



Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)

Life of Emerson

from: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson. New York, Boston, Thomas Y. Crowell & Company: 1899. Introduction by Nathan Haskell Dole.

(Introduction to Early Poems of Ralph Waldo Emerson)

– Nathan Haskell Dole, 1899

In the early years of the nineteenth century, when Boston was as yet only a comfortable little seaport town, and its principal streets still gave room for gardens and cow pastures, there stood at the corner of what is now Summer and Chauncy streets a gambrel-roofed wooden building, shaded by elms and Lombardy poplars, and surrounded by ample grounds. This was the parish house of the oldest church in Boston, called the First or "Old Brick Church."

The minister of this church and occupant of this mansion was the Rev. William Emerson, who on the 25th of May, 1803, wrote in his diary: "This day, whilst I was at dinner at Governor Strong's, my son Ralph Waldo was born."

The Rev. William Emerson was one of the notable men of his day. Although his life was cut off at the early age of forty-two, he had accomplished a work the influence of which is still definitely, if unconsciously, felt, and always will be felt in the culture of Boston. Science and learning as represented by the Lowell Institute, literature as represented by the Athenæum, art as represented by the Museum, point back to that vivacious, liberal-minded, and eloquent young minister. He had been settled in the town of Harvard at a yearly salary of less than six hundred dollars, but Boston heard him preach, wanted him and, in 1799, bought him off from the Harvard parish for a bonus of a thousand dollars, giving rise to the epigram perpetrated at the expense of the Old Brick Church: "You bought your minister and sold your bell."

William Emerson traced his descent from Thomas Emerson, who emigrated from England to America in 1635, was thrifty, and left a large estate for those days. His son John, minister at Gloucester, was the common ancestor of Phillips Brooks and Wendell Phillips. His son Joseph, preacher successively at Wells, at Milton, and at Mendon, married Elizabeth, granddaughter of Peter Bulkeley, a wealthy and learned dissenting minister, who rounded Concord and Concord church. Edward, son of Joseph and Elizabeth, married Rebecca Waldo, and his son Joseph married Mary Moody and had ten children, the ninth of whom was William, who was the minister at Concord, and built the Old Manse celebrated by Hawthorne. When he died at the early age of thirty-three, his widow married his successor, the Rev. Ezra Ripley, who was a kindly and wise step-father to the lively young William, his mother's only son. It is said that he had no drawing to the ministry, but, on hearing Dr. Ripley pray for the fulfilment of his mother's desire, he studied divinity and was settled at Harvard at the age of twenty-three. His letters are full of wit and vivacity. He was extremely fond of society and liked to sing and to play on the bass viol. He was too poor to keep a horse, but in 1796, when his salary was only \$330.30, he married Miss Ruth Haskins, sold his bass fiddle, took boarders, taught, and worked his farm. At the time of his death he was receiving \$2500 a year, thirty cords of wood, and the rent on his house. He raised potatoes, corn, and

other vegetables in his garden on Summer Street. He was the founder of the Philosophical Society, and the leading member of the Anthology Club, which established a library, a museum, a course of lectures, and a monthly magazine.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was eight at the time of his father's death. The parish voted to continue the salary to the widow for six months longer, to pay her \$500 a year for seven years, and permitted her to occupy the parish house for more than three years. She took boarders, did her own work, and managed to educate the children, as she felt that they were born to be educated. The distance between her little vessel and the lee shore of poverty was very small. Mrs. Ripley found the family one day without any food, except the stories of heroic endurance with which their aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, was regaling them. Ralph and his brother Edward had but one overcoat between them, and had to take turns going to school.

This aunt, Miss Emerson, was a thorn in the spirit for the whole family. Of great intellect, of lofty views, ambitious, religious, sceptical, a burning brand in the household, she stimulated, she exasperated, she made herself and every one about her unhappy. She wanted every one but herself to be orthodox. Emerson said of her: "She tramples on the common humanities all day, and they rise as ghosts and torment her all night." Mr. Charles Eliot Cabot says: "She was an ever-present embodiment of the Puritan conscience." Her influence on the Emerson children was, on the whole, injurious. Even Ralph Waldo, who was less susceptible to it than the others, felt it severely.

Ralph was sent to school before he was three years old. At ten he writes his Aunt Mary of his studies in the Latin School, which were supplemented by two hours' attendance at a private school where he learned to write and cipher. Once or twice he played truant during this midday recess of extra work, and was punished for it by imprisonment with bread and water. He was not a brilliant scholar, nor was he inclined to mingle with his associates in play. He

never owned a sled, and, though there was a good pond for skating not far away, he did not learn to skate till he was a freshman in college. According to Dr. Furness he held aloof from "Coram" and "Hy-spy," and other sports, simply because from his earliest years he dwelt in a higher sphere. He could not remember the time when Emerson was not literary in his pursuits. When he was thirteen his uncle, Samuel Ripley, asked him how it was that all the boys disliked him and quarrelled with him.

