty, they concluded I had taken my clothes with me. Before ten o’clock every vessel northward bound was thoroughly examined, and the law against harboring fugitives was read to all on board. At night a watch was set over the town. Knowing how distressed my grandmother would be, I wanted to send her a message; but it could not be done. Every one who went in or out of her house was closely watched. The doctor said he would take my children, unless she became responsible for them; which of course she willingly did. The next day was spent in searching. Before night, the following advertisement was posted at every corner, and in every public place for miles round: —

$300 REWARD! Ran away from the subscriber, an intelligent, bright, mulatto girl, named Linda, 21 years age. Five feet four inches high. Dark eyes, and black hair inclined to curl; but it can be made straight. Has a decayed spot on a front tooth. She can read and write, and in all probability will try to get to the Free States. All persons are forbidden, under penalty of the law, to harbor or employ said slave. $150 will be given to whoever takes her in the state, and $300 if taken out of the state and delivered to me, or lodged in jail.

Dr. Flint.
XXI. The loophole of retreat.

A small shed had been added to my grandmother’s house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by any thing but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long, and seven wide. The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Philip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap door, which communicated with the storeroom. He had been doing this while I was waiting in the swamp. The storeroom opened upon a piazza. To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread on the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and I slept such sleep as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them.

Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered for air even more than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep. This continued darkness was oppressive.

It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day, without one gleam of light. Yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave, though white people considered it an easy one; and it was so compared with the fate of others. I was never cruelly over-worked; I was never lacerated with the whip from head to foot; I was never so beaten and bruised that I could not turn from one side to the other; I never had my heel-strings cut to prevent my running away; I was never chained to a log and forced to drag it about, while I toiled in the fields from morning till night; I was never branded with hot iron, or torn by bloodhounds. On the contrary, I had always been kindly treated, and tenderly cared for, until I came into the hands of Dr. Flint. I had never wished for freedom till then. But though my life in slavery was comparatively devoid of hardships, God pity the woman who is compelled to lead such a life!

My food was passed up to me through the trap-door my uncle had contrived; and my grandmother, my uncle Phillip, and aunt Nancy would seize such opportunities as they could, to mount up there and chat with me at the opening. But of course this was not safe in the daytime. It must all be done in darkness. It was impossible for me to move in an erect position, but I crawled about my den for exercise. One day I hit my head against something, and found it was a gimlet. My uncle had left it sticking there when he made the trap-door. I was as rejoiced as Robinson Crusoe could have been in finding such a treasure. It put a lucky thought into my head. I said to myself, “Now I will have some light. Now I will see my children.”
I did not dare to begin my work during the daytime, for fear of attracting attention. But I groped round; and having found the side next the street, where I could frequently see my children, I stuck the gimlet in and waited for evening. I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children. The first person I saw in the street was Dr. Flint. I had a shuddering, superstitious feeling that it was a bad omen. Several familiar faces passed by. At last I heard the merry laughing of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to tell them I was there!

My condition was now a little improved. But for weeks I was tormented by hundreds of little red insects, fine as a needle’s point, that pierced through my skin, and produced an intolerable burning. The good grandmother gave me herb teas and cooling medicines, and finally I got rid of them. The heat of my den was intense, for nothing but thin shingles protected me from the scorching summer’s sun. But I had my consolations. Through my peeping-hole I could watch the children, and when they were near enough, I could hear their talk.

**XXIX. Preparations for escape.**

I hardly expect that the reader will credit me, when I affirm that I lived in that little dismal hole, almost deprived of light and air, and with no space to move my limbs, for nearly seven years. But it is a fact; and to me a sad one, even now; for my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment, to say nothing of my soul. Members of my family, now living in New York and Boston, can testify to the truth of what I say.

Countless were the nights that I sat late at the little loophole scarcely large enough to give me a glimpse of one twinkling star. There, I heard the patrols and slave-hunters conferring together about the capture of runaways, well knowing how rejoiced they would be to catch me.

Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children’s faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, “Your mother is here.” Sometimes it appeared to me as if ages had rolled away since I entered upon that gloomy, monotonous existence. At times, I was stupefied and listless; at other times I became very impatient to know when these dark years would end, and I should again be allowed to feel the sunshine, and breathe the pure air.

After Ellen left us, this feeling increased. Mr. Sands had agreed that Benny might go to the north whenever his uncle Phillip could go with him; and I was anxious
to be there also, to watch over my children, and protect them so far as I was able. Moreover, I was likely to be drowned out of my den, if I remained much longer; for the slight roof was getting badly out of repair, and uncle Phillip was afraid to remove the shingles, lest some one should get a glimpse of me. When storms occurred in the night, they spread mats and bits of carpet, which in the morning appeared have been laid out to dry; but to cover the roof in the daytime might have attracted attention. Consequently, my clothes and bedding were often drenched; a process by which the pains and aches in my cramped and stiffened limbs were greatly increased.

I revolved various plans of escape in my mind, which I sometimes imparted to my grandmother, when she came to whisper with me at the trap-door. The kind-hearted old woman had an intense sympathy for runaways. She had known too much of the cruelties inflicted on those who were captured. Her memory always flew back at once to the sufferings of her bright and handsome son, Benjamin, the youngest and dearest of her flock. So, whenever I alluded to the subject, she would groan out, “O, don’t think of it, child. You’ll break my heart.” I had no good old aunt Nancy now to encourage me; but my brother William and my children were continually beckoning me to the north.

XXX. Northward bound.

I never could tell how we reached the wharf. My brain was all of a whirl, and my limbs tottered under me. At an appointed place we met my uncle Phillip, who had started before us on a different route, that he might reach the wharf first, and give us timely warning if there was any danger. A row-boat was in readiness. As I was about to step in, I felt something pull me gently, and turning round I saw Benny, looking pale and anxious. He whispered in my ear, “I’ve been peeping into the doctor’s window, and he’s at home. Don’t cry; I’ll come.” He hastened away. I clasped the hand of my good uncle, to whom I owed so much, and of Peter, the brave, generous friend who had volunteered to run such terrible risks to secure my safety. To this day I remember how bright his face beamed with joy, when he told me he had discovered a safe method for me to escape. Yet that intelligent, enterprising, noble-hearted man was a chattel! liable, by the laws of a country that calls itself civilized, to be sold with horses and pigs! We parted in silence. Our hearts were all too full for words!

Swiftly the boat glided over the water. After a while, one of the sailors said, “Don’t be down-hearted, madam. We will take you safely to your husband, in ——.” At first I could not imagine what he meant; but I had presence of mind to think that it probably referred to something the captain had told him; so I thanked him, and said I hoped we should have pleasant weather.

When I entered the vessel the captain came forward to meet me. He was an elderly man, with a pleasant countenance. He showed me to a little box of a cabin, where
sah my friend Fanny. She started as if she had seen a spectre. She gazed on me in utter astonishment, and exclaimed, “Linda, can this be you? or is it your ghost?” When we were locked in each other’s arms, my overwrought feelings could no longer be restrained. My sobs reached the ears of the captain, who came and very kindly reminded us, that for his safety, as well as our own, it would be prudent for us not to attract any attention. He said that when there was a sail in sight he wished us to keep below; but at other times, he had no objection to our being on deck. He assured us that he would keep a good lookout, and if we acted prudently, he thought we should be in no danger. He had represented us as women going to meet our husbands in ——. We thanked him, and promised to observe carefully all the directions he gave us.

Fanny and I now talked by ourselves, low and quietly, in our little cabin. She told me of the sufferings she had gone through in making her escape, and of her terrors while she was concealed in her mother’s house. Above all, she dwelt on the agony of separation from all her children on that dreadful auction day. She could scarcely credit me, when I told her of the place where I had passed nearly seven years. “We have the same sorrows,” said I. “No,” replied she, “you are going to see your children soon, and there is no hope that I shall ever even hear from mine.”

The vessel was soon under way, but we made slow progress. The wind was against us. I should not have cared for this, if we had been out of sight of the town; but until there were miles of water between us and our enemies, we were filled with constant apprehension that the constables would come on board. Neither could I feel quite at ease with the captain and his men. I was an entire stranger to that class of people, and I had heard that sailors were rough, and sometimes cruel. We were so completely in their power, that if they were bad men, our situation would be dreadful. Now that the captain was paid for our passage, might he not be tempted to make more money by giving us up to those who claimed us as property? I was naturally of a confiding disposition, but slavery had made me suspicious of everybody. Fanny did not share my distrust of the captain or his men. She said she was afraid at first, but she had been on board three days while the vessel lay in the dock, and nobody had betrayed her, or treated her otherwise than kindly.

The captain soon came to advise us to go on deck for fresh air. His friendly and respectful manner, combined with Fanny’s testimony, reassured me, and we went with him. He placed us in a comfortable seat, and occasionally entered into conversations. He told us he was a Southerner by birth, and had spent the greater part of his life in the Slave States, and that he had recently lost a brother who traded in slaves. “But,” said he, “it is a pitiable and degrading business, and I always felt ashamed to acknowledge my brother in connection with it.” As we passed Snaky Swamp, he pointed to it, and said, “There is a slave territory that defies all the laws.” I thought of the terrible days I had spent there, and though it was not called Dismal Swamp, it made me feel very dismal as I looked at it.
I shall never forget that night. The balmy air of spring was so refreshing! And how shall I describe my sensations when we were fairly sailing on Chesapeake Bay? O, the beautiful sunshine! the exhilarating breeze! and I could enjoy them without fear or restraint. I had never realized what grand things air and sunlight are till I had been deprived of them.

Ten days after we left land we were approaching Philadelphia. The captain said we should arrive there in the night, but he thought we had better wait till morning, and go on shore in broad daylight, as the best way to avoid suspicion.

I replied, “You know best. But will you stay on board and protect us?”

He saw that I was suspicious, and he said he was sorry, now that he had brought us to the end of our voyage, to find I had so little confidence in him. Ah, if he had ever been a slave he would have known how difficult it was to trust a white man. He assured us that we might sleep through the night without fear; that he would take care we were not left unprotected. Be it said to the honor of this captain, Southerner as he was, that if Fanny and I had been white ladies, and our passage lawfully engaged, he could not have treated us more respectfully. My intelligent friend, Peter, had rightly estimated the character of the man to whose honor he had intrusted us.

The next morning I was on deck as soon as the day dawned. I called Fanny to see the sunrise, for the first time in our lives, on free soil; for such I then believed it to be. We watched the reddening sky; and saw the great orb come up slowly out of the water; as it seemed. Soon the waves began to sparkle, and every thing caught the beautiful glow. Before us lay the city of strangers. We looked at each other; and the eyes of both were moistened with tears. We had escaped from slavery; and we supposed ourselves to be safe from the hunters. But we were alone in the world, and we had left dear ties behind us; ties cruelly sundered by the demon Slavery.

XLI. Free at last.

Without my knowledge, Mrs. Bruce employed a gentleman in New York to enter into negotiations with Mr. Dodge. He proposed to pay three hundred dollars down, if Mr. Dodge would sell me, and enter into obligations to relinquish all claim to me or my children forever after: He who called himself my master said he scorned so small an offer for such a valuable servant. The gentleman replied, “You can do as you choose, sir. If you reject this offer you will never get any thing; for the woman has friends who will convey her and her children out of the country.”

Mr. Dodge concluded that “half a loaf was better than no bread,” and he agreed to the proffered terms. By the next mail I received this brief letter from Mrs. Bruce: “I am rejoiced to tell you that the money for your freedom has been paid to Mr. Dodge. Come home to-morrow. I long to see you and my sweet babe.”
My brain reeled as I read these lines. A gentleman near me said, “It’s true; I have seen the bill of sale.” “The bill of sale!” Those words struck me like a blow. So I was sold at last! A human being sold in the free city of New York! The bill of sale is on record, and future generations will learn from it that women were articles of traffic in New York, late in the nineteenth century of the Christian religion. It may hereafter prove a useful document to antiquaries, who are seeking to measure the progress of civilization in the United States. I well know the value of that bit of paper; but much as I love freedom, I do not like to look upon it. I am deeply grateful to the generous friend who procured it, but I despise the miscreant who demanded payment for what never rightfully belonged to him or his.

I had objected to having my freedom bought, yet I must confess that when it was done I felt as if a heavy load had been lifted from my weary shoulders. When I rode home in the cars I was no longer afraid to unveil my face and look at people as they passed. I should have been glad to have met Daniel Dodge himself; to have had him seen me and known me, that he might have mourned over the untoward circumstances which compelled him to sell me for three hundred dollars.

When I reached home, the arms of my benefactress were thrown round me, and our tears mingled. As soon as she could speak, she said, “O Linda, I’m so glad it’s all over! You wrote to me as if you thought you were going to be transferred from one owner to another. But I did not buy you for your services. I should have done just the same, if you had been going to sail for California to-morrow. I should, at least, have the satisfaction of knowing that you left me a free woman.”

My heart was exceedingly full. I remembered how my poor father had tried to buy me, when I was a small child, and how he had been disappointed. I hoped his spirit was rejoicing over me now. I remembered how my good old grandmother had laid up her earnings to purchase me in later years, and how often her plans had been frustrated. How that faithful, loving old heart would leap for joy, if she could look on me and my children now that we were free! My relatives had been foiled in all their efforts, but God had raised me up a friend among strangers, who had bestowed on me the precious, long-desired boon. Friend! It is a common word, often lightly used. Like other good and beautiful things, it may be tarnished by careless handling; but when I speak of Mrs. Bruce as my friend, the word is sacred.

My grandmother lived to rejoice in my freedom; but not long after, a letter came with a black seal. She had gone “where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.”

Time passed on, and a paper came to me from the south, containing an obituary notice of my uncle Phillip. It was the only case I ever knew of such an honor conferred upon a colored person. It was written by one of his friends, and contained these words: “Now that death has laid him low, they call him a good man and a useful citizen; but what are eulogies to the black man, when the world has faded from
his vision? It does not require man’s praise to obtain rest in God’s kingdom.” So they called a colored man a citizen! Strange words to be uttered in that region!

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearth-stone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children’s sake far more than for my own. But God so orders circumstances as to keep me with my friend Mrs. Bruce. Love, duty, gratitude, also bind me to her side. It is a privilege to serve her who pities my oppressed people, and who has bestowed the inestimable boon of freedom on me and my children.

It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospection is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea.
Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)

Frederick Douglass (born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey; c. February 1818 – February 20, 1895) was an African-American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. After escaping from slavery in Maryland, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts and New York, gaining note for his dazzling oratory and incisive antislavery writings. In his time, he was described by abolitionists as a living counter-example to slaveholders’ arguments that slaves lacked the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizens. Northerners at the time found it hard to believe that such a great orator had once been a slave.

Douglass wrote several autobiographies. He described his experiences as a slave in his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, an American Slave, which became a bestseller, and was influential in promoting the cause of abolition, as was his second book, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). After the Civil War, Douglass remained an active campaigner against slavery and wrote his last autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. First published in 1881 and revised in 1892, three years before his death, it covered events during and after the Civil War. Douglass also actively supported women's suffrage, and held several public offices. Without his approval, Douglass became the first African American nominated for Vice President of the United States as the running mate and Vice Presidential nominee of Victoria Woodhull, on the Equal Rights Party ticket.

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born into slavery on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay in Talbot County, Maryland. The plantation was between Hillsboro and Cordova; his birthplace was likely his grandmother’s shack east of Tappers Corner, and west of Tuckahoe Creek. The exact date of his birth is unknown, and he later chose to celebrate his birthday on February 14. In his first autobiography, Douglass stated: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it.”

Douglass was of mixed race, which likely included Native American on his mother’s side, as well as African and European. He was given his name by his mother, Harriet Bailey. After escaping to the North years later, he took the surname Douglass, having already dropped his two middle names. He wrote of his earliest times with his mother:

*The opinion was ... whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion I know nothing.... My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant.... It [was] common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. ... I do not recollect ever seeing*
my mother by the light of day. ... She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone.

After this early separation from his mother, young Frederick lived with his maternal grandmother, Betty Bailey. At the age of seven, he was separated from his grandmother and moved to the Wye House plantation, where Aaron Anthony worked as overseer. Douglass’s mother died when he was about ten. After Anthony died, Douglass was given to Lucretia Auld, wife of Thomas Auld, who sent him to serve Thomas’ brother Hugh Auld in Baltimore.

When Douglass was about twelve, Hugh Auld’s wife Sophia started teaching him the alphabet. Douglass described her as a kind and tender-hearted woman, who treated him “as she supposed one human being ought to treat another”. Hugh Auld disapproved of the tutoring, feeling that literacy would encourage slaves to desire freedom; Douglass later referred to this as the “first decidedly antislavery lecture” he had ever heard. Under her husband’s influence, Sophia came to believe that education and slavery were incompatible and one day snatched a newspaper away from Douglass. In his autobiography, Douglass related how he learned to read from white children in the neighborhood, and by observing the writings of the men with whom he worked.

Douglass continued, secretly, to teach himself how to read and write. He later often said, “knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom”. As Douglass began to read newspapers, pamphlets, political materials, and books of every description, this new realm of thought led him to question and condemn the institution of slavery.

When Douglass was hired out to William Freeland, he taught other slaves on the plantation to read the New Testament at a weekly Sunday school. As word spread, the interest among slaves in learning to read was so great that in any week, more than 40 slaves would attend lessons. For about six months, their study went relatively unnoticed. While Freeland remained complacent about their activities, other plantation owners became incensed about their slaves being educated. One Sunday they burst in on the gathering, armed with clubs and stones, to disperse the congregation permanently.

In 1833, Thomas Auld took Douglass back from Hugh (“[a]s a means of punishing Hugh,” Douglass later wrote). Thomas Auld sent Douglass to work for Edward Covey, a poor farmer who had a reputation as a “slave-breaker.” He whipped Douglass regularly, and nearly broke him psychologically. The sixteen-year-old Douglass finally rebelled against the beatings, however, and fought back. After Douglass won a physical confrontation, Covey never tried to beat him again.

Douglass first tried to escape from Freeland, who had hired him out from his owner Colonel Lloyd, but was unsuccessful. In 1836, he tried to escape from his new master Covey, but failed again. In 1837, Douglass met and fell in love with Anna
Murray, a free black woman in Baltimore about five years older than he. Her free status strengthened his belief in the possibility of gaining his own freedom.

On September 3, 1838, Douglass successfully escaped by boarding a train from the newly merged Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad (P.W.& B.) railroad line to the great Northern cities. The area where he boarded was a short distance east of the previous temporary P.W.& B. train depot in a recently developed neighborhood between the modern neighborhoods of Harbor East and Little Italy. The depot was located at President and Fleet streets, east of “The Basin” of the Baltimore harbor, on the Northwest Branch of the Patapsco River. (This depot was replaced by the historic President Street Station, constructed 1849–1850; it was noted as a site of other slave escapes along one of many routes of the famous “Underground Railroad” and during the Civil War.)

Young Douglass reached Havre de Grace, Maryland, in Harford County, in the northeast corner of the state, along the southwest shore of the Susquehanna River, which flowed into the Chesapeake Bay. Though this placed him some 20 miles from the free state of Pennsylvania, it was easier to travel through Delaware, another slave state. Dressed in a sailor’s uniform provided to him by Murray, who also gave him part of her savings to cover his travel costs, he carried identification papers and protection papers that he had obtained from a free black seaman. Douglass crossed the wide Susquehanna River by the railroad’s steam-ferry at Havre de Grace to Perryville on the opposite shore in Cecil County, then continued by train across the state line to Wilmington, Delaware, a large port at the head of the Delaware Bay. From there, because the rail line was not yet completed, he went by steamboat along the Delaware River further northeast to the “Quaker City” of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, an anti-slavery stronghold, and continued to the safe house of noted abolitionist David Ruggles in New York City. His entire journey to freedom took less than 24 hours.

Frederick Douglass later wrote of his arrival in New York City:

*I have often been asked, how I felt when first I found myself on free soil. And my readers may share the same curiosity. There is scarcely anything in my experience about which I could not give a more satisfactory answer. A new world had opened upon me. If life is more than breath, and the ‘quick round of blood,’ I lived more in one day than in a year of my slave life. It was a time of joyous excitement which words can but tamely describe. In a letter written to a friend soon after reaching New York, I said: ‘I felt as one might feel upon escape from a den of hungry lions.’ Anguish and grief, like darkness and rain, may be depicted; but gladness and joy, like the rainbow, defy the skill of pen or pencil.*

Once Douglass had arrived, he sent for Murray to follow him north to New York. She brought with her the necessary basics for them to set up a home. They were married on September 15, 1838, by a black Presbyterian minister, just eleven days
after Douglass’s arrival in New York. At first, they adopted Johnson as their married name, to divert attention.

Douglass’s best-known work is his first autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, an American Slave, published in 1845. At the time, some skeptics questioned whether a black man could have produced such an eloquent piece of literature. The book received generally positive reviews and became an immediate bestseller. Within three years, it had been reprinted nine times, with 11,000 copies circulating in the United States. It was also translated into French and Dutch and published in Europe.

Douglass published three versions of his autobiography during his lifetime (and revised the third of these), each time expanding on the previous one. The 1845 Narrative was his biggest seller, and probably allowed him to raise the funds to gain his legal freedom the following year, as discussed below. In 1855, Douglass published *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In 1881, after the Civil War, Douglass published *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which he revised in 1892.

By the time of the Civil War, Douglass was one of the most famous black men in the country, known for his orations on the condition of the black race and on other issues such as women's rights. His eloquence gathered crowds at every location. His reception by leaders in England and Ireland added to his stature.

Douglass and the abolitionists argued that because the aim of the Civil War was to end slavery, African Americans should be allowed to engage in the fight for their freedom. Douglass publicized this view in his newspapers and several speeches. In August 1861, Douglass published an account of the First Battle of Bull Run that noted that there were some blacks already in the Confederate ranks. A few weeks later, Douglass brought the subject up again, quoting a witness to the battle who said they saw black Confederates “with muskets on their shoulders and bullets in their pockets.” Douglass conferred with President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 on the treatment of black soldiers, and with President Andrew Johnson on the subject of black suffrage.

President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, which took effect on January 1, 1863, declared the freedom of all slaves in Confederate-held territory. (Slaves in Union-held areas and Northern states were freed with the adoption of the 13th Amendment on December 6, 1865.) Douglass described the spirit of those awaiting the proclamation: “We were waiting and listening as for a bolt from the sky ... we were watching ... by the dim light of the stars for the dawn of a new day ... we were longing for the answer to the agonizing prayers of centuries.”

During the U.S. Presidential Election of 1864, Douglass supported John C. Frémont. Douglass was disappointed that President Lincoln did not publicly endorse suffrage for black freedmen. Douglass believed that since African-American men were fighting for the Union in the American Civil War, they deserved the right to vote.
With the North no longer obliged to return slaves to their owners in the South, Douglass fought for equality for his people. He made plans with Lincoln to move liberated slaves out of the South. During the war, Douglass also helped the Union cause by serving as a recruiter for the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment. His eldest son, Charles Douglass, joined the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, but was ill for much of his service. Lewis Douglass fought at the Battle of Fort Wagner. Another son, Frederick Douglass Jr., also served as a recruiter.

After the Civil War, Douglass continued to work for equality for African-Americans and women. Due to his prominence and activism during the war, Douglass received several political appointments. He served as president of the Reconstruction-era Freedman's Savings Bank. Douglass also became chargé d'affaires for the Dominican Republic, but resigned that position after two years because of disagreements with U.S. government policy.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C. During that meeting, he was brought to the platform and received a standing ovation. Shortly after he returned home, Frederick Douglass died of a massive heart attack or stroke. He was 77. (Adapted from Wikipedia)
Chapter II

Here, too, the slaves of all the other farms received their monthly allowance of food, and their yearly clothing. The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars. The allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.

There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these. This, however, is not considered a very great privation. They find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day’s work in the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side, on one common bed, — the cold, damp floor, — each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver’s horn.

At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field. There must be no halting; every one must be at his or her post; and woe betides them who hear not this morning summons to the field; for if they are not awakened by the sense of hearing, they are by the sense of feeling: no age nor sex finds any favor. Mr. Severe, the overseer, used to stand by the door of the quarter, armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin, ready to whip any one who was so unfortunate as not to hear; or, from any other cause, was prevented from being ready to start for the field at the sound of the horn.

Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel man. I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this, too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother’s release. He seemed to take pleasure in
manifesting his fiendish barbarity. Added to his cruelty, he was a profane swearer. It was enough to chill the blood and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man to hear him talk. Scarce a sentence escaped him but that was commenced or concluded by some horrid oath. The field was the place to witness his cruelty and profanity. His presence made it both the field of blood and of blasphemy. From the rising till the going down of the sun, he was cursing, raving, cutting, and slashing among the slaves of the field, in the most frightful manner. His career was short. He died very soon after I went to Colonel Lloyd’s; and he died as he lived, uttering, with his dying groans, bitter curses and horrid oaths. His death was regarded by the slaves as the result of a merciful providence.

Chapter VII.

I lived in Master Hugh’s family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach.

Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband’s precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience
soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood.

This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence forbids; — not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey’s ship-yard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. “You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, but I am a slave for life! Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?” These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

Chapter IX.

We slaves loved Mr. Cookman. We believed him to be a good man. We thought him instrumental in getting Mr. Samuel Harrison, a very rich slaveholder, to emancipate his slaves; and by some means got the impression that he was laboring to effect the emancipation of all the slaves. When he was at our house, we were sure to be called in to prayers. When the others were there, we were sometimes called in and sometimes not. Mr. Cookman took more notice of us than either of the other ministers. He could not come among us without betraying his sympathy for us, and, stupid as we were, we had the sagacity to see it.
While I lived with my master in St. Michael’s, there was a white young man, a Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the New Testament. We met but three times, when Mr. West and Mr. Fairbanks, both class-leaders, with many others, came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again. Thus ended our little Sabbath school in the pious town of St. Michael’s.

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—”He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.”

Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner; and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master’s cruelty toward “Henny” is found in the fact of her being almost helpless. When quite a child, she fell into the fire, and burned herself horribly. Her hands were so burnt, that she never got the use of them. She could do very little but bear heavy burdens. She was to master a bill of expense; and as he was a mean man, she was a constant offence to him.

He seemed desirous of getting the poor girl out of existence. He gave her away once to his sister; but, being a poor gift, she was not disposed to keep her. Finally, my benevolent master, to use his own words, “set her adrift to take care of herself.” Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them.

Chapter X.

Mr. Covey was at the house, about one hundred yards from the treading-yard where we were fanning. On hearing the fan stop, he left immediately, and came to the spot where we were. He hastily inquired what the matter was. Bill answered that I was sick, and there was no one to bring wheat to the fan. I had by this time crawled away under the side of the post and rail-fence by which the yard was enclosed, hoping to find relief by getting out of the sun. He then asked where I was. He was told by one of the hands. He came to the spot, and, after looking at me awhile, asked me what was the matter.

I told him as well as I could, for I scarce had strength to speak. He then gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. I tried to do so, but fell back in the
attempt. He gave me another kick, and again told me to rise. I again tried, and suc-
cceeded in gaining my feet; but, stooping to get the tub with which I was feeding the
fan, I again staggered and fell. While down in this situation, Mr. Covey took up the
hickory slat with which Hughes had been striking off the half-bushel measure, and
with it gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood
ran freely; and with this again told me to get up.

I made no effort to comply, having now made up my mind to let him do his worst.
In a short time after receiving this blow, my head grew better. Mr. Covey had now
left me to my fate. At this moment I resolved, for the first time, to go to my master;
enter a complaint, and ask his protection. In order to this, I must that afternoon
walk seven miles; and this, under the circumstances, was truly a severe undertak-
ing. I was exceedingly feeble; made so as much by the kicks and blows which I re-
ceived, as by the severe fit of sickness to which I had been subjected. I, however;
watched my chance, while Covey was looking in an opposite direction, and started
for St. Michael's.

I succeeded in getting a considerable distance on my way to the woods, when
Covey discovered me, and called after me to come back, threatening what he would
do if I did not come. I, disregarded both his calls and his threats, and made my way
to the woods as fast as my feeble state would allow; and thinking I might be over-
hauled by him if I kept the road, I walked through the woods, keeping far enough
from the road to avoid detection, and near enough to prevent losing my way. I had
not gone far before my little strength again failed me. I could go no farther. I fell
down, and lay for a considerable time. The blood was yet oozing from the wound
on my head.

For a time I thought I should bleed to death; and think now that I should have
done so, but that the blood so matted my hair as to stop the wound. After lying there
about three quarters of an hour, I nerved myself up again, and started on my way,
through bogs and briers, barefooted and bareheaded, tearing my feet sometimes
at nearly every step; and after a journey of about seven miles, occupying some five
hours to perform it, I arrived at master's store. I then presented an appearance
enough to affect any but a heart of iron. From the crown of my head to my feet, I
was covered with blood.

My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. My legs
and feet were torn in sundry places with briers and thorns, and were also covered
with blood. I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts, and
barely escaped them. In this state I appeared before my master, humbly entreating
him to interpose his authority for my protection. I told him all the circumstances as
well as I could, and it seemed, as I spoke, at times to affect him.

He would then walk the floor, and seek to justify Covey by saying he expected I
deserved it. He asked me what I wanted. I told him, to let me get a new home; that as
sure as I lived with Mr. Covey again, I should live with but to die with him; that Covey
would surely kill me; he was in a fair way for it. Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey’s killing me, and said that he knew Mr. Covey; that he was a good man, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that, should he do so, he would lose the whole year’s wages; that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and that I must go back to him, come what might; and that I must not trouble him with any more stories, or that he would himself get hold of me.

After threatening me thus, he gave me a very large dose of salts, telling me that I might remain in St. Michael’s that night, (it being quite late,) but that I must be off back to Mr. Covey’s early in the morning; and that if I did not, he would get hold of me, which meant that he would whip me. I remained all night, and, according to his orders, I started off to Covey’s in the morning, (Saturday morning,) wearied in body and broken in spirit. I got no supper that night, or breakfast that morning.

I reached Covey’s about nine o’clock; and just as I was getting over the fence that divided Mrs. Kemp’s fields from ours, out ran Covey with his cow skin, to give me another whipping. Before he could reach me, I succeeded in getting to the cornfield; and as the corn was very high, it afforded me the means of hiding. He seemed very angry, and searched for me a long time. My behavior was altogether unaccountable. He finally gave up the chase, thinking, I suppose, that I must come home for something to eat; he would give himself no further trouble in looking for me. I spent that day mostly in the woods, having the alternative before me,—to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death.

That night, I fell in with Sandy Jenkins, a slave with whom I was somewhat acquainted. Sandy had a free wife who lived about four miles from Mr. Covey’s; and it being Saturday, he was on his way to see her. I told him my circumstances, and he very kindly invited me to go home with him. I went home with him, and talked this whole matter over, and got his advice as to what course it was best for me to pursue. I found Sandy an old adviser.

He told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. He said he had carried it for years; and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to while he carried it.

I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could do no harm, if it did no good. To please him, I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. This was Sunday morning.

I immediately started for home; and upon entering the yard gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to meeting. He spoke, to me very kindly, bade me drive the pigs from a lot near by, and passed on towards the church. Now, this singular conduct
of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was something in the root which Sandy, had given me; and had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root, and as it was, I was half inclined to think the root to be something more than I at first had taken it to be.

All went well till Monday morning. On this morning, the virtue of the root was fully tested. Long before daylight I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey. But whilst thus engaged, whilst in the act of throwing down some blades from the loft, Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suitting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and, as I did so, I rose.

He held onto me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr. Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also.

When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed. He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. With that, he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just out of the stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he was leaning over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground. By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do.

Covey said, “Take hold of him, take hold of him!” Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all.

I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say, he didn’t want to get hold of me again. “No,” thought I, “you need not; for you will come off worse than you did before.”
This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me.

From this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards. I had several fights, but was never whipped.

It was for a long time a matter of surprise to me why Mr. Covey did not immediately have me taken by the constable to the whipping-post, and there regularly whipped for the crime of raising my hand against a white man in defence of myself. And the only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me; but such as it is, I will give it. Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker. It was of considerable importance to him. That reputation was at stake; and had he sent me—a boy about sixteen years old—to the public whipping-post, his reputation would have been lost; so, to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished.

Mr. Freeland was himself the owner of but two slaves. Their names were Henry Harris and John Harris. The rest of his hands he hired. These consisted of myself, Sandy Jenkins, and Handy Caldwell. Henry and John were quite intelligent, and in a very little while after I went there, I succeeded in creating in them a strong desire to learn how to read. This desire soon sprang up in the others also. They very soon mustered up some old spelling-books, and nothing would do but that I must keep a Sabbath school. I agreed to do so, and accordingly devoted my Sundays to teaching these my loved fellow-slaves how to read.

Neither of them knew his letters when I went there. Some of the slaves of the neighboring farms found what was going on, and also availed themselves of this little opportunity to learn to read. It was understood, among all who came, that there must be as little display about it as possible. It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael’s unacquainted with the fact, that, instead of spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God; for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings.

My blood boils as I think of the bloody manner in which Messrs. Wright Fairbanks and Garrison West, both class-leaders, in connection with many others, rushed in
upon us with sticks and stones, and broke up our virtuous little Sabbath school, at St. Michael’s — all calling themselves Christians! humble followers of the Lord Jesus Christ! But I am again digressing.

I held my Sabbath school at the house of a free colored man, whose name I deem it imprudent to mention; for should it be known, it might embarrass him greatly, though the crime of holding the school was committed ten years ago. I had at one time over forty scholars, and those of the right sort, ardently desiring to learn. They were of all ages, though mostly men and women. I look back to those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other, and to leave them at the close of the Sabbath was a severe cross indeed.

When I think that these precious souls are to-day shut up in the prison-house of slavery, my feelings overcome me, and I am almost ready to ask, “Does a righteous God govern the universe? and for what does he hold the thunders in his right hand, if not to smite the oppressor, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the spoiler?” These dear souls came not to Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness.

I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. I kept up my school nearly the whole year I lived with Mr. Freeland; and, beside my Sabbath school, I devoted three evenings in the week, during the winter, to teaching the slaves at home. And I have the happiness to know, that several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency.

Chapter XI.

Things went on without very smoothly indeed, but within there was trouble. It is impossible for me to describe my feelings as the time of my contemplated start drew near. I had a number of warm-hearted friends in Baltimore, — friends that I loved almost as I did my life, — and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression. It is my opinion that thousands would escape from slavery, who now remain, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their friends.

The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend. The love of them was my tender point, and shook my decision more than all things else. Besides the pain of separation, the dread and apprehension of a failure exceeded what I had experienced at my first attempt. The
appalling defeat I then sustained returned to torment me. I felt assured that, if I failed in this attempt, my case would be a hopeless one — it would seat my fate as a slave forever.

I could not hope to get off with any thing less than the severest punishment, and being placed beyond the means of escape. It required no very vivid imagination to depict the most frightful scenes through which I should have to pass, in case I failed. The wretchedness of slavery, and the blessedness of freedom, were perpetually before me. It was life and death with me. But I remained firm, and, according to my resolution, on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind. How I did so, — what means I adopted, — what direction I travelled, and by what mode of conveyance, — I must leave unexplained, for the reasons before mentioned.

I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. I have never been able to answer the question with any satisfaction to myself. It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate. In writing to a dear friend, immediately after my arrival at New York, I said I felt like one who had escaped a den of hungry lions.

This state of mind, however, very soon subsided; and I was again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness. I was yet liable to be taken back, and subjected to all the tortures of slavery. This in itself was enough to damp the ardor of my enthusiasm. But the loneliness overcame me. There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren — children of a common Father; and yet I dared not to unfold to any one of them my sad condition. I was afraid to speak to any one for fear of speaking to the wrong one, and thereby falling into the hands of money-loving kidnappers, whose business it was to lie in wait for the panting fugitive, as the ferocious beasts of the forest lie in wait for their prey.

The motto which I adopted when I started from slavery was this — “Trust no man!” I saw in every white man an enemy, and in almost every colored man cause for distrust. It was a most painful situation; and, to understand it, one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances.

Let him be a fugitive slave in a strange land — a land given up to be the hunting-ground for slaveholders — whose inhabitants are legalized kidnappers — where he is every moment subjected to the terrible liability of being seized upon by his fellowmen, as the hideous crocodile seizes upon his prey! — say, let him place himself in my situation — without home or friends — without money or credit — wanting shelter; and no one to give it — wanting bread, and no money to buy it, — and at the same time let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay, — perfectly helpless both as to the means of defence and means of escape, — in the midst of plenty, yet suffer-
ing the terrible gnawings of hunger, — in the midst of houses, yet having no home, — among fellow-men, yet feeling as if in the midst of wild beasts, whose greediness to swallow up the trembling and half-famished fugitive is only equalled by that with which the monsters of the deep swallow up the helpless fish upon which they subsist, — I say, let him be placed in this most trying situation, — the situation in which I was placed, — then, and not till then, will he fully appreciate the hardships of, and know how to sympathize with, the toil-worn and whip-scarred fugitive slave.