In 1814 the price of provisions became so high in Boston that Mrs. Emerson and her family took refuge in Concord with Dr. Ripley, with whom they spent a year. On their return to Boston they lived in a house on Beacon Hill lent by its owner in exchange for board for his wife and children. Emerson remembered driving the cow to pasture on Carver Street. That year he was reading "Télémaque" in French and Priestley's lectures on history, and his letters are pretty well peppered with original verse. In October, 1817, he went to Cambridge, having passed a very good examination, and his mother rejoiced because he did not have to be admonished to study. He was appointed President's Freshman, a position which gave him a room free of charge. He waited at Commons, and this reduced the cost of board to one quarter, and he received a scholarship. He added to his slender means by tutoring and by teaching during the winter vacations at his Uncle Ripley's school in Waltham. Mr. Conway says that during his college course his mother moved to Cambridge and took student boarders, but Emerson had his room in the college buildings, occupying 5, 15, and 9 Hollis, during the last three years, respectively.

Even in his fourteenth year he was described as being "just what he was afterward, kindly, affable, but self-contained, receiving praise or sympathy without taking much notice of it."

He was fonder of desultory reading than of regular study, and naturally came into some disfavor with the authorities. In mathematics he confessed himself "a hopeless dunce," and laughingly declared that a possible English congener, William Emerson of Durham, a

famous mathematician, must have appropriated all his talents in that line. "I can't multiply seven by twelve with security," he added.

George Ticknor, who taught modern languages, and Edward Everett, Greek professor, gave lectures, and Emerson attended them with profit. He took two Bowdoin prizes for dissertations, and the Boylston prize of \$30 for declamation. He graduated just above the middle of a class of fifty-nine, and had one of the twenty-nine commencement parts, but, disgusted at its insignificance, took no pains to learn it, and had to be frequently prompted. He was not entitled to admission to the [Phi Beta Kappa] Society, but he was elected class poet, and his poem was regarded as a superior production. His future seemed indefinite. All he would promise was "to try to be a minister and have a house." The house was for his mother, so that he might "in some feeble degree repay her for the cares and woes and inconveniences she had so often been subject to on her son's account alone."

After he graduated he for two years assisted his brother William in a school for young ladies established in his mother's house, and when William went to Göttingen to study divinity, he remained another year in sole charge. During these three years he earned nearly \$3000 and was enabled to help his mother and brothers. But he always remembered his terrors at entering the school, his timidities at French, "the infirmities of his cheek," and his occasional admiration of some of his pupils, and his vexation of spirit when the will of the pupils was a little too strong for the will of the teacher.

He regretted that his teaching was perfunctory. He wished that he had shown his pupils the poems and works of imagination which he himself delighted in. Then teaching might have been for him also "a liberal and delicious art." He always wondered why the poorest country college never offered him a professorship of rhetoric. He wrote in his journal: "I think I could have taught an orator, though I am none."

In 1823 Mrs. Emerson hired a house on Canterbury Lane, also called Light Lane, Dark Lane, or Featherbed Lane, Roxbury, about four miles from the State House. In Franklin Park a tablet in the Overlook on Schoolmaster Hill commemorates the fact that Emerson there, stretched out beneath the pines, wrote his poem. "Good-by, proud world; I'm going home." His letters from there show that the teaching in town, which he still kept up, was not much more irksome than the communion with nature which had been recommended to him. "I cannot find myself quite as perfectly at home on the rock and in the wood as my ancient, and I might say infant, aspirations led me to suspect he wrote on the 19th of June of that year. "When I took my book to the woods I found nature not half poetical, not half visionary, enough I found that I had only transplanted into the new place my entire personal identity, and was grievously disappointed."

In 1825 Emerson wrote his aunt that Channing was "preaching sublime sermons every Sunday morning in Federal Street." The influence of Channing may have determined him to fit for the ministry, though his brother William, much to his mother's grief, had found it impossible to subscribe to creeds and had decided against that profession. But Ralph Waldo confessed that, while he inherited from his "sire a formality of manners and speech," he also "derived from him or his patriotic parent a passionate love for the strains of eloquence." He therefore elected to study divinity. His brother William advised his going to Göttingen, but he wrote: "Unless I take the wings of the morning for a packet, and feed on wishes instead of dollars, and be clothed with imagination for raiment, I must not expect to go." And like a true philosopher—like the fox philosopher of the story—he adds: "It might not do me any good."

Certain lands in the city had increased in value and a little money was forthcoming from them; so he decided to go to Cambridge, where "the learned and reverend" had consented to admit him to the middle class. In February, 1825, on the eve of leaving his Canterbury home, he wrote that he had "learned a few more names and dates, additional facility of

expression; the gauge of his own ignorance, its sounding-places and bottomless depths." He added that his "cardinal vice of intellectual dissipation— sinful strolling from book to book, from care to idleness"— was his cardinal vice still—was a malady which "belonged to the chapter of incurables."

He took a floor room in the cold, damp northeast corner of Divinity Hall, and within a month was obliged by ill health and weak eyes to suspend his studies. He went first to Newton and worked on his Uncle Ladd's farm. Here he fell in with an "ignorant and rude laborer" who was a Methodist, and it is chronicled that Emerson's first sermon was founded on this man's dictum, that "men were always praying and all their prayers were answered." But he added as a saving clause, "We must beware, then, what we ask!"

In the summer he instructed a few private pupils, and in September took charge of a public school in Chelmsford, which he left at the beginning of the next year to relieve his brother Edward of the care of his school in Roxbury, and then in April he returned to Cambridge, where his mother had again taken a house. He opened a school there and had among his pupils Richard Henry Dana, 2d, but he was afflicted with rheumatism and threatened with lung complaint.

He managed to attend some of the lectures at the Divinity School, and made a show of keeping along with his class. But he afterward declared that if the authorities had examined him on his studies they would not have passed him. They did not examine him, and he was "approbated to preach" by the Middlesex Association of Ministers in October, 1826, and on the fifteenth of that month delivered his first public sermon at Waltham.

As cold weather came on, he was obliged to go South. The deferring of his hopes made him heartsick. Mr. M. D. Conway says he preached in Charleston, which had the only Unitarian pulpit south of the Potomac. But the weather was cold and he took a sloop to St. Augustine,

where he spent the winter "parading the beach and thinking of his brother barnacles at a distance." He was amused at the theological and civil manners of the place, where "the worthy father of the Catholic Church was arrested and imprisoned for debt, where the president of the Bible Society was notorious for his profanity, and its treasurer, the marshal of the district, combined meetings of the society with slave-auctions." Emerson made the acquaintance of Prince Achille Murat, "a philosopher, a scholar, a man of the world, very sceptical but very candid, and an ardent lover of truth." He long remembered him as "a type Of heroic manners and sweet-tempered ability."

When he reached Alexandria after a direfully tempestuous voyage, he wrote his aunt that he was not a jot better or worse than when he left home. In this same letter he describes how when he reads Walter Scott, a thousand imperfect suggestions arise in his mind, which, if he could give heed, would make him a novelist; and, when he chanced to light on a verse of genuine poetry, even in the corner of a newspaper, a forcible sympathy awakened a legion of little goblins in the recesses of his soul, and if he had leisure to attend to the fine tiny rabble, he would straightway be a poet. He confessed that in his day-dreams he hungered and thirsted to be a painter.

On his return he "supplied" for some weeks at the First Church, during the absence of its regular minister. Then in the autumn of 1827 he supplied for Mr. Hall at Northampton, where he made the acquaintance of the Lymans. Mrs. Lyman was a descendant of Anne Hutchinson, whom Emerson's ancestor, Peter Bulkeley, had helped to drive out of Massachusetts; but a warm friendship quickly sprang up between the brilliant and beautiful woman and the pale young student, whom she called an angel unawares.

He had several "calls" to accept permanent positions, but his health was still so uncertain that he refused them all, and lived at Cambridge a desultory life, "lounging on a system,"

writing a sermon a month, strolling, courting the society of laughing persons, and trying to win "firmer health and solid powers."

He had not as yet shown evidence of remarkable ability; his brothers Edward and Charles entirely eclipsed him. He never jested (so Dr. Hedge said), was slow in speech and in movement, and was never known to run. Yet when his brother Edward, "the admired, learned, eloquent," lost first his reason and then his health, and died in self-imposed exile, Emerson wrote in his journal that he had little fear for such an evil, even in the line of the constitutional calamity of his family; "I have so much mixture of silliness in my intellectual frame, that I think Providence has tempered me against this."

He had preached temporarily at Concord, N. H., and there he met Miss Ellen Louisa Tucker, the daughter of a former Boston merchant. She had greatly impressed him, but he thought he had "got over his blushes and his wishes." But when he met her again in December, 1828, he "surrendered at discretion." "She is seventeen years old and very beautiful by universal consent," he wrote his brother William.

In March of the following year he was settled as colleague of the Rev. Henry Ware, Jr., over the Second or Old North Church, and in September was married and established in a house in Chardon Place. His happiness and success seemed to him too great to last. His intuitions were not ill founded. He found himself unable to administer the Communion in its concrete oral form, and when the church refused to let him continue the service, dropping "the use of the elements," he resigned, and his resignation was accepted by a vote of thirty against twenty-four. It must have been a relief to him to be free, for all that savored of ritual was distasteful to him, and even. extempore prayer was irksome. He did not excel in the usual pastoral relations. It is related of him that when he was summoned to administer consolation at the bedside of a Revolutionary veteran, and showed some awkwardness in the matter, the dying man rose in his wrath and exclaimed, "Young man, if you don't know your business,

you had better go home." Even the sexton of the church declared that in his opinion he was not born to be a minister.

But his ability in the pulpit was marked, and many of his congregation greatly regretted the step that was forced on him. He had recently suffered the loss of his young wife, who even before her marriage was threatened with consumption. She died in February, 1831. He was like a ship adrift. But great schemes were floating in his mind. One of them was the establishment of "a magazine of his ownty-donty," in which there should be no coöperation, but only his personal individuality to unify it.

Again his health broke down. He was disheartened, and felt that the doom of his race was on him. At first it was suggested that he should go to the West Indies and visit his brother Edward, but at the last moment he found that a 236-ton brig was about to sail for the Mediterranean: he took passage on her and was landed at Malta on the 2d of February, 1832.

In his diary written on the vessel one can read the influence of Carlyle. Speaking of the clouds, he says: "What they said goest thou forth so far to seek— painted canvas, carved marble, renowned towns? Yes, welcome, young man, the universe is hospitable; the great God who is love hath made you aware of the forms and breeding of His wide house. We greet you well to the place of history, as you please to style it, to the mighty Lilliput or ant-hill of your genealogy." And so on quite in the style of "Sartor."