Thank Heaven, I remained but a short time in this distressed situation. I was relieved from it by the humane hand of Mr. DAVID RUGGLES, whose vigilance, kindness, and perseverance, I shall never forget. I am glad of an opportunity to express, as far as words can, the love and gratitude I bear him. Mr. Ruggles is now afflicted with blindness, and is himself in need of the same kind offices which he was once so forward in the performance of toward others. I had been in New York but a few days, when Mr. Ruggles sought me out, and very kindly took me to his boarding-house at the corner of Church and Lespenard Streets. Mr. Ruggles was then very deeply engaged in the memorable Darg case, as well as attending to a number of other fugitive slaves, devising ways and means for their successful escape; and, though watched and hemmed in on almost every side, he seemed to be more than a match for his enemies.

In about four months after I went to New Bedford, there came a young man to me, and inquired if I did not wish to take the “Liberator.” I told him I did; but, just having made my escape from slavery, I remarked that I was unable to pay for it then. I, however, finally became a subscriber to it. The paper came, and I read it from week to week with such feelings as it would be quite idle for me to attempt to describe. The paper became my meat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire. Its sympathy for my brethren in bonds — its scathing denunciations of slaveholders — its faithful exposures of slavery — and its powerful attacks upon the upholders of the institution — sent a thrill of joy through my soul, such as I had never felt before!

I had not long been a reader of the “Liberator,” before I got a pretty correct idea of the principles, measures and spirit of the anti-slavery reform. I took right hold of the cause. I could do but little; but what I could, I did with a joyful heart, and never felt happier than when in an anti-slavery meeting. I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others.

But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket, on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people’s meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren — with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide.
Unit VII - American Romantic Poetry: The Fireside Poets

Historical Context: The Fireside Poets

The so-called “Fireside Poets” owed their unprecedented popularity and acclaim to the explosion in literacy and the growth of the book and magazine publishing industries in mid-nineteenth century America. Though typically regarded as inferior to the greatest American poets of their age—Whitman, Dickinson, and Poe—the Fireside Poets are significant both for the wide readership their work earned both in America and in Europe and for their mastery of traditional verse forms and a prevailing tone of sentimentality that continues to resonate in American popular culture to the present day.

The Fireside poets (also known as the “schoolroom” or “household” poets) earned their name for the accessibility of their poems, which could be read and enjoyed by diverse audiences in intimate settings. Their themes often reflected a patriotic, even propagandistic view of the founding of a nation still in search of a unique identity detached from the influence of England and France but still retaining a cultural sophistication difficult to lay claim to outside the traditions of Europe. Hence, the poems of Longfellow, Bryant, and Holmes might celebrate subjects such as Paul Revere’s midnight ride before the inaugural battle of the Revolutionary War, the legacy of a great Native American tribal chieftan, or the decommissioning of a famous US frigate that won important naval battles in the War of 1812, but their style and tone were utterly conventional and reminiscent of the Victorian poetry practiced by their English contemporaries. More importantly, the rhyming cadences and patriotic subjects of their best known poems made them popular choices for recitation exercises for schoolchildren.

Though the poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and William Cullen Bryant lack the thematic and stylistic ambition of Whitman and Dickinson, they are nevertheless valuable for their mastery of form and their preference for American legends, scenes of American home life, and contemporary politics as their subject matter. The Fireside Poets were also politically active, writing anti-slavery poems and editorials published in the Atlantic Monthly (whose first editor was Fireside Poet James Russell Lowell), one of the oldest and most respected magazines still published today. The popularity of these poets and their commitment to speaking out on the controversial issues of the day had a profound influence on the wide audience for their poetry.
William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878)

William Cullen Bryant was the second son of Peter Bryant, a doctor and later a state legislator, and Sarah Snell. His maternal ancestry traces back to passengers on the *Mayflower*; his father’s, to colonists who arrived about a dozen years later. His paternal father’s line goes from Peter, to Phillip, to Icabod and Mr. Stephen Bryant who came to America and married Mehitable Standish, the granddaughter of Capt. Myles Standish also of the Mayflower.

Bryant developed an interest in poetry early in life. Under his father’s tutelage, he emulated Alexander Pope and other Neo-Classic British poets. *The Embargo*, a savage attack on President Thomas Jefferson published in 1808, reflected Dr. Bryant’s Federalist political views. The first edition quickly sold out—partly because of the publicity earned by the poet’s young age—and a second, expanded edition, which included Bryant’s translation of Classical verse, was printed. The youth wrote little poetry while preparing to enter Williams College as a sophomore, but upon leaving Williams after a single year and then beginning to read law, he regenerated his passion for poetry through encounter with the English pre-Romantics and, particularly, William Wordsworth.

Although “Thanatopsis,” his most famous poem, has been said to date from 1811, it is much more probable that Bryant began its composition in 1813, or even later. What is known about its publication is that his father took some pages of verse from his son’s desk and submitted them, along with his own work, to the *North American Review* in 1817. The *Review* was edited by Edward Tyrrel Channing at the time and, upon receiving it, read the poem to his assistant, who immediately exclaimed, “That was never written on this side of the water!” Someone at the *North American* joined two of the son’s discrete fragments, gave the result the Greek-derived title *Thanatopsis* (“meditation on death”), mistakenly attributed it to the father, and published it. With all the errors, it was well-received, and soon Bryant was publishing poems with some regularity, including “To a Waterfowl” in 1821.

On January 11, 1821, Bryant, still striving to build a legal career, married Frances Fairchild. Soon after, having received an invitation to address the Harvard University Phi Beta Kappa Society at the school’s August commencement, Bryant spent months working on “The Ages,” a panorama in verse of the history of civilization, culminating in the establishment of the United States. That poem led a collection, entitled *Poems*, which he arranged to publish on the same trip to Cambridge. For that book, he added sets of lines at the beginning and end of “Thanatopsis.” His career as a poet was launched. Even so, it was not until 1832, when an expanded *Poems* was published in the U.S. and, with the assistance of Washington Irving, in Britain, that he won recognition as America’s leading poet.

With the help of a distinguished and well-connected literary family, the Sedgwicks, he gained a foothold in New York City, where, in 1825, he was hired as editor; first
of the New-York Review, then of the United States Review and Literary Gazette. But the magazines of that day usually enjoyed only an ephemeral life-span. After two years of fatiguing effort to breathe life into periodicals, he became Assistant Editor of the New-York Evening Post, a newspaper founded by Alexander Hamilton that was surviving precariously. Within two years, he was Editor-in-Chief and a part owner. He remained the Editor-in-Chief for half a century (1828–78). Eventually, the Evening-Post became not only the foundation of his fortune but also the means by which he exercised considerable political power in his city, state, and nation.

Bryant’s poetry is tender and graceful, pervaded by a contemplative melancholy, and a love of solitude and the silence of the woods. Though he was brought up to admire Pope, and in his early youth imitated him, he was one of the first American poets to throw off his influence. He had a high sense of duty, was a prominent and patriotic citizen, and enjoyed the esteem and even the reverence of his fellow-countrymen. In 1884, New York City’s Reservoir Square, at the intersection of 42nd Street and Sixth Avenue, was renamed Bryant Park in his honor. The city later named a public high school in Long Island City, Queens in his honor.

As a writer, Bryant was an early advocate of American literary nationalism, and his own poetry focusing on nature as a metaphor for truth established a central pattern in the American literary tradition.

Martin Luther King, Jr quoted Bryant in his speech “Give Us the Ballot,” when he says: “There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying: “Truth crushed to earth will rise again.”
“THANATOPSIS”

To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder and grow sick at heart;--
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature’s teachings, while from all around--
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air--
Comes a still voice--Yet a few days, and thee
The all-beholding sun shall see no more
In all his course; nor yet in the cold ground,
Where thy pale form was laid with many tears,
Nor in the embrace of ocean, shall exist
Thy image. Earth, that nourish’d thee, shall claim
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up
Thine individual being, shalt thou go
To mix for ever with the elements,
To be a brother to the insensible rock,
And to the sluggish clod, which the rude swain
Turns with his share, and treads upon. The oak
Shall send his roots abroad, and pierce thy mould.

Yet not to thine eternal resting-place
Shalt thou retire alone, nor couldst thou wish
Couch more magnificent. Thou shalt lie down
With patriarchs of the infant world--with kings,
The powerful of the earth--the wise, the good,
Fair forms, and hoary seers of ages past,
All in one mighty sepulchre. The hills
Rock-ribb’d and ancient as the sun,--the vales
Stretching in pensive quietness between;
The venerable woods; rivers that move
In majesty, and the complaining brooks
That make the meadows green; and, pour’d round all,
Old Ocean’s grey and melancholy waste,—
Are but the solemn decorations all
Of the great tomb of man. The golden sun,
The planets, all the infinite host of heaven,
Are shining on the sad abodes of death,
Through the still lapse of ages. All that tread
The globe are but a handful to the tribes
That slumber in its bosom.—Take the wings
Of morning, pierce the Barcan wilderness,
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods
Where rolls the Oregon and hears no sound
Save his own dashings—yet the dead are there:
And millions in those solitudes, since first
The flight of years began, have laid them down
In their last sleep—the dead reign there alone.
So shalt thou rest: and what if thou withdraw
In silence from the living, and no friend
Take note of thy departure? All that breathe
Will share thy destiny. The gay will laugh
When thou art gone, the solemn brood of care
Plod on, and each one as before will chase
His favourite phantom; yet all these shall leave
Their mirth and their employments, and shall come
And make their bed with thee. As the long train
Of ages glides away, the sons of men,
The youth in life’s green spring, and he who goes
In the full strength of years, matron and maid,
The speechless babe, and the gray-headed man—
Shall one by one be gathered to thy side
By those who in their turn shall follow them.

So live, that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged by his dungeon; but, sustain’d and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave,
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams.
TO A WATERFOWL

Whither, midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far, through their rosy depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?

Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,
As, darkly seen against the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along.

Seek'st thou the plashy brink
Of weedy lake, or large of river wide,
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed ocean-side?

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast --
The desert and illimitable air --
Lone wandering, but not lost.

All day thy wings have fanned,
At that far height, the cold, thin atmosphere,
Yet stoop not, weary, to the welcome land,
Though the dark night is near.

And soon that toil shall end;
Soon shalt thou find a summer home, and rest,
And scream among thy fellows; reeds shall bend,
Soon, o'er thy sheltered nest.

Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven
Hath swallowed up thy form; yet, on my heart
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given,
And shall not soon depart.

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.
Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809 –1894)

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. was educated at Phillips Academy and Harvard College. After graduating from Harvard in 1829, he briefly studied law before turning to the medical profession. He began writing poetry at an early age; one of his most famous works, “Old Ironsides,” was published in 1830. Following training at the prestigious medical schools of Paris, Holmes was granted his M.D. from Harvard Medical School in 1836. He taught at Dartmouth Medical School before returning to teach at Harvard and, for a time, served as dean there. During his long professorship, he became an advocate for various medical reforms and notably posited the controversial idea that doctors were capable of carrying puerperal fever from patient to patient. Holmes retired from Harvard in 1882 and continued writing poetry, novels and essays until his death in 1894.

Surrounded by Boston’s literary elite—which included friends such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell—Holmes made an indelible imprint on the literary world of the 19th century. Many of his works were published in The Atlantic Monthly, a magazine that he named. For his literary achievements and other accomplishments, he was awarded numerous honorary degrees from universities around the world. Holmes’s writing often commemorated his native Boston area, and much of it was meant to be humorous or conversational. Some of his medical writings, notably his 1843 essay regarding the contagiousness of puerperal fever, were considered innovative for their time. He was often called upon to issue occasional poetry, or poems written specifically for an event, including many occasions at Harvard. Holmes also popularized several terms, including “Boston Brahmin” and “anesthesia.”

In September of 1830, Holmes read a short article in the Boston Daily Advertiser about the renowned 18th century frigate USS Constitution, which was to be dismantled by the Navy. Holmes was moved to write “Old Ironsides” in opposition of the ship’s scrapping. The patriotic poem was published in the Advertiser the very next day and was soon printed by papers in New York, Philadelphia and Washington. It not only brought the author immediate national attention, but the three-stanza poem also generated enough public sentiment that the historic ship was preserved.

During the rest of the year, Holmes published only five more poems. His last major poem that year was “The Last Leaf,” which was inspired in part by Thomas Melvill (grandfather of the novelist Herman Melville), “the last of the cocked hats” and one of the “Indians” from the 1774 Boston Tea Party. Holmes would later write that Melvill had reminded him of “a withered leaf which has held to its stem through the storms of autumn and winter, and finds itself still clinging to its bough while the new growths of spring are bursting their buds and spreading their foliage all around it.” Literary critic Edgar Allan Poe called the poem one of the finest works in the English language. Years later, Abraham Lincoln would also become a fan of
the poem; William Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner and biographer, wrote in 1867: “I have heard Lincoln recite it, praise it, laud it, and swear by it.”

Like Samuel Johnson in 18th century England, Holmes was noted for his conversational powers in both his life and literary output. Though he was popular at the national level, Holmes promoted Boston culture and often wrote from a Boston-centric point of view, believing the city was “the thinking centre of the continent, and therefore of the planet”. He is often referred to as a Boston Brahmin, a term that he created while referring to the oldest families in the Boston area. The term, as he used it, referred not only to members of a good family but also implied intellectualism. He also famously nicknamed Emerson’s *The American Scholar* as the American “intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

In 1915, Bostonians placed a memorial seat and sundial behind Holmes’s final home at 296 Beacon Street in a spot where he would have seen it from his library. King’s Chapel in Boston, where Holmes worshiped, erected an inscribed memorial tablet in his honor. The tablet notes Holmes’s achievements in the order he recognized them: “Teacher of Anatomy, Essayist and Poet”. It ends with a quote from Horace’s *Ars Poetica: Miscuit Utile Dulci*: “He mingled the useful with the pleasant.” (adapted from Wikipedia)
"THE CHAMBERED NAUTILUS"

This is the ship of pearl, which, poets feign,
Sail the unshadowed main,--
The venturous bark that flings
On the sweet summer wind its purpled wings
In gulfs enchanted, where the Siren sings,
And coral reefs lie bare,
Where the cold sea-maids rise to sun their streaming hair.

Its webs of living gauze no more unfurl;
Wrecked is the ship of pearl!
And every chambered cell,
Where its dim dreaming life was wont to dwell,
As the frail tenant shaped his growing shell,
Before thee lies revealed,--
Its irised ceiling rent, its sunless crypt unsealed!

Year after year beheld the silent toil
That spread his lustrous coil;
Still, as the spiral grew,
He left the past year's dwelling for the new,
Stole with soft step its shining archway through,
Built up its idle door,
Stretched in his last-found home, and knew the old no more.

Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathed horn;
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:--

Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!
“OLD IRONSIDES”

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down! 
Long has it waved on high, 
And many an eye has danced to see 
That banner in the sky; 
Beneath it rung the battle shout, 
And burst the cannon's roar; — 
The meteor of the ocean air 
Shall sweep the clouds no more. 
Her deck, once red with heroes' blood, 
Where knelt the vanquished foe, 
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood, 
And waves were white below, 
No more shall feel the victor's tread, 
Or know the conquered knee; — 
The harpies of the shore shall pluck 
The eagle of the sea! 
Oh, better that her shattered hulk 
Should sink beneath the wave; 
Her thunders shook the mighty deep, 
And there should be her grave; 
Nail to the mast her holy flag, 
Set every threadbare sail, 
And give her to the god of storms, 
The lightning and the gale!
“THE LAST LEAF”

I saw him once before,
As he passed by the door,
    And again
The pavement stones resound,
As he totters o’er the ground
    With his cane.

They say that in his prime,
Ere the pruning-knife of Time
    Cut him down,
Not a better man was found
By the Crier on his round
    Through the town.

But now he walks the streets,
And looks at all he meets
    Sad and wan,
And he shakes his feeble head,
That it seems as if he said,
    “They are gone.”

The mossy marbles rest
On the lips that he has prest
    In their bloom,
And the names he loved to hear
Have been carved for many a year
    On the tomb.

My grandmamma has said—
Poor old lady, she is dead
    Long ago—
That he had a Roman nose,
And his cheek was like a rose
    In the snow;

But now his nose is thin,
And it rests upon his chin
    Like a staff,
And a crook is in his back,
And a melancholy crack
    In his laugh.
I know it is a sin
For me to sit and grin
   At him here;
But the old three-cornered hat,
And the breeches, and all that,
   Are so queer!

And if I should live to be
The last leaf upon the tree
   In the spring,
Let them smile, as I do now,
At the old forsaken bough
   Where I cling.
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was the most popular poet of his day and is generally regarded as the most distinguished poet the country had produced. As a friend once wrote to him, “no other poet was so fully recognized in his lifetime”. Many of his works helped shape the American character and its legacy, particularly with the poem “Paul Revere’s Ride.” He was such an admired figure in the United States during his life that his 70th birthday in 1877 took on the air of a national holiday, with parades, speeches, and the reading of his poetry.

Over the years, Longfellow’s personality has become part of his reputation. He has been presented as a gentle, placid, poetic soul: an image perpetuated by his brother Samuel Longfellow, who wrote an early biography which specifically emphasized these points. As James Russell Lowell said, Longfellow had an “absolute sweetness, simplicity, and modesty.” At Longfellow’s funeral, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson called him “a sweet and beautiful soul.” In reality, Longfellow’s life was much more difficult than was assumed. He suffered from neuralgia, which caused him constant pain, and he also had poor eyesight. He wrote to friend Charles Sumner: “I do not believe anyone can be perfectly well, who has a brain and a heart.” He had difficulty coping with the death of his second wife. Longfellow was very quiet, reserved, and private; in later years, he was known for being unsocial and avoided leaving home.

Longfellow was born on February 27, 1807, to Stephen Longfellow and Zilpah (Wadsworth) Longfellow in Portland, Maine, then a district of Massachusetts, and he grew up in what is now known as the Wadsworth-Longfellow House. His father was a lawyer; and his maternal grandfather, Peleg Wadsworth, was a general in the American Revolutionary War and a Member of Congress. He was named after his mother’s brother Henry Wadsworth, a Navy lieutenant who died only three years earlier at the Battle of Tripoli.

In the fall of 1822, the 15-year old Longfellow enrolled at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, alongside his brother Stephen. His grandfather was a founder of the college and his father was a trustee. There, Longfellow met Nathaniel Hawthorne, who would later become his lifelong friend. Longfellow eventually became a professor of literature and languages, first at Bowdoin and then at Harvard. He earned early acclaim as a translator. His translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy, published late in his career, became the authoritative English version of the text for many years.

By the mid-1830s, Longfellow had established a national reputation as a popular poet. He married a childhood friend, Mary Potter, in 1831, but lost her to illness after a miscarriage in 1835. In 1839, he met and began courting Frances “Fanny” Appleton, the daughter of a prominent Boston businessman. Initially spurned by Fanny, she eventually accepted his proposal, and they were married in 1843. By
then, Longfellow was regarded as the nation’s most popular poet, eventually earning as much as $3,000 for a single poem—a sum rarely earned today by even the most highly regarded poets writing in English.

On July 9, 1861, a hot day, Fanny was putting locks of her children’s hair into an envelope and attempting to seal it with hot sealing wax while Longfellow took a nap. Her dress suddenly caught fire. Longfellow, awakened from his nap, rushed to help her and threw a rug over her, though it was too small. He stifled the flames with his body as best he could, but she was already badly burned. Fanny was taken to her room to recover and a doctor was called. The next morning, July 10, 1861, she died shortly after 10 o’clock after requesting a cup of coffee. Longfellow, in trying to save her, had burned himself badly enough that he was unable to attend her funeral. His facial injuries caused him to stop shaving, thereafter wearing the beard which has become his trademark. Devastated by the loss of Fanny, he never fully recovered and occasionally resorted to laudanum and ether to deal with it. He worried he would go insane and begged “not to be sent to an asylum” and noted that he was “inwardly bleeding to death”. He expressed his grief in the sonnet “The Cross of Snow” (1879), which he wrote eighteen years later to commemorate her death.

Over time, Longfellow’s popularity rapidly declined, beginning shortly after his death and into the twentieth century as academics began to appreciate poets like Walt Whitman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, and Robert Frost. In the twentieth century, literary scholar Kermit Vanderbilt noted, “Increasingly rare is the scholar who braves ridicule to justify the art of Longfellow’s popular rhyings.” 20th century poet Lewis Putnam Turco concluded “Longfellow was minor and derivative in every way throughout his career... nothing more than a hack imitator of the English Romantics.”

Longfellow predominantly wrote lyric poems which are known for their musi- cality and which often presented stories of mythology and legend. He became the most popular American poet of his day and also had success overseas. He has been criticized, however, for imitating European styles and writing specifically for the masses. Contemporary writer Edgar Allan Poe wrote to Longfellow in May 1841 of his “fervent admiration which [your] genius has inspired in me” and later called him “unquestionably the best poet in America”. However, after Poe’s reputation as a critic increased, he publicly accused Longfellow of plagiarism in what has been since termed by Poe biographers as “The Longfellow War”. His assessment was that Longfellow was “a determined imitator and a dextrous adapter of the ideas of other people”, specifically Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Poet Walt Whitman also considered Longfellow an imitator of European forms, though he praised his ability to reach a popular audience as “the expressor of common themes – of the little songs of the masses”. He added, “Longfellow was no revolutionarie: never traveled new paths: of course never broke new paths.” Literary historian Lewis Mumford said that Longfellow could be completely removed from the history of literature without much effect.
Longfellow was one of the first American celebrities and was also popular in Europe. It was reported that 10,000 copies of *The Courtship of Miles Standish* sold in London in a single day. Children adored him and, when the “spreading chestnut-tree” mentioned in the poem “The Village Blacksmith” was cut down, the children of Cambridge had the tree converted into an armchair which they presented to the poet. In 1884, Longfellow became the first non-British writer for whom a commemorative sculpted bust was placed in Poet’s Corner of Westminster Abbey in London; he remains the only American poet represented with a bust.
“THE CROSS OF SNOW”

In the long, sleepless watches of the night,
A gentle face--the face of one long dead--
Looks at me from the wall, where round its head
The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.
Here in this room she died, and soul more white
Never through martyrdom of fire was led
To its repose; nor can in books be read
The legend of a life more benedight.
There is a mountain in the distant West
That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
Displays a cross of snow upon its side.
Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
And seasons, changeless since the day she died.

“THE TIDE RISES, THE TIDE FALLS”

The tide rises, the tide falls,
The twilight darkens, the curlew calls;
Along the sea-sands damp and brown
The traveller hastens toward the town,
    And the tide rises, the tide falls.

Darkness settles on roofs and walls,
But the sea, the sea in darkness calls;
The little waves, with their soft, white hands,
Efface the footprints in the sands,
    And the tide rises, the tide falls.

The morning breaks; the steeds in their stalls
Stamp and neigh, as the hostler calls;
The day returns, but nevermore
Returns the traveller to the shore,
    And the tide rises, the tide falls.
“PAUL REVERE’S RIDE”

Listen, my children, and you shall hear  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,  
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-Five:  
Hardly a man is now alive  
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, “If the British march  
By land or sea from the town to-night,  
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry-arch  
Of the North-Church-tower, as a signal-light,—  
One if by land, and two if by sea;  
And I on the opposite shore will be,  
Ready to ride and spread the alarm  
Through every Middlesex village and farm,  
For the country-folk to be up and to arm.”

Then he said “Good night!” and with muffled oar  
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,  
Just as the moon rose over the bay,  
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay  
The Somerset, British man-of-war:  
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar  
Across the moon, like a prison-bar,  
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified  
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street  
Wanders and watches with eager ears,  
Till in the silence around him he hears  
The muster of men at the barrack door;  
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,  
And the measured tread of the grenadiers  
Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed to the tower of the church,  
Up the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,  
To the belfry-chamber overhead,  
And startled the pigeons from their perch  
On the sombre rafters, that round him made  
Masses and moving shapes of shade,—  
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,  
Where he paused to listen and look down  
A moment on the roofs of the town,  
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,  
In their night-encampment on the hill,  
Wrapped in silence so deep and still  
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,  
The watchful night-wind, as it went  
Creeping along from tent to tent,  
And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"  
A moment only he feels the spell  
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread  
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;  
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent  
On a shadowy something far away,  
Where the river widens to meet the bay, --  
A line of black, that bends and floats  
On the rising tide, like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,  
Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride,  
On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.  
Now he patted his horse's side,  
Now gazed on the landscape far and near,  
Then impetuous stamped the earth,  
And turned and tightened his saddle-girth;  
But mostly he watched with eager search  
The belfry-tower of the old North Church,  
As it rose above the graves on the hill,  
Lonely and spectral and sombre and still.  
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height,  
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!  
He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,  
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight  
A second lamp in the belfry burns!

A hurry of hoofs in a village-street,  
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,  
And beneath from the pebbles, in passing, a spark  
Struck out by a steed that flies fearless and fleet:  
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,  
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.

He has left the village and mounted the steep,
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
And under the alders, that skirt its edge,
Now soft on the sand, now load on the ledge,
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
He heard the crowing of the cock,
And the barking of the farmer's dog,
And felt the damp of the river-fog,
That rises when the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington.
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, blank and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon.

It was two by the village clock,
When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze
Blowing over the meadows brown.
And one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,
Pierced by a British musket-ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read,
How the British Regulars fired and fled,—
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard-wall,
Chasing the red-coats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm,--
A cry of defiance, and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo forevermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

“A PSALM OF LIFE”

What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist
Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
“Life is but an empty dream!”
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
“Dust thou art, to dust returnest,”
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Finds us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world’s broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe’er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,—act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o’erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another;
Sailing o’er life’s solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother;
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing
Learn to labor and to wait.

“MY LOST YOUTH”

OFTEN I think of the beautiful town
That is seated by the sea;
Often in thought go up and down
The pleasant streets of that dear old town,
And my youth comes back to me.
And a verse of a Lapland song
Is haunting my memory still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

I can see the shadowy lines of its trees,
And catch, in sudden gleams,
The sheen of the far-surrounding seas,
And islands that were the Hesperides
Of all my boyish dreams.
And the burden of that old song,
It murmurs and whispers still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

I remember the black wharves and the slips,
And the sea-tides tossing free;
And Spanish sailors with bearded lips,
And the beauty and mystery of the ships,
And the magic of the sea.
And the voice of that wayward song
Is singing and saying still:
“\textit{A boy’s will is the wind’s will,}
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

I remember the bulwarks by the shore,
And the fort upon the hill;
The sunrise gun, with its hollow roar,
The drum-beat repeated o’er and o’er,
And the bugle wild and shrill.
And the music of that old song
Throbs in my memory still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

I remember the sea-fight far away,
How it thundered o’er the tide!
And the dead captains, as they lay
In their graves, o’erlooking the tranquil bay
Where they in battle died.
And the sound of that mournful song
Goes through me with a thrill:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

I can see the breezy dome of groves,
The shadows of Deering’s Woods;
And the friendships old and the early loves
Come back with a Sabbath sound, as of doves
In quiet neighborhoods.
And the verse of that sweet old song,
It flutters and murmurs still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

I remember the gleams and glooms that dart
Across the school-boy’s brain;
The song and the silence in the heart,
That in part are prophecies, and in part
Are longings wild and vain.
And the voice of that fitful song
Sings on, and is never still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

There are things of which I may not speak;
There are dreams that cannot die;
There are thoughts that make the strong heart weak,
And bring a pallor into the cheek,
And a mist before the eye.
And the words of that fatal song
Come over me like a chill:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”
Strange to me now are the forms I meet
When I visit the dear old town;
But the native air is pure and sweet,
And the trees that o’ershadow each well-known street,
As they balance up and down,
Are singing the beautiful song,
Are sighing and whispering still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”

And Deering’s Woods are fresh and fair,
And with joy that is almost pain
My heart goes back to wander there,
And among the dreams of the days that were,
I find my lost youth again.
And the strange and beautiful song,
The groves are repeating it still:
“A boy’s will is the wind’s will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.”
Unit VIII - Whitman & Dickinson: Poetry of the American Renaissance

Historical Context: American Renaissance Poetry

Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson are the two major American poets to emerge in the wake of the Transcendentalist movement; they are also the two most significant and widely studied American poets of the 19th Century. Though distinctly different in style and ambition, both poets reflect the aesthetic and philosophy of Transcendentalism, and each foreshadows another major movement in American literary tradition: in the case of Whitman, Realism/Naturalism; in the case of Dickinson, Modernism.

Scholar F. O. Matthiessen originated the phrase “American Renaissance” in his 1941 book *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. Although Mathiessen limited his definition to the period between 1850 and 1855, the term has since expanded to a broader range of time. In *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, for example, Eric Sundquist expands the years covered by the American Renaissance to “the 1830s through the Civil War.”

The notion of an American Renaissance has been criticized for overemphasizing a small number of white male writers and artifacts of high culture. William E. Cain noted the “extreme white male formation” of Mathiessen’s list of authors and stated that by “devoting hundreds of pages of analysis and celebration to five white male authors, Mathiessen unwittingly prefigured in his book what later readers would dispute and labor to correct.” The demographic exclusivity of the American Renaissance began eroding toward the end of the twentieth century. Emily Dickinson, who began her poetry in the late 1850s, made her way into the canon.

The American Renaissance continues as a central term in American studies. The American Renaissance was for long considered synonymous with American Romanticism and was closely associated with Transcendentalism. Often considered a movement centered in New England, the American Renaissance was inspired in part by a new focus on humanism as a way to move from Calvinism. The thematic center of the American Renaissance was what Matthiessen called the “devotion” of all five of his writers, especially Whitman, to “the possibilities of democracy.” He presented the American Renaissance texts as “literature for our democracy” and challenged the nation to repossess them.
Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Less than a hundred years after the vast and largely uninhabited territory of America had become the United States, the new nation found its voice in a poet who spoke to all the world. His name was Walt Whitman, and he struck a note in literature that was as forthright, as original, and as deeply charged with democracy's energies as the land that produced him.

But the appearance of something radically different in poetry is always greeted with a mixed response; Whitman's work was no exception. What he said and how he said it troubled guardians of tradition as much as it excited readers for whom he was the master of a new language and the author of a national identity.

Whitman was a curious mixture of the homespun and the theatrical; he had the earthy spirit of the born democrat and the self-dramatizing disposition of the aristocratic dandy. At times he was the man on the street wearing rolled-up sleeves and unpressed corduroys. At other times he was the artist in a slouch felt hat and the sort of flowing silk tie associated with the affectations of Romanticism.

Whitman's two-sided image of himself is a clue to his poetry. Much of it has the simplicity of folk literature. He takes delight in catalogues--in the long listings of things, names, and activities found in ancient epics and sagas. Yet the greater part of Whitman's poetry escapes all categories; it demands to be read with the same attention that we give to the most sophisticated poetry in our language.

Whitman was born on May 31, 1819, to parents of Dutch and English descent. They kept a farm in West Hills, Long Island, in what is today the township of Huntington. His father's ancestors had come from England only twenty years after the landing of the Mayflower and had settled in Connecticut. On his mother's side, his ancestors were among the early immigrants from Holland who settled on Manhattan Island and along the Hudson River. Whitman and his eight brothers and sisters were able to assume their essential Americanness with an uncommon confidence. They knew their American grandparents, and they grew up in circumstances that allowed them both the communal experience of country life and the experience of a new city on its way to becoming a metropolis.

This city was Brooklyn, which, by 1855, would become the third largest city in America. It was there that Walter Whitman, Sr., hoped to prosper as a carpenter and builder of houses. He moved there with his wife Louisa and their family in 1823. Young Walter went to school until he was eleven. He then worked as an office boy and printer's assistant, and for a time he taught school.

On weekends spent along the beaches and in the woods of Long Island, Whitman read Sir Walter Scott, the Bible, Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, and “the ancient Hindoo poems.” He never became a scholar; he never went to college.
Before he was twenty, his feeling for the written word and his fascination with the boom-town atmosphere of Brooklyn led him into journalism. After ten years of this, he took a kind of working vacations difficult overland trip by train, horse-drawn coach, and riverboat to New Orleans. There he put his newspaperman’s talent to work for the *Crescent* and his own talent for observation to work for himself. After a few months, he returned to New York by way of the Great Lakes and a side trip to Niagara Falls. By this time, Whitman had added to his limited sense of America the experience of a wilderness surrendering its vastness to civilization. He also had become acquainted with the entirely alien culture that French Catholic New Orleans represented.

Back in Brooklyn, Whitman accepted an offer to become editor of *The Freeman*. For the next six or seven years, he supplemented his income as a part-time carpenter and building contractor. All this while, he was keeping notebooks and quietly putting together the sprawling collection of poems that would transform his life and change the course of American literature.

In 1855, he published this collection at his own expense, under the title *Leaves of Grass*. Since the book was too boldly new and strange to win the attention of reviewers or readers with fixed ideas about poetry, its publication went all but unnoticed. Disappointed but not defeated, Whitman bided his time and was rewarded for his patience and his own efforts at self-promotion. He was not only his own publisher, but also his own salesman. To stir up interest in the product he sent samples to people whose endorsement he thought might be useful. One of these samples reached Ralph Waldo Emerson, who at once wrote to Whitman the most important letter he would ever receive:

Concord, Massachusetts, 21 July, 1855

Dear Sir-- I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy Nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our Western wits fat and mean.

I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. Emerson
The “long foreground” of which Emerson spoke had not been the careful, confident period of preparation to which many poets devote themselves before they are ready to publish. Instead, it had been a precarious existence. Journalism had kept Whitman going financially, but not even the editorials he wrote for the Brooklyn Eagle had brought him distinction. On the surface, at least, his “long foreground” of preparation had been a mixture of hack work and jack-of-all-trades ingenuity.

But surfaces can be deceptive. Behind the scenes, Whitman’s wide reading and lively contemplation had shaped a character that would not be denied expression. What he saw and heard on the crowded streets of New York somehow fused with his knowledge of European philosophy and Oriental mysticism. The result was a vision-realistic in its immediate concerns and cosmic in implication.

By the time he was ready to declare himself a poet and to publish the first version of his book, Walt Whitman was unique. Leaves of Grass is a masterpiece that Whitman was to expand and revise through many editions. Its process of growth did not end until the ninth, “deathbed” edition was published in 1891, thirty-six years after its first appearance.

The figure we know today as Walt Whitman was conceived and created by the poet himself. Whitman promoted his “image” and sold it to the public with a pitchman’s skill worthy of P. T. Barnum, the great showman of the century. At first glance, that figure is a bundle of contradictions. Whitman seems to have had the theatrical flair of a con man and the selfless dignity of a saint; the sensibility of an artist and the carefree spirit of a hobo; the blustery egotism of a braggart and the demure shyness of a shrinking violet. On second glance, these contradictions disappear: Walt Whitman was everything he seemed to be. The figure he so carefully crafted and put on display was not a surrogate, but the man himself.

“One would see him afar off,” wrote the great naturalist John Burroughs, “in the crowd but not of it—a large, slow-moving figure, clad in gray, with broad-brimmed hat and gray beard—or, quite as frequently, on the front platform of the street horse-cars with the driver.... Whitman was of large mold in every way, and of bold, far-reaching schemes, and is very sure to fare better at the hands of large men than of small. The first and last impression which his personal presence always made upon one was of a nature wonderfully gentle, tender, and benignant.... I was impressed by the fine grain and clean, fresh quality of the man.... He always had the look of a man who had just taken a bath.”

The extraordinary thing about that man “in the crowd but not of it” was that, in defining himself, he created a hero of epic stature and single-handedly added the myth of America to the world’s mythology. If there is a side of Whitman that today we would associate with “image building,” or self-promotion, there is nothing in his poetry to suggest that it was anything but the product of the kind of genius that permanently changes the history of art.
Other American poets—notably Ralph Waldo Emerson—had already begun to give expression to American democratic ideals and aspirations. But these poets still wrote in the formal measures of traditional English poetry and in the diction of the “King’s English,” which educated Americans had quite naturally adopted. Whitman modified that diction and abandoned traditional rhyme schemes and formal meters in favor of the natural rhythms and speech patterns of free verse.

The result was poetry that could sing and speak of anything under the sun. Its sweep was easy and its range was broad. Suddenly, poetry was no longer a matter of organized word-structures that neatly clicked shut at the last line; instead, it was a series of open-ended units of rhythm that flowed one into the other and demanded to be read in their totality.

“Whitman throws his chunky language at the reader,” says critic Paul Zweig. “He cajoles and thunders; he chants, celebrates, chuckles, and caresses. He spills from his capacious American soul every dreg of un-Englishness, every street sound thumbing its nose at traditional subject matter and tone. Here is Samson pulling the house of literature down around his ears, yet singing in the ruins.”

Walt Whitman had invented a way of writing poetry that perfectly accommodated his way of seeing. His form is loose enough to allow for long lists and catalogues abundant in detail; it is also flexible enough to include delicate moments of lyricism as well as stretches of blustering oratory. This form served Whitman as observer and prophet—as a private man tending the wounded in the hospital wards of the Civil War; and as the public man who gave voice to the grief of a nation in his great elegy for the slain Lincoln, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” Most important, Whitman’s technique was the instrument by which the message of one man in his time became, for all time, news of America the world wanted to hear.