From Malta, where he with a tame curiosity looked about La Valetta, he crossed to Sicily, spent several days in sight of Etna, drank of the waters of Arethusa, plucked the papyrus on the banks of the Anopus, visited the Catacombs, heard Mass in the ancient Temple of Minerva, and fed on fragrant Hyblæan honey and Ortygian quails; but he felt tormented by his ignorance, wanted his Vergil and his Ovid, his history and his Plutarch. "It is the

playground of the gods and goddesses." "The poor hermit who with saucer eyes had strayed from his study" found himself somewhat at a loss in those "out courts of the Old World." "Some faces under new caps and jackets," he says, "another turn of the old kaleidoscope."

He was not sure in the noise and myriads of people, amid the grandeur and poverty that he saw that he was growing much wiser or any better for his travels. "An hour in Boston and an hour in Naples have about equal value to the same person."

Even his judgment of people remind one of Carlyle in his peevish days. He hoped he should not always be "yoked with green, dull, pitiful persons." The "various little people" with whom he had been "cabined up by sea and land" may have been all better and wiser than he; still they did not help him. He longed for a teacher. He would "give all Rome for one man such as were fit to walk" there.

At Florence he dined and breakfasted with Landor, who, he thought, did "not quite show the same caliber in conversation as in his books." He hoped for better things of Carlyle to whom he was pilgriming through all such inanimate trifles as coliseums and duomos. Even Venice he called "a great oddity, a city for beavers . . . a most disagreeable residence"; and Paris was "a loud modern New York of a place." "Pray, what brought you here, grave sir?" "the moving Boulevard" seemed to ask him. A lecture at the Sorbonne, he complains, was far less useful to him than a lecture which he should write himself!

He stayed about three weeks in London. He attended service at St. Paul's. "Poor church," is his only comment. He visited Coleridge and Bowring and John Stuart Mill, and still in quest for Carlyle reached Edinburgh, where he preached in the Unitarian chapel, and at last, after peculiar difficulties, discovered his ideal living quietly at Craigenputtoch – the youth he sought he called "good and wise and pleasant," and his wife, "a most accomplished,

agreeable woman." "Truth and peace and faith dwell with them." His visit with them he called "a white day in his years." Carlyle, on his part, always declared it was the most beautiful thing in his experience at Craigenputtock. Yet even Carlyle was not the long-sought master. In the deepest matters the Scotchman had nothing to teach the Yankee. He had met with men, he wrote, of far less power who had got greater insight into religious truth.

But the interview on both sides was pleasing and resulted in a lifelong friendship.

At Rydal Mount he paid his respects to Wordsworth, and was not offended by the old poet's egotisms. (Note: For Emerson's own account of his experiences see "English Traits.") Having reached Liverpool, he confided to his journal his gratitude to the great God who had led him in safety and pleasure through "this European scene— this last schoolroom" in which He had pleased to instruct him. The sight of Landor, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Wordsworth, though he realized that not one of them was "a mind of the very first class, "had comforted and confirmed him in his convictions. He felt that he would be able to judge more justly, less timidly, of wise men for evermore.

It is odd and sounds almost prehistoric to read Emerson quoting the prediction that "the tithes will come when the ocean will be navigated by merchantmen by steam."

With health restored and established, he reached New York early in October, after a voyage which lasted more than a month; and, having rejoined his mother at Newton, where she was then living, he began to preach and lecture as occasion offered. On the second Sunday after his return he occupied his old pulpit in the Second Church and for four years supplied at various places. He might have had a call to New Bedford, but as he stipulated that he must not be expected to administer the Communion or to offer prayer unless the Spirit moved, the church withdrew its invitation. His first lecture was delivered in November, 1883, before

the Boston Society of Natural History. His early lectures were on scientific subjects and before scientific bodies.

He was expecting to have his wife's share of her father's estate, and this expectation was soon satisfied, so that he made sure of a yearly income of about \$1200, and he was meditating more seriously than ever the adventure of a periodical paper which should "speak the truth without fear or favor." This materialized afterward in *The Dial*.

In the summer of 1834 he was the chosen poet for the [Phi Beta Kappa] Society, and the verses contained a word portrait of Daniel Webster. His brother Edward, who had just died, had been Webster's private secretary and tutor to his children. He went to Bangor to preach for a few Sundays, and wrote to Dr. F. H. Hedge that he was seriously thinking of trying to persuade a small number of persons to join him in a colony thirty miles up the river; but this visionary project of a forest hermitage was never carried out, and in October he went to live in Concord, which was his home throughout the rest of his life. He lived with his mother in the Manse until, in 1835, having become engaged to Miss Lidia Jackson of Plymouth, he bought at a bargain the Coolidge house, which he said was a mean place, and would be till trees and flowers should give it a character of its own. It was a square mansion set rather low in a field, through which flowed a brook down to the sluggish Concord River.

In September he was called on as a townsman to deliver a discourse on the two hundredth anniversary of the incorporation of the town, and he made special investigations for the purpose of imparting historic value to it. Two days after this event he drove to Plymouth and was married there at the Winslow house, which belonged to his bride. She would have liked to live in Plymouth, but he preferred Concord, and had written to her that "he was born a poet, though his singing was very husky and for the most part in prose," and therefore must guard and study his rambling propensities. Concord, he intimated, gave him sunsets,

forests, snowstorms, and river views, which were more to him than friends, but Plymouth! –
"Plymouth is streets!"

In the winters of 1835-1836, besides supplying the East Lexington church, he began a course of ten lectures on English literature, and this made such a favorable impression that henceforth his career was assured. Not only was the subject-matter original and unique, but the judgments expressed were sound, and the delivery was marked by a peculiar charm which those who heard him never forgot: "You are filled with delight at his clear demonstration. Each figure, word, gesture, just fits the occasion!" said Lowell.