When Whitman died in 1892, he had fulfilled a great personal intention. He had enlarged the possibilities of American poetry to include the lyricism of simple speech and the grand design of the epic. The epic is that rare kind of poetry in which the ideals and values of a society are embodied in the experiences of a hero or heroine. Usually, these epic heroes set out on a quest for knowledge that involves them deeply, sometimes secretly, in the ordinary life of their times. But their adventures, however day-to-day and down to earth, eventually become metaphors for tests of character and moments of spiritual enlightenment.

How is *Leaves of Grass* like an epic? Who is its hero? What is its action? The hero is the poet, and he is a hero not of the ancient past but of the future. As in all epics, the action takes the form of a journey. In *Leaves of Grass*, the journey is the one the speaker takes as he becomes a poet:

> I am the poet of the Body, and I am the poet of the Soul . . .
> I am the poet of the woman the same as
the man . . .
I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not
decline to be the poet of wickedness also . . .

By the end of his epic journey, which even takes him down into the depths of a
kind of Hell, the poet has also been transformed. The “I” has become identified with
every element in the universe and has been reborn as something divine. He has be-
come the saving force which Whitman believed it was the true role of the American
poet to be. Nothing quite like it had ever been done before.

Those who came after Whitman would also bring the vernacular of farmers, steel
workers, and small-town housewives into literature. Other poets-- notably Hart
Crane and William Carlos Williams-- would base their own epics on that American
experience whose dimensions Whitman was the first to explore.

Yet Whitman's greatest contribution to literature may be the gift that only he
could have given. He brought a humanizing touch that unites poetry as an art with
poetry as an aspiration that runs through the life of every person. His poetry is an
attempt to break the bounds of poetry, to desanctify the art of words by lending it
the artlessness of feelings prodded into statement. The volume containing his life's
work is not a collection of polished aphorisms or rhymed nuggets of wisdom that
may be quoted in support of this idea or that. Instead, it is a spiritual autobiography
that tells the story of an enchanted observer who says who he is at every opportu-
nity and claims what he loves by naming it. Wait Whitman found his place in our
literature and yet, pre-eminent as it was, refused to be confined there. “Camerado,”
he said, “this is no book / Who touches this touches a man.”
“SONG OF MYSELF”

1
I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Creeds and schools in abeyance,
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,
Nature without check with original energy.

2
Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

The smoke of my own breath,
Echoes, ripples, buzz’d whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-color’d sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,

The sound of the belch’d words of my voice loos’d to the eddies of the wind,
A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields
and hill-sides,
The feeling of health, the full-noon trill, the song of me rising
from bed and meeting the sun.

Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much? have you reckon’d the earth much?
Have you practis’d so long to learn to read?
Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of
all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions
of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through
the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either; nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

3
I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the
beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.

Urge and urge and urge,
Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and
increase, always sex,
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.
To elaborate is no avail, learn’d and unlearn’d feel that it is so.

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well
entretied, braced in the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery here we stand.

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.
Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age,
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they
discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.

I am satisfied—I see, dance, laugh, sing;
As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night,
and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread,
Leaving me baskets cover’d with white towels swelling the house with their plenty,
Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization and scream at my eyes,
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,
And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,
Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead?

4
Trippers and askers surround me,
People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation,
The latest dates, discoveries, inventions, societies, authors old and new,
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doing or loss
or lack of money, or depressions or exaltations,
Battles, the horrors of fratricidal war, the fever of doubtful news,
the fitful events;
These come to me days and nights and go from me again,
But they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.
Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders, I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait.

5
I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you, And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat, Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best, Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning, How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me, And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart, And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth, And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers, And that a kelson of the creation is love, And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields, And brown ants in the little wells beneath them, And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap’d stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

6
A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord, A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt, Bearing the owner’s name someway in the corners, that we may see and remark, and say Whose?

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.
Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I
receive them the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,
It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken soon out
of their mothers’ laps,
And here you are the mothers’ laps.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken
soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceas’d the moment life appear’d.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

7
Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.
I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash’d babe, and
am not contain’d between my hat and boots,
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike and every one good,
The earth good and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and
fathomless as myself,
(They do not know how immortal, but I know.)

Every kind for itself and its own, for me mine male and female,
For me those that have been boys and that love women,
For me the man that is proud and feels how it stings to be slighted,
For me the sweet-heart and the old maid, for me mothers and the
mothers of mothers,
For me lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears,
For me children and the begetters of children.

Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless, and cannot be shaken away.

8
The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies
with my hand.

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair; I note where the pistol
has fallen.

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of
the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the
clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous’d mobs,
The flap of the curtain’d litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his
passage to the centre of the crowd,
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,
What groans of over-fed or half-starv’d who fall sunstruck or in fits,
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and
give birth to babes,
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls
restrain’d by decorum,
Arrests of criminals, slights, adulterous offers made, acceptances,
rejections with convex lips,
I mind them or the show or resonance of them—I come and I depart.

The big doors of the country barn stand open and ready,
The dried grass of the harvest-time loads the slow-drawn wagon,
The clear light plays on the brown gray and green intertinged,
The armfuls are pack’d to the sagging mow.

I am there, I help, I came stretch’d atop of the load,
I felt its soft jolts, one leg reclined on the other,
I jump from the cross-beams and seize the clover and timothy,
And roll head over heels and tangle my hair full of wisps.

Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt,
Wandering amazed at my own lightness and glee,
In the late afternoon choosing a safe spot to pass the night,
Kindling a fire and broiling the fresh-kill’d game,
Falling asleep on the gather’d leaves with my dog and gun by my side.

The Yankee clipper is under her sky-sails, she cuts the sparkle and scud,
My eyes settle the land, I bend at her prow or shout joyously from the deck.

The boatmen and clam-diggers arose early and stopt for me,
I tuck’d my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time;
You should have been with us that day round the chowder-kettle.

I saw the marriage of the trapper in the open air in the far west,
the bride was a red girl,
Her father and his friends sat near cross-legged and dumbly smoking,
they had moccasins to their feet and large thick blankets
hanging from their shoulders,
On a bank lounged the trapper, he was drest mostly in skins, his luxuriant
beard and curls protected his neck, he held his bride by the hand,
She had long eyelashes, her head was bare, her coarse straight locks
descended upon her voluptuous limbs and reach’d to her feet.
The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
And brought water and fill’d a tub for his sweated body and bruis’ed feet,
And gave him a room that enter’d from my own, and gave him some
coarse clean clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass’d north,
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean’d in the corner.

11
Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly;
Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather,
The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glisten’d with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams pass’d all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also pass’d over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the
sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray.

12
The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens his knife
at the stall in the market,
I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and break-down.
Blacksmiths with grimed and hairy chests environ the anvil,
Each has his main-sledge, they are all out, there is a great heat in
the fire.

From the cinder-strew’d threshold I follow their movements,
The lithe sheer of their waists plays even with their massive arms,
Overhand the hammers swing, overhand so slow, overhand so sure,
They do not hasten, each man hits in his place.

13
The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags
underneath on its tied-over chain,
The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard, steady and
tall he stands pois’d on one leg on the string-piece,
His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over
his hip-band,
His glance is calm and commanding, he tosses the slouch of his hat
away from his forehead,
The sun falls on his crispy hair and mustache, falls on the black of
his polish’d and perfect limbs.

I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop there,
I go with the team also.

In me the caresser of life wherever moving, backward as well as
forward sluing,
To niches aside and junior bending, not a person or object missing,
Absorbing all to myself and for this song.

Oxen that rattle the yoke and chain or halt in the leafy shade, what
is that you express in your eyes?
It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.

My tread scares the wood-drake and wood-duck on my distant and
day-long ramble,
They rise together, they slowly circle around.

I believe in those wing’d purposes,
And acknowledge red, yellow, white, playing within me,
And consider green and violet and the tufted crown intentional,
And do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else,
And the in the woods never studied the gamut, yet trills pretty well to me,
And the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me.
The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,
Ya-honk he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation,
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close,
Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky.

The sharp-hoof’d moose of the north, the cat on the house-sill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog,
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,
The brood of the turkey-hen and she with her half-spread wings,
I see in them and myself the same old law.

The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections,
They scorn the best I can do to relate them.

I am enamour’d of growing out-doors,
Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,
Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes and mauls, and the drivers of horses,
I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
Scattering it freely forever.

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain’d with cross’d hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loaf and looks at the oats and rye,
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm’d case,
(He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother’s bed-room;)
The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blur with the manuscript;  
The malformed limbs are tied to the surgeon’s table;  
What is removed drops horribly in a pail;  
The quadroon girl is sold at the auction-stand, the drunkard nods by  
the bar-room stove,  
The machinist rolls up his sleeves, the policeman travels his beat,  
the gate-keeper marks who pass,  
The young fellow drives the express-wagon, (I love him, though I do  
not know him;)  
The half-breed straps on his light boots to compete in the race,  
The western turkey-shooting draws old and young, some lean on their  
rifles, some sit on logs,  
Out from the crowd steps the marksman, takes his position, levels his piece;  
The groups of newly-come immigrants cover the wharf or levee,  
As the woolly-pates hoe in the sugar-field, the overseer views them  
from his saddle,  
The bugle calls in the ball-room, the gentlemen run for their  
partners, the dancers bow to each other;  
The youth lies awake in the cedar-roof’d garret and harks to the  
musical rain,  
The Wolverine sets traps on the creek that helps fill the Huron,  
The squaw wrapt in her yellow-hemm’d cloth is offering moccasins and  
bead-bags for sale,  
The connoisseur peers along the exhibition-gallery with half-shut  
eyes bent sideways,  
As the deck-hands make fast the steamboat the plank is thrown for  
the shore-going passengers,  
The young sister holds out the skein while the elder sister winds it  
off in a ball, and stops now and then for the knots,  
The one-year wife is recovering and happy having a week ago borne  
herself first child,  
The clean-hair’d Yankee girl works with her sewing-machine or in the  
factory or mill,  
The paving-man leans on his two-handed rammer, the reporter’s lead  
flies swiftly over the note-book, the sign-painter is lettering  
with blue and gold,  
The canal boy trots on the tow-path, the book-keeper counts at his  
desk, the shoemaker waxes his thread,  
The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers follow him,  
The child is baptized, the convert is making his first professions,  
The regatta is spread on the bay, the race is begun, (how the white  
sails sparkle!)  
The drover watching his drove sings out to them that would stray,  
The pedler sweats with his pack on his back, (the purchaser higgling
about the odd cent;

The bride unrumples her white dress, the minute-hand of the clock moves slowly,
The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open’d lips,
The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other;
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)
The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great Secretaries,
On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly with twined arms,
The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of halibut in the hold,
The Missourian crosses the plains toting his wares and his cattle,
As the fare-collector goes through the train he gives notice by the jingling of loose change,
The floor-men are laying the floor; the tinners are tinning the roof, the masons are calling for mortar;
In single file each shouldering his hod pass onward the laborers;
Seasons pursuing each other the indescribable crowd is gather’d, it is the fourth of Seventh-month, (what salutes of cannon and small arms!)
Seasons pursuing each other the plougher ploughs, the mower mows, and the winter-grain falls in the ground;
Off on the lakes the pike-fisher watches and waits by the hole in the frozen surface,
The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the squatter strikes deep with his axe,
Flatboatmen make fast towards dusk near the cotton-wood or pecan-trees,
Coon-seekers go through the regions of the Red river or through those drain’d by the Tennessee, or through those of the Arkansas,
Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahooche or Altamahaw,
Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and great-grandsons around them,
In walls of adobie, in canvas tents, rest hunters and trappers after their day’s sport,
The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their time,
The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband sleeps by his wife;
And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.
I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
Stuff’d with the stuff that is coarse and stuff’d with the stuff
that is fine,
One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same and the
largest the same,
A Southerner soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and
hositable down by the Oconee I live,
A Yankee bound my own way ready for trade, my joints the limberest
joints on earth and the sternest joints on earth,
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deer-skin
leggings, a Louisianian or Georgian,
A boatman over lakes or bays or along coasts, a Hoosier, Badger, Buckeye;
At home on Kanadian snow-shoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen
off Newfoundland,
At home in the fleet of ice-boats, sailing with the rest and tacking,
At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the
Texan ranch,
Comrade of Californians, comrade of free North-Westerners, (loving
their big proportions,)
Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen, comrade of all who shake hands
and welcome to drink and meat,
A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfullest,
A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons,
Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

(The moth and the fish-eggs are in their place,
The bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their place,
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.)

These are really the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they
are not original with me,
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing,
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing.
This is the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is, 
This the common air that bathes the globe.

18
With music strong I come, with my cornets and my drums, 
I play not marches for accepted victors only, I play marches for 
conquer’d and slain persons.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day? 
I also say it is good to fall, battles are lost in the same spirit 
in which they are won.

I beat and pound for the dead, 
I blow through my embouchures my loudest and gayest for them.

Vivas to those who have fail’d! 
And to those whose war-vessels sank in the sea! 
And to those themselves who sank in the sea! 
And to all generals that lost engagements, and all overcome heroes! 
And the numberless unknown heroes equal to the greatest heroes known!

19
This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger, 
It is for the wicked just same as the righteous, I make appointments 
with all, 
I will not have a single person slighted or left away, 
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited, 
The heavy-lipp’d slave is invited, the venerealee is invited; 
There shall be no difference between them and the rest.

This is the press of a bashful hand, this the float and odor of hair, 
This the touch of my lips to yours, this the murmur of yearning, 
This the far-off depth and height reflecting my own face, 
This the thoughtful merge of myself, and the outlet again.

Do you guess I have some intricate purpose? 
Well I have, for the Fourth-month showers have, and the mica on the 
side of a rock has.

Do you take it I would astonish? 
Does the daylight astonish? does the early redstart twittering 
through the woods?
Do I astonish more than they?
This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.

20
Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude;
How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?

What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?

All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own,
Else it were time lost listening to me.

I do not snivel that snivel the world over;
That months are vacuums and the ground but wallow and filth.

Whimpering and truckling fold with powders for invalids, conformity
go to the fourth-remov’d,
I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.

Why should I pray? why should I venerate and be ceremonious?

Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair; counsel’d with
doctors and calculated close,
I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less,
And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them.

I know I am solid and sound,
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter’s compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child’s carlace cut with a burnt
stick at night.

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,
(I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house by,
after all.)
I exist as I am, that is enough,
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,
And if each and all be aware I sit content.

One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself,
And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten thousand or ten
million years,
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.

My foothold is tenon’d and mortis’d in granite,
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time.

2
I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate
into new tongue.

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

I chant the chant of dilation or pride,
We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,
I show that size is only development.

Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and
still pass on.

I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.

Press close bare-bosom’d night—press close magnetic nourishing night!
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.

Smile O voluptuous cool-breath’d earth!
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!
Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!
Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!
Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!
Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!
Far-swooping elbow’d earth—rich apple-blossom’d earth!
Smile, for your lover comes.

Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!
O unspeakable passionate love.

22
You sea! I resign myself to you also—I guess what you mean,
I behold from the beach your crooked fingers,
I believe you refuse to go back without feeling of me,
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight of the land,
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you.

Sea of stretch’d ground-swells,
Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths,
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell’d yet always-ready graves,
Howler and scooper of storms, capricious and dainty sea,
I am integral with you, I too am of one phase and of all phases.

Partaker of influx and efflux I, extoller of hate and conciliation,
Extoller of amies and those that sleep in each others’ arms.

I am he attesting sympathy,
(Shall I make my list of things in the house and skip the house that supports them?)

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.

What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent,
My gait is no fault-finder’s or rejecter’s gait,
I moisten the roots of all that has grown.

Did you fear some scrofula out of the unflagging pregnancy?
Did you guess the celestial laws are yet to be work’d over and rectified?

I find one side a balance and the antipedal side a balance,
Soft doctrine as steady help as stable doctrine,
Thoughts and deeds of the present our rouse and early start.

This minute that comes to me over the past decillions,
There is no better than it and now.

235
What behaved well in the past or behaves well to-day is not such wonder,
The wonder is always and always how there can be a mean man or an infidel.

23
Endless unfolding of words of ages!
And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse.

A word of the faith that never balks,
Here or henceforward it is all the same to me, I accept Time absolutely.

It alone is without flaw, it alone rounds and completes all,
That mystic baffling wonder alone completes all.

I accept Reality and dare not question it,
Materialism first and last imbuing.

Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!
Fetch stonecrop mixt with cedar and branches of lilac,
This is the lexicographer, this the chemist, this made a grammar of the old cartouches,
These mariners put the ship through dangerous unknown seas.
This is the geologist, this works with the scalper, and this is a mathematician.

Gentlemen, to you the first honors always!
Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling,
I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling.

Less the reminders of properties told my words,
And more the reminders they of life untold, and of freedom and extrication,
And make short account of neuters and geldings, and favor men and women fully equipt,
And beat the gong of revolt, and stop with fugitives and them that plot and conspire.

24
Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest.

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!
Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas’d and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform’d, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil’d and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur’d.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch’d from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it,
Translucent mould of me it shall be you!
Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you!
Firm masculine colter it shall be you!
Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you!
You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life!
Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you!
My brain it shall be your occult convolutions!
Root of wash’d sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded
duplicate eggs! it shall be you!
Mix’d tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
Sun so generous it shall be you!
Vapors lighting and shading my face it shall be you!
You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!
Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
Broad muscular fields, branches of live oak, loving lounger in my
winding paths, it shall be you!
Hands I have taken, face I have kiss’d, mortal I have ever touch’d,
it shall be you.

I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious,
Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy,
I cannot tell how my ankles bend, nor whence the cause of my faintest wish,
Nor the cause of the friendship I emit, nor the cause of the
friendship I take again.

That I walk up my stoop, I pause to consider if it really be,
A morning-glory at my window satisfies me more than the metaphysics
of books.

To behold the day-break!
The little light fades the immense and diaphanous shadows,
The air tastes good to my palate.

Hefts of the moving world at innocent gambols silently rising
freshly exuding,
Scooting obliquely high and low.

Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs,
Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven.

The earth by the sky staid with, the daily close of their junction,
The heav’d challenge from the east that moment over my head,
The mocking taunt, See then whether you shall be master!

25
Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.
We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun,
We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of the daybreak.

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,
It provokes me forever; it says sarcastically,
Walt you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of
articulation,
Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?
Waiting in gloom, protected by frost,
The dirt receding before my prophetical screams,
I underlying causes to balance them at last,
My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all things,
Happiness, (which whoever hears me let him or her set out in search
of this day.)

My final merit I refuse you, I refuse putting from me what I really am,
Encompass worlds, but never try to encompass me,
I crowd your sleekest and best by simply looking toward you.

Writing and talk do not prove me,
I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,
With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic.

26
Now I will do nothing but listen,
To accrue what I hear into this song, to let sounds contribute toward it.

I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames,
clack of sticks cooking my meals,
I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the day and night,
Talkative young ones to those that like them, the loud laugh of
work-people at their meals,
The angry base of disjointed friendship, the faint tones of the sick,
The judge with hands tight to the desk, his pallid lips pronouncing
a death-sentence,
The heave’e’yo of stevedores unlading ships by the wharves, the
refrain of the anchor-lifters,
The ring of alarm-bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-streaking engines and hose-carts with premonitory tinkles and color’d lights, The steam-whistle, the solid roll of the train of approaching cars, The slow march play’d at the head of the association marching two and two, (They go to guard some corpse, the flag-tops are draped with black muslin.)

I hear the violoncello, (‘tis the young man’s heart’s complaint,) I hear the key’d cornet, it glides quickly in through my ears, It shakes mad-sweet pangs through my belly and breast.

I hear the chorus, it is a grand opera, Ah this indeed is music—this suits me.

A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me, The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full.

I hear the train’d soprano (what work with hers is this?) The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies, It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I possess’d them, It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick’d by the indolent waves, I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath, Steep’d amid honey’d morphine, my windpipe throttled in fakes of death, At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles, And that we call Being.

27
To be in any form, what is that? (Round and round we go, all of us, and ever come back thither,) If nothing lay more develop’d the quahaug in its callous shell were enough.

Mine is no callous shell, I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop, They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.

I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy, To touch my person to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand.

28
Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity, Flames and ether making a rush for my veins, Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them, My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself, On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,
Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip,
Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,
Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,
Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist,
Deluding my confusion with the calm of the sunlight and pasture-fields,
Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away,
They bribed to swap off with touch and go and graze at the edges of me,
No consideration, no regard for my draining strength or my anger,
Fetching the rest of the herd around to enjoy them a while,
Then all uniting to stand on a headland and worry me.

The sentries desert every other part of me,
They have left me helpless to a red marauder,
They all come to the headland to witness and assist against me.

I am given up by traitors,
I talk wildly, I have lost my wits, I and nobody else am the greatest traitor,
I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there.

You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat,
Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me.

29
Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath'd hooded sharp-tooth'd touch!
Did it make you ache so, leaving me?

Parting track'd by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan,
Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.

Sprouts take and accumulate, stand by the curb prolific and vital,
Landscapes projected masculine, full-sized and golden.

30
All truths wait in all things,
They neither hasten their own delivery nor resist it,
They do not need the obstetric forceps of the surgeon,
The insignificant is as big to me as any,
(What is less or more than a touch?)

Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night drives deeper into my soul.
(Only what proves itself to every man and woman is so,
Only what nobody denies is so.)

A minute and a drop of me settle my brain,
I believe the soggy clods shall become lovers and lamps,
And a compend of compends is the meat of a man or woman,
And a summit and flower there is the feeling they have for each other,
And they are to branch boundlessly out of that lesson until it
becomes omnific,
And until one and all shall delight us, and we them.

31
I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey work of the stars,
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg
of the wren,
And the tree-toad is a chef-d’oeuvre for the highest,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,
And the cow crunching with depress’d head surpasses any statue,
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels.

I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits,
grains, esculent roots,
And am stucco’d with quadrupeds and birds all over,
And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,
But call any thing back again when I desire it.

In vain the speeding or shyness,
In vain the plutonic rocks send their old heat against my approach,
In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder’d bones,
In vain objects stand leagues off and assume manifold shapes,
In vain the ocean settling in hollows and the great monsters lying low,
In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,
In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs,
In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,
In vain the razor-bill’d auk sails far north to Labrador,
I follow quickly, I ascend to the nest in the fissure of the cliff.

32
I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and
self-contain’d,
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of
    owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of
    years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

So they show their relations to me and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their
    possession.

I wonder where they get those tokens,
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?

Myself moving forward then and now and forever,
Gathering and showing more always and with velocity,
Infinite and omnigenous, and the like of these among them,
Not too exclusive toward the reachers of my remembrancers,
Picking out here one that I love, and now go with him on brotherly terms.

A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,
Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,
Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,
Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.

His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,
His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and return.

I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,
Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?
Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.

33
Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guess’d at,
What I guess’d when I loaf’d on the grass,
What I guess’d while I lay alone in my bed,
And again as I walk’d the beach under the paling stars of the morning.

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
I am afoot with my vision.
By the city's quadrangular houses—in log huts, camping with lumber-men,
Along the ruts of the turnpike, along the dry gulch and rivulet bed,
Weeding my onion-patch or hosing rows of carrots and parsnips,
crossing savannas, trailing in forests,
Prospecting, gold-digging, girdling the trees of a new purchase,
Scorch’d ankle-deep by the hot sand, hauling my boat down the
shallow river,
Where the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead, where the buck turns furiously at the hunter,
Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock, where the otter is feeding on fish,
Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou,
Where the black bear is searching for roots or honey, where the beaver pats the mud with his paddle-shaped tail;
Over the growing sugar, over the yellow-flower’d cotton plant, over the rice in its low moist field,
Over the sharp-peak’d farm house, with its scallop’d scum and slender shoots from the gutters,
Over the western persimmon, over the long-leav’d corn, over the delicate blue-flower flax,
Over the white and brown buckwheat, a hummer and buzzer there with the rest,
Over the dusky green of the rye as it ripples and shades in the breeze;
Scaling mountains, pulling myself cautiously up, holding on by low scragged limbs,
Walking the path worn in the grass and beat through the leaves of the brush,
Where the quail is whistling betwixt the woods and the wheat-lot,
Where the bat flies in the Seventh-month eve, where the great goldbug drops through the dark,
Where the brook puts out of the roots of the old tree and flows to the meadow,
Where cattle stand and shake away flies with the tremulous shuddering of their hides,
Where the cheese-cloth hangs in the kitchen, where andirons straddle the hearth-slab, where cobwebs fall in festoons from the rafters;
Where trip-hammers crash, where the press is whirling its cylinders,
Wherever the human heart beats with terrible throes under its ribs,
Where the pear-shaped balloon is floating aloft, (floating in myself and looking composedly down,)
Where the life-car is drawn on the slip-noose, where the heat hatches pale-green eggs in the dented sand,
Where the she-whale swims with her calf and never forsakes it,
Where the steam-ship trails hind-ways its long pennant of smoke,
Where the fin of the shark cuts like a black chip out of the water;
Where the half-burn’d brig is riding on unknown currents,
Where shells grow to her slimy deck, where the dead are corrupting below;
Where the dense-starr’d flag is borne at the head of the regiments,
Approaching Manhattan up by the long-stretching island,
Under Niagara, the cataract falling like a veil over my countenance,
Upon a door-step, upon the horse-block of hard wood outside,
Upon the race-course, or enjoying picnics or jigs or a good game of base-ball,
At feasts, with blackguard gibes, ironical license,
  bull-dances, drinking, laughter,
At the cider-mill tasting the sweets of the brown mash, sucking the juice through a straw,
At apple-pearling wanting kisses for all the red fruit I find,
At masts, beach-parties, friendly bees, huskings, house-raisings;
Where the mocking-bird sounds his delicious gurgles, cackles, screams, weeps,
Where the hay-rick stands in the barn-yard, where the dry-stalks are scatter’d, where the brood-cow waits in the hovel,
Where the bull advances to do his masculine work, where the stud to the mare, where the cock is treading the hen,
Where the heifers browse, where geese nip their food with short jerks,
Where sun-down shadows lengthen over the limitless and lonesome prairie,
Where herds of buffalo make a crawling spread of the square miles far and near,
Where the humming-bird shimmers, where the neck of the long-lived swan is curving and winding,
Where the laughing-gull scoots by the shore, where she laughs her near-human laugh,
Where bee-hives range on a gray bench in the garden half hid by the high weeds,
Where band-neck’d partridges roost in a ring on the ground with their heads out,
Where burial coaches enter the arch’d gates of a cemetery,
Where winter wolves bark amid wastes of snow and icicled trees,
Where the yellow-crown’d heron comes to the edge of the marsh at night and feeds upon small crabs,
Where the splash of swimmers and divers cools the warm noon,
Where the katy-did works her chromatic reed on the walnut-tree over the well,
Through patches of citrons and cucumbers with silver-wired leaves,
Through the salt-lick or orange glade, or under conical firs,
Through the gymnasium, through the curtain’d saloon, through the office or public hall;
Pleas’d with the native and pleas’d with the foreign, pleas’d with
the new and old,
Pleas’d with the homely woman as well as the handsome,
Pleas’d with the quakeress as she puts off her bonnet and talks melodiously,
Pleas’d with the tune of the choir of the whitewash’d church,
Pleas’d with the earnest words of the sweating Methodist preacher,
impres’sd seriously at the camp-meeting;
Looking in at the shop-windows of Broadway the whole forenoon,
flatting the flesh of my nose on the thick plate glass,
Wandering the same afternoon with my face turn’d up to the clouds,
or down a lane or along the beach,
My right and left arms round the sides of two friends, and I in the middle;
Coming home with the silent and dark-cheek’d bush-boy, (behind me
he rides at the drape of the day,)
Far from the settlements studying the print of animals’ feet, or the
moccasin print,
By the cot in the hospital reaching lemonade to a feverish patient,
Nigh the coffin’d corpse when all is still, examining with a candle;
Voyaging to every port to dicker and adventure,
Hurrying with the modern crowd as eager and fickle as any,
Hot toward one I hate, ready in my madness to knife him,
Solitary at midnight in my back yard, my thoughts gone from me a long
while,
Walking the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful gentle God by my side,
Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars,
Speeding amid the seven satellites and the broad ring, and the
diameter of eighty thousand miles,
Speeding with tail’d meteors, throwing fire-balls like the rest,
Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother in its belly,
Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,
Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,
I tread day and night such roads.

I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the product,
And look at quintillions ripen’d and look at quintillions green.

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,
My course runs below the soundings of plummets.

I help myself to material and immaterial,
No guard can shut me off, no law prevent me.

I anchor my ship for a little while only,
My messengers continually cruise away or bring their returns to me.
I go hunting polar furs and the seal, leaping chasms with a pike-pointed staff, clinging to topples of brittle and blue.

I ascend to the foretruck,
I take my place late at night in the crow’s-nest,
We sail the arctic sea, it is plenty light enough,
Through the clear atmosphere I stretch around on the wonderful beauty,
The enormous masses of ice pass me and I pass them, the scenery is plain in all directions,
The white-topt mountains show in the distance, I fling out my fancies toward them,
We are approaching some great battle-field in which we are soon to be engaged,
We pass the colossal outposts of the encampment, we pass with still feet and caution,
Or we are entering by the suburbs some vast and ruin’d city,
The blocks and fallen architecture more than all the living cities of the globe.

I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires,
I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself,
I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.

My voice is the wife’s voice, the screech by the rail of the stairs,
They fetch my man’s body up dripping and drown’d.

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
The courage of present times and all times,
How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the steamship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,
How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was faithful of days and faithful of nights,
And chalk’d in large letters on a board, Be of good cheer, we will not desert you;
How he follow’d with them and tack’d with them three days and would not give it up,
How he saved the drifting company at last,
How the lank loose-gown’d women look’d when boated from the side of their prepared graves,
How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the sharp-lipp’d unshaved men;
All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine, I am the man, I suffer’d, I was there.
The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
The mother of old, condemn’d for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her
children gazing on,
The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence,
blowing, cover’d with sweat,
The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the murderous
buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn’d with the
ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the
wounded person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

I am the mash’d fireman with breast-bone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke I inspired, I heard the yelling shouts of my comrades,
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
They have clear’d the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

I lie in the night air in my red shirt, the pervading hush is for my sake,
Painless after all I lie exhausted but not so unhappy,
White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are bared
of their fire-caps,
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches.

Distant and dead resuscitate,
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the clock myself.

I am an old artillerist, I tell of my fort’s bombardment,
I am there again.

Again the long roll of the drummers,
Again the attacking cannon, mortars,
Again to my listening ears the cannon responsive.
I take part, I see and hear the whole,
The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots,
The ambulanza slowly passing trailing its red drip,
Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs,
The fall of grenades through the rent roof, the fan-shaped explosion,
The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air.

Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general, he furiously waves
   with his hand,
He gasps through the clot Mind not me—mind—the entrenchments.

34
Now I tell what I knew in Texas in my early youth,
(I tell not the fall of Alamo,
Not one escaped to tell the fall of Alamo,
The hundred and fifty are dumb yet at Alamo,)
‘Tis the tale of the murder in cold blood of four hundred and twelve young men.

Retreating they had form’d in a hollow square with their baggage for breastworks,
Nine hundred lives out of the surrounding enemies, nine times their number, was the price they took in advance,
Their colonel was wounded and their ammunition gone,
They treated for an honorable capitulation, receiv’d writing and seal, gave up their arms and march’d back prisoners of war.

They were the glory of the race of rangers,
Matchless with horse, rifle, song, supper, courtship,
Large, turbulent, generous, handsome, proud, and affectionate,
Bearded, sunburnt, drest in the free costume of hunters,
Not a single one over thirty years of age.

The second First-day morning they were brought out in squads and massacred, it was beautiful early summer,
The work commenced about five o’clock and was over by eight.

None obey’d the command to kneel,
Some made a mad and helpless rush, some stood stark and straight,
A few fell at once, shot in the temple or heart, the living and dead lay together,
The maim’d and mangled dug in the dirt, the new-comers saw them there,
Some half-kill’d attempted to crawl away,
These were despatch’d with bayonets or batter’d with the blunts of muskets,
A youth not seventeen years old seiz’d his assassin till two more came to release him, 
The three were all torn and cover’d with the boy’s blood.

At eleven o’clock began the burning of the bodies; 
That is the tale of the murder of the four hundred and twelve young men.

35
Would you hear of an old-time sea-fight? 
Would you learn who won by the light of the moon and stars? 
List to the yarn, as my grandmother’s father the sailor told it to me.

Our foe was no skulk in his ship I tell you, (said he,) 
His was the surly English pluck, and there is no tougher or truer, 
    and never was, and never will be; 
Along the lower’d eve he came horribly raking us.

We closed with him, the yards entangled, the cannon touch’d, 
My captain lash’d fast with his own hands.

We had receiv’d some eighteen pound shots under the water, 
On our lower-gun-deck two large pieces had burst at the first fire, 
    killing all around and blowing up overhead.

Fighting at sun-down, fighting at dark, 
Ten o’clock at night, the full moon well up, our leaks on the gain, 
    and five feet of water reported, 
The master-at-arms loosing the prisoners confined in the after-hold to give them a chance for themselves.

The transit to and from the magazine is now stopt by the sentinels, 
They see so many strange faces they do not know whom to trust.

Our frigate takes fire, 
The other asks if we demand quarter? 
If our colors are struck and the fighting done?

Now I laugh content, for I hear the voice of my little captain, 
We have not struck, he composedly cries, we have just begun our part of the fighting.

Only three guns are in use, 
One is directed by the captain himself against the enemy’s main-mast,
Two well serv’d with grape and canister silence his musketry and clear his decks.

The tops alone second the fire of this little battery, especially the main-top,
They hold out bravely during the whole of the action.

Not a moment’s cease,
The leaks gain fast on the pumps, the fire eats toward the powder-magazine.

One of the pumps has been shot away, it is generally thought we are sinking.

Serene stands the little captain,
He is not hurried, his voice is neither high nor low,
His eyes give more light to us than our battle-lanterns.

Toward twelve there in the beams of the moon they surrender to us.

36
Stretch’d and still lies the midnight,
Two great hulls motionless on the breast of the darkness,
Our vessel riddled and slowly sinking, preparations to pass to the one we have conquer’d,
The captain on the quarter-deck coldly giving his orders through a countenance white as a sheet,
Near by the corpse of the child that serv’d in the cabin,
The dead face of an old salt with long white hair and carefully curl’d whiskers,
The flames spite of all that can be done flickering aloft and below,
The husky voices of the two or three officers yet fit for duty,
Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves, dabs of flesh upon the masts and spars,
Cut of cordage, dangle of rigging, slight shock of the soothe of waves,
Black and impassive guns, litter of powder-parcels, strong scent,
A few large stars overhead, silent and mournful shining,
Delicate sniffs of sea-breeze, smells of sedgy grass and fields by the shore, death-messages given in charge to survivors,
The hiss of the surgeon’s knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw,
Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long dull, tapering groan,
These so, these irretrievable.

37
You laggards there on guard! look to your arms!
In at the conquer’d doors they crowd! I am possess’d!
Embody all presences outlaw’d or suffering,
See myself in prison shaped like another man,
And feel the dull unintermitted pain.

For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and keep watch,
It is I let out in the morning and barr’d at night.

Not a mutineer walks handcuff’d to jail but I am handcuff’d to him
and walk by his side,
(I am less the jolly one there, and more the silent one with sweat
on my twitching lips.)

Not a youngster is taken for larceny but I go up too, and am tried
and sentenced.

Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last gasp,
My face is ash-color’d, my sinews gnarl, away from me people retreat.

Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in them,
I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg.

38
Enough! enough! enough!
Somehow I have been stunn’d. Stand back!
Give me a little time beyond my cuff’d head, slumbers, dreams, gaping,
I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.

That I could forget the mockers and insults!
That I could forget the trickling tears and the blows of the
bludgeons and hammers!
That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and
bloody crowning.

I remember now,
I resume the overstaid fraction,
The grave of rock multiplies what has been confided to it, or to any graves,
Corpses rise, gashes heal, fastenings roll from me.

I troop forth replenish’d with supreme power, one of an average
unending procession,
Inland and sea-coast we go, and pass all boundary lines,
Our swift ordinances on their way over the whole earth,
The blossoms we wear in our hats the growth of thousands of years.
Eleves, I salute you! come forward!
Continue your annotations, continue your questionings.

39
The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?
Is he waiting for civilization, or past it and mastering it?

Is he some Southwesterner rais’d out-doors? is he Kanadian?
Is he from the Mississippi country? Iowa, Oregon, California?
The mountains? prairie-life, bush-life? or sailor from the sea?

Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,
They desire he should like them, touch them, speak to them, stay with them.

Behavior lawless as snow-flakes, words simple as grass, uncomb’d
head, laughter, and naivete,
Slow-stepping feet, common features, common modes and emanations,
They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,
They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath, they fly out of
the glance of his eyes.

40
Flaunt of the sunshine I need not your bask—lie over!
You light surfaces only, I force surfaces and depths also.

Earth! you seem to look for something at my hands,
Say, old top-knot, what do you want?

Man or woman, I might tell how I like you, but cannot,
And might tell what it is in me and what it is in you, but cannot,
And might tell that pining I have, that pulse of my nights and days.

Behold, I do not give lectures or a little charity,
When I give I give myself.

You there, impotent, loose in the knees,
Open your scarf’d chops till I blow grit within you,
Spread your palms and lift the flaps of your pockets,
I am not to be denied, I compel, I have stores plenty and to spare,
And any thing I have I bestow.

I do not ask who you are, that is not important to me,
You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you.
To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean,
On his right cheek I put the family kiss,
And in my soul I swear I never will deny him.

On women fit for conception I start bigger and nimbler babes.
(This day I am jetting the stuff of far more arrogant republics.)

To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door.
Turn the bed-clothes toward the foot of the bed,
Let the physician and the priest go home.

I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,
O despairer; here is my neck,
By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight upon me.

I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,
Every room of the house do I fill with an arm’d force,
Lovers of me, bafflers of graves.

Sleep—I and they keep guard all night,
Not doubt, not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you,
I have embraced you, and henceforth possess you to myself,
And when you rise in the morning you will find what I tell you is so.

41

I am he bringing help for the sick as they pant on their backs,
And for strong upright men I bring yet more needed help.

I heard what was said of the universe,
Heard it and heard it of several thousand years;
It is middling well as far as it goes—but is that all?

Magnifying and applying come I,
Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson,
Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix
engraved,
With Odin and the hideous-faced Mexitli and every idol and image,
Taking them all for what they are worth and not a cent more,
Admitting they were alive and did the work of their days,
(They bore mites as for unfledg’d birds who have now to rise and fly
and sing for themselves,)
Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself,
   bestowing them freely on each man and woman I see,
Discovering as much or more in a framer framing a house,
Putting higher claims for him there with his roll’d-up sleeves
   driving the mallet and chisel,
Not objecting to special revelations, considering a curl of smoke or
   a hair on the back of my hand just as curious as any revelation,
Lads ahold of fire-engines and hook-and-ladder ropes no less to me
   than the gods of the antique wars,
Minding their voices peal through the crash of destruction,
Their brawny limbs passing safe over charr’d laths, their white
   foreheads whole and unhurt out of the flames;
By the mechanic’s wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for
   every person born,
Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels
   with shirts bagg’d out at their waists,
The snag-tooth’d hostler with red hair redeeming sins past and to come,
Selling all he possesses, traveling on foot to fee lawyers for his
   brother and sit by him while he is tried for forgery;
What was strewn in the amplest strewing the square rod about me, and
   not filling the square rod then,
The bull and the bug never worshipp’d half enough,
Dung and dirt more admirable than was dream’d,
The supernatural of no account, myself waiting my time to be one of
   the supremes,
The day getting ready for me when I shall do as much good as the
   best, and be as prodigious;
By my life-lumps! becoming already a creator,
Putting myself here and now to the ambush’d womb of the shadows.

42
A call in the midst of the crowd,
My own voice, orotund sweeping and final.

Come my children,
Come my boys and girls, my women, household and intimates,
Now the performer launches his nerve, he has pass’d his prelude on
   the reeds within.

Easily written loose-finger’d chords—I feel the thrum of your
   climax and close.

My head slues round on my neck,
Music rolls, but not from the organ,
Folks are around me, but they are no household of mine.
Ever the hard unsunk ground,
Ever the eaters and drinkers, ever the upward and downward sun, ever
the air and the ceaseless tides,
Ever myself and my neighbors, refreshing, wicked, real,
Ever the old inexplicable query, ever that thorn’d thumb, that
breath of itches and thirsts,
Ever the vexer’s hoot! hoot! till we find where the sly one hides
and bring him forth,
Ever love, ever the sobbing liquid of life,
Ever the bandage under the chin, ever the trestles of death.

Here and there with dimes on the eyes walking,
To feed the greed of the belly the brains liberally spooning,
Tickets buying, taking, selling, but in to the feast never once going,
Many sweating, ploughing, thrashing, and then the chaff for payment
receiving,
A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming.

This is the city and I am one of the citizens,
Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, markets,
newspapers, schools,
The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories,
stocks, stores, real estate and personal estate.

The little plentiful manikins skipping around in collars and tail’d coats
I am aware who they are, (they are positively not worms or fleas,)
I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest
is deathless with me,
What I do and say the same waits for them,
Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them.

I know perfectly well my own egotism,
Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less,
And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself.

Not words of routine this song of mine,
But abruptly to question, to leap beyond yet nearer bring;
This printed and bound book—but the printer and the
printing-office boy?
The well-taken photographs—but your wife or friend close and solid
in your arms?
The black ship mail’d with iron, her mighty guns in her turrets—but
the pluck of the captain and engineers?
In the houses the dishes and fare and furniture—but the host and hostess, and the look out of their eyes?
The sky up there—yet here or next door, or across the way?
The saints and sages in history—but you yourself?
Sermons, creeds, theology—but the fathomless human brain,
And what is reason? and what is love? and what is life?

43
I do not despise you priests, all time, the world over,
My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern,
Believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,
Waiting responses from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun,
Making a fetich of the first rock or stump, powowing with sticks in the circle of obis,
Helping the llama or brahmin as he trims the lamps of the idols,
Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession, rapt and austere in the woods a gymnosophist,
Drinking mead from the skull-cap, to Shastas and Vedas admirant, minding the Koran,
Walking the teokallis, spotted with gore from the stone and knife, beating the serpent-skin drum,
Accepting the Gospels, accepting him that was crucified, knowing assuredly that he is divine,
To the mass kneeling or the puritan’s prayer rising, or sitting patiently in a pew,
Ranting and frothing in my insane crisis, or waiting dead-like till my spirit arouses me,
Looking forth on pavement and land, or outside of pavement and land, Belonging to the winders of the circuit of circuits.

One of that centripetal and centrifugal gang I turn and talk like man leaving charges before a journey.

Down-hearted doubters dull and excluded,
Frivolous, sullen, moping, angry, affected, dishearten’d, atheistical,
I know every one of you, I know the sea of torment, doubt, despair and unbelief.

How the flukes splash!
How they contort rapid as lightning, with spasms and spouts of blood!

Be at peace bloody flukes of doubters and sullen mopers,
I take my place among you as much as among any,
The past is the push of you, me, all, precisely the same,
And what is yet untried and afterward is for you, me, all, precisely
the same.

I do not know what is untried and afterward,
But I know it will in its turn prove sufficient, and cannot fail.

Each who passes is consider’d, each who stops is consider’d, not
single one can it fall.

It cannot fall the young man who died and was buried,
Nor the young woman who died and was put by his side,
Nor the little child that peep’d in at the door, and then drew back
and was never seen again,
Nor the old man who has lived without purpose, and feels it with
bitterness worse than gall,
Nor him in the poor house tubercled by rum and the bad disorder,
Nor the numberless slaughter’d and wreck’d, nor the brutish koboo
call’d the ordue of humanity,
Nor the sacs merely floating with open mouths for food to slip in,
Nor any thing in the earth, or down in the oldest graves of the earth,
Nor any thing in the myriads of spheres, nor the myriads of myriads
that inhabit them,
Nor the present, nor the least wisp that is known.

44
It is time to explain myself—let us stand up.

What is known I strip away,
I launch all men and women forward with me into the Unknown.

The clock indicates the moment—but what does eternity indicate?

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers,
There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.

Births have brought us richness and variety,
And other births will bring us richness and variety.

I do not call one greater and one smaller,
That which fills its period and place is equal to any.

Were mankind murderous or jealous upon you, my brother, my sister?
I am sorry for you, they are not murderous or jealous upon me,
All has been gentle with me, I keep no account with lamentation,
(What have I to do with lamentation?)

I am an acme of things accomplish’d, and I an encloser of things to be.

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs,
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps,
All below duly travel’d, and still I mount and mount.

Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me,
Afar down I see the huge first Nothing, I know I was even there,
I waited unseen and always, and slept through the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid carbon.

Long I was hugg’d close—long and long.

Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help’d me.

Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen,
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

Before I was born out of my mother generations guided me,
My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it.

For it the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it
with care.

All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me,
Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

45
O span of youth! ever-push’d elasticity!
O manhood, balanced, florid and full.

My lovers suffocate me,
Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin,
Jostling me through streets and public halls, coming naked to me at night,
Crying by day, Ahoy! from the rocks of the river, swinging and
chirping over my head,
Calling my name from flower-beds, vines, tangled underbrush,
Lighting on every moment of my life,
Bussing my body with soft balsamic busses,
Noiselessly passing handfuls out of their hearts and giving them to be mine.

Old age superbly rising! O welcome, ineffable grace of dying days!

Every condition promulges not only itself, it promulges what grows after and out of itself,
And the dark hush promulges as much as any.

I open my scuttle at night and see the far-sprinkled systems,
And all I see multiplied as high as I can cipher edge but the rim of the farther systems.

Wider and wider they spread, expanding, always expanding,
Outward and outward and forever outward.

My sun has his sun and round him obediently wheels,
He joins with his partners a group of superior circuit,
And greater sets follow, making specks of the greatest inside them.

There is no stoppage and never can be stoppage,
If I, you, and the worlds, and all beneath or upon their surfaces,
   were this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would not avail the long run,
We should surely bring up again where we now stand,
And surely go as much farther, and then farther and farther.

A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues, do not hazard the span or make it impatient,
They are but parts, any thing is but a part.

See ever so far, there is limitless space outside of that,
Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that.

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,
The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there.

46
I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.
I tramp a perpetual journey, (come listen all!)
My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,
No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,
I have no chair; no church, no philosophy,
I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange,
But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a knoll,
My left hand hooking you round the waist,
My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents and the public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.

It is not far, it is within reach,
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know,
Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.

Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth,
Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go.

If you tire, give me both burdens, and rest the chuff of your hand
  on my hip,
And in due time you shall repay the same service to me,
For after we start we never lie by again.

This day before dawn I ascended a hill and look’d at the crowded heaven,
And I said to my spirit When we become the enfolders of those orbs,
  and the pleasure and knowledge of every thing in them, shall we
be fill’d and satisfied then?
And my spirit said No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond.

You are also asking me questions and I hear you,
I answer that I cannot answer, you must find out for yourself.

Sit a while dear son,
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink,
But as soon as you sleep and renew yourself in sweet clothes, I kiss you
  with a good-by kiss and open the gate for your egress hence.

Long enough have you dream’d contemptible dreams,
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every
  moment of your life.
Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout,
and laughingly dash with your hair.

47
I am the teacher of athletes,
He that by me spreads a wider breast than my own proves the width of my
own,
He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher.

The boy I love, the same becomes a man not through derived power,
but in his own right,
Wicked rather than virtuous out of conformity or fear,
Fond of his sweetheart, relishing well his steak,
Unrequited love or a slight cutting him worse than sharp steel cuts,
First-rate to ride, to fight, to hit the bull’s eye, to sail a
skiff, to sing a song or play on the banjo,
Preferring scars and the beard and faces pitted with small-pox over
all latherers,
And those well-tann’d to those that keep out of the sun.

I teach straying from me, yet who can stray from me?
I follow you whoever you are from the present hour,
My words itch at your ears till you understand them.

I do not say these things for a dollar or to fill up the time while
I wait for a boat,
(It is you talking just as much as myself, I act as the tongue of you,
Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen’d.)

I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house,
And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her
who privately stays with me in the open air.

If you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore,
The nearest gnat is an explanation, and a drop or motion of waves key,
The maul, the oar, the hand-saw, second my words.

No shutter’d room or school can commune with me,
But roughs and little children better than they.

The young mechanic is closest to me, he knows me well,
The woodman that takes his axe and jug with him shall take me with
him all day,
The farm-boy ploughing in the field feels good at the sound of my voice,
In vessels that sail my words sail, I go with fishermen and seamen
and love them.

The soldier camp’d or upon the march is mine,
On the night ere the pending battle many seek me, and I do not fail them,
On that solemn night (it may be their last) those that know me seek me.
My face rubs to the hunter’s face when he lies down alone in his blanket,
The driver thinking of me does not mind the jolt of his wagon,
The young mother and old mother comprehend me,
The girl and the wife rest the needle a moment and forget where they are,
They and all would resume what I have told them.

48
I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one’s self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy walks to his own
funeral drest in his shroud,
And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth,
And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod confounds the
learning of all times,
And there is no trade or employment but the young man following it
may become a hero,
And there is no object so soft but it makes a hub for the wheel’d universe,
And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and composed
before a million universes.

And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God,
(No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and
about death.)

I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least,
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

Why should I wish to see God better than this day?
I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass,
I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign’d
by God’s name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe’er I go,
Others will punctually come for ever and ever.
And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.

To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes, I see the elder-hand pressing receiving supporting, I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors, And mark the outlet, and mark the relief and escape.

And as to you Corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not offend me, I smell the white roses sweet-scented and growing, I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish’d breasts of melons.

And as to you Life I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths, (No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before.)

I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven, O suns—O grass of graves—O perpetual transfers and promotions, If you do not say any thing how can I say any thing?

Of the turbid pool that lies in the autumn forest, Of the moon that descends the steeps of the soughing twilight, Toss, sparkles of day and dusk—toss on the black stems that decay in the muck, Toss to the moaning gibberish of the dry limbs.

I ascend from the moon, I ascend from the night, I perceive that the ghastly glimmer is noonday sunbeams reflected, And debouch to the steady and central from the offspring great or small.

There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me. Wrench’d and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes, I sleep—I sleep long.

I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid, It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.

Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on, To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me. Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters.
Do you see O my brothers and sisters?
It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.

51
The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them.
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,
(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I concentrate toward them that are nigh, I wait on the door-slab.

Who has done his day's work? who will soonest be through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? will you prove already too late?

52
The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

The last scud of day holds back for me,
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.
Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

“A NOISELESS, PATIENT SPIDER”

A NOISELESS, patient spider,
I mark’d, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;
Mark’d how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;
Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you, O my Soul, where you stand,
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,—seeking the spheres, to connect them;
Till the bridge you will need, be form’d—till the ductile anchor hold;
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.

“WHEN I HEARD THE LEARNED ASTRONOMER”

WHEN I heard the learn’d astronomer;
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;
When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
Till rising and gliding out, I wander’d off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.
“I HEAR AMERICA SINGING”

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning,
or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,
or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

“PIONEERS! O, PIONEERS!”

Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp-edged axes?
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

For we cannot tarry here,
We must march my darlings, we must bear the brunt of danger,
We the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us depend,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

O you youths, Western youths,
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and friendship,
Plain I see you Western youths, see you tramping with the foremost,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!
All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

We detachments steady throwing,
Down the edges, through the passes, up the mountains steep,
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

We primeval forests felling,
We the rivers stemming, vexing we and piercing deep the mines within,
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil upheaving,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Colorado men are we,
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras and the high plateaus,
From the mine and from the gully, from the hunting trail we come,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,
Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with the continental blood intervein'd,
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the Southern, all the Northern,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O resistless restless race!
O beloved race in all! O my breast aches with tender love for all!
O I mourn and yet exult, I am rapt with love for all,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Raise the mighty mother mistress,
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the starry mistress,
(bend your heads all,) Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern, impassive, weapon'd mistress,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

See my children, resolute children,
By those swarms upon our rear we must never yield or falter,
Ages back in ghostly millions frowning there behind us urging,
Pioneers! O pioneers!
On and on the compact ranks,
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of the dead quickly fill’d,
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet and never stopping.
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O to die advancing on!
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the hour come?
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and sure the gap is fill’d.
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the pulses of the world,
Falling in they beat for us, with the Western movement beat,
Holding single or together, steady moving to the front, all for us,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Life’s involv’d and varied pageants,
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their work,
All the seamen and the landmen, all the masters with their slaves,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

All the hapless silent lovers,
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous and the wicked,
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all the dying,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

I too with my soul and body,
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,
Through these shores amid the shadows, with the apparitions pressing,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

Lo, the darting bowling orb!
Lo, the brother orbs around, all the clustering suns and planets,
All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with dreams,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

These are of us, they are with us,
All for primal needed work, while the followers there in embryo wait behind,
We to-day’s procession heading, we the route for travel clearing,
Pioneers! O pioneers!

O you daughters of the West!
O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you wives!
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

   Minstrels latent on the prairies!
(Shrouded bards of other lands, you may rest, you have done your work,)
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise and tramp amid us,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

   Not for delectations sweet,
Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peaceful and the studious,
Not the riches safe and palling, not for us the tame enjoyment,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

   Do the feasters gluttonous feast?
Do the corpulent sleepers sleep? have they lock’d and bolted doors?
Still be ours the diet hard, and the blanket on the ground,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

   Has the night descended?
Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop discouraged nodding
   on our way?
Yet a passing hour I yield you in your tracks to pause oblivious,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!

   Till with sound of trumpet,
Far, far off the daybreak call—hark! how loud and clear I hear it wind,
Swift! to the head of the army!—swift! spring to your places,
   Pioneers! O pioneers!
“O ME! O LIFE!”

O me! O life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I,
and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.
That you are here—that life exists and identity,
That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.

“BEAT! BEAT! DRUMS!”

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Through the windows—through doors—burst like a ruthless force,
Into the solemn church, and scatter the congregation,
Into the school where the scholar is studying;
Leave not the bridegroom quiet—no happiness must he have now with his bride,
Nor the peaceful farmer any peace, ploughing his field or gathering his grain,
So fierce you whirr and pound you drums—so shrill you bugles blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Over the traffic of cities—over the rumble of wheels in the streets;
Are beds prepared for sleepers at night in the houses? no sleepers must sleep in those beds,
No bargainers’ bargains by day—no brokers or speculators—would they continue?
Would the talkers be talking? would the singer attempt to sing?
Would the lawyer rise in the court to state his case before the judge?
Then rattle quicker; heavier drums—you bugles wilder blow.

Beat! beat! drums!—blow! bugles! blow!
Make no parley—stop for no expostulation,
Mind not the timid—mind not the weeper or prayer;
Mind not the old man beseeching the young man,
Let not the child’s voice be heard, nor the mother’s entreaties,
Make even the trestles to shake the dead where they lie awaiting the hearses,
So strong you thump O terrible drums—so loud you bugles blow.

“VIGIL STRANGE I KEPT ON THE FIELD ONE NIGHT”

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night;
When you my son and my comrade dropt at my side that day,
One look I but gave which your dear eyes return’d with a look I shall never forget,
One touch of your hand to mine O boy, reach’d up as you lay on the ground,
Then onward I sped in the battle, the even-contested battle,
Till late in the night reliev’d to the place at last again I made my way,
Found you in death so cold dear comrade, found your body son of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Bared your face in the starlight, curious the scene, cool blew the moderate night-wind,
Long there and then in vigil I stood, dimly around me the battlefield spreading,
Vigil wondrous and vigil sweet there in the fragrant silent night,
But not a tear fell, not even a long-drawn sigh, long, long I gazed,
Then on the earth partially reclining sat by your side leaning my chin in my hands,
Passing sweet hours, immortal and mystic hours with you dearest comrade—not a tear, not a word,
Vigil of silence, love and death, vigil for you my son and my soldier,
As onward silently stars aloft, eastward new ones upward stole,
Vigil final for you brave boy, (I could not save you, swift was your death,
I faithfully loved you and cared for you living, I think we shall surely meet again,)
Till at latest lingering of the night, indeed just as the dawn appear’d,
My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop’d well his form,
Folded the blanket well, tucking it carefully over head and carefully under feet,
And there and then and bathed by the rising sun, my son in his grave, in his rude-dug grave I deposited,
Ending my vigil strange with that, vigil of night and battle-field dim,
Vigil for boy of responding kisses, (never again on earth responding,)
Vigil for comrade swiftly slain, vigil I never forget, how as day brighten’d,
I rose from the chill ground and folded my soldier well in his blanket,
And buried him where he fell.

“O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!”

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
   But O heart! heart! heart!
   O the bleeding drops of red,
   Where on the deck my Captain lies,
   Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
   Here Captain! dear father!
   This arm beneath your head!
   It is some dream that on the deck,
   You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
   Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
   But I with mournful tread,
   Walk the deck my Captain lies,
   Fallen cold and dead.
Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

A brief outline of Emily Dickinson's life reads like the plot of a story destined to become a legend. Once upon a time there was born to a religious and well-to-do New England family a daughter they named Emily. As a child she was lively, well-behaved, and obedient; she took pleasure in the busy household of which she was a part and in the seasonal games, parties, and outings of a village snowy cold in winter and brilliantly green and flowering in the summer.

At home she learned to cook and sew. When she was old enough, she was sent to a school where strict rules did not keep Emily and the other girls from displaying their high spirits as they enjoyed the entertainments of boarding-school life. Emily took part in these, but not always with as much enthusiasm as she might have. As she said many years later, something sad and reserved in her nature made her “a mourner among the children.”

To her family and friends, everything about the young Dickinson seemed normal. No one doubted that she would grow gracefully into womanhood, make a good marriage, and settle into a village life of churchgoing, holiday gatherings, and neighborly harmony. But something happened in her life that has been the subject of speculation for decades.

When Dickinson was twenty-three years old, her father, who had become a United States Congressman, took her with him to Washington, D.C., and then on to Philadelphia. The journey seems to have marked the start of the turning point of her existence. Her father may have taken her with him because she had fallen in love with someone she could never marry. This was a married lawyer, older than Emily, a man who would die that year of tuberculosis.

Whatever happened, it seems likely that in the course of the journey, Emily fell in love with someone else. This was Charles Wadsworth, who was also married and who was pastor of the Arch Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Letters to the Reverend Wadsworth show that Dickinson saw him as a “muse,” someone who could help her with her feeling ard her writings, someone she could love passionately in her imagination.

But in 1861 Wadsworth took up a new assignment in San Francisco. His leaving seems to have caused the great crisis in Dickinson’s life: “I sing,” she wrote around this time, “as the boy does by the burying ground, because I am afraid.”

The young woman quietly and abruptly withdrew from all social life except that involving her immediate family. Within a few years, dressed always in white-like the bride she would never become-she had gone into a state of seclusion. Her only activities were household tasks and the writing of poems that she either kept to
herself or sent out as valentines, birthday greetings, or notes to go with the gift of a cherry pie or a batch of cookies.

Around the time that Wadsworth was preparing to move to California, Dickinson sent a few of her poems to Thomas Wentworth Higginson. As editor of the Atlantic Monthly, Higginson had been encouraging the work of younger poets. Higginson never became a substitute for Wadsworth, but he was kindly, and he did serve as a distant “teacher” and “mentor.” Eventually, Dickinson gave up hope of ever finding a wider audience than her few friends and relatives. About 1861, she wrote “I’m Nobody! Who are you?/Are you-Nobody-too?”

During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson published no more than a handful of her typically brief poems. She seemed to lack a concern for an audience, and she went so far as to instruct her family to destroy any poems she might leave behind. Still, she saw to it that bundles of handwritten poems were carefully wrapped and put away in places where friendly, appreciative, and, finally, astonished eyes would find them. The poems were assembled and edited by different members of her family and friends; they were then published in installments so frequent that readers began to wonder when they would ever end.

Then, in 1955, a collection called The Poems of Emily Dickinson was finally made available. This was the devoted work of Thomas H. Johnson, a scholar who, unlike Dickinson’s earlier editors, refrained from making “presentable” entities of poems whose punctuation, rhyme schemes, syntax, and word choice were frequently baffling.

As a result of Johnson’s research, whole generations of readers who had grown up on Dickinson poems were faced with new versions of poems that sometimes “rescued” meanings from the tamperings of her first editors. And sometimes, these originals made emphases which, in the interests of “smoothness,” those editors had overlooked. Yet, at other times, comparisons also revealed that Dickinson’s first editors had often served her well-in spirit, if not always in the way demanded by scholarship.

Here is an example of how one stanza was changed by the original editors. Johnson’s version is first:

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

And this is how the early editor changed it:

We passed the school where children played
Their lessons scarcely done;
We passed the fields of gazing grain,
We passed the setting sun.

When Dickinson died at the age of fifty-six, hardly anyone knew that the strange, shy woman in their midst, the perpetual bride who never crossed her own doorstep, was a poet whose sharp and delicate voice would echo for generations to come. Some eighty years after her death, when the quarrels among her relatives who had inherited her manuscripts had died down and all of her work was finally published, she was recognized as one of the greatest poets America, and perhaps the world, had produced.

The self-imposed restrictions of Dickinson’s actual life were more than matched by her ability to see the universal in the particular, and vice versa. She perceived the relationship between a drop of dew and a flood, between a desert and a grain of sand. These perceptions helped her to make metaphors that embraced experiences far beyond the limited compass of Amherst village life.

Yet, no matter how far her imagination ranged, Dickinson never denied those experiences their truth as aspects of a cycle of existence important in itself. When an Amherst neighbor’s barn caught fire and lit up the sky, it was a real barn at the edge of a real pasture, and its loss became a matter of local anguish. But these local actualities did not prevent Dickinson from regarding the incident as a reminder of ultimate doom, of the Biblical prophecies of destruction of the earth by fire.

Behind the now famous legend of Emily Dickinson, and the plays and novels that have romanticized and sentimentalized her life, is a woman whose genius made its own rules, followed its own commands, and found its own fulfillment. Tears for the once cheerful young woman whose supposed broken heart drove her into self-imposed exile do not apply. Emily Dickinson’s life as a recluse was richer, more varied and-in the satisfactions that come with the exercise of God-given talent—even happier than the lives of those around her. In the prospect of history, we can see that the untold secret of Emily Dickinson’s emotional life is secondary to the great secret of her genius, the secret destiny would not let her keep.
PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION OF EMILY DICKINSON’S COLLECTED POEMS

The verses of Emily Dickinson belong emphatically to what Emerson long since called “the Poetry of the Portfolio,”—something produced absolutely without the thought of publication, and solely by way of expression of the writer’s own mind. Such verse must inevitably forfeit whatever advantage lies in the discipline of public criticism and the enforced conformity to accepted ways. On the other hand, it may often gain something through the habit of freedom and the unconventional utterance of daring thoughts. In the case of the present author, there was absolutely no choice in the matter; she must write thus, or not at all. A recluse by temperament and habit, literally spending years without setting her foot beyond the doorstep, and many more years during which her walks were strictly limited to her father’s grounds, she habitually concealed her mind, like her person, from all but a very few friends; and it was with great difficulty that she was persuaded to print, during her lifetime, three or four poems. Yet she wrote verses in great abundance; and though brought curiously indifferent to all conventional rules, had yet a rigorous literary standard of her own, and often altered a word many times to suit an ear which had its own tenacious fastidiousness.

Miss Dickinson was born in Amherst, Mass., Dec. 10, 1830, and died there May 15, 1886. Her father, Hon. Edward Dickinson, was the leading lawyer of Amherst, and was treasurer of the well-known college there situated. It was his custom once a year to hold a large reception at his house, attended by all the families connected with the institution and by the leading people of the town. On these occasions his daughter Emily emerged from her wonted retirement and did her part as gracious hostess; nor would any one have known from her manner, I have been told, that this was not a daily occurrence. The annual occasion once past, she withdrew again into her seclusion, and except for a very few friends was as invisible to the world as if she had dwelt in a nunnery. For myself, although I had corresponded with her for many years, I saw her but twice face to face, and brought away the impression of something as unique and remote as Undine or Mignon or Thekla.

This selection from her poems is published to meet the desire of her personal friends, and especially of her surviving sister. It is believed that the thoughtful reader will find in these pages a quality more suggestive of the poetry of William Blake than of anything to be elsewhere found,—flashes of wholly original and profound insight into nature and life; words and phrases exhibiting an extraordinary vividness of descriptive and imaginative power; yet often set in a seemingly whimsical or even rugged frame. They are here published as they were written, with very few and superficial changes; although it is fair to say that the titles have been assigned, almost invariably, by the editors. In many cases these verses will seem to the reader like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them, giving a freshness and a fragrance not otherwise to be conveyed. In other cases, as in
the few poems of shipwreck or of mental conflict, we can only wonder at the gift of vivid imagination by which this recluse woman can delineate, by a few touches, the very crises of physical or mental struggle. And sometimes again we catch glimpses of a lyric strain, sustained perhaps but for a line or two at a time, and making the reader regret its sudden cessation. But the main quality of these poems is that of extraordinary grasp and insight, uttered with an uneven vigor sometimes exasperating, seemingly wayward, but really unsought and inevitable. After all, when a thought takes one’s breath away, a lesson on grammar seems an impertinence. As Ruskin wrote in his earlier and better days, “No weight nor mass nor beauty of execution can outweigh one grain or fragment of thought.”

— Thomas Wentworth Higginson

This is my letter to the world,
    That never wrote to me, —
The simple news that Nature told,
    With tender majesty.

Her message is committed
    To hands I cannot see;
For love of her, sweet countrymen,
    Judge tenderly of me!
It sifts from Leaden Sieves
It powders all the Wood
It fills with Alabaster Wool
The Wringles of the Road

It makes an Even Face
Of Mountain, and of Plain—
Unbroken Forehead from the East
Unto the East again—

It reaches to the Fence—
It wraps it Rail by Rail
Till it is lost in Fleeces—
It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack—and Stem—
A Summer’s empty Room—
Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,
Recordless, but for them—

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts
As Ankles of a Queen—
Then stills its Artisans—like Ghosts—
Denying they have been—
(67)

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

(212)

I taste a liquor never brewed—
From Tankards scooped in Pearl—
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

Inebriate of air—am I—
And Debauchee of Dew—
Reeling—thro’ endless summer days—
From inns of molten Blue—

When “Landlords” turn the drunken Bee
Out of the Foxglove’s door—
When Butterflies—renounce their “drams”—
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats—
And Saints—to windows run—
To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the—Sun!
I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,  
And Mourners to and fro  
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed  
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,  
A Service, like a Drum—  
Kept beating—beating—till I thought  
My Mind was going numb—

And then I heard them lift a Box  
And creak across my Soul  
With those same Boots of Lead, again,  
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,  
And Being, but an Ear,  
And I, and Silence, some strange Race  
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,  
And I dropped down, and down—  
And hit a World, at every plunge,  
And Finished knowing—then—

The Soul selects her own Society —  
Then — shuts the Door —  
To her divine Majority —  
Present no more —

Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —  
At her low Gate —  
Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling  
Upon her Mat —

I’ve known her — from an ample nation —  
Choose One —  
Then — close the Valves of her attention —  
Like Stone —
I died for Beauty -- but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining room --

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
“For Beauty”, I replied --
“And I -- for Truth -- Themself are One --
We Brethren, are”, He said --

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night --
We talked between the Rooms --
Until the Moss had reached our lips --
And covered up -- our names --

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portions of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –
This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond --
Invisible, as Music --
But positive, as Sound --
It beckons, and it baffles --
Philosophy -- don’t know --
And through a Riddle, at the last --
Sagacity, must go --
To guess it, puzzles scholars --
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown --
Faith slips -- and laughs, and rallies --
Blushes, if any see --
Plucks at a twig of Evidence --
And asks a Vane, the way --
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit --
Strong Hallelujahs roll --
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul --
(511)

If you were coming in the Fall,
I'd brush the Summer by
With half a smile, and half a spurn,
As Housewives do, a Fly.

If I could see you in a year,
I'd wind the months in balls—
And put them each in separate Drawers,
For fear the numbers fuse—

If only Centuries, delayed,
I'd count them on my Hand,
Subtracting, till my fingers dropped
Into Van Dieman's Land.

If certain, when this life was out—
That yours and mine, should be
I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,
And take Eternity—

But, now, uncertain of the length
Of this, that is between,
It goads me, like the Goblin Bee—
That will not state—it's sting.
Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Or rather—He passed us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—

Since then—‘tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity—
(956)

What shall I do when the Summer troubles—
What, when the Rose is ripe—
What when the Eggs fly off in Music
From the Maple Keep?

What shall I do when the Skies a’chirrup
Drop a Tune on me—
When the Bee hangs all Noon in the Buttercup
What will become of me?

Oh, when the Squirrel fills His Pockets
And the Berries stare
How can I bear their jocund Faces
Thou from Here, so far?

'Twoudn’t afflict a Robin—
All His Goods have Wings—
I—do not fly, so wherefore
My Perennial Things?

(1129)

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—
A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel—
A Resonance of Emerald—
A Rush of Cochineal—
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head—
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning’s Ride—

Apparenty with no surprise
To any happy Flower
The Frost beheads it at its play—
In accidental power—
The blonde Assassin passes on—
The Sun proceeds unmoved
To measure off another Day
For an Approving God.
Historical Context: American Realist Poetry

From the late 19th to the early 20th centuries, the United States experienced enormous industrial, economic, social and cultural change. A continuous wave of European immigration and the rising potential for international trade brought increasing growth and prosperity to America. Through art and artistic expression (through all mediums including painting, literature and music), American Realism attempted to portray the exhaustion and cultural exuberance of the figurative American landscape and the life of ordinary Americans at home. Artists used the feelings, textures and sounds of the city to influence the color, texture and look of their creative projects. Musicians noticed the quick and fast paced nature of the early 20th century and responded with a fresh and new tempo. Writers and authors told a new story about Americans; boys and girls real Americans could have grown up with. Pulling away from fantasy and focusing on the now, American Realism presented a new gateway and a breakthrough — introducing modernism, and what it means to be in the present.

With the rise of Realism, the democratic, democratizing vision of Walt Whitman was finally achieved. Though acclaimed in his lifetime, Whitman’s most popular poems were his most conventional. By the end of the 19th Century, less original but more widely read poets such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters adapted and popularized many of Whitman’s trademark innovations—most significantly, free verse and interest in the lives of common characters and experiences previously considered unworthy of a great poet’s interest. Robert Frost also adapted these subjects, along with a neoclassical reverence for rural or pastoral settings, to become the most beloved and enduring American poet of his age.
Robert Frost (1874-1963)

Robert Frost is simultaneously perhaps the most beloved American poet of the twentieth century and the most difficult to categorize. Though his poetry arrived at the peak of Modernism and he was intimately acquainted with the major Modernist poets of his age—especially his friend William Carlos Williams—Frost’s poetry owes more in both content and form to Walt Whitman and late nineteenth century poets like E. A. Robinson and Edgar Lee Masters. What makes Frost’s achievement distinct and distinctly modern is the manner in which he transforms traditional verse forms and styles into unique, technically innovative but accessible poems that have made him both the best loved and among the most critically revered literary artists of his age.

Although Robert Frost is the poet whom Americans most closely identify with New England, he was born in San Francisco, California. He was ten years old before he first saw the New England landscapes and knew the changing seasons that he would later describe with the familiarity of a native son. The boy’s move across the country was the result of his father’s early death and his mother’s decision to settle in the industrial town of Lawrence, Massachusetts. After high school there, Frost entered Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. He decided after a few months that he was not yet ready for higher education, and he returned to Lawrence to work in the cotton mills and to write. His verses, however, found little favor with magazine editors.

In his early twenties, married and with a growing family, Frost finally began to feel the need for a more formal education than his random reading could provide. He took his family to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he entered Harvard and stayed for only two years. He later wrote of his decision to leave: “Harvard had taken me away from the question of whether I could write or not.”

Frost earned a living as a schoolteacher and as an editor before deciding to try farming. For ten years, Frost tilled the stony New Hampshire soil on thirty acres which his grandfather had bought for him. But he decided that the concentration demanded by writing poetry did not mix with the round-the-clock physical effort of working the land. Discouraged, he returned to teaching for a few years; then in 1912 he sought a complete change of scene by taking his family to England.

The move turned out to be a wise one. Stimulated by meeting English poets, Frost continued to write poetry, though he found his subjects in New England. In the three years he spent abroad, he completed the two volumes that would make him famous—A Boy’s Will (1913) and North of Boston (1914). These collections included several poems that would stand among Frost’s best-known works: “The Tuft of Flowers,” “In Hardwood Groves,” “Mending Wall,” “The Death of the Hired Man,” and “After Apple-Picking.” These poems were marked by a flinty realism and air impressive mastery of iambic rhythm, narrative dialogue, and the dramatic monologue.
When Frost came back to New Hampshire in 1915, he was no longer an obscure scribbler intent on turning New England folkways into poetry; he was an accomplished writer who had already extended the scope and character of American literature into the twentieth century.

In 1916, the publication of *Mountain Interval*, a collection that included such favorites as “The Road Not Taken,” “Birches,” and “‘Out, Out’”--solidified his fame. Rewarded with many prizes (including four Pulitzer Prizes and a Congressional medal), numerous honorary degrees, and the faithful attention of a wide readership, Frost spent the rest of his life as a lecturer at a number of colleges, and as a public performer who, as he put it, liked to “say” rather than to recite his poetry.

On stage, Frost in his later years became a character of his own creations lovable, fumbling old gent who could nevertheless pierce the minds and hearts of those able to see beyond his play-acting. In private, he was apt to put aside this guileless character and become a sometimes wicked commentator on the pretensions of rival poets; and he could be just as cutting to gushing devotees, who were unaware that he held in contempt the very flattery he demanded.

On Inaugural Day, 1961, standing bareheaded in a bright, cold wind beside President John F. Kennedy on the Capitol steps in Washington, D.C., Frost recited “The Gift Outright.” His art with words had brought him not only the friendship of a president (who was half his age) but, by means of radio and television, the largest single audience in history for a poet.