In 1836 Emerson helped to introduce to American readers Carlyle's "Sartor Resartus," which had the distinction of selling the first edition and a thousand copies besides, before it was put into book form in England. His efforts in this practical direction elicited the little sneer in Lowell's "Fable for Critics," where he speaks of Emerson in these words :–

**His is, we may say,
A Greek head on right Yankee shoulders, whose range
Has Olympus for one pole, for t'other the Exchange.**

Or again a little farther down he says he is composed of "one part pure earth, ninety-nine parts pure lecturer."

Lowell was even more severe on Emerson's poetry. After comparing his rich words to "gold nails in temples to hang trophies on," he says, his –

**Prose is grand verse. while his verse, the Lord knows,
Is some of it pr– No, 't is not even prose.**

And he goes on: –

**In the worst of his poems are mines of rich matter,
But thrown in a heap with a crash and a clatter.**

When Lowell was editor of the Atlantic Monthly, Emerson sent him his mystic "Song of Nature." But Lowell returned it to him, stating that certain lines in it would offend the religious susceptibilities of the community. The lines particularized were those where Homer, Shakespeare, and Plato were united with Christ in one:–

**Twice have I moulded an image,
And thrice outstretched my hand;
Made one of day, and one of night,
And one of the salt sea-sand.
One in a Judean manger
And one by Avon stream,
One over against the mouths of Nile,
And one in the Academe.**

Emerson was amazed, and took the poem to Miss Elizabeth Hoar, who was always his kindly censor, and asked her if she could see anything offensive in the lines.

Emerson said: "She read them carefully, but failed to help me out, concluding that they were not to be altered and must be allowed to stand. So they will not trouble the readers of the Atlantic."

In 1836, on the day of the two-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Harvard College, Emerson and others met and discussed the state of philosophy and theology. A few days later a project ripened of rounding a periodical to embody their views. Thus was started The Dial, which became the organ of the so-called transcendental movement, though the first number did not appear till July, 1840. Emerson's book, "Nature," is regarded as "the first document of that remarkable outburst of Romanticism on Puritan ground." It was published in September, 1836. Only a few copies were sold, and twelve years elapsed before a new edition was called for. But it was violently attacked by the champions of orthodoxy. Yet Dr. O. W. Holmes said Emerson took down men's "idols from their pedestals so tenderly that it seemed like an act of worship." This year was saddened by the death of Charles Emerson, whom Ralph Waldo called "his brother, his friend, his ornament, his joy, and pride"; he "has fallen by the wayside or rather has risen out of this dust," he wrote in his journal; "now commences a new and gloomy epoch of my life.... Who can ever supply his place to me?"

Charles Emerson was a born orator, who would have conferred on the Republic rare gifts of genius had he lived. Emerson's lament for him was one of the most touching things he ever wrote. This same year Emerson's first child, a boy "of wonderful promise," was born, but he lived only five years.

Within a few years Margaret Fuller and Amos Bronson Alcott came to him in Concord; but Margaret Fuller, in spite of her genius and in spite of his admiration for her genius, always "froze him to silence," and he had the same effect on her when they were on the point of coming nearer. But for Alcott he had the highest praise. He called him the most extraordinary man and the highest genius of his time. This admiration lasted till the end of his life. In his later days, when aphasia had so shattered his mind, there is a pathetic picture of him talking over the fence with Alcott with much of his old-time fluency; but in the afternoon Alcott returned and brought back to Emerson the philosophic bread that had

been cast on the waters so abundantly. And Emerson, oblivious to the fact that it was his own, dilated with admiration, and exclaimed: "What a wonderful mind my friend over yonder"—he could not remember his name— "has!"

Thoreau was also one of Emerson's intimates, and frequently shared his week-day walks. Yet, curiously enough, Emerson objected to printing Thoreau's "Winter Walk" in *The Dial*. Hawthorne lived for four years in Concord, occupying the old Manse, but, though he was a great walker, he is known to have walked with Emerson only once, when they went together to visit the Shakers at Lebanon. Emerson said of Hawthorne, "Alcott and he together would make a man!"

Emerson's reading, as might be imagined, was peculiarly eclectic and erratic. Mr. Cabot says he cared nothing for Shelley, Aristophanes, Don Quixote, Miss Austen, Dickens, Dante, or French literature. He rarely read a novel. But the Neo-Platonists and the Sacred Books of the East particularly engaged him, and were the inspiration of many of his mystic lines.

Mr. Cabot says he lived among his books and was never comfortable away from them, yet they did not enter much into his life.

In 1836, having finished a course of twelve lectures on the "Philosophy of History," he was asked to repeat them in various places, though the one on "Religion" gave some offence. The substance of these twelve lectures afterward was included in his first series of "Essays." He still officiated occasionally as a minister, but the reception of his Phi Beta Kappa oration on "The American Scholar;" given August 31, 1837 cut the last thread of attachment. Lowell said of this: "It was an event without any former parallel in our literary annals What crowded and breathless aisles, what windows clustering with eager heads, what enthusiasm of approval, what grim silence of foregone dissent." Dr. Holmes called that oration "Our Intellectual Declaration of Independence."