In a period when poetry was being changed by verbal experiment and by exotic influences from abroad, Frost remained devoted to traditional forms and firmly rooted in American soil. If, at the time of his death, he seemed to belong more to the past than to the present, his reputation today is secure. Neither the cranky realism nor the homely philosophy of self-reliance and spiritual independence that mark his work has been forgotten. He was an artist who developed his talents with stubborn persistence, and he found a unique voice that remained unaffected by the clamor of modernism.
“DESIGN”

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth --
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches’ broth --
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

“BIRCHES”

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the line of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy’s been swinging them.
But swinging doesn’t bend them down to stay
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun’s warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You’d think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.
One by one he subdued his father’s trees
By riding them down over and over again
Until he took the stiffness out of them,
And not one but hung limp, not one was left
For him to conquer. He learned all there was
To learn about not launching out too soon
And so not carrying the tree away
Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise
To the top branches, climbing carefully
With the same pains you use to fill a cup
Up to the brim, and even above the brim.
Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,
Kicking his way down through the air to the ground.
So was I once myself a swinger of birches.
And so I dream of going back to be.
It’s when I’m weary of considerations,
And life is too much like a pathless wood
Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs
Broken across it, and one eye is weeping
From a twig’s having lashed across it open.
I’d like to get away from earth awhile
And then come back to it and begin over.
May no fate willfully misunderstand me
And half grant what I wish and snatch me away
Not to return. Earth’s the right place for love:
I don’t know where it’s likely to go better.
I’d like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.
“THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN”

Mary sat musing on the lamp-flame at the table
Waiting for Warren. When she heard his step,
She ran on tip-toe down the darkened passage
To meet him in the doorway with the news
And put him on his guard. ‘Silas is back.’
She pushed him outward with her through the door
And shut it after her. “Be kind,” she said.
She took the market things from Warren’s arms
And set them on the porch, then drew him down
To sit beside her on the wooden steps.

‘When was I ever anything but kind to him?
But I’ll not have the fellow back,’ he said.
‘I told him so last haying, didn’t I?
“If he left then,” I said, “that ended it.”
What good is he? Who else will harbor him
At his age for the little he can do?
What help he is there’s no depending on.
Off he goes always when I need him most.
‘He thinks he ought to earn a little pay,
Enough at least to buy tobacco with,
won't have to beg and be beholden.”
“All right,” I say “I can't afford to pay
Any fixed wages, though I wish I could.”
“Someone else can.”
“Then someone else will have to.
I shouldn't mind his bettering himself
If that was what it was. You can be certain,
When he begins like that, there’s someone at him
Trying to coax him off with pocket-money, --
In haying time, when any help is scarce.
In winter he comes back to us. I’m done.’

‘Shh I not so loud: he'll hear you,’ Mary said.

‘I want him to: he’ll have to soon or late.’

‘He’s worn out. He’s asleep beside the stove.
When I came up from Rowe’s I found him here,
Huddled against the barn-door fast asleep,
A miserable sight, and frightening, too-
You needn't smile -- I didn't recognize him- 
I wasn't looking for him- and he's changed. 
Wait till you see.'

'Where did you say he'd been?

'He didn't say. I dragged him to the house, 
And gave him tea and tried to make him smoke. 
I tried to make him talk about his travels. 
Nothing would do: he just kept nodding off.'

'What did he say? Did he say anything?'

'But little.'

'Anything? Mary, confess 
He said he'd come to ditch the meadow for me.'

'Warren!' 

'But did he? I just want to know.'

'Of course he did. What would you have him say? 
Surely you wouldn't grudge the poor old man 
Some humble way to save his self-respect. 
He added, if you really care to know, 
He meant to dear the upper pasture, too. 
That sounds like something you have heard before? 
Warren, I wish you could have heard the way 
He jumbled everything. I stopped to look 
Two or three times -- he made me feel so queer-- 
To see if he was talking in his sleep. 
He ran on Harold Wilson -- you remember - 
The boy you had in haying four years since. 
He's finished school, and teaching in his college. 
Silas declares you'll have to get him back. 
He says they two will make a team for work: 
Between them they will lay this farm as smooth! 
The way he mixed that in with other things. 
He thinks young Wilson a likely lad, though daft 
On education -- you know how they fought 
All through July under the blazing sun, 
Silas up on the cart to build the load, 
Harold along beside to pitch it on.'
'Yes, I took care to keep well out of earshot.'

'Well, those days trouble Silas like a dream. You wouldn’t think they would. How some things linger! Harold’s young college boy’s assurance piqued him. After so many years he still keeps finding Good arguments he sees he might have used. I sympathize. I know just how it feels To think of the right thing to say too late. Harold’s associated in his mind with Latin. He asked me what I thought of Harold’s saying He studied Latin like the violin Because he liked it -- that an argument! He said he couldn’t make the boy believe He could find water with a hazel prong-- Which showed how much good school had ever done him. He wanted to go over that. ‘But most of all He thinks if he could have another chance To teach him how to build a load of hay --’

‘I know, that’s Silas’ one accomplishment. He bundles every forkful in its place, And tags and numbers it for future reference, So he can find and easily dislodge it In the unloading. Silas does that well. He takes it out in bunches like big birds’ nests. You never see him standing on the hay He’s trying to lift, straining to lift himself.’

‘He thinks if he could teach him that, he’d be Some good perhaps to someone in the world. He hates to see a boy the fool of books. Poor Silas, so concerned for other folk, And nothing to look backward to with pride, And nothing to look forward to with hope, So now and never any different.’

Part of a moon was filling down the west, Dragging the whole sky with it to the hills. Its light poured softly in her lap. She saw And spread her apron to it. She put out her hand Among the harp-like morning-glory strings, Taut with the dew from garden bed to eaves, As if she played unheard the tenderness
That wrought on him beside her in the night.
‘Warren,’ she said, ‘he has come home to die:
You needn’t be afraid he’ll leave you this time.’

‘Home,’ he mocked gently.

‘Yes, what else but home?
It all depends on what you mean by home.
Of course he’s nothing to us, any more
then was the hound that came a stranger to us
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail.’

‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.’

‘I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’

Warren leaned out and took a step or two,
Picked up a little stick, and brought it back
And broke it in his hand and tossed it by.
‘Silas has better claim on’ us, you think,
Than on his brother? Thirteen little miles
As the road winds would bring him to his door.
Silas has walked that far no doubt to-day.
Why didn’t he go there? His brother’s rich,
A somebody-director in the bank.’

‘He never told us that.’

‘We know it though.’

‘I think his brother ought to help, of course.
I’ll see to that if there is need. He ought of right
To take him in, and might be willing to--
He may be better than appearances.
But have some pity on Silas. Do you think
If he’d had any pride in claiming kin
Or anything he looked for from his brother,
He’d keep so still about him all this time?’

‘I wonder what’s between them.’

‘I can tell you.
Silas is what he is -- we wouldn't mind him--
But just the kind that kinsfolk can't abide.
He never did a thing so very bad.
He don't know why he isn't quite as good
As anyone. He won't be made ashamed
To please his brother, worthless though he is.'

'I can't think Si ever hurt anyone.'

'No, but he hurt my heart the way he lay
And rolled his old head on that sharp-edged chair-back.
He wouldn't let me put him on the lounge.
You must go in and see what you can do.
I made the bed up for him there to-night.
You'll be surprised at him -- how much he's broken.
His working days are done; I'm sure of it.'

'I'd not be in a hurry to say that.'

'I haven't been. Go, look, see for yourself.
But, Warren, please remember how it is:
He' come to help you ditch the meadow.
He has a plan, You mustn't laugh at him.
He may not speak of it, and then he may.
I'll sit and see if that small sailing cloud
Will hit or miss the moon.'

It hit the moon.

Then there were three there, making a dim row,
The moon, the little silver cloud, and she.
Warren returned-- too soon, it seemed to her,
Slipped to her side, caught up her hand and waited.

'Warren?' she questioned.

'Dead,' was all he answered.
“DESSERT PLACES”

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.

The woods around it have it--it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.

And lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less--
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.

They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars--on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

“NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY”

Nature’s first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf’s a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.
“AFTER APPLE-PICKING”

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.
I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough
And held against the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,
And I could tell
What form my dreaming was about to take.
Magnified apples appear and disappear,
Stem end and blossom end,
And every fleck of russet showing clear.
My instep arch not only keeps the ache,
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.

And I keep hearing from the cellar bin
The rumbling sound
Of load on load of apples coming in.
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all
That struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth.
One can see what will trouble
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep.
“STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING”

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound’s the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
“THE ROAD NOT TAKEN”

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
"OUT, OUT—"

The buzz saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behing the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside him in her apron
To tell them "Supper." At the word, the saw,
As if it meant to prove saws know what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy's hand, or seemed to leap -
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all -
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart -
He saw all was spoiled. "Don't let him cut my hand off -
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!"
So. The hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether:
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then - the watcher at his pulse took a fright.
No one believed. They listened to his heart.
Little - less - nothing! - and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.
“MENDING WALL”

Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
‘Stay where you are until our backs are turned!’
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, ‘Good fences make good neighbors’.
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
‘Why do they make good neighbors? Isn’t it
Where there are cows?’
But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I’d ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,
That wants it down.’ I could say ‘Elves’ to him,
But it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me~
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father’s saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, “Good fences make good neighbors.”
Edgar Lee Masters (1868-1950)

Edgar Lee Masters’ fame rests on the enduring impact of his masterpiece, *Spoon River Anthology* (1915). A collection of short free-form poems that collectively describe the life of the fictional small town of Spoon River (named after the real Spoon River that ran near Masters’ home town, *Spoon River Anthology* includes two hundred and twelve separate characters, all providing two-hundred forty-four accounts of their lives and losses. Each following poem is an epitaph of a dead citizen, delivered by the dead themselves. They speak about the sorts of things one might expect: some recite their histories and turning points, others make observations of life from the outside, and petty ones complain of the treatment of their graves, while few tell how they really died. Speaking without reason to lie or fear the consequences, they construct a picture of life in their town that is shorn of façades. The interplay of various villagers — e.g. a bright and successful man crediting his parents for all he’s accomplished, and an old woman weeping because he is secretly her illegitimate child — forms a gripping, if not pretty, whole. The volume’s popularity and its then-controversial themes drew widespread attention to the Midwestern literary culture of which Masters was a product, ushering in the “Chicago Renaissance” led by Masters, Carl Sandburg, Theodore Dreiser; and Vachel Lindsay.

Born on August 23, 1868 to Emma J. Dexter and Hardin Wallace Masters in Garnett, Kansas, his father had briefly moved to set up a law practice. The family soon moved back to his paternal grandparents’ farm near Petersburg in Menard County, Illinois. In 1880 they moved to Lewistown, Illinois, where he attended high school and had his first publication in the *Chicago Daily News*. The culture around Lewistown, in addition to the town’s cemetery at Oak Hill, and the nearby Spoon River were the inspirations for many of his works, most notably *Spoon River Anthology*. Masters attended The Knox Academy from 1889–1890, a defunct preparatory program run by Knox College, but was forced to leave due to his family’s inability to finance his education.

After working in his father’s law office, he was admitted to the Illinois bar and moved to Chicago, where he established a law partnership with Kickham Scanlan in 1893. He married twice. In 1898, he married Helen M. Jenkins, the daughter of a lawyer in Chicago, and had three children. For several years, he shared a practice with Clarence Darrow, who later went on to fame as the lead defense attorney in the 1925 *Scopes Trial* and the 1924 trial of *Leopold and Loeb*, then dubbed the “Trial of the Century.” During his law partnership with Clarence Darrow, from 1903 to 1908, Masters defended the poor. In 1911, he started his own law firm, despite the three years of unrest (1908–1911) due to extramarital affairs and an argument with Darrow. Two of his children followed him with literary careers. His daughter Marcia pursued poetry, while his son, Hilary Masters became a novelist. Hilary and his half-brother Hardin wrote a memoir of their father.
Masters long harbored literary ambitions, but, early on in his writing career, published his poems anonymously under various pseudonyms to protect his reputation as a lawyer. With the 1915 publication of *Spoon River Anthology*, Masters became known as a leading poet of the Midwest. *Spoon River* is especially significant for popularizing **free verse**, a style innovated by **Walt Whitman** that had yet to be studied or practiced widely in the early Twentieth Century.

Masters died at a nursing home on March 5, 1950, in Melrose Park, Pennsylvania, aged 81. He is buried in Oakland cemetery in Petersburg, Illinois. His epitaph includes his poem, “To-morrow is My Birthday” from *Toward the Gulf* (1918):

> Good friends, let’s to the fields...
> After a little walk and by your pardon,
> I think I’ll sleep, there is no sweeter thing.
> Nor fate more blessed than to sleep.
> I am a dream out of a blessed sleep-
> Let’s walk, and hear the lark.
From Spoon River Anthology

“THE HILL”

Where are Elmer, Herman, Bert, Tom and Charley,
The weak of will, the strong of arm, the clown, the boozer; the fighter?
All, all are sleeping on the hill.
One passed in a fever,
One was burned in a mine,
One was killed in a brawl,
One died in a jail,
One fell from a bridge toiling for children and wife—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.
Where are Ella, Kate, Mag, Lizzie and Edith,
The tender heart, the simple soul, the loud, the proud, the happy one?—
All, all are sleeping on the hill.
One died in shameful child-birth,
One of a thwarted love,
One at the hands of a brute in a brothel,
One of a broken pride, in the search for heart’s desire;
One after life in far-away London and Paris
Was brought to her little space by Ella and Kate and Mag—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.
Where are Uncle Isaac and Aunt Emily,
And old Towny Kincaid and Sevigne Houghton,
And Major Walker who had talked
With venerable men of the revolution?—
All, all are sleeping on the hill.
They brought them dead sons from the war,
And daughters whom life had crushed,
And their children fatherless, crying—
All, all are sleeping, sleeping, sleeping on the hill.
Where is Old Fiddler Jones
Who played with life all his ninety years,
Braving the sleet with bared breast,
Drinking, rioting, thinking neither of wife nor kin,
Nor gold, nor love, nor heaven?
Lo! he babbles of the fish-frys of long ago,
Of the horse-races of long ago at Clary’s Grove,
Of what Abe Lincoln said
One time at Springfield.
“THE UNKNOWN”

Ye aspiring ones, listen to the story of the unknown
Who lies here with no stone to mark the place.
As a boy reckless and wanton,
Wandering with gun in hand through the forest
Near the mansion of Aaron Hatfield,
I shot a hawk perched on the top
Of a dead tree.
He fell with guttural cry
At my feet, his wing broken.
Then I put him in a cage
Where he lived many days cawing angrily at me
When I offered him food.
Daily I search the realms of Hades
For the soul of the hawk,
That I may offer him the friendship
Of one whom life wounded and caged.

“RICHARD BONE”

When I first came to Spoon River
I did not know whether what they told me
Was true or false.
They would bring me an epitaph
And stand around the shop while I worked
And say “He was so kind,” “He was wonderful,”
“She was the sweetest woman,” “He was a consistent Christian.”
And I chiseled for them whatever they wished,
All in ignorance of its truth.
But later, as I lived among the people here,
I knew how near to the life
Were the epitaphs that were ordered for them when they died.
But still I chiseled whatever they paid me to chisel
And made myself party to the false chronicles
Of the stones,
Even as the historian does who writes
Without knowing the truth,
Or because he is influenced to hide it.
After I got religion and steadied down
They gave me a job in the canning works,
And every morning I had to fill
The tank in the yard with gasoline,
That fed the blow-fires in the sheds
To heat the soldering irons.
And I mounted a rickety ladder to do it,
Carrying buckets full of the stuff.
One morning, as I stood there pouring,
The air grew still and seemed to heave,
And I shot up as the tank exploded,
And down I came with both legs broken,
And my eyes burned crisp as a couple of eggs.
For someone left a blow-fire going,
And something sucked the flame in the tank.
The Circuit Judge said whoever did it
Was a fellow-servant of mine, and so
Old Rhodes’ son didn’t have to pay me.
And I sat on the witness stand as blind
As Jack the Fiddler, saying over and over,
“I didn’t know him at all.”
“LUCINDA MATLOCK”

I went to the dances at Chandlerville,
And played snap-out at Winchester.
One time we changed partners,
Driving home in the midnight of middle June,
And then I found Davis.
We were married and lived together for seventy years,
Enjoying, working, raising the twelve children,
Eight of whom we lost
Ere I had reached the age of sixty.
I spun, I wove, I kept the house, I nursed the sick,
I made the garden, and for holiday
Rambled over the fields where sang the larks,
And by Spoon River gathering many a shell,
And many a flower and medicinal weed--
Shouting to the wooded hills, singing to the green valleys.
At ninety-six I had lived enough, that is all,
And passed to a sweet repose.
What is this I hear of sorrow and weariness,
Anger, discontent and drooping hopes?
Degenerate sons and daughters,
Life is too strong for you--
It takes life to love Life.
Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935)

Edwin Arlington Robinson won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry three times: in 1922 for his first Collected Poems, in 1925 for The Man Who Died Twice, and in 1928 for Tristram.

Robinson was born in Head Tide, Lincoln County, Maine, but his family moved to Gardiner, Maine, in 1870. He described his childhood in Maine as “stark and unhappy”: his parents, having wanted a girl, did not name him until he was six months old, when they visited a holiday resort; other vacationers decided that he should have a name, and selected a man from Arlington, Massachusetts to draw a name out of a hat. His brother Dr. Dean Robinson died of a drug overdose. His early difficulties led many of his poems to have a dark pessimism and his stories to deal with “an American dream gone awry”.

In late 1891, at the age of 21, Edwin entered Harvard University as a special student. He took classes on English, French, and Shakespeare, as well as one on Anglo-Saxon that he later dropped. His mission was not to get all A’s, as he wrote his friend Harry Smith, “B, and in that vicinity, is a very comfortable and safe place to hang.” His real desire was to get published in one of the Harvard literary journals. Within the first fortnight of being there, The Harvard Advocate published Robinson’s “Ballade of a Ship”. He was even invited to meet with the editors, but when he returned he complained to his friend Mowry Saben, “I sat there among them, unable to say a word.” Robinson’s literary career had false-started.

After Edwin’s first year at Harvard the family endured what they knew was coming. His father, Edward, had died. He was buried at the top of the street in Oak Grove Cemetery in a plot purchased for the family. In the fall Edwin returned to Harvard for a second year, but it was to be his last one as a student there. Though short, his stay in Cambridge included some of his most cherished experiences, and there he made his most lasting friendships. He wrote his friend Harry Smith on June 21, 1893:

I suppose this is the last letter I shall ever write you from Harvard. The thought seems a little queer, but it cannot be otherwise. Sometimes I try to imagine the state my mind would be in had I never come here, but I cannot. I feel that I have got comparatively little from my two years, but still, more than I could get in Gardiner if I lived a century.

Robinson had returned to Gardiner by mid-1893. He had plans to start writing seriously. In October he wrote his friend Gledhill:

Writing has been my dream ever since I was old enough to lay a plan for an air castle. Now for the first time I seem to have something like a favorable opportunity and this winter I shall make a beginning.
With his father gone, Edwin became the man of the household. He tried farming and developed a close relationship with his brother’s wife Emma Robinson, who after her husband Herman’s death moved back to Gardiner with her children. She rejected marriage proposals from Edwin twice, after which Edwin Robinson permanently left Gardiner. He moved to New York, where he led a precarious existence as an impoverished poet while cultivating friendships with other writers, artists, and would-be intellectuals. In 1896 he self-published his first book, *The Torrent and the Night Before*, paying 100 dollars for 500 copies. Robinson meant it as a surprise for his mother. Days before the copies arrived, Mary Palmer Robinson died of diphtheria.

His second volume, *The Children of the Night*, had a somewhat wider circulation. Its readers included President Theodore Roosevelt’s son Kermit, who recommended it to his father. Impressed by the poems and aware of Robinson’s straits, Roosevelt in 1905 secured the writer a job at the New York Customs Office. Robinson remained in the job until Roosevelt left office.

Gradually his literary successes began to mount. He won the Pulitzer Prize three times in the 1920s. During the last twenty years of his life he became a regular summer resident at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, where several women made him the object of their devoted attention, but he maintained a solitary life and never married.
"MINIVER CHEEvy"

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
    Grew lean while he assailed the seasons
He wept that he was ever born,
    And he had reasons.

Miniver loved the days of old
    When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
    Would send him dancing.

Miniver sighed for what was not,
    And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
    And Priam's neighbors.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown
    That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
    And Art, a vagrant.

Miniver loved the Medici,
    Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
    Could he have been one.

Miniver cursed the commonplace
    And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the medieval grace
    Of iron clothing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
    But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
    And thought about it.

Miniver Cheevy, born too late,
    Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
    And kept on drinking.
“RICHARD CORY”

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean-favoured and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
“Good Morning!” and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich, yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine -- we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked and waited for the light,
And went without the meat and cursed the bread,
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet in his head.

“MR. FLOOD’S PARTY”

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night
Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home, paused warily.
The road was his with not a native near;
And Eben, having leisure, said aloud,
For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear:

“Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird.” He raised up to the light
The jug that he had gone so far to fill,
And answered huskily: “Well, Mr. Flood,
Since you propose it, I believe I will.”
Alone, as if enduring to the end
A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn,
He stood there in the middle of the road
Like Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn.
Below him, in the town among the trees,
Where friends of other days had honored him,
A phantom salutation of the dead
Rang thinly till old Eben’s eyes were dim.

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again:

“Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this
In a long time; and many a change has come
To both of us, I fear, since last it was
We had a drop together. Welcome home!”
Convivially returning with himself,
Again he raised the jug up to the light;
And with an acquiescent quaver said:
“Well, Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.

“Only a very little, Mr. Flood --
For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do.”
So, for the time, apparently it did,
And Eben evidently thought so too;
For soon amid the silver loneliness
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,
Secure, with only two moons listening,
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang --

“For auld lang syne.” The weary throat gave out,
The last word wavered; and the song being done,
He raised again the jug regretfully
And shook his head, and was again alone.
There was not much that was ahead of him,
And there was nothing in the town below --
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago.
Historical Context: What is Modernism?

Modernism describes a series of reforming cultural movements in art and architecture, music, literature and the applied arts which emerged roughly in the period of 1884-1914. The term covers many political, cultural and artistic movements rooted in the changes in Western society at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Modernism is a trend of thought that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve, and reshape their environment, with the aid of scientific knowledge, technology and practical experimentation. Modernism encouraged the re-examination of every aspect of existence, from commerce to philosophy, with the goal of finding that which was ‘holding back’ progress, and replacing it with new, progressive and therefore better, ways of reaching the same end. The ordered, stable and inherently meaningful world view of the nineteenth century could not, wrote T.S. Eliot, accord with ‘the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.’.. rejecting nineteenth-century optimism, [modernists] presented a profoundly pessimistic picture of a culture in disarray.”

In essence, the Modernist movement argued that the new realities of the industrial and mechanized age were permanent and imminent, and that people should adapt their world view to accept that the new equaled the good, the true and the beautiful. Modern (quantum and relativistic) physics, modern (analytical and continental) philosophy and modern number theory in mathematics also date from this period. Modernism encompasses the works of thinkers who rebelled against nineteenth century academic and historicist traditions, believing the “traditional” forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life were becoming outdated; they directly confronted the new economic, social and political aspects of an emerging fully industrialized world.

The key historical catalysts for the rise of Modernism were the Industrial Revolution and World War I. The harsh realities of industrialism—polluted cities, inhumane living and labor conditions for the working poor, child labor, urbanization and the alienation of the working class (proletariat)—called into question the alleged progress of Enlightenment values. World War I, with its unprecedented carnage and destruction, seemed to be direct evidence that mankind was not improving in any measurable way, and that technology and industrialism had merely enabled man’s cruel, animal instincts to play out on a much larger scale. Loss of faith in Enlightenment values and religion led to the rising popularity of a movement that could be summarized in Ezra Pound’s famous phrase, “Make it New.” (adapted from Wikipedia)
Characteristics of Modernism

Modernism should be understood as a response to change.

Some characteristics of Modernist poetry (note that this is not a definitive list; nor does every Modernist poem demonstrate all—or even most—of these characteristics):

- Fragmentation and disconnection: poems often undergo sudden shifts in perspective, subject matter, or chronology, often with no connection or transition (stream of consciousness)
- Frequent quotations, allusions, and references to information outside the poem
- Divided self/detached speaker: The speaker does not have a unified sense of self, and the distinct “I” disappears
- An overall feeling of powerlessness and alienation
- A focus on language: the words themselves become the focus of the poem; modernist poets often used analytical, riddle-like language; description becomes secondary
- Difficult to understand
- Deals with subject matter that had traditionally been considered mundane or trivial
- The presentation of an individual consciousness against a panorama of the age
Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Ezra Pound is remembered by many people as the man who was charged with treason during World War II and who spent many years in a mental institution. This notoriety, acquired toward the end of his life, has tended to obscure Pound’s impact on American poetry. But his healthy influence is still apparent everywhere; the generations of poets who have come after him have confirmed it. They have kept alive a happier memory of a man whose career wavered between brilliance and episodic madness.

Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, and grew up in Pennsylvania. After graduating from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, he took the first steps toward a teaching career, first at the University of Pennsylvania and then at Wabash College in Indiana. Even as a young man, however, Pound was too unconventional in his thinking and behavior to fit into a conservative academic community.

In search of greater personal freedom and of contacts with European poets, Pound settled in London in 1908. There he became a leading spokesman for the new poetic movement known as Imagism. He also became a self-exiled critic of American life and torchbearer for any art that challenged the complacent middle class.

Pound—whose slogan was “Make it new!”—was a born teacher whose advice was sought by the most brilliant young writers of the period. T. S. Eliot acknowledged Pound’s valuable advice when he dedicated his great poem The Waste Land (1922) to Pound. For a time, Pound served as an unpaid secretary and mentor to the great Irish poet William Butler Yeats.

After World War I, Pound felt the need for even broader horizons than London offered him. He moved to Paris in 1920, the same year that he published Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, one of his most important poems. He spent time with artists from many countries whose innovations put them in the forefront of modernism. Pound also mingled with the American expatriate community—writers who had voluntarily left home to live and write in the headier atmosphere of France. These included Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, E. E. Cummings, and Archibald MacLeish.

In 1924, Pound moved to the town of Rapallo, Italy, overlooking the Tyrrhenian Sea. There he continued to write poetry and criticism. And now came a tragic turning point in Pound’s life. His interest in economics and social theory led him to support Benito Mussolini, the Fascist dictator of Italy.

When World War II broke out, Mussolini’s government allied itself with Hitler and became an enemy of the United States. Pound stayed in Italy, and in a terrible lapse of judgment, turned propagandist for Mussolini’s policies. In his radio broadcasts from Italy, Pound denounced the struggle of Great Britain, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union against Germany, Italy, and Japan. Some of these broadcasts were vicious with anti-Semitism.
When the American army advanced northward up the Italian peninsula in 1945, Pound, the notorious propagandist, was taken prisoner. He was confined to a cage on an airstrip near Pisa and eventually returned to the United States to be tried for treason. But psychiatrists judged him to be mentally incompetent, and the poet was committed to St. Elizabeth’s, a hospital for the criminally insane, in Washington, D.C.

Twelve years later, he was released through the intercession of poets Archibald MacLeish and Robert Frost, who argued that his literary contributions outweighed his disastrous lack of judgment and his notorious bigotry. Pound lived out the ten years left to him in Rapallo and in Venice. He was a sad old man who rarely spoke. In his rare interviews, he seemed to try to penetrate the meanings of his own life, though he remained assertive and opinionated about poetry, economics, and the state of the world to the end.

During these years of exile, a reporter once asked Pound where he was living. “In hell,” the old man answered. “Which hell?” the reporter asked. “Here,” said Pound, pressing his heart. “Here.”

When he died in Venice, Pound left behind a body of work extending from the delicate lyrics he wrote at the turn of the century to The Cantos, an enormous epic he did not complete until well over fifty years later. He also left a public record which still uncomfortably involves scholars and historians in that mystery known as “The Case of Ezra Pound.”

Pound, Modernism, and Imagism

Modernism called for changes in subject matter, in fictional styles, in poetic forms, and in attitudes. Pound and Eliot wanted to rid poetry of its nineteenth century “prettiness” and sentimentality. Imagism, a Modernist movement in European and American poetry, advocated the creation of hard, clear images, concisely written in everyday speech.

Ezra Pound tried to influence modern poetry to make the image the center of poetry (as opposed to theme and literary devices). With Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and others, Pound found the Imagist group. Their purpose was to sanction experimentation in verse form and to aim at new modes of perception. Pound wrote an essay, “A Few Don’ts for an Imagist,” which set forth these principles:

- Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective
- To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
- As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome
- To use the language of common speech, but always the exact word– not the almost exact one
• To create new rhythms; free verse was encouraged but not required
• Absolute freedom of subject matter

The imagists believed in poetry as an art of suggestion rather than statement. They saw poetry as an art of recreating states of mind and feeling, as opposed to reporting or confessing them. Eliot coined the term **objective correlative**, or a “set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula for that particular emotion.”
“IN A STATION OF THE METRO”

The Apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

- poem was originally 30 lines long, but Pound shortened it down to only 20 words.

- Overcome by emotion on the subway one day—this poem expresses that emotion

- Arguably the heart of the poem is not the first line, nor the second, but the mental process that links the two together: “In a poem of this sort,” as Pound explained, “one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.”

- The poem interweaves subjective impression with objective expression, presenting in miniature the controlling myth of Pound’s work: the discovery of light amid darkness, fertility amid waste, figured in the myth of Persephone in the Underworld.

- Pound’s definition of the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”
Whenever you approach an imagist poem, you should ask yourself: what complexities of intellect and emotion might be packed into this poem?

Ezra Pound on “In a Station of the Metro”
(from Gaudier-Brzeska, 1916)

Three years ago in Paris I got out of a “metro” train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to meworthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation...not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that - a “pattern,” or hardly a pattern, if by “pattern” you mean something with a “repeat” in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour. I do not mean that I was unfamiliar with the kindergarten stories about colours being like tones in music. I think that sort of thing is nonsense.
If you try to make notes permanently correspond with particular colours, it is like tying narrow meanings to symbols.

That evening, in the Rue Raynouard, I realized quite vividly that if I were a painter, or if I had, often, that kind of emotion, or even if I had the energy to get paints and brushes and keep at it, I might found a new school of painting that would speak only by arrangements in colour.

And so, when I came to read Kandinsky’s chapter on the language of form and colour, I found little that was new to me. I only felt that someone else understood what I understood, and had written it out very clearly. It seems quite natural to me that an artist should have just as much pleasure in an arrangement of planes or in a pattern of figures, as in painting portraits of fine ladies, or in portraying the Mother of God as the symbolists bid us.

When I find people ridiculing the new arts, or making fun of the clumsy odd terms that we use in trying to talk of them amongst ourselves; when they laugh at our talking about the “ice-block quality” in Picasso, I think it is only because they do not know what thought is like, and they are familiar only with argument and gibe and opinion. That is to say, they can only enjoy what they have been brought up to consider enjoyable, or what some essayist has talked about in mellifluous phrases. They think only “the shells of thought,” as de Gourmont calls them; the thoughts that have been already thought out by others.

Any mind that is worth calling a mind must have needs beyond the existing categories of language, just as a painter must have pigments or shades more numerous than the existing names of the colours.

Perhaps this is enough to explain the words in my “Vortex”: --

“Every concept, every emotion, presents itself to the vivid consciousness in some primary form. It belongs to the art of this form.”

That is to say, my experience in Paris should have gone into paint. If instead of colour I had perceived sound or planes in relation, I should have expressed it in music or in sculpture. Colour was, in that instance, the “primary pigment”; I mean that it was the first adequate equation that came into consciousness. The Vorticist uses the “primary pigment.” Vorticism is art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary application.

What I have said of one vorticist art can be transposed for another vorticist art. But let me go on then with my own branch of vorticism, about which I can probably speak with greater clarity. All poetic language is the language of exploration. Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The point of Imagism is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.
I once saw a small child go to an electric light switch and say, “Mamma, can I *open* the light?” She was using the age-old language of exploration, the language of art. It was a sort of metaphor, but she was not using it as ornamentation.

One is tired of ornamentations, they are all a trick, and any sharp person can learn them.

The Japanese have had the sense of exploration. They have understood the beauty of this sort of knowing. A Chinaman said long ago that if a man can’t say what he has to say in twelve lines he had better keep quiet. The Japanese have evolved the still shorter form of the *hokku*.

“The fallen blossom flies back to its branch:

A butterfly.”

That is the substance of a very well-known *hokku*. Victor Plarr tells me that once, when he was walking over snow with a Japanese naval officer, they came to a place where a cat had crossed the path, and the officer said, “Stop, I am making a poem.” Which poem was, roughly, as follows: --

“The footsteps of the cat upon the snow:

(are like) plum-blossoms.”

The words “are like” would not occur in the original, but I add them for clarity.

The “one image poem” is a form of super-position, that is to say, it is one idea set on top of another. I found it useful in getting out of the impasse in which I had been left by my metro emotion. I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work “of second intensity.” Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence: --

“The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals, on a wet, black bough.”

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought. In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.
While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,
You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me. I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

"The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter" is based on the first of Li Po's "Two Letters from Chang-Kan."
T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

At the time when he was regarded as America’s most eminent living poet, T.S. Eliot announced that he was an “Anglo-Catholic in religion, a royalist in politics, and a classicist in literature.” In 1927, Eliot gave up his American citizenship and became a subject of the King of England. The same year he was received into the Church of England. (By a kind of poetic justice, this loss to America was later to be made up for: W. H. Auden, the leading British poet of his time, became a naturalized American citizen in 1946.)

But residence in an adopted country does not necessarily change the philosophy or the style of a poet. Eliot continued to speak in a voice first heard in the Puritan pulpits of Massachusetts. And Auden retained a British sense of language unaffected by the in-roads of American speech.

T.S. Eliot’s family was rooted in New England, yet he was born in St. Louis, Missouri, where his father was the chancellor of Washington University. Eliot’s childhood awareness of his native city would show itself in his poetry, but only after he had moved far away from St. Louis. He graduated from Harvard and went on to postgraduate work at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Just before the outbreak of World War 1, Eliot took up residence in London, the city that would become his home for the rest of his life. There he worked for a time in a bank, suffered a nervous breakdown, married an emotionally troubled Englishwoman, and finally took up the business of literature. He became active as a publisher in the outstanding firm of Faber & Faber, and, on his own, edited The Criterion, a literary magazine. As a critic, he was responsible for reviving interest in many neglected poets, notably the seventeenth-century poet John Donne.

Long before he decided to live abroad permanently, Eliot had developed a taste for classical literature. He was as familiar with European and Eastern writings as he was with the masterpieces of English. But the most crucial influence upon his early work came from the late-nineteenth century French poets who, as a group, came to be known as the Symbolists. When he was nineteen, Eliot came upon a book by the British critic Arthur Symons entitled The Symbolist Movement in Literature. “I myself owe Mr. Symons a great debt,” wrote Eliot. “But for having read his book I should not … have heard of Laforgue and Rimbaud; I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine; and but for reading Verlaine, I should not have heard of Corbiere. So the Symons book is one of those which have affected the course of my life.”

The poets Eliot mentions were men of distinctly different talents. Yet they all believed in poetry as an art of suggestion rather than statement. They saw poetry as an art of recreating states of mind and feeling, as opposed to reporting or confessing them. These beliefs became the basis of Eliot’s own poetic methods. When people complained that this poetic method of suggestion was complex and difficult
to understand, Eliot retorted that poetry had to be complex to express the complexities of modern life. More or less ignoring the still undervalued contribution of Walt Whitman, Eliot and other American poets also believed that, divorced from British antecedents, they would once and for all bring the peculiar rhythms of their native speech into the mainstream of world literature. Eliot and these other poets are often referred to as Modernists.

Eliot had an austere view of poetic creativity; he disagreed with those who regarded a poem as a means of self-expression, as a source of comfort, or as a kind of spiritual pep talk. Practicing what he preached, Eliot startled his contemporaries in 1917 with “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady.” Then, in 1922, with the editorial advice and encouragement of Ezra Pound, Eliot published *The Waste Land*, a long work which would become the most significant poem of the early twentieth century. The poem was so influential that the word *wasteland* entered common usage from Eliot’s work. The word suggests a civilization that is spiritually empty and paralyzed by indecision and anxiety.

Assembled in the manner of a painter’s collage or a movie-maker’s montage, *The Waste Land* proved that it was possible to write an epic poem of classical scope in the space of 434 lines. Critics pored over the poem’s complex structure and its dense network of allusions to world literature, Oriental religion, and anthropology. A few years after *The Waste Land* appeared, Eliot published a series of notes identifying many of his key references. (He was dismayed to find that some of his more ardent admirers were more interested in the notes than in the poem itself.)

In 1925, Eliot published a kind of lyrical postscript to *The Waste Land* called *The Hollow Men*, which predicted in its somber conclusion that the world would not end with a bang but with a whimper. In *The Hollow Men*, Eliot repeats and expands some of the themes of his longer poem and arrives at that point of despair beyond which lie but two alternatives: renewal or annihilation.