In February he relinquished his charge at East Lexington, though his wife mourned "to see the forward man cutting the last threads that bound him to that prized gown and band, the symbols black and white of old and distant Judah."

A still greater shock came from the discourse which Emerson delivered in July, 1838, on the graduation day of the Divinity School. The Advertiser led in a bitter attack on him. Emerson described the stir that it made as "a storm in our wash-bowl." But it nearly resulted in excluding him from the lyceum as well as from the church; and he felt a little disturbed that it had placed him on an undeserved pedestal as a champion of heresy.

But his annual courses of lectures in Boston were not less popular. Theodore Parker wrote of the first one, given in the early winter of 1839: It "was splendid— better meditated and more coherent than any theory I have ever heard from him. Your eyes were not dazzled by a stream of golden atoms of thought such as he sometimes shoots forth —though there was no lack of these sparklers."

Emerson had at first declined to have editorial control of *The Dial*, but when, after two years of uphill struggle, Margaret Fuller relinquished it, he took hold most unwillingly and kept it along for two years more at some expense of money and much expense of worry. It lived till April, 1844. His own known contributions numbered not far from fifty. There may have been half as many again.

During three years the question of negro emancipation was coming to the fore. Emerson was at first more interested in having the right of free discussion upheld than in the deeper question beyond. In November, 1837, he spoke on Slavery in the vestry of the Second Church in Concord, but the Abolitionists thought his tone was too cool and philosophical; but in 1844 he delivered an address in the Concord courthouse in celebration of the

anniversary of the liberation of the British West India Island slaves. All of the Concord churches refused to open their doors to the convention, so Thoreau secured the court-house, and is said to have rung the bell himself. And this time Emerson's trumpet gave forth no uncertain sound. He took a wise and common-sense view about woman suffrage, and, though he was not inveigled into any of the labor associations, such as Brook Farm and Fruitlands, in which his enthusiastic friends tried to interest him, he was not averse to developing a simpler and fairer way of living, and he invited the Alcotts to come and make common cause with them for a year. But Mrs. Alcott was wiser than the rest, and prevented the experiment being tried.

These years were not free from pecuniary anxieties. The most he ever received for a course of ten lectures before 1847 was \$570. The country lyceums paid \$10 and expenses. His family was increasing, and the town levied heavy taxes on him. His tax-bill for 1839 was more than \$160. So he was constantly in debt, and his chief resource was the lecture field, though it revolted his nature to sell "good wine of Castaly." In 1843 he spent the whole winter away from home, lecturing in New York, Baltimore, and other places. Moreover, in order to preserve a hold on nature, he bought fourteen acres of woodland on Lake Walden, and this was a pecuniary burden for several years.

It comes with a sense of relief, like a sea-breeze on a sultry day, to read of him taking a vacation from that strenuous life of the platform by going to the seashore. He wrote his wife: "I read Plato, I swim, and be it known unto you, I did verily catch with hook and line yesterday morning two haddocks, a cod, a flounder, and a pollock, and a perch The sea is great!" This touch of the sea, "inexact and boundless," may be detected in the oration which he tried to write at Nantasket for delivery at Waterville, Me. But "the heat and happiness" of his inspiration were extinguished, as he long afterward confessed, by the cold reception with which it met. It was either at Waterville or in a Vermont town, perhaps both, that the minister at the end of the discourse prayed to be "delivered from ever again hearing such

transcendental nonsense from the sacred desk." Afterward he went a number of times to the Adirondacks, where some of his sweetest poems were composed. He bought a rifle, but never used it.

Mr. Cabot says that lecturing, after all, was not the mode of utterance to which he aspired. Verse was, because he could get a larger and freer speech in rhyme. Some of his poems had been circulated, a few had been printed. And in December, 1843, a bookseller proposed to him to furnish a volume of his verses. But four years passed before the crucial impulse came to remedy "the corrigible and reparable places in them," and to put them together. "It was a small venture," he said. "My poems did not pay. My cranberry meadows paid much better." And when he made this remark he added, "My poems fell dead in England."

In 1847 he made his second journey to England, visited Carlyle for four days, and was amazed at "the great and constant stream" of his talk. "Carlyle and his wife," he says in a home letter, "live on beautiful terms." He breakfasted with Rogers, drank tea with James Martineau, and found profuse kindness and hospitality in Preston, Leicester, Chesterfield (where he dined with Stephenson, "the old engineer who built the first locomotive "), Birmingham— everywhere he went. At Edinburgh, where he lectured several times, he met all the notables, — "Christopher North," David Scott the painter, who made a portrait of him, Mrs. Jeffrey, Lord Jeffrey, Thomas De Quincey, and many more.

Still more brilliant was the society he met in London, — Macaulay, Bunsen, Milman, Milnes, Hallam, Lord Morpeth, "Barry Cornwall," Lord and Lady Ashburton, Thackeray, Disraeli, Lord Palmerston, and Tennyson. He was elected a member of the Athenæum Club, where he found some of the best men of England.

In May, 1848, he crossed to Paris and saw something of the Revolution and went to the theatre, where he heard Rachel. He complained humorously that his French was far from being as good as Madame de Staël's.

He returned to London in June and gave a course of lectures, at which he had most aristocratic audiences and dined with great lords and brilliant authors. But the pecuniary returns were smaller than he had reason to expect. For the Marylebone course of six he got only £80 instead of £200.