For critics surveying Eliot’s career, it has become commonplace to say that, after the spiritual dead-end of *The Hollow Men*, Eliot chose hope over despair, and faith over the world-weary cynicism that marked his early years. But there is much evidence in his later poems to indicate that, for Eliot, hope and faith were not conscious choices. Instead, they were the consequences of a submission, even a surrender, to that “peace which passeth understanding” referred to in the last line of *The Waste Land*.

His later poems include *Ash Wednesday* (1930), with its deeply religious spiritual explorations, and *Four Quartets*, which contain the philosophical conclusions of a lifetime (though always tentative).

Eliot spent the remainder of his poetic career in an extended meditation upon the limits of individual will and the limitless power of faith in the presence of grace.
Cited for his work as “a trail-blazing pioneer of modern poetry,” Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. In the decades that followed, he came frequently to the United States to lecture and to read his poems, sometimes to audiences so large he had to appear in football stadiums. Some of those who fought to buy tickets on the fifty-yard line were probably unaware of the irony in all of this: that a man once regarded as the most difficult and obscure poet of his era had achieved the drawing power of a rock star.

Ezra Pound (who called Eliot “Possum”) wrote a few final words on the death of his old friend, ending with this passage: “Am I to write ‘about’ the poet Thomas Stearns Eliot? Or my friend ‘the Possum’? Let him rest in peace, I can only repeat, but with the urgency of fifty years ago: READ HIM.”

**Eliot’s Traditionalism**

Put simply, because of the rise of the middle class, T.S. Eliot and Pound both feared the dilution of high culture and began to write poetry that challenged readers to educate themselves so that they would better understand their culture and thereby cope with the collective alienation in western society that arose after World War I. They wrote poems with the following qualities:

- Sudden shifts in perspective (stream of consciousness was a popular point of view)
- Unacknowledged quotations in different languages
- The presentation of an individual consciousness against a panorama of the age
- Allusions to world literature, Oriental religion, and anthropology

Eliot’s “The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock” and “The Wasteland” were two of Eliot’s early poems that set the tone and subject for many modernist poets.
“THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK”

S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,
Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question....
Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--
(They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”)
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin--
(They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”)
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

For I have known them all already, known them all:
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all--
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all--
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
(But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!)
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.
And should I then presume?
And how should I begin?
Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows?

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep ... tired ... or it malingers.
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald)
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet--and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"--
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,
After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts
that trail along the floor--
And this, and so much more?--
It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while If one, settling a
pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?
I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.
I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves
Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.
“THE HOLLOW MEN”

MISTAH KURTZ -- HE DEAD.
A penny for the Old Guy

I

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats’ feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death’s other Kingdom
Remember us--if at all--not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death’s dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are
In the wind’s singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death’s dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat’s coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer--

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man’s hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this
In death’s other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.

IV

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
and avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death’s twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

V

Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o’clock in the morning.

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception
And the creation
Between the emotion
And the response
Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
and the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

For thine is
Life is
For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.
In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to “the tradition” or to “a tradition”; at most, we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of So-and-so is “traditional” or even “too traditional.” Seldom, perhaps, does the word appear except in a phrase of censure. If otherwise, it is vaguely approbative, with the implication, as to the work approved, of some pleasing archaeological reconstruction. You can hardly make the word agreeable to English ears without this comfortable reference to the reassuring science of archaeology.

Certainly the word is not likely to appear in our appreciations of living or dead writers. Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius. We know, or think we know, from the enormous mass of critical writing that has appeared in the French language the critical method or habit of the French; we only conclude (we are such unconscious people) that the French are “more critical” than we, and sometimes even plume ourselves a little with the fact, as if the French were the less spontaneous. Perhaps they are; but we might remind ourselves that criticism is as inevitable as breathing, and that we should be none the worse for articulating what passes in our minds when we read a book and feel an emotion about it, for criticizing our own minds in their work of criticism. One of the facts that might come to light in this process is our tendency to insist, when we praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else. In these aspects or parts of his work we pretend to find what is individual, what is the peculiar essence of the man. We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet’s difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity.

Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, “tradition” should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour: It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole
of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of
his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.
This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and
of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And
it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in
time, of his contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his
appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You
cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the
dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The ne-
cessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens
when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all
the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order
among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really
new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work
arrives; for order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing
order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of
each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between
the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of Eu-
ropean, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be
altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet
who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.

In a peculiar sense he will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the
standards of the past. I say judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as
good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons
of dead critics. It is a judgment, a comparison, in which two things are measured by
each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at
all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not
quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of
its value—a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we
are none of us infallible judges of conformity. We say: it appears to conform, and is
perhaps individual, or it appears individual, and may conform; but we are hardly
likely to find that it is one and not the other.

To proceed to a more intelligible exposition of the relation of the poet to the past:
he can neither take the past as a lump, an indiscriminate bolus, nor can he form him-
self wholly on one or two private admirations, nor can he form himself wholly upon
one preferred period. The first course is inadmissible, the second is an important
experience of youth, and the third is a pleasant and highly desirable supplement.
The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow
invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of
the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite
the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own coun-
try—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own pri-
vate mind—is a mind which changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.

Some one said: “The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.” Precisely, and they are that which we know.

I am alive to a usual objection to what is clearly part of my programme for the métier of poetry. The objection is that the doctrine requires a ridiculous amount of erudition (pedantry), a claim which can be rejected by appeal to the lives of poets in any pantheon. It will even be affirmed that much learning deadens or perverts poetic sensibility. While, however, we persist in believing that a poet ought to know as much as will not encroach upon his necessary receptivity and necessary laziness, it is not desirable to confine knowledge to whatever can be put into a useful shape for examinations, drawing-rooms, or the still more pretentious modes of publicity. Some can absorb knowledge, the more tardy must sweat for it. Shakespeare acquired more essential history from Plutarch than most men could from the whole British Museum. What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past and that he should continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career.

What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science. I shall, therefore, invite you to consider, as a suggestive analogy, the action which takes place when a bit of finely filiated platinum is introduced into a chamber containing oxygen and sulphur dioxide.

II

Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry. If we attend to the confused cries of the newspaper critics and the susurrus of popular repetition that follows, we shall hear the names of poets in great numbers; if we seek not Blue-book knowledge but the enjoyment of poetry, and ask for a poem, we shall seldom find it. In the last article I tried to point out the importance of the relation of the poem to other poems by other authors, and
suggested the conception of poetry as a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written. The other aspect of this Impersonal theory of poetry is the relation of the poem to its author. And I hinted, by an analogy, that the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one not precisely in any valuation of “personality,” not being necessarily more interesting, or having “more to say,” but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations.

The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.

The experience, you will notice, the elements which enter the presence of the transforming catalyst, are of two kinds: emotions and feelings. The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different in kind from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several; and various feelings, inhering for the writer in particular words or phrases or images, may be added to compose the final result. Or great poetry may be made without the direct use of any emotion whatever: composed out of feelings solely. Canto XV of the Inferno (Brunetto Latini) is a working up of the emotion evident in the situation; but the effect, though single as that of any work of art, is obtained by considerable complexity of detail. The last quatrain gives an image, a feeling attaching to an image, which “came,” which did not develop simply out of what precedes, but which was probably in suspension in the poet’s mind until the proper combination arrived for it to add itself to. The poet’s mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together.

If you compare several representative passages of the greatest poetry you see how great is the variety of types of combination, and also how completely any semi-ethical criterion of “sublimity” misses the mark. For it is not the “greatness,” the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts. The episode of Paolo and Francesca employs a definite emotion, but the intensity of the poetry is something quite different from whatever intensity in the supposed experience it may give the impression of. It is no more intense, furthermore, than Canto XXVI, the voyage of Ulysses, which has not the direct dependence upon an emotion. Great variety is possible in the process of transmutation of emotion: the murder of Agamemnon, or the agony of Othello, gives an artistic effect apparently closer to a
possible original than the scenes from Dante. In the *Agamemnon*, the artistic emotion approximates to the emotion of an actual spectator; in *Othello* to the emotion of the protagonist himself. But the difference between art and the event is always absolute; the combination which is the murder of Agamemnon is probably as complex as that which is the voyage of Ulysses. In either case there has been a fusion of elements. The ode of Keats contains a number of feelings which have nothing particular to do with the nightingale, but which the nightingale, partly, perhaps, because of its attractive name, and partly because of its reputation, served to bring together.

The point of view which I am struggling to attack is perhaps related to the metaphysical theory of the substantial unity of the soul: for my meaning is, that the poet has, not a “personality” to express, but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experiences combine in peculiar and unexpected ways. Impressions and experiences which are important for the man may take no place in the poetry, and those which become important in the poetry may play quite a negligible part in the man, the personality.

I will quote a passage which is unfamiliar enough to be regarded with fresh attention in the light—or darkness—of these observations:

And now methinks I could e’en chide myself
For doating on her beauty, though her death
Shall be revenged after no common action.
Does the silkworm expend her yellow labours
For thee? For thee does she undo herself?
Are lordships sold to maintain ladyships
For the poor benefit of a bewildering minute?
Why does yon fellow falsify highways,
And put his life between the judge’s lips,
To refine such a thing—keeps horse and men
To beat their valours for her?...

In this passage (as is evident if it is taken in its context) there is a combination of positive and negative emotions: an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it. This balance of contrasted emotion is in the dramatic situation to which the speech is pertinent, but that situation alone is inadequate to it. This is, so to speak, the structural emotion, provided by the drama. But the whole effect, the dominant tone, is due to the fact that a number of floating feelings, having an affinity to this emotion by no means superficially evident, have combined with it to give us a new art emotion.

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very com-
plex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that “emotion recollected in tranquility” is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquility. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not “recollected,” and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is “tranquil” only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him “personal.” Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

III

This essay proposes to halt at the frontier of metaphysics or mysticism, and confine itself to such practical conclusions as can be applied by the responsible person interested in poetry. To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim: for it would conduce to a juster estimation of actual poetry, good and bad. There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.
FEW critics have even admitted that *Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary. And Hamlet the character has had an especial temptation for that most dangerous type of critic: the critic with a mind which is naturally of the creative order, but which through some weakness in creative power exercises itself in criticism instead. These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization. Such a mind had Goethe, who made of Hamlet a Werther; and such had Coleridge, who made of Hamlet a Coleridge; and probably neither of these men in writing about Hamlet remembered that his first business was to study a work of art. The kind of criticism that Goethe and Coleridge produced, in writing of Hamlet, is the most misleading kind possible. For they both possessed unquestionable critical insight, and both make their critical aberrations the more plausible by the substitution—of their own Hamlet for Shakespeare’s—which their creative gift effects. We should be thankful that Walter Pater did not fix his attention on this play.

Two recent writers, Mr. J. M. Robertson and Professor Stoll of the University of Minnesota, have issued small books which can be praised for moving in the other direction. Mr. Stoll performs a service in recalling to our attention the labours of the critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, observing that they knew less about psychology than more recent Hamlet critics, but they were nearer in spirit to Shakespeare’s art; and as they insisted on the importance of the effect of the whole rather than on the importance of the leading character, they were nearer, in their old-fashioned way, to the secret of dramatic art in general.

*Qua* work of art, the work of art cannot be interpreted; there is nothing to interpret; we can only criticize it according to standards, in comparison to other works of art; and for “interpretation” the chief task is the presentation of relevant historical facts which the reader is not assumed to know. Mr. Robertson points out, very pertinently, how critics have failed in their “interpretation” of *Hamlet* by ignoring what ought to be very obvious: that *Hamlet* is a stratification, that it represents the efforts of a series of men, each making what he could out of the work of his predecessors. The *Hamlet* of Shakespeare will appear to us very differently if, instead of treating the whole action of the play as due to Shakespeare’s design, we perceive his *Hamlet* to be superposed upon much cruder material which persists even in the final form.

We know that there was an older play by Thomas Kyd, that extraordinary dramatic (if not poetic) genius who was in all probability the author of two plays so dissimilar as the *Spanish Tragedy* and *Arden of Feversham*; and what this play was like we can guess from three clues: from the *Spanish Tragedy* itself, from the tale of Belleforest upon which Kyd’s *Hamlet* must have been based, and from a version acted in Germany in Shakespeare’s lifetime which bears strong evidence of having been adapted from the earlier, not from the later, play. From these three sources it
is clear that in the earlier play the motive was a revenge-motive simply; that the action or delay is caused, as in the *Spanish Tragedy*, solely by the difficulty of assassinating a monarch surrounded by guards; and that the “madness” of Hamlet was feigned in order to escape suspicion, and successfully. In the final play of Shakespeare, on the other hand, there is a motive which is more important than that of revenge, and which explicitly “blunts” the latter; the delay in revenge is unexplained on grounds of necessity or expediency; and the effect of the “madness” is not to lull but to arouse the king’s suspicion. The alteration is not complete enough, however, to be convincing. Furthermore, there are verbal parallels so close to the *Spanish Tragedy* as to leave no doubt that in places Shakespeare was merely revising the text of Kyd. And finally there are unexplained scenes—the Polonius-Laertes and the Polonius-Reynaldo scenes—for which there is little excuse; these scenes are not in the verse style of Kyd, and not beyond doubt in the style of Shakespeare. These Mr. Robertson believes to be scenes in the original play of Kyd reworked by a third hand, perhaps Chapman, before Shakespeare touched the play. And he concludes, with very strong show of reason, that the original play of Kyd was, like certain other revenge plays, in two parts of five acts each. The upshot of Mr. Robertson’s examination is, we believe, irrefragable: that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, so far as it is Shakespeare’s, is a play dealing with the effect of a mother’s guilt upon her son, and that Shakespeare was unable to impose this motive successfully upon the “intractable” material of the old play.

Of the intractability there can be no doubt. So far from being Shakespeare’s masterpiece, the play is most certainly an artistic failure. In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed. The versification is variable. Lines like

> Look, the morn, in russet mantle clad, Walks o’er the dew of yon high eastern hill,

are of the Shakespeare of *Romeo and Juliet*. The lines in Act v. sc. ii.,

> Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting That would not let me sleep... Up from my cabin, My sea-gown scarf’d about me, in the dark Grop’d I to find out them: had my desire; Finger’d their packet;

are of his quite mature. Both workmanship and thought are in an unstable condition. We are surely justified in attributing the play, with that other profoundly interesting play of “intractable” material and astonishing versification, *Measure for Measure*, to a period of crisis, after which follow the tragic successes which culminate in *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* may be not as “interesting” as *Hamlet*, but it is, with *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare’s most assured artistic success. And probably more
people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the “Mona Lisa” of literature.

The grounds of *Hamlet’s* failure are not immediately obvious. Mr. Robertson is undoubtedly correct in concluding that the essential emotion of the play is the feeling of a son towards a guilty mother:

[Hamlet’s] tone is that of one who has suffered tortures on the score of his mother’s degradation.... The guilt of a mother is an almost intolerable motive for drama, but it had to be maintained and emphasized to supply a psychological solution, or rather a hint of one.

This, however, is by no means the whole story. It is not merely the “guilt of a mother” that cannot be handled as Shakespeare handled the suspicion of Othello, the infatuation of Antony, or the pride of Coriolanus. The subject might conceivably have expanded into a tragedy like these, intelligible, self-complete, in the sunlight. *Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art. And when we search for this feeling, we find it, as in the sonnets, very difficult to localize. You cannot point to it in the speeches; indeed, if you examine the two famous soliloquies you see the versification of Shakespeare, but a content which might be claimed by another, perhaps by the author of the *Revenge of Bussy d’Ambois*, Act v. sc. i. We find Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* not in the action, not in any quotations that we might select, so much as in an unmistakable tone which is unmistakably not in the earlier play.

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. If you examine any of Shakespeare’s more successful tragedies, you will find this exact equivalence; you will find that the state of mind of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep has been communicated to you by a skilful accumulation of imagined sensory impressions; the words of Macbeth on hearing of his wife’s death strike us as if, given the sequence of events, these words were automatically released by the last event in the series. The artistic “inevitability” lies in this complete adequacy of the external to the emotion; and this is precisely what is deficient in *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* (the man) is dominated by an emotion which is inexpressible, because it is in excess of the facts as they appear. And the supposed identity of Hamlet with his author is genuine to this point: that Hamlet’s bafflement at the absence of objective equivalent to his feelings is a prolongation of the bafflement of his creator in the face of his artistic problem. *Hamlet* is up against the difficulty that his disgust is occasioned by his mother; but that his mother is not an adequate equivalent for it; his disgust envelops and exceeds her. It is thus a feeling which he cannot understand; he cannot objectify it, and it therefore remains to poison life and obstruct action. None of the possible actions can satisfy it; and nothing that Shakespeare can do with the plot
can express Hamlet for him. And it must be noticed that the very nature of the données of the problem precludes objective equivalence. To have heightened the criminality of Gertrude would have been to provide the formula for a totally different emotion in Hamlet; it is just because her character is so negative and insignificant that she arouses in Hamlet the feeling which she is incapable of representing.

The “madness” of Hamlet lay to Shakespeare’s hand; in the earlier play a simple ruse, and to the end, we may presume, understood as a ruse by the audience. For Shakespeare it is less than madness and more than feigned. The levity of Hamlet, his repetition of phrase, his puns, are not part of a deliberate plan of dissimulation, but a form of emotional relief. In the character Hamlet it is the buffoonery of an emotion which can find no outlet in action; in the dramatist it is the buffoonery of an emotion which he cannot express in art. The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study to pathologists. It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feeling to fit the business world; the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions. The Hamlet of Laforgue is an adolescent; the Hamlet of Shakespeare is not, he has not that explanation and excuse. We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know. We need a great many facts in his biography; and we should like to know whether, and when, and after or at the same time as what personal experience, he read Montaigne, II. xii., Apologie de Raimond Sebond. We should have, finally, to know something which is by hypothesis unknowable, for we assume it to be an experience which, in the manner indicated, exceeded the facts. We should have to understand things which Shakespeare did not understand himself.
William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

William Carlos Williams was born in Rutherford, New Jersey, where he lived and practiced medicine as a pediatrician and obstetrician for most of his adult life. While studying medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, he came in contact with Ezra Pound. Pound’s theories of Imagism had a considerable influence on Williams’s early verse, which was published in Poems (1909) and The Tempers (1913).

During the next two decades, however, Williams went on to evolve his own distinctive poetic style, which he called Objectivism. Williams defined the source of his poetry as “the local,” by which he meant a strict focus on the reality of individual life and its surroundings. Williams looked for a return to the barest essentials in poetry. In this respect, he opposed such contemporaries as Eliot and, to a certain extent, Pound himself, in their frequent use of allusions to art, history, religion, and foreign cultures. (Williams and Eliot, in fact, made no secret of their dislike for each other’s work.)

In addition to poetry, Williams produced novels, plays, essays, and several autobiographical memoirs. His influence on twentieth-century American poetry, especially since World War II, has been considerable, and he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1963. His masterpiece is the long epic Paterson, a poem which appeared in five volumes over a twelve-year span (1946-1958). In this partly autobiographical epic, a poet wanders the neighborhoods of Paterson, New Jersey, an industrial town near Williams’s home, and meditates on the variegated experiences of urban life.

In his insistence on local topics and colloquial speech, Williams allied himself with the kind of poetic revolution championed by the English Romantics a century earlier: William Wordsworth, in his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1798), had written that poetry should treat “incidents and situations from common life ... [in a] selection of language really spoken by men.”

Williams deliberately wrote in a spare, detached style about commonplace subjects, the very opposite of what many nineteenth-century American writers had thought of as “poetic material.” Using as his slogan “No ideas but in things,” Williams wrote of such sights and events as animals at the zoo, schoolgirls walking down a street, a piece of paper blowing down a street, or a raid on the refrigerator. As Marianne Moore, an admirer, pointed out, Williams’s topics are “American”-crowds at the movies, turkey nests, mushrooms among the fir trees, mist rising from the duck pond, the ball game.

Like Pound’s Imagists, Williams also was part of an organized group of writers and artists who called themselves ‘the Others.’ The group was designed to encourage collaboration between European émigré artists and the American Avant Garde and included famed photographer Man Ray and Robert Frost.
Well after the other Imagists had moved on to longer, more ambitious forms of the poem, Williams continued to write his volumes of stark minimalist verse. Like the photographs of his friend Alfred Steiglitz, which concentrated on minute details of large subjects—a single leaf, a window, the ridge of a hill—Williams’s poems focused with delicate precision upon the tiny authentic details of ordinary life, as in “Winter”:

Now the snow
lies on the ground
and more snow
is descending upon it--
Patches of red dirt
hold together
the old
snow patches
This in winter--
rosettes of
leather-green leaves
by the old fence
and bare trees
marking the sky--
This is winter
winter, winter
leather-green leaves
spearshaped
in the falling snow

Williams’s long use of the Imagist poetic may have no other cause than that he found it suitable to his imagination. But it may also have been a matter of necessity, since after marrying Flossie Herman in 1912 and beginning his medical practice in earnest, Williams had little free time in which to write. And he thought of himself as first a writer, only second as a provider and family man. In The Autobiography (1951), an informal and chatty memoir, he records how he would often pull up his typewriter between patients and dash out a poem, quite often in its first and only draft. The very brevity of the lyric, in other words, expressed the condition of the poet’s harried life as much as it staked out his unique position on the making of poetry. Like his friend Wallace Stevens, who lived a double life of poet and life insurance executive, Williams could not venture into longer and more ambitious forms of the poem until much later in life, when children were grown and a degree of financial security afforded him more leisure to write.
“THE RED WHEELBARROW”

so much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow

 glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

“THIS IS JUST TO SAY”

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

“A SORT OF SONG”

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.
-- through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.
“QUEEN ANNE’S LACE”

Her body is not so white as anemone petals nor so smooth - nor so remote a thing. It is a field of the wild carrot taking the field by force; the grass does not raise above it. Here is no question of whiteness, white as can be, with a purple mole at the center of each flower. Each flower is a hand’s span of her whiteness. Wherever his hand has lain there is a tiny purple blemish. Each part is a blossom under his touch to which the fibres of her being stem one by one, each to its end, until the whole field is a white desire, empty, a single stem, a cluster, flower by flower, a pious wish to whiteness gone over--or nothing.

“SPRING AND ALL”

By the road to the contagious hospital under the surge of the blue mottled clouds driven from the northeast—a cold wind. Beyond, the waste of broad, muddy fields brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen patches of standing water the scattering of tall trees

All along the road the reddish purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy stuff of bushes and small trees with dead, brown leaves under them leafless vines—

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches—

They enter the new world naked, cold, uncertain of all save that they enter. All about them the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

One by one objects are defined— It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

But now the stark dignity of entrance—Still, the profound change has come upon them: rooted they grip down and begin to awaken

“LANDSCAPE WITH THE FALL OF ICARUS”

According to Brueghel when Icarus fell it was spring

a farmer was ploughing his field the whole pageantry

of the year was awake tingling near

the edge of the sea concerned with itself

sweating in the sun that melted the wings’ wax

unsignificantly off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

“THE CROWD AT THE BALL GAME”

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them—

all the exciting detail
of the chase

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius—

all to no end save beauty
the eternal—

So in detail they, the crowd,
are beautiful

for this
to be warned against

saluted and defied—
It is alive, venomous

it smiles grimly
its words cut—

The flashy female with her
mother, gets it—

The Jew gets it straight— it
is deadly, terrifying—

It is the Inquisition, the
Revolution
It is beauty itself
that lives

day by day in them
idly—

This is
the power of their faces

It is summer, it is the solstice
the crowd is

cheering, the crowd is laughing
in detail

permanently, seriously
without thought
e.e. cummings (1894-1962)

E. E. Cummings (the initials stand for Edward Estlin) was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the son of a Unitarian minister. After a childhood spent within walking distance of Harvard, he attended the university at a time when aspiring writers were beginning to feel the impact of the two developments that would shape the character of American poetry for half a century. These new influences, sources of both inspiration and imitation, were French Symbolism and free verse. Like other poets, Cummings found in the Imagist manifesto guidelines that allowed him to break old rules and to try verbal experiments which would define his style.

If there is such a thing as “rugged individualism” in poetry, Cummings may be its prime example. All by himself, he altered conventional English syntax and made typography and the division of words part of the shape and meaning of a poem. And-in the age of celebration of the common man-he went against the grain by championing the virtues of elitism. “So far as I am concerned,” he wrote, “poetry and every other art was and is and forever will be strictly and distinctly a question of individuality ... poetry is being, not doing. If you wish to follow, even at a distance, the poet’s calling ... you’ve got to come out of the measurable doing universe into the immeasurable house of being.... Nobody else can be alive for you; nor can you be alive for anybody else.”

Graduating from college in the midst of World War I, Cummings became part of the conflict well before American soldiers appeared on European battlefields in 1917. He volunteered for an ambulance corps privately financed by Americans and staffed by young men like himself. Crossing to Bordeaux on a French troop ship threatened by German U-Boats, Cummings had hardly begun his duties when a French censor, intercepting one of his typographically odd letters, imprisoned him on suspicion of espionage. Released within three months, and little the worse for wear, Cummings drew upon the experience to produce his first important book of prose, The Enormous Room (1922).

After World War I, Cummings returned to France. He was one of the American literary expatriates who found in Paris the freedom and inspiration they felt were denied them by the restrictive Puritanism of their own country. During this period, Cummings refined the eccentric shifts of syntax and typography that would become his trademark. In 1923, he published his first collection of verse, Tulips and Chimneys, which was followed by & (1925), XLI Poems (1925), and is 5 (1926). His poetry is often marked by jubilant lyricism, as he celebrates love, nature’s beauty, and an almost Transcendentalist affirmation of the individual. He reserved his mischievous wit for the satire of the “unman,” by which he meant the unthinking, unfeeling temperament of urban “humans.”
Cummings split his time between an apartment in Greenwich Village in New York City and a house in Silver Lake, New Hampshire. He died still believing that “when skies are hanged and oceans drowned, / the single secret will still be man.”

**Cummings’ experimentation with style and form**

- linguistic risk-taking was measured to control sound—pacing, syllable stress, juncture—and sight
- strong visual characteristics through experiments with typography owed much to his parallel development as a painter
- absence of capital letters, irregular use of punctuation and parentheses, use of the ampersand sign (&); used enjambment (the continuation of a syntactic unit from one line or couplet of a poem to the next with no pause)
- his dismemberment of syntax derived from the advances in contemporary European visual art, particularly cubism

Example:
I will wade out
Srewolf gninrub ni depeets era shghi't ym llit

- trained his ear on American speech; attacked the inauthentic and the manipulative; twisted overused words into punning submission; mimicked familiar public slogans in despairing but vigorous poems

Example:

**“POEM, OR BEAUTY HURTS MR. VINAL”**

take it from me kiddo
believe me
my country, ‘tis of you, land of the Cluett Shirt Boston Garter and Spearmint Girl With The Wrigley Eyes of you land of the Arrow Ide and Earl & Wilson Collars of you i sing: land of Abraham Lincoln and Lydia E. Pinkham, land above all of Just Add Hot Water And Serve—from every B.V.D. Let freedom ring[.]
“in Just-“

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame baloonman
whistles far and wee
and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it’s
spring
when the world is puddle-wonderful
the queer
old baloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing
from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
it’s
spring
and
the
    goat-footed
baloonMan whistles
far
and
wee
“O sweet spontaneous”

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting
    fingers of
purient philosophers pinched
and
poked
thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy
    beauty .how
oftn have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and
buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
    (but
true
to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover
    thou answerest
them only with
        spring)

“anyone lived in a pretty how town”

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn’t he danced his did

Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn’t they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain
children guessed (but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then) they
said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april
wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men (both dong and ding)
summer autumn winter spring
reaped their sowing and went their came
sun moon stars rain
“somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond”

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond
any experience, your eyes have their silence:
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

your slightest look easily will unclose me
though i have closed myself as fingers,
you open always petal by petal myself as Spring opens
(touching skilfully, mysteriously) her first rose

or if your wish be to close me, i and
my life will shut very beautifully, suddenly,
as when the heart of this flower imagines
the snow carefully everywhere descending;

nothing which we are to perceive in this world equals
the power of your intense fragility: whose texture
compels me with the colour of its countries,
rendering death and forever with each breathing

(i do not know what it is about you that closes
and opens; only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes is deeper than all roses)
nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands
Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)

Like his friend William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens was unusual among major American Modernist poets in that he lived a quiet life largely dissociated from the world of academe and the circles of poets and artists based in and around major urban centers like London, Paris, and New York. Though he began writing poetry seriously while an undergraduate at Harvard, Stevens did not begin publishing his work until well after he had begun his career as a lawyer and insurance company executive; in fact, Stevens wrote most of his major poems after the age of 50.

The son of a prosperous lawyer, Stevens attended Harvard as a non-degree special student, after which he moved to New York City and briefly worked as a journalist. He then attended New York Law School, graduating in 1903. On a trip back to Reading in 1904 Stevens met Elsie Viola Kachel (1886–1963, aka Elsie Moll), a young woman who had worked as a saleswoman, milliner, and stenographer. After a long courtship, he married her in 1909 over the objections of his parents, who considered her lower-class. As The New York Times reported in an article in 2009, “Nobody from his family attended the wedding, and Stevens never again visited or spoke to his parents during his father’s lifetime”. A daughter, Holly, was born in 1924. She later edited her father’s letters and a collection of his poems.

In 1913, the Stevenses rented a New York City apartment from sculptor Adolph A. Weinman, who made a bust of Elsie. Her striking profile was later used on Weinman’s 1916-1945 Mercury dime design and possibly for the head of the Walking Liberty Half Dollar. In later years Elsie Stevens began to exhibit symptoms of mental illness and the marriage suffered as a result, but the Stevenses never divorced.

In 1916, Stevens joined the home office of Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and left New York City to live in Hartford, where he would remain the rest of his life. By 1934, he had been named vice-president of the company. After he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955, he was offered a faculty position at Harvard but declined since it would have required him to give up his vice-presidency of The Hartford.

Stevens, whose work was meditative and philosophical, is very much a poet of ideas. “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully,” he wrote. Concerning the relation between consciousness and the world, in Stevens’s work “imagination” is not equivalent to consciousness nor is “reality” equivalent to the world as it exists outside our minds. Reality is the product of the imagination as it shapes the world. Because it is constantly changing as we attempt to find imaginatively satisfying ways to perceive the world, reality is an activity, not a static object. We approach reality with a piecemeal understanding, putting together parts of the world in an attempt to make it seem coherent. To make sense of the world is to construct a worldview through an active exercise of the imagination. This is no dry, philosophical activity, but a passionate engagement in finding order and meaning.

(adapted from Wikipedia)
“THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD”

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VI

Icicles filled the long window
With barbaric glass.
The shadow of the blackbird
Crossed it, to and fro.
The mood
Traced in the shadow
An indecipherable cause.

VII

O thin men of Haddam,
Why do you imagine golden birds?
Do you not see how the blackbird
Walks around the feet
Of the women about you?

VIII

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

IX

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

X

At the sight of blackbirds
Flying in a green light,
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

XI

He rode over Connecticut
In a glass coach.
Once, a fear pierced him,
In that he mistook
The shadow of his equipage
For blackbirds.

XII

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.
XIII

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

“THE EMPEROR OF ICE-CREAM”

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers.
Let be be finale of seem.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
On which she embroidered fantails once
And spread it so as to cover her face.
If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

“THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST”

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
The song and water were not medleyed sound
Even if what she sang was what she heard,
Since what she sang was uttered word by word.
It may be that in all her phrases stirred
The grinding water and the gasping wind;
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.
Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end
And sound alone. But it was more than that,
More even than her voice, and ours, among
The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
Of sky and sea.

It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
She measured to the hour its solitude.
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
As the night descended, tilting in the air,
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

“ANECDOTE OF THE JAR”

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.
Unit XI - Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance

Historical Context: The Great Migration

The Great Migration was the movement of 2 million blacks out of the Southern United States to the Midwest, Northeast and West from 1910 to 1930. African Americans migrated to escape racism and prejudice in the South, as well as to seek jobs in industrial cities.

When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, less than eight percent of the African American population lived in the Northeastern or Midwestern United States. In 1900, about 90 percent of blacks still lived in Southern states. Between 1910 and 1930, the African American population grew by about 40% in Northern states, mostly in the major cities. Cities such as Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Cleveland had some of the biggest increases in the early part of the century. Because changes were concentrated in cities, urban tensions rose as African Americans and new or recent European immigrants, both groups chiefly from rural societies, competed for jobs and housing with the white ethnic working class. Tensions were often most severe between ethnic Irish, defending their recently gained positions and territory, and recent immigrants and blacks.

African Americans moved as individuals or small family groups. There was no government assistance, but often northern industries, such as the railroads, meat-packing and stockyards, recruited people. The primary factor for migration was the racial climate and widespread violence of lynching in the South. In the North, they could find better schools and adult men could vote (joined by women after 1920). Burgeoning industries meant there were job opportunities.

The Great Migration created the first large urban black communities in the North. It is conservatively estimated that 400,000 blacks left the South in 1916 through 1918 to take advantage of a labor shortage in the wake of the First World War. In 1910, the African-American population of Detroit was 6,000. The Great Migration, and immigration from eastern and southern Europe, turned the city into the country’s fourth-largest. By the start of the Great Depression in 1929, its African-American population had climbed to 120,000. In 1900, Chicago had a total population of 1,698,575. By 1920, the city had added more than 1 million residents. During the second wave of the Great Migration (1940–1960), the African-American population in the city grew from 278,000 to 813,000. The South Side of Chicago became and remains the black financial and cultural capital of America. Other northern and midwestern industrial cities, such as St. Louis, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Omaha and New York, also saw dramatic increases in their African-American populations. By the 1920s, New York’s Harlem became a center of black cultural life, also
The Harlem Renaissance

The term “Harlem Renaissance” was coined by philosopher, critic, and writer Alain Locke, a Harvard graduate and the first African-American Rhodes Scholar. In his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, Locke describes a flowering of artistic and intellectual ambition among descendants of African slaves, characterized primarily by an embrace of African cultural traditions carried over the Atlantic and originally suppressed by the dominant white culture. The new movements were bent on rejecting the notion that only European cultural, intellectual, and artistic traditions had any merit, and on celebrating the unique history and traditions of the descendants of slavery and reclaiming a legacy that was previously thought inferior and shameful.

Though northern cities were hardly free of racism and the new presence of African-American populations was frequently met with violence, the relative social and political freedom of the north enabled African-American communities to organize both politically and creatively. The Harlem Renaissance coincided with the founding of the National Urban League and the NAACP. Though united in the goal of advancing African-American opportunities, significant divisions existed on how best to pursue change. The three most significant intellectual figures of the period embodied the tensions: Booker T. Washington represented ‘assimilationism’ and ‘accommodationism’—i.e., adapting to European cultural norms and pursuing limited goals for advancement. Marcus Garvey advocated ‘Black Nationalism’ and pursued a return of slave descendants to the African continent. W.E.B. DuBois (founder of the NAACP and author of the seminal text *The Souls of Black Folk*) sought to fight segregation and racism and to celebrate the distinctly African-American culture, and, hence, became one of the major intellectual influences over the Harlem Renaissance.

Art, Music, Literature, and Politics

Unlike the 19th Century American Literary Renaissance of Hawthorne and Melville, Emerson and Thoreau, and Whitman and Dickinson, the Harlem Renaissance was not limited to one particular region, despite its eponymous association with the famous Manhattan neighborhood. Many significant Harlem Renaissance figures lived and worked outside New York, even as far as Paris, a popular destination for African-American artists. Nor was the Harlem Renaissance limited to literature. On the contrary: the movement’s most popular and enduring product was its music, which evolved over the course of the Harlem Renaissance from Dixie-
land jazz and Delta blues into the wildly popular swing jazz and jump blues of the 1930s and 40s and, by the 1950s, into avant garde, experimental BeBop Jazz, Electric Chicago blues, and, of course, Rock 'n' Roll. Significantly, the popularity of African-American music during the Harlem Renaissance drew white audiences into African-American clubs and dance halls, stimulating increased acceptance of African-American culture but also renewing still-simmering racial tensions.

Visual art was equally prominent, and was perhaps the genre in which the fraught tension between white patrons of Harlem Renaissance art and the artists who produced it became obvious. African-American artists came to depend on the support of wealthy whites like the heiress and socialite Charlotte Osgood Mason, who supported, among others, Aaron Douglass, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston, and real estate tycoon William E. Harmon, who created the Harmon Foundation to support African-American artists and the Harmon Foundation Award for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes, the recipients of which include Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. Harlem Renaissance artists often flinched against the expectations of their white patrons, who sometimes pressured them to create more distinctly 'primitive' or colloquial works.

Some Harlem Renaissance artists also felt pressure from the African-American community to create propaganda works designed to improve the public image of African-Americans, rather than to follow their own independent directions as artists. Publications such as the NAACP's Crisis magazine and the National Urban League's Opportunity were important venues for Harlem Renaissance writers but were nevertheless specifically edited to serve the socio-political agendas of their organizations rather than free expression.