On his return to America he made the larger part of his income by lecturing. But he looked on the whole business as rather unseemly. He thought that it was a pity to drive young America to lecture, and as to the lecturer, he said that the "dragging of a decorous old gentleman out of home was tantamount to a bet of \$50 a day that he would not leave his library and wade, and freeze, and ride, and run, and suffer all manner of indignities, and stand up for an hour each night reading in a hall."

But he did it, and his pictures of travel in the West in the pre-Pullman days are like the stories of the martyrs. Here we find him sleeping on the floor of a canal-boat, where the cushion allowed him for a bed was crossed at the knees by another tier of sleepers as long-limbed as he, "so that in the air was a wreath of legs"; again occupying a cabin, though in company with governors and legislators, and a cold of minus fifteen degrees. Again, flying through the forests of Michigan in company with college professors and wolverines. And again, ferried across the Mississippi in a skiff, where "much of the rowing was on the surface of fixed ice, in fault of running water."

In 1849 Emerson's separate addresses and "Nature" were published in one volume, and the next year came "Representative Men."

That year, 1850, also brought with it the Fugitive Slave Law, and Emerson's voice was lifted nobly against it. He here made a magnificent attack on Daniel Webster, for whose genius he had such an admiration as "the best and proudest, the first man of the North." He believed in confining slavery to the slave states, and then gradually and effectually making an end of it. He called on "the thirty nations" to do something besides ditching and draining. Said he, "Let them confront this mountain of poison and shovel it once for all down into the bottomless pit. A thousand millions were cheap!" History proved the truth of his prophetic words. At Cambridge he repeated the words containing these wise counsels, but was so interrupted by hisses and cat-calls that he could not go on. The college authorities, like the clergy and merchants, were generally Southern in sentiment.

When John Brown was in prison under sentence of death Emerson had the courage to call him "that new saint, than whom none purer or more brave was ever led by love of men into conflict and death— the new saint awaiting his martyrdom." His attitude on that burning question of the day militated against his success as a lecturer. Invitations to speak were withdrawn, and in 1861 at the meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society "the mob roared" whenever he tried to speak, and he had to withdraw. That was in his native Boston! The war also brought poverty pretty close to Emerson as to so many others. His books did not sell, his income from lecturing almost ceased, his real estate was unproductive, and he found himself struggling with the problem, how to pay three or four hundred dollars' worth of debts with fifty.

On January 1, 1863, when Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, a Jubilee Concert was given at the Music Hall, and Emerson read his "Boston Hymn." The time which he gave himself for its composition was so short that he was in despair, lest he should not be able to do anything worthy of the occasion. But the inspiration flowed and a new treasure was added to English literature.

That same evening a gathering of the faithful took place at the house of Major George L. Stearns, at Medford, who perhaps did more than any man in Massachusetts to help along the cause of emancipation, who spent money like water, and himself raised the first two regiments of colored troops. Mrs. Stearns, who, with intellect as keen as ever, still lives to speak eloquently of those great days, thus tells the story of that epic gathering.

"Mr. Emerson was persuaded to repeat his poem, the 'Boston Hymn,' the original manuscript of which the Rev. Samuel Longfellow promptly begged of the author.

"It was a brilliant assembly, filled with exultation over the decree of emancipation which had been wired from Washington. The certainty of this great measure Wendell Phillips had announced as he entered the drawing-room. Instinctively the company burst into the John Brown song, greeting the newly unveiled bust of the martyr of freedom, which the sculptor J. Q. A. Brackett had just made.

"It was past midnight when the guests departed, every heart glowing with the sublime event, rejoicing with a mighty joy that deliverance from slavery at last had come."

Then occurred one of those charming little episodes so characteristic of Emerson's thoughtfulness and simplicity. Mrs. Stearns thus relates it: –

"Mr. Emerson and his friend, Mr. Alcott, remained overnight.

"When the hostess asked Mr. Emerson his preference of sleeping rooms, he said, 'Let Mr. Alcott and myself have the same room, then Vesta will have only one instead of two beds to make in the morning.'"

Another characteristic anecdote of the same kind may be related here, also from Mrs. Stearns's recollections: –

"On one occasion, after we had been visiting the Emersons, when we were preparing to drive home, the evening being rather chilly, for it was autumn, Mr. Emerson brought his overcoat from the hall, and, holding it up by the collar, said, 'I am always a little suspicious of the warmth of ladies' garments, the evening is cool, and the drive is one of seventeen miles; it will oblige me, Mrs. Stearns, if you will put on this overcoat, and wear it home. It can be recommended for warmth if not for elegance.'

"It was beautiful hospitality and consideration, but I instinctively drew back, saying:–

"'Oh, Mr. Emerson, how can I dare to wear the Lion 's Skin!'"

He could only be persuaded to withdraw the overcoat by being assured that sufficient wraps were stowed away in the carriage. "I have regretted," says Mrs. Stearns, "the modest scruples that hindered the wearing of the Poet's Coat, just for once."

In 1863 he was appointed one of the visitors to West Point, where John Burroughs, seeing him, took him to be "an inquisitive farmer." In 1866 he was granted the degree of Doctor of Laws by Harvard and elected one of the overseers. The following year he was orator for the [Phi Beta Kappa] Society –" not now," says Mr. Cabot, "as a promising young beginner from whom a fair poetical speech might be expected, but as the foremost man of letters of New England."