Many Harlem Renaissance artists became involved in progressive political movements that challenged the status quo. Painter and muralist Aaron Douglass (whose most famous works include a series of murals at Fisk University in Nashville, where he founded the Art Department and served as a professor for 27 years) created innovative and provocative images that confronted viewers with the harsh realities of the slave trade, sometimes employing iconography associated with the Communist Party, such as red five-pointed stars. Poet Claude McKay became involved with Communism, infusing many of his poems with the violent imagery of revolution. Novelist Richard Wright was a party member for some years. Langston Hughes published essays in support of Communism and the Soviet Union, but never officially joined the party and distanced himself from his former Communist associations after being called to testify before the U.S. Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in 1953, during the height of McCarthyism. Even NAACP founder W.E.B. DuBois gravitated toward Communism in the latter part of his career, having become convinced that Marxist Revolution was the only way to end the oppression of African-Americans. In contrast, novelist and cultural anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston was an outspoken conservative and libertarian who resented government impositions on personal freedom, even those designed to benefit African-Americans. Hurston supported Republican candidates and was
openly critical of liberal causes such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s **New Deal** policies and the 1954 **Brown vs. Board of Education** decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

Hence, the poetry and prose of the Harlem Renaissance are infused both with the energy and aesthetic character of other African-American art forms and with the competing emotions and contradictions of African-American life in the early to mid 20th Century.
Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)

Paul Laurence Dunbar was the most significant African-American poet of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though technically not a participant in the Harlem Renaissance movement, Dunbar’s personal history reflects the same experiences and concerns that stimulated the Harlem Renaissance, and his aesthetic was a major influence on the poets of that movement, especially Langston Hughes. Dunbar’s work is known for its colorful language and use of dialect, and a conversational tone, with a brilliant rhetorical structure.

Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio to parents who had escaped from slavery in Kentucky; his father was a veteran of the American Civil War, having served in the 55th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment and the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry Regiment. His parents instilled in him a love of learning and history. He was the only African-American student during the years he attended Dayton’s Central High School, and he participated actively as a student. During high school, he was both the editor of the school newspaper and class president, as well as the president of the school literary society. He wrote his first poem at age 6 and gave his first public recital at age 9.

In 1890 Dunbar wrote and edited Dayton’s first weekly African-American newspaper, *The Tattler*, printed by the fledgling company of his high school acquaintances and lifelong friends Wilbur and Orville Wright. The paper lasted only 6 weeks. In 1892 Dunbar asked the Wrights to publish his dialect poems in book form, but the brothers did not have the facility to do so. Dunbar was directed to the United Brethren Publishing House who, in 1893, printed Dunbar’s first collection of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*.

The work attracted the attention of James Whitcomb Riley, the popular “Hoosier Poet.” Both Riley and Dunbar wrote poems in both standard English and dialect. His second book, *Majors and Minors* (1895) brought him national fame and the patronage of William Dean Howells, the novelist and critic and editor of *The Atlantic*. After Howells’ praise, his first two books were combined as *Lyrics of Lowly Life* and Dunbar started on a career of international literary fame. He moved to Washington, D.C., in the LeDroit Park neighborhood. While in Washington, he attended Howard University.

Dunbar wrote a dozen books of poetry, four books of short stories, five novels, and a play. He also wrote lyrics for *In Dahomey* - the first musical written and performed entirely by African-Americans to appear on Broadway in 1903; the musical comedy successfully toured England and America over a period of four years - one of the more successful theatrical productions of its time. His essays and poems were published widely in the leading journals of the day. His work appeared in *Harper’s Weekly*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *Denver Post*, *Current Literature* and a num-


ber of other publications. During his life, considerable emphasis was laid on the fact that Dunbar was of pure black descent.

Dunbar traveled to England in 1897 to recite his works on the London literary circuit. He met the brilliant young black composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who set some of his poems to music and who was influenced by Dunbar to use African and American Negro songs and tunes in future compositions.

Much of Dunbar's work was authored in conventional English, while some was rendered in **African-American dialect**. Dunbar remained always suspicious that there was something demeaning about the marketability of dialect poems:

> I am tired, so tired of dialect. I send out graceful little poems, suited for any of the magazines, but they are returned to me by editors who say, Dunbar, but we do not care for the language compositions.

After returning from England, Dunbar married short story writer Alice Ruth Moore in 1898. Dunbar took a job at the **Library of Congress** in Washington. In 1900, he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and moved to Colorado with his wife on the advice of his doctors. Dunbar and his wife separated in 1902, but they never divorced. Depression and declining health drove him to a dependence on alcohol, which further damaged his health. He moved back to Dayton to be with his mother in 1904. Dunbar died from tuberculosis on February 9, 1906, at age thirty-three. (adapted from Wikipedia)
“WE WEAR THE MASK”

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-wise,  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us, while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask!

“SYMPATHY”

I know what the caged bird feels, alas!  
When the sun is bright on the upland slopes;  
When the wind stirs soft through the springing grass,  
And the river flows like a stream of glass;  
When the first bird sings and the first bud opes,  
And the faint perfume from its chalice steals —  
I know what the caged bird feels!

I know why the caged bird beats his wing  
Till its blood is red on the cruel bars;  
For he must fly back to his perch and cling  
When he fain would be on the bough a-swing;  
And a pain still throbs in the old, old scars  
And they pulse again with a keener sting —  
I know why he beats his wing!

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,—  
When he beats his bars and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
But a prayer that he sends from his heart’s deep core,
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings —
I know why the caged bird sings!

**“AN ANTE BELLUM SERMON”**

We is gathahed hyeah, my brothahs,
In di howlin’ wildaness,
Fu’ to speak some words o comfo’t
to each othah in distress.
An’ we choose fu’ ouah subjic’
Dis—we’ll ‘splain it by an’ by;
“An’ de Lawd said, “Moses, Moses,”
An’ de man said, Hyeah am I.”

Now ole Pher’oh, down in Egypt
Was de wuss man evah bo’n,
An’ he had de Hebrew chillun
Down dah wukin’ in his co’n;
’Twell de Lawd got tiahed o’ his foolin’,
an’ sez he: “I’ll let him know’
Look hyeah, Moses, go tell Pher’oh
Fu’ to let dem chillun go.”

“An’ ef he refuse do it,
I will make him rue de houah,
fu’ I’ll empty down on Egypt
All de vials of my powah.”
Yes, he did—an’ Pher’oh’s ahmy
Wasn’t wurth a ha’f a dime;
Fu’ de Lawd will he’p his chillum,
You kin trust him evah time.

An’ you’ enemies may ‘sail you
In de back an’ de front;
But de Lawd is all aroun’ you,
Fu’ to ba’ de battle’s brunt.
Dey kin fo’ge yo’chains an’ shackles
F’om de mountains to de sea;
But de Lawd will sen’ some Moses
Fu’ to set his chilun free.

An’ de lan’ shall hyeah his thundah,
Lak a blas’ f’om Gab’el’s ho’n,
Fu’ de Lawd of hosts is mighty
When he girds his ahmor on.
But fu’ feah some one mistakes me,
I will pause right hyeah to say,
Dat I’m still a-preachin’ ancient,
I ain’t talkin’ bout to-day.

But I tell you, fellah christuns,
Things’ll happen mighty strange;
Now, de Lawd done dis fu’ Isrul,
An’ his ways don’t nevah change,
An’ de love he showed to Isrul
Wasn’t all on Isrul spent;
Now don’t run an’ tell yo’ mastahs
Dat I’s preachin’ discontent.

‘Cause I isn’t; I’se a-judgin’
Bible people by dier ac’s;
I’se a-givin’ you de Scriptuah,
I’se a-handin’ you de fac’s.
Cose ole Pher’or b’lieved in slav’ry,
But de Lawd he let him see,
Dat de people he put bref in,
Evah mothah’s son was free.

An’ dah’s othahs thinks lak Pher’or,
But dey calls de Scriptuah liar;
Fu’ de Bible says “a servant
Is worthy of his hire,”
An’ you cain’t git roun’ nor thoo dat,
An’ you cain’t git ovah it,
Fu’ whatevah place you git in,
Dis hyeah Bible too’ll fit.

So you see de Lawd’s intention,
Evah sence de worl’ began,
Was dat His almight freedom
Should belong to evah man,
But I think it would be bettah,
Ef I’d pause agin to say,
Dat I’m talkin’ ‘bout ouah freedom
In a Bibleistic way.
But de Moses is a-comin',
An' he's comin', suah and fas'
We kin hyeah his feet a-trompin',
We kin hyeah his trumpit blas'.
But I want to wa'n you people,
Don't you git too brigity;
An' don't you git to braggin'
"Bout dese things, you wait an' see.

But when Moses wif his powah
Comes an' sets us chillun free,
We will praise de gracious Mastah
Dat has gin us liberty;
An' we'll shout ouah halleluyahs,
On dat mighty reck'nin' day,
When we'se reco'nised ez citiz'
Huh uh! Chillun, let us pray!

“WHEN MALINDY SINGS”

G'WAY an' quit dat noise, Miss Lucy --
Put dat music book away;
What's de use to keep on tryin'?;
Ef you practise twell you're gray,
You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin'
Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to be big woods
When Malindy sings.

You ain't got de nachel o'gans
Fu' to make de sou'n' come right,
You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's
Fu' to make it sweet an' light.
Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,
An' I'm tellin' you fu' true,
When hit comes to raal right singin',
"T ain't no easy thing to do.

Easy 'nough fu' folks to hollah,
Lookin' at de lines an' dots,
When dey ain't no one kin sence it,
An' de chune comes in, in spots;
But fu' real melojous music,
Dat jes’ strikes yo’ hea’t and clings,
Jes’ you stan’ an’ listen wif me
When Malindy sings.

Ain’t you nevah hyeahd Malindy?
Blessed soul, tek up de cross!
Look hyeah, ain’t you jokin’, honey?
Well, you don’t know whut you los’.
Y’ ought to hyeah dat gal a-wa'blin’,
Robins, la’ks, an’ all dem things,
Heish dey moufs an’ hides dey faces
When Malindy sings.

Fiddlin’ man jes’ stop his fiddlin’,
Lay his fiddle on de she’f;
Mockin’-bird quit tryin’ to whistle,
‘Cause he jes’ so shamed hisse’f.
Folks a-playin’ on de banjo
Draps dey fingahs on de strings--
Bless yo’ soul--fu’hits to move em,
When Malindy sings.

She jes’ spreads huh mouf and hollahs,
“Come to Jesus,” twell you hyeah
Sinnahs’ tremblin’ steps and voices,
Timid-lak a-drawin’ neah;
Den she tu’ns to “Rock of Ages,”
Simply to de cross she clings,
An’ you fin’ yo’ teahs a-drappin’
When Malindy sings.

Who dat says dat humble praises
Wif de Master nevah counts?
Heish yo’ mouf, I hyeah dat music,
Ez hit rises up an’ mounts--
Floatin’ by de hills an’ valleys,
Way above dis buryin’ sod,
Ez hit makes its way in glory
To de very gates of God!

Oh, hit’s sweetah dan de music
Of an edicated band;
An’ hit’s dearah dan de battle’s
Song o’ triumph in de lan’.
It seems holier dan evenin’
   When de solemn chu’ch bell rings,
Ez I sit an’ ca’my listen
   While Malindy sings.

Towsah, stop dat ba’kin’, hyeah me!
   Mandy, mek dat chile keep still;
Don’t you hyeah de echoes callin’
   F’om de valley to de hill?
Let me listen, I can hyeah it,
   Th’oo de breesh of angels’ wings,
Sof’ an’ sweet, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,”
   Ez Malindy sings.

“THE HAUNTED OAK”

PRAY why are you so bare, so bare,
   Oh, bough of the old oak-tree;
And why, when I go through the shade you throw,
   Runs a shudder over me?

My leaves were green as the best, I trow,
   And sap ran free in my veins,
But I saw in the moonlight dim and weird
   A guiltless victim’s pains.

I bent me down to hear his sigh;
   I shook with his gurgling moan,
And I trembled sore when they rode away,
   And left him here alone.

They’d charged him with the old, old crime,
   And set him fast in jail:
Oh, why does the dog howl all night long,
   And why does the night wind wail?

He prayed his prayer and he swore his oath,
   And he raised his hand to the sky;
But the beat of hoofs smote on his ear,
   And the steady tread drew nigh.
Who is it rides by night, by night,
Over the moonlit road?
And what is the spur that keeps the pace,
What is the galling goad?

And now they beat at the prison door,
"Ho, keeper, do not stay!
We are friends of him whom you hold within,
And we fain would take him away

"From those who ride fast on our heels
With mind to do him wrong;
They have no care for his innocence,
And the rope they bear is long."

They have fooled the jailer with lying words,
They have fooled the man with lies;
The bolts unbar, the locks are drawn,
And the great door open flies.

Now they have taken him from the jail,
And hard and fast they ride,
And the leader laughs low down in his throat,
As they halt my trunk beside.

Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of black,
And the doctor one of white,
And the minister, with his oldest son,
Was curiously bedight.

Oh, foolish man, why weep you now?
‘Tis but a little space,
And the time will come when these shall dread
The mem'ry of your face.

I feel the rope against my bark,
And the weight of him in my grain,
I feel in the throe of his final woe
The touch of my own last pain.

And never more shall leaves come forth
On the bough that bears the ban;
I am burned with dread, I am dried and dead,
From the curse of a guiltless man.
And ever the judge rides by, rides by,
   And goes to hunt the deer,
And ever another rides his soul
   In the guise of a mortal fear.

And ever the man he rides me hard,
   And never a night stays he;
For I feel his curse as a haunted bough,
   On the trunk of a haunted tree.

“THE POET”

He sang of life, serenely sweet,
With, now and then, a deeper note.
From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
He voiced the world’s absorbing beat.

He sang of love when earth was young,
And Love, itself, was in his lays.
But ah, the world, it turned to praise
A jingle in a broken tongue.
Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

James Mercer Langston Hughes was and remains the most widely read and recognized poet of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes is largely credited with pioneering the genre known as Jazz Poetry, which strived to reflect the rhythms and stylistic concerns of the popular jazz and blues music then en vogue in Harlem. Though chiefly remembered as a poet, Hughes worked in almost every imaginable literary genre and won high praise for his fiction, memoirs, and essays as well as his poems. As the most popular African-American poet of his age, Hughes became a spokesperson for African-American culture. His poetry champions the diverse traditions of African-American culture and celebrates themes of racial pride.

Langston Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. Both of his parents descended from a prominent African-American family whose ancestors included leading members of Midwestern abolitionist societies and the first African-American to be elected to Congress from Virginia in 1888.

Hughes’ childhood, however, was itinerant: his parents moved frequently; eventually, his father divorced his mother and left the United States in hopes of finding a life free of racial persecution. After his father’s departure, Hughes’ mother was forced to travel seeking employment, leaving young Langston to be raised by his maternal grandmother, whose stories of her family’s activism instilled in Hughes an early sense of racial pride. After his mother remarried, Hughes resettled first in Lincoln, Illinois and then in Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended high school and began his writing career as editor of the school newspaper and yearbook and the official “class poet.” While in high school, Hughes began to write poetry influenced by Midwestern poet Carl Sandburg and fellow Ohio native Paul Laurence Dunbar, then the most celebrated black poet in American literature.

After graduating from high school, Hughes briefly lived with his father in Mexico, and then left to attend Columbia University in New York. Weary of suffering prejudice as one of a tiny minority of black students, Hughes abandoned his studies at Columbia and began a series of odd jobs including bell hop and merchant marine sailor. For a time, he lived abroad in England among other expatriate African-Americans. He returned in 1924 to live with his mother in Washington, D.C., where he gained a position as a personal assistant to African-American historian Carter G. Woodson. Hughes found that the job left him little time for writing, so he quit and took a position at a hotel, where he made the acquaintance of then-popular Midwestern poet Vachel Lindsay, who, upon reading some of his poems, championed Hughes to the literary community as a newly discovered black poet of great promise.

In 1926, Hughes enrolled at Lincoln University, where he was a classmate of future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. After graduating from Lincoln
in 1929, Hughes moved to Harlem, which remained his primary residence until his death.

By the time Hughes returned to Harlem, he had already published his first book of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926), which established him as one of the most exciting young writers in America. He was quickly absorbed into the literary and artistic culture of Harlem, and began to work closely alongside other significant figures in the Harlem Renaissance, especially writers Zora Neale Hurston and Countee Cullen and painters Richard Bruce Nugent and Aaron Douglass.

Though Hughes benefitted from the patronage of white supporters of African-American art such as Charlotte Osgood Mason, who supported Hughes for two years while he was writing his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and the Harmon Foundation, which awarded the novel with the Harmon Foundation Gold Medal for Distinguished Achievement, Hughes was openly critical of the perceived Eurocentrism and assimilationism of Harlem Renaissance mentors such as Alain Locke and W. E. B. DuBois. Hughes and his contemporaries tried to depict the “low-life” in their art, that is, the real lives of blacks in the lower social-economic strata. They criticized the divisions and prejudices based on skin color within the black community. Hughes wrote what would be considered the manifesto published in *The Nation* in 1926:

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”

The younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too. The tom-tom cries, and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.

Hughes stressed a racial consciousness and cultural nationalism devoid of self-hate that united people of African descent and Africa across the globe and encouraged pride in their diverse black folk culture and black aesthetic. Hughes was one of the few black writers of any consequence to champion racial consciousness as a source of inspiration for black artists. His African-American race consciousness and cultural nationalism would influence many foreign black writers. In addition to his example in social attitudes, Hughes had an important technical influence by his emphasis on folk and jazz rhythms as the basis of his poetry of racial pride. Hughes also remained an important mentor and advocate of emerging African-American writers, including Alice Walker, who went on to write the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Color Purple* (1982).
On May 22, 1967, Hughes died from complications after abdominal surgery, related to prostate cancer, at the age of 65. His ashes are interred beneath a floor medallion in the middle of the foyer leading to the auditorium named for him within the Arthur Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. The design on the floor covering his cremated remains is an African cosmogram titled Rivers. The title is taken from his poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Within the center of the cosmogram, above his ashes, is the line: “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” (adapted from Wikipedia)
"THE NEGRO SPEAKS OF RIVERS"

I’ve known rivers:
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I’ve known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

"THE WEARY BLUES"

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
    I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
    He did a lazy sway . . .
    He did a lazy sway . . .
To the tune o’ those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
    O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
    Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
    O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--
    “Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied--
I ain't happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

“JAZZONIA”

Oh, silver tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
A dancing girl whose eyes are bold
Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!
Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

Were Eve’s eyes
In the first garden
Just a bit too bold?
Was Cleopatra gorgeous
In a gown of gold?

Oh, shining tree!
Oh, silver rivers of the soul!

In a whirling cabaret
Six long-headed jazzers play.
“BOUND NO’TH BLUES”

Goin' down the road, Lawd,
Goin' down the road.
Down the road, Lawd,
Way,way down the road.
Got to find somebody
To help me carry this load.

Road’s in front o’ me,
Nothin’ to do but walk.
Road’s in front of me,
Walk...an’ walk...an’ walk.
I’d like to meet a good friend
To come along an’ talk.

Hates to be lonely,
Lawd, I hates to be sad.
Says I hates to be lonely,
Hates to be lonely an’ sad,
But ever friend you finds seems
Like they try to do you bad.

Road, road, road, O!
Road, road...road...road, road!
Road, road, road, O!
On the no’thern road.
These Mississippi towns ain’t
Fit fer a hoppin’ toad.
“I, TOO”

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I’ll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody’ll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.

Besides,
They’ll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.
James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938)

In addition to his lauded career as a poet and lyricist, James Weldon Johnson was a prominent novelist, folklorist, lawyer, diplomat, educator, and political activist. Born in Jacksonville, Florida to middle-class parents (his father was the headwaiter at a luxury beach hotel and resort; his mother a teacher), Johnson was sent first to preparatory school and then to college at Atlanta University, a historically black college founded in 1865. After graduating in 1894, Johnson returned to Jacksonville and began a career as a school administrator. While working as a teacher and principal, Johnson trained himself in law and passed the Florida Bar exam. He also began collaborating on songs with his brother, a musician. In 1900, Johnson wrote the lyrics for “Lift Every Voice and Sing” to be performed at a celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. The song gained quick popularity among African-Americans and, in 1919, was officially adopted by the NAACP as “The Negro National Anthem.”

In 1902, hoping to launch a songwriting career, Johnson moved with his brother to New York, where he became acquainted with the early leaders of the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson became a protégé of Booker T. Washington, who used his influence with President Theodore Roosevelt to gain Johnson an appointment as a U.S. Consul, first in Venezuela and later in Nicaragua. While in Latin America, Johnson began publishing poetry and completed a fictional memoir, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), written from the point of view of an African-American with skin light enough to pass as white.

In 1914, Johnson returned to New York, where he went to work for the NAACP and began pursuing a more active role as a poet and anthologist of Harlem Renaissance literature. He rose from the position of Field Secretary (the equivalent of a recruiting officer) to become the inter-racial NAACP’s first African-American Secretary (CEO). Simultaneously, he wrote numerous poems and essays and edited several anthologies of Harlem Renaissance literature. After resigning from the NAACP in 1930, Johnson rounded out his career as a Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at Fisk University in Nashville. He died in a car accident while vacationing in Maine in 1938.

Johnson’s poetry reflects his stern commitment to the cause of civil rights and a then-unusually blunt and direct engagement with troubling subject matter such as lynching and cultural taboos like rape and miscegenation. Johnson also differs notably from many of his fellow Harlem Renaissance poets in his preference for formal diction and traditional poetic technique. His poems are striking in their presentation of the contrast of elegant language with sometimes violent and stirring imagery. (Dr. Ed Tarkington)
“BROTHERS”

See! There he stands; not brave, but with an air
Of sullen stupor. Mark him well! Is he
Not more like brute than man? Look in his eye!
No light is there; none, save the glint that shines
In the now glaring, and now shifting orbs
Of some wild animal caught in the hunter’s trap.

How came this beast in human shape and form?
Speak, man! -- We call you man because you wear
His shape. -- How are you thus? Are you not from
That docile, child-like, tender-hearted race
Which we have known three centuries? Not from
That more than faithful race which through three wars
Fed our dear wives and nursed our helpless babes
Without a single breach of trust? Speak out!

I am, and am not.

Then who, why are you?

I am a thing not new, I am as old
As human nature. I am that which lurks,
Ready to spring whenever a bar is loosed;
The ancient trait which fights incessantly
Against restraint, balks at the upward climb;
The weight forever seeking to obey
The law of downward pull; and I am more:
The bitter fruit am I of planted seed;
The resultant, the inevitable end
Of evil forces and the powers of wrong.

Lessons in degradation, taught and learned,
The memories of cruel sights and deeds,
The pent-up bitterness, the unspent hate
Filtered through fifteen generations have
Sprung up and found in me sporadic life.
In me the muttered curse of dying men,
On me the stain of conquered women, and
Consuming me the fearful fires of lust,
Lit long ago, by other hands than mine.
In me the down-crushed spirit, the hurled-back prayers
Of wretches now long dead, -- their dire bequests, --
In me the echo of the stifled cry
Of children for their bartered mothers’ breasts.

I claim no race, no race claims me; I am
No more than human dregs; degenerate;
The monstrous offspring of the monster, Sin;
I am-just what I am . . . . The race that fed
Your wives and nursed your babes would do the same
To-day, but I --

Enough, the brute must die!
Quick! Chain him to that oak! It will resist
The fire much longer than this slender pine.
Now bring the fuel! Pile it ‘round him! Wait!
Pile not so fast or high! or we shall lose
The agony and terror in his face.
And now the torch! Good fuel that! the flames
Already leap head-high. Ha! hear that shriek!
And there’s another! Wilder than the first.
Fetch water! Water! Pour a little on
The fire, lest it should burn too fast. Hold so!
Now let it slowly blaze again. See there!
He squirms! He groans! His eyes bulge wildly out,
Searching around in vain appeal for help!
Another shriek, the last! Watch how the flesh
Grows crisp and hangs till, turned to ash, it sifts
Down through the coils of chain that hold erect
The ghastly frame against the bark-scorched tree.

Stop! to each man no more than one man’s share.
You take that bone, and you this tooth; the chain --
Let us divide its links; this skull, of course,
In fair division, to the leader comes.

And now his fiendish crime has been avenged;
Let us back to our wives and children. -- Say,
What did he mean by those last muttered words,
“Brothers in spirit, brothers in deed are we”?
"THE WHITE WITCH"

O brothers mine, take care! Take care!
The great white witch rides out to-night.
Trust not your prowess nor your strength,
Your only safety lies in flight;
For in her glance there is a snare,
And in her smile there is a blight.

The great white witch you have not seen?
Then, younger brothers mine, forsooth,
Like nursery children you have looked
For ancient hag and snaggle-tooth;
But no, not so; the witch appears
In all the glowing charms of youth.

Her lips are like carnations, red,
Her face like new-born lilies, fair;
Her eyes like ocean waters, blue,
She moves with subtle grace and air,
And all about her head there floats
The golden glory of her hair.

But though she always thus appears
In form of youth and mood of mirth,
Unnumbered centuries are hers,
The infant planets saw her birth;
The child of throbbing Life is she,
Twin sister to the greedy earth.

And back behind those smiling lips,
And down within those laughing eyes,
And underneath the soft caress
Of hand and voice and purring sighs,
The shadow of the panther lurks,
The spirit of the vampire lies.

For I have seen the great white witch,
And she has led me to her lair,
And I have kissed her red, red lips
And cruel face so white and fair;
Around me she has twined her arms,
And bound me with her yellow hair.
I felt those red lips burn and sear
My body like a living coal;
Obeyed the power of those eyes
As the needle trembles to the pole;
And did not care although I felt
The strength go ebbing from my soul.

Oh! she has seen your strong young limbs,
And heard your laughter loud and gay,
And in your voices she has caught
The echo of a far-off day,
When man was closer to the earth;
And she has marked you for her prey.

She feels the old Antaean strength
In you, the great dynamic beat
Of primal passions, and she sees
In you the last besieged retreat
Of love relentless, lusty, fierce,
Love pain-ecstatic, cruel-sweet.

O, brothers mine, take care! Take care!
The great white witch rides out to-night.
O, younger brothers mine, beware!
Look not upon her beauty bright;
For in her glance there is a snare,
And in her smile there is a blight.
“O BLACK AND UNKNOWN BARDs”

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel’s lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul, burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As “Steal away to Jesus”? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great “Jordan roll”? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot “swing low”? And who was he
That breathed that comforting, melodic sigh,
“Nobody knows de trouble I see”?

What merely living clod, what captive thing,
Could up toward God through all its darkness grope,
And find within its deadened heart to sing
These songs of sorrow, love and faith, and hope?
How did it catch that subtle undertone,
That note in music heard not with the ears?
How sound the elusive reed so seldom blown,
Which stirs the soul or melts the heart to tears.

Not that great German master in his dream
Of harmonies that thundered amongst the stars
At the creation, ever heard a theme
Nobler than “Go down, Moses.” Mark its bars
How like a mighty trumpet-call they stir
The blood. Such are the notes that men have sung
Going to valorous deeds; such tones there were
That helped make history when Time was young.

There is a wide, wide wonder in it all,
That from degraded rest and servile toil
The fiery spirit of the seer should call
These simple children of the sun and soil.
O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed,
You—you alone, of all the long, long line
Of those who've sung untaught, unknown, unnamed,
Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine.

You sang not deeds of heroes or of kings;
No chant of bloody war, no exulting paean
Of arms-won triumphs; but your humble strings
You touched in chord with music empyrean.
You sang far better than you knew; the songs
That for your listeners' hungry hearts sufficed
Still live;—but more than this to you belongs:
You sang a race from wood and stone to Christ.
“LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING”

Lift ev’ry voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list’ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast’ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.
Claude McKay (1889-1948)

One of the most prominent and highly regarded poets and novelists of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay is especially notable as the only major figure of the period who was both Afro-Caribbean rather than the descendent of American slaves and an immigrant to the United States: born in Jamaica, McKay first arrived in the U.S. in 1912 and did not become a naturalized U.S. citizen until 1940.

Upon traveling to the U.S. intent on attending Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, McKay was shocked by the intense racism he encountered when he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina. At Tuskegee, he disliked the “semi-military, machinelike existence there” and quickly left to study at Kansas State University. At Kansas State, he read W. E. B. Du Bois’ Souls of Black Folk, which had a major impact on him and stirred his political involvement. McKay published two poems in 1917 in Seven Arts under the Alias Eli Edwards while working as a waiter on the railways. In 1919 he met Crystal and Max Eastman, who produced The Liberator (where McKay would serve as Co-Executive Editor until 1922). It was here that he published one of his most famous poems, “If We Must Die,” during the “Red Summer,” a period of intense racial violence against black people in Anglo-American societies. This was among a page of his poetry which signaled the commencement of his life as a professional writer.

McKay became involved with a group of black radicals who were unhappy both with Marcus Garvey’s nationalism and the middle class reformist NAACP. They fought for black self-determination within the context of socialist revolution. Together they founded the semi-secret revolutionary organization, the African Blood Brotherhood. Hubert Harrison had asked McKay to write for Garvey’s Negro World, but only a few copies of the paper have survived from this period, none of which contain any articles by McKay. McKay soon left for London, England. While in London, McKay became involved with Workers’ Dreadnought and the Workers’ Socialist Federation, a Council Communist group active in the East End and which had a majority of women involved in it at all levels of the organization. He became a paid journalist for the paper; some people claim he was the first black journalist in Britain. He attended the Communist Unity Conference which established the Communist Party of Great Britain.

McKay was a substantial figure who emerged as one of the first and most militant voices of the Harlem Renaissance. He was regarded as one of the first major poets of the movement. Some of his most famous poems during that period were the militant If We Must Die (1919) and his self portrait Outcast, which was collected in Harlem Shadows (1922). McKay also wrote lyrics reminiscent of his Jamaican homeland and works about love and exile, such as the Tropics in New York and Harlem Dancer. The tone for many of his works have been described as race-conscious and revolutionary. He was an advocate for full civil liberties and racial solidarity.
McKay's pride in his culture and racial awareness helped stimulate expression in African American literacy. (adapted from Wikipedia)
“THE HARLEM DANCER”

Applauding youths laughed with young prostitutes
And watched her perfect, half-clothed body sway;
Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes
Blown by black players upon a picnic day.
She sang and danced on gracefully and calm,
The light gauze hanging loose about her form;
To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm
Grown lovelier for passing through a storm.
Upon her swarthy neck black, shiny curls
Profusely fell; and, tossing coins in praise,
The wine-flushed, bold-eyed boys, and even the girls,
Devoured her with their eager, passionate gaze;
But, looking at her falsely-smiling face
I knew her self was not in that strange place.

“FLAME HEART”

So much have I forgotten in ten years,
So much in ten brief years! I have forgot
What time the purple apples come to juice,
And what month brings the shy forget-me-not.
I have forgot the special, startling season
Of the pimento’s flowering and fruiting;
What time of year the ground doves brown the fields
And fill the noonday with their curious fluting.
I have forgotten much, but still remember
The poinsettia’s red, blood-red in warm December.

I still recall the honey-fever grass,
But cannot recollect the high days when
We rooted them out of the ping-wing path
To stop the mad bees in the rabbit pen.
I often try to think in what sweet month
The languid painted ladies used to dapple
The yellow by-road mazing from the main,
Sweet with the golden threads of the rose-apple.
I have forgotten--strange--but quite remember
The poinsettia’s red, blood-red in warm December.

What weeks, what months, what time of the mild year
We cheated school to have our fling at tops?
What days our wine-thrilled bodies pulsed with joy
Feasting upon blackberries in the copse?
Oh some I know! I have embalmed the days
Even the sacred moments when we played,
All innocent of passion, uncorrupt,
At noon and evening in the flame-heart’s shade.
We were so happy, happy, I remember,
Beneath the poinsettia’s red in warm December.

“AMERICA”

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth,
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
Giving me strength erect against her hate.
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time’s unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.
“THE TROPICS IN NEW YORK”

Bananas ripe and green, and ginger-root,
   Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grape fruit,
   Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories
   Of fruit-trees laden by low-singing rills,
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
   In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
   A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
   I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

“ENSLAVED”

Oh when I think of my long-suffering race,
For weary centuries despised, oppressed,
Enslaved and lynched, denied a human place
In the great life line of the Christian West;
And in the Black Land disinherited,
Robbed in the ancient country of its birth,
My heart grows sick with hate, becomes as lead,
For this my race that has no home on earth.
Then from the dark depths of my soul I cry
To the avenging angel to consume
The white man’s world of wonders utterly:
Let it be swallowed up in earth’s vast womb,
Or upward roll as sacrificial smoke
To liberate my people from its yoke!
“IF WE MUST DIE”

If we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die—oh, let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
Oh, Kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

McKay on “If We Must Die”

Among my new poems there was a sonnet entitled “If We Must Die.” It was the most recent of all. Great events had occurred between the time when I had first met Frank Harris and my meeting with Max Eastman. The World War had ended. But its end was a signal for the outbreak of little wars between labor and capital and, like a plague breaking out in sore places, between colored folk and white.

Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted. We did not separate from one another gaily to spend ourselves in speakeasies and gambling joints. We stuck together, some of us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters. We stayed in our quarters all through the dreary ominous nights, for we never knew what was going to happen.

It was during those days that the sonnet, “If We Must Die,” exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry. It was the only poem I ever read to the members of my crew. They were all agitated. Even the fourth waiter - who was the giddiest and most irresponsible of the lot, with all his motives and gestures colored by a strangely acute form of satyriasis - even he actually cried. One, who was a believer in the Marcus Garvey Back-to-Africa Movement, suggested that I should go to Liberty Hall, the headquarters of the organization, and read the poem. As I was not uplifted with his enthusiasm for the Garvey Movement, yet did not like to say so, I told him truthfully that I had no ambition to harangue a crowd.
That afternoon with Max Eastman was spent in a critical estimation of my verse. He decided to publish a page of it. When I departed I left some of the verses but took with others the “If We Must Die” sonnet. I wanted Frank Harris, whom I had not seen for many months, to see it. I had always remembered his criticism and rejection of “The Lynching,” and now I wanted to know if in “If We Must Die” I had “risen to the heights and stormed heaven,” as he had said I should.

At that time Pearson’s Magazine had its office in the same building as The Liberator. Frank Harris had me ushered in as soon as I was announced. “And where have you been and what doing all this time, my lad?” he roared, fixing me with a lowering look. All his high exhibitionism could not conceal the frank friendliness and deep kindliness that were the best of him. “Now what have you done to be called a real poet, to join the ranks of the elect? Have you written a GREAT poem yet?” I produced “If We Must Die.” He read it at once. Then he slapped his thigh and shouted, “Grand! Grand! You have done it. That is a great poem, authentic fire and blood; blood pouring from a bleeding heart. I shall be proud to publish it in Pearson’s.”

I said that I was sorry, but the poem had already been accepted by The Liberator: “What? It belongs to me,” Frank Harris thundered. “The Liberator be damned! I gave you the inspiration to write that sonnet and I want to have the credit of publishing it. In the next number of Pearson’s. I’ll play it up big.”

But I said I couldn’t do that; I would have to ask Max Eastman’s permission. “No, you won’t,” roared Frank Harris. “Do you think I am the kind of man to accept a favor from Max Eastman? Why did you bring your poem here, after showing it to him?” Because I wanted him to see what I had done, I said, because I valued his opinion so highly, perhaps more than any other critic’s, because his unforgettable words that memorable night of our first meeting were like a fire alive in me, because I so much desired to know if he considered what I had written as an achievement. I was excited and spoke quickly and earnestly. Frank Harris melted a little, for what I said had pleased him. But he was none the less angry.

Countee Cullen (1903-1946)

Among the major poets of the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen is perhaps most notable for a substantial body of work that avoids distinctly racial or political themes and utilizes traditional forms and poetic diction. Cullen considered poetry raceless, although some of his poems take on racial themes, such as “Simon the Cyrenian Speaks” and “The Black Christ.”

Countee Cullen was very secretive about his life. According to different sources, he was born in Louisville, Kentucky or Baltimore, Maryland. Cullen was possibly abandoned by his mother, and reared by a woman named Mrs. Porter, who was probably his paternal grandmother. Cullen once said that he was born in New York City, but may not have meant it literally. Porter brought young Countee to Harlem when he was nine. She died in 1918. At the age of 15, Cullen was adopted unofficially by the Reverend F.A. Cullen, minister of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, one of the largest congregations of Harlem. Later Reverend Cullen became the head of the Harlem chapter of National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). His real mother did not contact him until he became famous in the 1920s.

As a schoolboy, Cullen won a city-wide poetry contest and saw his winning stanzas widely reprinted. With the help of Reverend Cullen, he attended the prestigious De Witt Clinton High School in Manhattan. After graduating, he entered New York University, where his works attracted critical attention. Cullen’s first collection of poems, Color (1925), was published in the same year he graduated from NYU. Written in a careful, traditional style, the work celebrated black beauty and deplored the effects of racism. “Yet Do I Marvel,” about racial identity and injustice, showed the influence of the literary expression of William Wordsworth and William Blake, but its subject was far from the world of their Romantic sonnets. The poet accepts that there is God, and “God is good, well-meaning, kind,” but he finds a contradiction of his own plight in a racist society: he is black and a poet.

A brilliant student, Cullen graduated from New York University Phi Beta Kappa. He attended Harvard, earning his masters degree in 1926. He worked as assistant editor for Opportunity magazine, where his column, “The Dark Tower,” increased his literary reputation. Cullen’s Guggenheim Fellowship of 1928 enabled him to study and write abroad. He met Nina Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W.E.B. DuBois, the leading black intellectual of the Harlem Renaissance period. At that time Yolande was involved romantically with a popular band leader. Between the years 1928 and 1934, Cullen travelled back and forth between France and the United States.

By 1929 Cullen had published four volumes of poetry. The title poem of The Black Christ and Other Poems (1929) was criticized for the use of Christian religious imagery - Cullen compared the lynching of a black man to the crucifixion of Jesus.
Cullen married Yolanda DuBois in April 1928. The marriage was the Harlem social event of the decade, but the marriage did not fair well, and he divorced in 1930. In 1940, Cullen married Ida Mae Robertson, whom he had known for ten years.

In the late 1920s Cullen’s reputation as a poet waned. From 1934 until the end of his life, he taught English, French, and creative writing at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York City. In the last years of his life, Cullen wrote mostly for the theatre. He worked with fellow Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps to adapt his 1931 novel, *God Sends Sunday* into *St. Louis Woman* (1946, publ. 1971) for the musical stage. Its score was composed by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer, both white. The Broadway musical, set in poor black neighborhood in St. Louis, was criticized by black intellectuals for creating a negative image of black Americans. Cullen also translated the Greek tragedy *Medea* by Euripides, which was published in 1935 as *The Medea and Some Poems* with a collection of sonnets and short lyrics. (adapted from Wikipedia)
"TO JOHN KEATS, POET, AT SPRINGTIME"

I cannot hold my peace, John Keats;
There never was a spring like this;
It is an echo, that repeats
My last year’s song and next year’s bliss.
I know, in spite of all men say
Of Beauty, you have felt her most.
Yea, even in your grave her way
Is laid. Poor, troubled, lyric ghost,
Spring never was so fair and dear
As Beauty makes her seem this year.

I cannot hold my peace, John Keats,
I am as helpless in the toil
Of Spring as any lamb that bleats
To feel the solid earth recoil
Beneath his puny legs. Spring beats
her tocsin call to those who love her,
And lo! the dogwood petals cover
Her breast with drifts of snow, and sleek
White gulls fly screaming to her, and hover
About her shoulders, and kiss her cheek,
While white and purple lilacs muster
A strength that bears them to a cluster
Of color and odor; for her sake
All things that slept are now awake.
And you and I, shall we lie still,
John Keats, while Beauty summons us?
Somehow I feel your sensitive will
Is pulsing up some tremulous
Sap road of a maple tree, whose leaves
Grow music as they grow, since your
Wild voice is in them, a harp that grieves
For life that opens death’s dark door:

Though dust, your fingers still can push
The Vision Splendid to a birth,
Though now they work as grass in the hush
Of the night on the broad sweet page of the earth.

“John Keats is dead,” they say, but I
Who hear your full insistent cry
In bud and blossom, leaf and tree,
Know John Keats still writes poetry.
And while my head is earthward bowed
To read new life sprung from your shroud,
Folks seeing me must think it strange
That merely spring should so derange
My mind. They do not know that you,
John Keats, keep revel with me, too.

“FOR A POET”

I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
And laid them away in a box of gold;
Where long will cling the lips of the moth,
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth;
I hide no hate; I am not even wroth
Who found the earth’s breath so keen and cold;
I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
And laid them away in a box of gold.

“SIMON THE CYRENIAN SPEAKS”

He never spoke a word to me,
And yet He called my name;
He never gave a sign to me,
And yet I knew and came.
At first I said, “I will not bear
His cross upon my back;
He only seeks to place it there
Because my skin is black.”

But He was dying for a dream,
And He was very meek,
And in His eyes there shone a gleam
Men journey far to seek.

It was Himself my pity bought;
I did for Christ alone
What all of Rome could not have wrought
With bruise of lash or stone
“YET DO I MARVEL”

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind
And did He stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand.
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black, and bid him sing!

“FROM THE DARK TOWER”

We shall not always plant while others reap
The golden increment of bursting fruit,
Not always countenance, abject and mute,
That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap;
Not everlastingly while others sleep
Shall we beguile their limbs with mellow flute,
Not always bend to some more subtle brute;
We were not made to eternally weep.
The night whose sable breast relieves the stark,
White stars is no less lovely being dark,
And there are buds that cannot bloom at all
In light, but crumple, piteous, and fall;
So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds,
And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds
**Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)**

Zora Neale Hurston was by far the most visible and acclaimed female figure in Harlem Renaissance literary culture. She was also perhaps the most iconoclastic of all black writers of her era, male or female. Best known for her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston’s work pushed boundaries in its frank representation of sexual themes and unprecedented depiction of strong black female characters. Her achievements as an anthropologist, particularly of the culture of slave descendants in Haiti, were crucial in developing a more nuanced view of previously mysterious rituals and religious practices such as *Voudon* (’voo-doo’). She was also a political conservative who voted for Republican candidates, in contrast to most of her Harlem Renaissance colleagues, who supported the Democratic Party or even identified with left-wing political organizations affiliated with Communism. Once among the most celebrated figures of the Harlem Renaissance, she ended life in obscurity, working as a domestic maid in Fort Pierce, Florida, where she died and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Hurston was the fifth of eight children of John Hurston and Lucy Ann Hurston (née Potts). Her father was a Baptist preacher, tenant farmer, and carpenter, and her mother was a school teacher. She grew up in Eatonville, the first all-Black town to be incorporated in the United States. Her father later became mayor of the town, which Hurston would glorify in her stories as a place black Americans could live as they desired, independent of white society. Hurston describes the experience of growing up in Eatonville in her 1928 essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.”

In 1904, Hurston’s mother died and her father remarried almost immediately. Hurston’s father and new stepmother sent her away to boarding school in Jacksonville, Florida, but they eventually stopped paying her tuition and the school expelled her. She later worked as a maid to the lead singer in a traveling Gilbert & Sullivan theatrical company. In 1917, Hurston began attending Morgan Academy, the high school division of Morgan College in Baltimore, Maryland. It was at this time, and apparently to qualify for a free high-school education, that the 26-year-old Hurston began claiming 1901 as her date of birth. She graduated from Morgan Academy in 1918.

In 1918, Hurston began undergraduate studies at Howard University, where she became one of the earliest initiates of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority and co-founded The Hilltop, the University’s student newspaper. Hurston left Howard in 1924 and in 1925 was offered a scholarship to Barnard College, where she was the college’s sole black student. Hurston received her B.A. in anthropology in 1927, when she was 36. While she was at Barnard, she conducted ethnographic research with noted anthropologist Franz Boas of Columbia University. She also worked with Ruth Benedict as well as fellow anthropology student Margaret Mead. After graduating from Barnard, Hurston spent two years as a graduate student in anthropology.
When Hurston arrived in New York City in 1925, the Harlem Renaissance was at its peak, and she soon became one of the writers at its center. Shortly before she entered Barnard, Hurston’s short story “Spunk” was selected for *The New Negro*, a landmark anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays focusing on African and African American art and literature. In 1926, a group of young black writers including Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman produced a literary magazine called *Fire!!* that featured many of the young artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance. By the mid-1930s, Hurston had published several short stories and the critically acclaimed *Mules and Men* (1935), a groundbreaking work of “literary anthropology” documenting African American folklore. In 1930, she also collaborated with Langston Hughes on *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life in Three Acts*, a play that was never finished, although it was published posthumously in 1991.

In 1937, Hurston was awarded a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship to conduct ethnographic research in Jamaica and Haiti. *Tell My Horse* (1938) documents her account of her fieldwork studying African rituals in Jamaica and voudon rituals in Haiti. Hurston also translated her anthropological work into the performing arts, and her folk revue, *The Great Day* premiered at the John Golden Theatre in New York in 1932. Hurston’s first three novels were also published in the 1930s: *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), written during her fieldwork in Haiti and considered her masterwork. In the 1940s, Hurston’s work was published in such periodicals as *The American Mercury* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. Her last published novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, notable principally for its focus on white characters, was published in 1948.

Despite her early acclaim, Hurston’s work slid into obscurity for decades, for a number of cultural and political reasons. Many readers objected to the representation of African American dialect in Hurston’s novels, given the racially charged history of dialect fiction in American literature. Her stylistic choices in terms of dialogue were influenced by her academic experiences. Thinking like a folklorist, Hurston strove to represent speech patterns of the period which she documented through ethnographic research. For example, a character in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* expresses herself in this manner:

"Dat’s a big ole resurrection lie, Ned. Uh slew-foot, drag-leg lie at dat, and Ah dare yuh tuh hit me too. You know Ahm uh fightin’ dawg and mah hide is worth money. Hit me if you dare! Ah’ll wash yo’ tub uh ‘gator guts and dat quick."

Several of Hurston’s literary contemporaries criticized Hurston’s use of dialect as a caricature of African American culture rooted in a racist tradition. More recently, many critics have praised Hurston’s skillful use of idiomatic speech. In particular, a number of writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance were critical of Hurston’s later writings, on the basis that they did not agree with or further the position of the overall movement. One particular criticism came from Richard Wright in his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:
... The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is “quaint,” the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the “superior” race.

Hurston was a Republican who was generally sympathetic to the foreign policy non-interventionism of the Old Right and a fan of Booker T. Washington’s self-help politics. She disagreed with the philosophies (including Communism and the New Deal) supported by many of her colleagues in the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, who was in the 1930s a supporter of the Soviet Union and praised it in several of his poems. Despite much common ground with the Old Right in domestic and foreign policy, Hurston was not a social conservative. Her writings show skepticism toward traditional religion and affinity for feminist individualism.

Hurston opposed the Supreme Court ruling in the Brown v. Board of Education case of 1954. She felt that if separate schools were truly equal (and she believed that they were rapidly becoming so) educating black students in physical proximity to white students would not result in better education. In addition, she worried about the demise of black schools and black teachers as a way to pass on cultural tradition to future generations of African-Americans. She voiced this opposition in a letter, “Court Order Can’t Make the Races Mix,” that was published in the Orlando Sentinel in August 1955. Hurston had not reversed her long-time opposition to segregation. Rather, she feared that the Court’s ruling could become a precedent for an all-powerful federal government to undermine individual liberty on a broad range of issues in the future.

Hurston traveled extensively in the Caribbean and the American South and immersed herself in local cultural practices to conduct her anthropological research. In 1927, she married Herbert Sheen, a jazz musician and former classmate at Howard who would later become a physician, but the marriage ended in 1931. In 1939, while Hurston was working for the WPA, she married Albert Price, a 23-year-old fellow WPA employee, and 25 years her junior, but this marriage ended after only a few months. In later life, in addition to continuing her literary career, Hurston served on the faculty of North Carolina College for Negroes (now North Carolina Central University) in Durham, North Carolina. She also established, in 1934, a school of dramatic arts “based on pure Negro expression” at Bethune-Cookman University (at the time, Bethune-Cookman College) in Daytona Beach, FL. In 1956 Hurston was bestowed the Bethune-Cookman College Award for Education and Human Relations in recognition of her vast achievements, and the English Department at Bethune-Cookman College remains dedicated to preserving her cultural legacy.

In 1948, Hurston was falsely accused of molesting a ten-year-old boy, and although the case was dismissed after Hurston presented evidence that she was in Honduras when the crime supposedly occurred in the U.S., her personal life was seriously disrupted by the scandal. Hurston spent her last decade as a freelance
writer for magazines and newspapers. She worked in a library in Cape Canaveral, Florida, and as a substitute teacher and maid in Fort Pierce.

During a period of financial and medical difficulties, Hurston was forced to enter St. Lucie County Welfare Home, where she suffered a stroke and died of hypertensive heart disease. She was buried in an unmarked grave in the Garden of Heavenly Rest cemetery in Fort Pierce. In 1973 African-American novelist Alice Walker and literary scholar Charlotte Hunt found an unmarked grave in the general area where Hurston had been buried and decided to mark it as hers. In the March 1975 Ms. Magazine, Walker published “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” an article largely credited with reviving interest in Hurston’s work. The reemergence of Hurston’s work coincided with the emergence of authors such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Walker herself, whose works are centered on African American experiences and include, but do not necessarily focus upon, racial struggle.
HOW IT FEELS TO BE COLORED ME

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother’s side was not an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more venturesome would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gatepost. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn’t mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I’d wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: “Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin’?” Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably “go a piece of the way” with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first “welcome-to-our-state” Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me “speak pieces” and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop, only they didn’t know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody’s Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, a Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as in the mirror, I became a fast brown—warranted not to rub nor run.

But I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. I do not mind at all. I do not belong to the sobbing
school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all but about it. Even in the helter-skelter skirmish that is my life, I have seen that the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more of less. No, I do not weep at the world--I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.

Someone is always at my elbow reminding me that I am the granddaughter of slaves. It fails to register depression with me. Slavery is sixty years in the past. The operation was successful and the patient is doing well, thank you. The terrible struggle that made me an American out of a potential slave said “On the line!” The Reconstruction said “Get set!” and the generation before said “Go!” I am off to a flying start and I must not halt in the stretch to look behind and weep. Slavery is the price I paid for civilization, and the choice was not with me. It is a bully adventure and worth all that I have paid through my ancestors for it. No one on earth ever had a greater chance for glory. The world to be won and nothing to be lost. It is thrilling to think--to know that for any act of mine, I shall get twice as much praise or twice as much blame. It is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.

The position of my white neighbor is much more difficult. No brown specter pulls up a chair beside me when I sit down to eat. No dark ghost thrusts its leg against mine in bed. The game of keeping what one has is never so exciting as the game of getting.

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.

For instance at Barnard. “Beside the waters of the Hudson” I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

Sometimes it is the other way around. A white person is set down in our midst, but the contrast is just as sharp for me. For instance, when I sit in the drafty basement that is The New World Cabaret with a white person, my color comes. We enter chatting about any little nothing that we have in common and are seated by the jazz waiters. In the abrupt way that jazz orchestras have, this one plunges into a number. It loses no time in circumlocutions, but gets right down to business. It constricts the thorax and splits the heart with its tempo and narcotic harmonies. This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen--follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeeoww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something-
-give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.

“Good music they have here,” he remarks, drumming the table with his fingertips.

Music. The great blobs of purple and red emotion have not touched him. He has only heard what I felt. He is far away and I see him but dimly across the ocean and the continent that have fallen between us. He is so pale with his whiteness then and I am so colored.

At certain times I have no race, I am me. When I set my hat at a certain angle and saunter down Seventh Avenue, Harlem City, feeling as snooty as the lions in front of the Forty-Second Street Library, for instance. So far as my feelings are concerned, Peggy Hopkins Joyce on the Boule Mich with her gorgeous raiment, stately carriage, knees knocking together in a most aristocratic manner, has nothing on me. The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.

I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries. My country, right or wrong.

Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company? It’s beyond me.

But in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small, things priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass, lengths of string, a key to a door long since crumbled away, a rusty knife-blade, old shoes saved for a road that never was and never will be, a nail bent under the weight of things too heavy for any nail, a dried flower or two still a little fragrant. In your hand is the brown bag. On the ground before you is the jumble it held--so much like the jumble in the bags, could they be emptied, that all might be dumped in a single heap and the bags refilled without altering the content of any greatly. A bit of colored glass more or less would not matter. Perhaps that is how the Great Stuffer of Bags filled them in the first place--who knows?
Appendix A - Prosody & Poetic Technique

Rhythm & Meter

Poetry is distinguished not only by intensity of meaning and significance but also by rhythm. Originally, poems were meant to be chanted or sung, sometimes with dance accompaniment. Rhythm can be created in many ways. Each poem is a unique combination of techniques. Some of these are:

**Rhyme** (not only at the end of lines, but also within and between)
**Line Length** (enjambed or end-stopped)
**Caesura** (pauses or spaces within lines)
**Repetition of vowel or consonant sounds** (assonance & consonance)
**Repetition of words or phrases** (cadence & anaphora)
**Pattern of accented and unaccented syllables**

The aspect of rhythm which consists of syllables, stress, and length of lines is termed **Meter** (measure). The meter of a poem is usually classified in one of four ways:

1. **Accentual-Syllabic**: traditional meter based on pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.
2. **Syllabic**: number of syllables in each line
3. **Accentual**: number of stressed syllables in each line (often in combination with repetition of vowels or consonants)
4. **Free Verse**: This term means that the poem is free of traditional rhythm, not free of rhythm. The free-verse poem must have a unique rhythm, often based on a pattern of ideas or a combination of traditional forms.

**Scansion**

The process of determining the meter of a poem is called Scansion.

To ‘scan’ a poem, follow these steps:

1. Read the poem with natural expression
2. Mark stressed and unstressed syllables in several lines
3. Look for patterns and stresses
4. Count syllables in each line for several lines
5. Look for consistent patterns of syllables
6. Decide the type of rhythm (syllabic, accentual-syllabic, etc.)

**Determining the Rhythm of a Poem**

After deciding on the type of meter, note the presence or absence of the following:

Rhyme
Repeated vowel or consonant sounds (alliteration, assonance)
Repeated words or phrases
Spacing of words or lines
Particular sounds of words (including onomatopoeia)
Any other feature which affects the sound of the poem

**Poetic Feet or Scansion**

Scansions pertains to accentual-syllabic meter. In order to describe the meter of an accentual-syllabic poem, you must have a working definition of the most common types of poetic feet. These are based on the most frequent patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables found in English speech and writing.

**Types of Poetic Feet**

1. **Iambus (Iambic Foot):** two syllables, unstressed followed by stress
   Example: return, review, about
   Iambic line: “I like to see it lap the miles
   And lick the valleys up.”

2. **Trochee (Trochaic Foot):** two syllables, stress followed by unstressed.
   Example: any, future, never
   Trochaic line: “Tiger, tiger, burning bright . . .”

3. **Anapest (Anapestic Foot):** three syllables, stress on the last.
   Example: “In the still of the night.”

4. **Dactyl (Dactylic Foot):** one stress followed by two unstressed syllables.
   Example: elephant, anyone, beautiful
   Dactylic line: “Down in the valley so beautiful.”

5. **Spondee:** two syllables, both stressed
   Example: campground, picnic, white boy
   Note: A spondee line is impossible, or nearly so.
6. **Pyrrhic Foot**: two unstressed syllables.  
Note: a pyrrhic line is impossible, or nearly so.

**Effects of Feet**

1. **Iambic line** – close to rhythm of speech; therefore the most common foot.  
2. **Trochaic line** – somewhat heavier than normal speech; emphatic.  
3. **Anaplectic or dactylic line** – waltzing rhythm; fast  
4. **Spondee** – very strong emphasis; heavy, plodding, slow.  
5. **Pyrrhic** – very fast and very unemphatic; weak.  

Regular and Substituted Feet

The most commonly repeated foot in the poem is the **regular foot** and determines the meter; however, most poets vary the meter from time to time. These variations are called **substitutions**. Spondee and Pyrrhic feet can only be used as substitutions. An incomplete foot is called an **imperfect foot**.

**Line Length**

After establishing the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables and, secondly, the dominant foot, you are ready to determine the line length, which follows a simple formula:

- **Dimeter** – two metrical feet per line  
- **Trimeter** – three metric feet per line  
- **Tetrameter** – four metric feet per line  
- **Pentameter** – five metric feet per line  
- **Hexameter** – six metric feet per line  
- **Heptameter** – seven metric feet per line  
- **Octameter** – eight metric feet per line  

Count substituted or imperfect feet (incomplete) feet as full feet. If the lines vary in length, give the pattern of line lengths. If the pattern is tetrameter-trimeter in stanzas of four lines, simply label the poem a **ballad**.

Example:

“Till Serpahs swing their snowy Hats—  
And Saints—to windows run—  
To see the little Tippler  
Leaning against the—sun—“
The third line is iambic tetrameter with an imperfect foot beginning with the last syllable of *tippler*. Note also the carefully placed substitution in the fourth line. Many of Emily Dickinson’s poems are written in ballad stanzas such as this one, but with sophisticated rhythm and rhyme.

Substituted and imperfect feet create *counterpoint* within an accentual-syllabic poem and prevent the rhythm from becoming sing-song.

**Elision** occurs when two syllables are slurred together in natural reading so as th serve as one. For example,

You’d think I never had felt before  
The weight of an ax-head poised aloft, . . .

Frost intends for us to elide the syllables of *never* and *of an*. Note also the spondee at ‘head poised.’

Scansion should also note caesura, endstopped lines, or enjambment.

**Metaphor, Simile**

One of many techniques used to make poetry intensive, musical, and significant, metaphor can be defined as an unusual, unconventional, or illogical comparison. Metaphor can be expressed in many grammatical ways, excluding like or as. Simile is actually a type of metaphor restricted to like or as used to make the comparison.

**Examples:**

*Love is blue* (popular song of 1967)  
*My love is like a red, red rose* (simile)

Note that not all metaphor is expressed with the verb ‘to be.’

**Appositives:**

*Prayer, the church’s banquet, angel’s age,*  
*God’s breath in man returning to his birth,*  
*The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,*  
*The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth . . .*

--George Herbert
Prepositional Phrases:

* A mind of winter

* Complacencies of the peignoir

  --Wallace Stevens

Verbs, verbals:

* The sea growled assult on the wave-bitten shore

  --Untermeyer

Piled-up metaphors:

* The old South Boston Aquarium stands

  * In a Sahara of snow now.

  --Robert Lowell

Extended metaphor (conceit) is one which runs through more than one line of a poem. Emily Dickinson’s puzzle poems, such as “I Like to See it Lap the Miles,” are examples of extended metaphor.

Note that metaphor and simile are often found in cliché and colorful but uncouth or socially unacceptable (and especially illogical) expressions:

--busy as a bee
--slow as molasses in January
--a party animal
--“that test was hard as (insert expletive).”

Do not confuse metaphor and simile with related but distinct figures of speech, such as personification, symbol, and oxymoron.

Figures of Speech

Figures of speech are devices used by writers, including poets, to expand the suggestiveness, capacity, and power of language. Metaphor and simile are the most common tropes, but many others can be identified.
Some of the other frequently found tropes include:

**Personification** – Attributing human qualities to non-human beings or objects.

Example: In Frost’s “Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening,” the horse is attributed with human characteristics (“He gives his harness bells a shake/To ask if there is some mistake”)

Note: giving animate qualities to inanimate things does not qualify as personification.

Ships, countries, and hurricanes are typically personified.

**Oxymoron** – A briefly stated paradox, a contradiction which makes sense.
Examples: cold fire, sweet sorrow, bittersweet

“I taste a liquor never brewed” – Emily Dickinson

**Symbol** – A tangible object or quality which represents a number of intangible or abstract ideas, concepts, or principles.

Many symbols are standardized to some degree. The rose is a symbol of love, passion, beauty, and romance. Religion employs standard symbols, such as the dove, which symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

Symbol is related to metaphor, but the significance of a symbol is more elaborate than that of metaphor.

**Synechdoche** – Reference to a part ot stand for the whole, or the individual for the group, or the group for the individual.

Examples:

Republicans now have the upper hand in Congress.
The coach gave the team a good word after the game.

**Metonymy** – Reference to something, an idea or quality, by means of a related feature, thing, or quality. This trope is considered the opposite of metaphor.

Examples:

Try not to eat sweets before a meal.
The pilot steered us high into the blue.
Denotations and Connotations of words - Poets are particularly careful to select words with the right related meanings, or shades of suggestion, to fit the theme and feeling of a poem. Compare and contrast the connotations of synonyms, such as pig and swine, fair and equitable, truth and fact.

**Synesthesia** – Describing one sense in terms of another, or mixing the senses. Do not confuse with Oxymoron (briefly stated paradox).

Examples:

“deafening sight” – Austin  
She felt my eyes upon her.  
Warm green, hard sounds, blue mood

**Apostrophe** – address (questioning or dialogue) to non-human or inanimate objects. Do not confuse with personification.

Examples:  

“With ow sad steps, O Moon, thou climb’st at the skies.”  
William Blake apostrophizes the tiger throughout “The Tiger.”

**Hyperbole** – exaggeration

Example: “Great wonder of wonders!”

**Litotes** – Understatement

Example:

“Oedipus, thou unhappy man.” (Spoken to the title character of Oedipus Rex after he has recently learned that he unwittingly murdered his biological father and is married to his biological mother.)

**Anaphora** – Repetition of words, phrases, or clauses; similar to musical cadence or refrain.

“I looked upon the scene before me–upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain–upon the bleak walls–upon the vacant eye-like windows–upon a few rank sedges–and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees . . .” (Poe)

-Dr. Wayne Batten
Appendix B - Glossary of Poetic Terms

Alexandrine – An iambic hexameter line of poetry.

Allegory – A narrative or description having a second meaning beneath the surface one.

Alliteration – The repetition at close intervals of the initial consonant sounds of accented syllables.

Allusion – A reference, explicit or implicit, to something in previous literature or history.

Amphibrach – A relatively uncommon type of metrical foot consisting of an unaccented syllable followed by one accented syllable and then another unaccented syllable (example: from Swinburne’s “Dolores” – “Ah, feed me and fill me with pleasure”).

Amphimacer (or Cretic) – A relatively uncommon type of metrical foot consisting of an accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable and then by another accented syllable (example: love is best).

Anapestic – A type of metrical foot consisting of two unaccented syllables followed by one accented syllable (example: ‘understand’).

Anaphora – Repetition of words, phrases, or clauses; similar to musical cadence or refrain.

Apostrophe – A figure of speech in which someone absent or dead or something not human is addressed as if it were alive and present and could reply.

Approximate rhyme – a term used for words in a rhyming pattern that have some kind of sound correspondence but are not perfect rhymes.

Assonance – the repetition at close intervals of the vowel sounds of accented syllables or important words (example: hat-ran-amber; vein-made).

Aubade – a love lyric in which the speaker complains about the arrival of the dawn, when he must part from his lover.
Bacchius (or Bacchic) – a relatively uncommon type of metrical foot consisting of an unaccented syllable followed by two accented syllables (example: some late lark).

Ballad – a fairly short narrative poem written in a songlike stanzaic form. The most common form is a quatrain of alternating four- and three-stress iambic lines, with the second and fourth lines rhyming. Often the ballad will employ a refrain – that is, the last line of each stanza will be identical or similar.

Blank verse – unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Cacophony – a harsh, discordant, unpleasant-sounding choice and arrangement of sounds.

Caesura – 1) a pause introduced into the reading of a line by a mark of punctuation. Also known as a grammatical pause, it does not affect scansion. 2) a natural pause, unmarked by punctuation, introduced into the reading of a line by its phrasing or syntax. Also known as a rhetorical pause, it does not affect scansion.

Cinquain – a five-line stanza.

Conceit – an extended metaphor that compares and links two apparently unrelated subjects in an unexpected combination; a philosophically intricate comparison.

Connotation – what a word suggests beyond its basic definition; a word’s overtones of meaning.

Consonance – the repetition at close intervals of the final consonant sounds of accented syllables or important words (example: book-plaque-thicker).

Couplet – two successive lines, usually in the same meter, often linked by rhyme (rhyming couplet).

Cretic – see Amphimacer

Dactylic – a type of meter consisting of one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables (example: merr-i-ly).

Denotation – the basic definition or dictionary meaning of a word.

Didactic poetry – poetry having as a primary purpose to teach or preach.
Dimeter – a metrical line consisting of two feet.

Double rhyme – a rhyme in which the repeated vowel sound is in the second-to-last syllable of the words involved (example: politely-sprightly-brightly); one form of feminine rhyme.

Dramatic monologue – a poem consisting of a self-revealing speech delivered by one person to a silent listener (example: Poe’s “The Raven”).

Elizabethan sonnet- see English sonnet.

End rhyme – rhyme that occurs at the ends of lines.

End-stopped line – a line that ends with a natural speech pause, usually marked by punctuation.

Enjambment – see run-on line.

Elegy – a poem commemorating someone’s death.

English (or Shakespearian) sonnet – a sonnet rhyming ababcdcdefefgg. Its content or structure ideally parallels the rhyme scheme, falling into three coordinate quatrains and a concluding couplet; but it is often structured, like the Italian sonnet, into octave and sestet, the principal break in thought coming at the end of the eighth line.

Explication – a careful line-by-line explanation of a passage in a poem or of an entire poem.

Feminine rhyme – a rhyme in which the repeated accented vowel is in either the second or third last syllable of the words involved (example: ceiling-appealing; hurrying-scurrying).

Figurative language – language employing figures of speech; language that cannot be taken literally or only literally.

Figure of speech – broadly, any way of saying something other than the ordinary way; more narrowly, a way of saying one thing and meaning another.

Foot – the basic unit used in the scansion or measurement of verse. A foot usually contains one accented syllable and one or two unaccented syllables, but the monosyllabic foot (the spondaic foot) is an exception.
Form – the structure or organization of the work that gives it unity, through arrangement, rhyme scheme, number of lines, etc. Different forms of poetry include haiku, sonnet, ode, elegy, lyric, epic, and many others.

Free verse – poetry that does not have regular rhythm, rhyme, or standard form.

Grammatical Pause – see Caesura.

Heptameter – a metrical line containing seven feet.

Heptastich – a seven-line stanza.

Heroic couplet – two successive lines of iambic pentameter.

Hexameter – a metrical foot containing six feet.

Hyperbole (or Overstatement) – a figure of speech in which exaggeration is used in the service of truth.

Iambic – a type of metrical foot consisting of one unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable (example: re-hearse).

Imagery – language that appeals to the senses.

Imperfect Rhyme – see Approximate Rhyme

Internal rhyme – a rhyme in which one or both of the rhyme-words occur within the line.

Irony – a situation, or a use of language, involving some kind of incongruity or discrepancy. Three kinds of irony are as follows: 1) Verbal irony: a figure of speech in which what is meant is the opposite of what is said. 2) Dramatic irony: a device by which the author implies a different meaning from that intended by the speaker (or by a speaker) in a literary work. 3) Situational irony: a situation in which there is an incongruity between actual circumstances and those that would seem appropriate or between what is anticipated and what actually comes to pass.

Italian (or Petrarchan) sonnet – a sonnet consisting of an octave rhyming abbaabba and of a sestet using an arrangement of two or three additional rhymes, such as cdcde or cdecde. The content is divided typically as follows: question-answer, problem-solution, description-response.
Litotes (or Understatement) – a figure of speech that consists of saying less than one means, or of saying what one means with less force than the occasion warrants.

Lyric poetry – poetry that expresses a feeling or emotion.

Masculine rhyme (also known as Single Rhyme) – a rhyme in which the repeated accented vowel sound is in the final syllable of the words involved (example: dance-pants, scald-recalled).

Metaphor – a figure of speech in which an implicit comparison is made between two things essentially unlike.

Meter – regularized rhythm; an arrangement of language in which the accents occur as apparently equal intervals in time. Types include iambic, trochaic, anapestic, dactylic.

Metonymy – a figure of speech in which some significant aspect or detail closely related to an experience or thing is used in the place of the experience or thing itself (example: “I drank the glass of milk,” meaning the contents of the glass; “The White House said today . . . ,” meaning a spokesperson for the President).

Monometer – a metrical line consisting of one foot.

Near Rhyme – see Approximate Rhyme.

Octameter – a metrical line consisting of eight feet.

Octave – 1) an eight-line stanza. 2) the first eight lines of a sonnet, especially one structured in the manner of an Italian sonnet.

Ode – a long, serious lyric focusing on a stated theme.

Onomatopoeia – the use of words that supposedly mimic their meaning in their sound (example: boom, click, plop, whisper).

Ottava rima – a particular specialized stanzaic form composed of eight lines rhyming abababcc and written in iambic pentameter.

Oxymoron – a compact paradox, one in which two successive words apparently contradict each other (example: icy hot, jumbo shrimp).
Paradox – a statement or situation containing apparently contradictory or incompatible elements (example: “The child is father to the man”); an apparent contradiction that actually may contain a universal truth.

Paraphrase – a restatement of the content of a poem designed to make its prose meaning as clear as possible.

Pentameter – a metrical line consisting of five feet.

Persona – the speaker in a poem.

Personification – a figure of speech in which human attributes are given to an animal, object, or concept.

Petrarchan sonnet – see Italian Sonnet.

Prose – non-metrical language; the opposite of verse.

Prosody – the study of sound and rhythm in poetry. Other equally descriptive words are metrics, versification, and mechanics of verse.

Pun – a play on words (ex: “To England will I steal, and there will I steal.”)

Pyrrhic – two unaccented syllables together, as in “of the.” This serves as a substitute for iambic and trochaic feet and does not serve as a metrical norm.

Quatrain – 1) a four-line stanza. 2) a four-line division of a sonnet marked off by its rhyme scheme.

Refrain – a repeated word, phrase, line, or group of lines, normally at some fixed position in a poem written in stanzaic form.

Rhetorical pause – see Caesura.

Rhythm – any wavelike recurrence of motion or sound.

Rhyme (Rime) – the repetition of the accented vowel sound and all succeeding sounds in important or importantly positioned words (example: old-cold, vane-reign, court-report, order-recorders). The above definition refers to perfect rhyme and assumes that the accented vowel sounds involved are preceded by differing consonant sounds. If the preceding consonant sound is the same (example: manse-romance, style-stile), or if there is no preceding consonant sound in either word (example: aisle-isle, alter-altar), or
if the same word is repeated in the rhyming position (example: hill-hill), the words are called identical rhymes. Both perfect rhymes and identical rhymes are to be distinguished from approximate rhymes.

Rhyme royal – a stanza composed of seven lines written in iambic pentameter and rhyming ababbcc.

Rhyme scheme – any fixed pattern of rhymes characterizing a whole poem or its stanzas.

Run-on line – a line that has no natural speech pause at its end, allowing the sense to flow uninterruptedly into the succeeding line (also known as enjambment).

Sarcasm – bitter or cutting speech; speech intended by its speaker to give pain to the person addressed.

Satire – a kind of literature that ridicules human folly or vice with the purpose of bringing about reform or of keeping others from falling into similar folly or vice.

Scansion – the process of measuring verse, that is, of marking accented and unaccented syllables, dividing the lines into feet, identifying the metrical pattern, and noting significant variations from that pattern.

Septet – a seven-line stanza.

Sestet – 1) a six-line stanza. 2) the last six lines of a sonnet structured on the Italian model.

Sestina – a poem of thirty-nine lines written in iambic pentameter. Its six-line stanzas repeat in an intricate and prescribed order the six last words of each line in the opening stanza. After the sixth stanza, there is a three-line envoi (or envoy), which uses the six repeating words.

Shakespearian Sonnet – see English Sonnet.

Simile – a figure of speech in which an explicit comparison is made between two things essentially unlike. The comparison is made explicit by the use of some such word or phrase as like, as, than, similar to, resembles, or seems.

Single rhyme – see Masculine Rhyme.

Slant Rhyme – see Approximate Rhyme.
Spenserian stanza – a stanza composed of nine lines, the first eight of which are written in iambic pentameter while the last or ninth line is written in iambic hexameter; the stanza rhymes ababbcbcc.

Synesthesia – figurative language in which one sense impression is described in terms of another (example: “hot pink” or “blue uncertain stumbling buzz”).

Sonnet – a fixed form of fourteen lines, normally iambic pentameter, with a rhyme scheme conforming to or approximating one of two main types – the Italian or the English.

Spondee – a metrical foot consisting of two syllables equally or almost equally accented (for example: true blue).

Stanza – a group of lines whose metrical pattern (and usually its rhyme scheme as well) is repeated throughout a poem.

Symbol – a figure of speech in which something (object, person, situation, or action) means more than what it is. A symbol, in other words, may be read both literally and metaphorically.

Synechdoche – a figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole (example: all hands on deck – represents the entire crew).

Tercet (or triplet) – a three-line stanza.

Terza rima – a verse form consisting of tercets, usually in iambic pentameter with an interlaced rhyme scheme (as aba, bcb, ded).

Tetrameter – a metrical line containing four feet.

Theme – the central idea of a literary work.

Tone – the writer’s or speaker’s attitude toward his subject, his audience, or himself; the emotional coloring, or emotional meaning, of a work.

Trimeter – a metrical line consisting of three feet.

Triple meter – a meter in which a majority of the feet contain three syllables. Anapastic and dactylic are both triple meters.

Triple rhyme – a rhyme in which the repeated accented vowel sound is in the third last syllable of the words involved (example: gainfully-disdainfully); one
form of feminine rhyme.  
Trochaic meter – a type of meter consisting of one accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable (example: bar-ter).

Verse – 1) metrical language; the opposite of prose. 2) a line of poetry.

Versification – the mechanics of poetic composition, including such elements as rhyme, rhythm, meter, and stanza form.

Villanelle – A French verse form of nineteen lines (of any length) divided into six stanzas – five tercets and a final quatrain—employing two rhymes and two refrains. The refrains consist of lines one (repeated as lines six, twelve, and eighteen) and three (repeated as lines nine, fifteen, and nineteen).


-Dr. Wayne Batten