It was at this time rumored that he was drifting back from heretical to more conventional opinions in religious matters; and it is stated on good authority that, when it was proposed to dispense with compulsory prayers at Harvard, Emerson's vote prevented the innovation

from prevailing. But he authorized his son to announce that he had not retracted any of his views.

Three years later he was gratified to be invited to give a course of university lectures in Cambridge, and for this he prepared his sketches of "The Natural History of the Intellect," but he was not satisfied with his attempt to make a system of philosophy. The fruit of Emerson's intellect was not cohesive, but granular, and his thoughts are not easily moulded into a consecutive logical form. Hence it was possible for him to begin a lecture or end it anywhere. In his latter days I remember hearing him read a paper before the Radical Club. Every little while he would stop, saying he had gone far enough. But the audience and his daughter would persuade him to continue. But when he finally paused, the subject had been neither begun nor exhausted. His mind was like a carbon point; when the electricity was turned on, it gave out light, and it was always ready to shine.

He repeated his Cambridge course the next year, but felt that he had not succeeded as he had hoped to do. In a letter to Carlyle he called it "a doleful ordeal," and when it was concluded, accepted with alacrity an invitation to visit California on a six weeks' trip with near friends and in the most delightful circumstances.

After 1870 the decay of his mental powers, particularly of his memory: was very noticeable. He spoke of himself as "a man who had lost his wits." His last effort of composition was an introduction to Plutarch's "Morals" edited by Professor Goodwin. He compared it carefully with the original Greek, which he was able to read.

In July, 1872, he had just returned from Amherst, where he had delivered an address, when he discovered that his house was on fire. The neighbors rushed to his aid and succeeded in saving the books, manuscript, and furniture; but the house was ruined by fire and water, and Emerson himself contracted a feverish attack from exposure to the dampness.

Friends rushed to his aid in even more substantial ways. Mr. Francis Cabot Lowell brought him an envelope containing \$5000. Nearly \$12,000 more were contributed to rebuild the house, and while the work was in progress he was persuaded to make another journey abroad, to visit London, Italy, and Egypt. He saw Carlyle once more and dined with the Khedive. He and his daughter went up the Nile to Philæ, but on the whole he was disappointed with the sacred land: "the people despise us," he wrote, "because we are helpless babies who cannot speak or understand a word they say; the sphynxes scorn dunces; the obelisks, the temple-walls, defy us with their histories which we cannot spell."

The journey did him good, however, and on his return to Italy he began to work on a new edition of his poems. In Paris he saw Renan, Taine, Turgénief, and James Russell Lowell; in England he declined all invitations but one to speak, but he breakfasted with Gladstone, and saw Browning and many other notables.

When he reached home in May he was surprised and touched by the spontaneous welcome of his townspeople. The church bells rang, the whole town assembled—babies and all—and he was escorted with music to his new house, where a triumphal arch had been erected. He found his study unchanged, but many improvements had been introduced in the restoration of the house.

The following year his anthology of collected poems, "Parnassus," was published, and he was asked to be one of the candidates for the lord rectorship of Glasgow University. For this he received five hundred votes. Disraeli was elected, however.

In March, 1875, he went to lecture in Philadelphia, and had a delightful visit with his old friends, Dr. Furhess and Samuel Bradford. The next month he made a little speech at the unveiling of Mr. Daniel C. French's "Minute Man," and this is believed to be the last piece

written out with his own hand. After this time Mr. James Eliot Cabot served as his literary guide, shaping his lectures, and combining them, and helping him to arrange for the complete edition of his works.

Still occasionally reading from his lectures, still enjoying the serene calm of old age, where even his infirmity of memory may have made it all the serener, free from all worryment, he lived on till the spring of 1882, when he died of pneumonia on the 27th of April, at the very end of his seventy-eighth year.

One could fill many pages with testimonials of the influence of Emerson with contemporary descriptions of the man and his beneficent life.

Henry Crabbe Robinson declared that he had one of the most interesting countenances that he had ever beheld –a quite disarming combination of intelligence and sweetness. N. P. Willis grew enthusiastic over the voice, which he said was the utterance of his soul only, and his soul had sprung to the adult stature of a child of the universe.

Dr. Holmes said: "He was always courteous and bland to a remarkable degree; his smile was the well remembered line of Terence written out in living features." No one who ever heard him speak will forget the play of his features, the lighting up of his eyes with a rapt inner illumination, the emphatic stamp of his foot when some weighty thought required enforcement. He was one of the great souls of the century, and his works will be for all time a source of inspiration to young and old. They are indeed a mine of thought, all the more valuable, perhaps, that they are not welded into a system.

Many enthusiasts consider him to have been the greatest poet America has yet produced. Technically this thesis can never be supported. His disdain of mere form led him to produce verses which read with heaviness and halting but the beauty of the thought atones for

missing symmetry and freshness of rhyme and Emerson as a poet will always have an audience of admirers and some worshippers, oblivious of his verse's fault. Once when some one praised his poetry Emerson interrupted, "You forget; we are damned for poetry." And he wrote to Carlyle that he was "not a poet, but a lover of poetry and poets"—a sort of harbinger of the poets to come.

Emerson's influence was always exerted in the line of the loftiest aspirations. Consequently he will always be dear to thinkers and to poets, and an inspiration to the young. His whole life, however closely examined, shows no flaw of temper or of foible. It was serene and lovely to the end.



Ralph Waldo Emerson
(1803-1882)