



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
(1803-1882)

# Thoughts on Modern Lit...

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There is no better illustration of the laws by which the world is governed than Literature. There is no luck in it. It proceeds by Fate. Every scripture is given by the inspiration of God. Every composition proceeds out of a greater or less depth of thought, and this is the measure of its effect. The highest class of books are those which express the moral element; the next, works of imagination; and the next, works of science; – all dealing in realities, – what ought to be, what is, and what appears. These, in proportion to the truth and beauty they involve, remain; the rest perish. They proceed out of the silent living mind to be heard again by the living mind. Of the best books it is hardest to write the history. Those books which are for all time are written indifferently at any time. For high genius is a day without night, a Caspian Ocean which hath no tides. And yet is literature in some sort a creature of time. Always the oracular soul is the source of thought, but always the occasion is administered by the low mediations of circumstance. Religion, Love, Ambition, War, some fierce antagonism, or it may be, some petty annoyance must break the round of perfect circulation, or no spark, no joy, no event can be. The poet rambling through the fields or the forest, absorbed in contemplation to that degree, that his walk is but a pretty dream, would never awake to precise thought, if the scream of an eagle, the cries of a crow or curlew near his head did not break the sweet continuity. Nay the finest lyrics of the poet come of this

unequal parentage; the imps of matter beget such child on the soul, fair daughter of God. Nature mixes facts with thoughts to yield a poem. But the gift of immortality is of the mother's side. In the spirit in which they are written is the date of their duration, and never in the magnitude of the facts. Everything lasts in proportion to its beauty. In proportion as it was not polluted by any wilfulness of the writer, but flowed from his mind after the divine order of cause and effect, it was not his but nature's, and shared the sublimity of the sea and sky. That which is truly told, nature herself takes in charge against the whims and injustice of men. For ages, Herodotus was reckoned a credulous gossip in his descriptions of Africa, and now the sublime silent desert testifies through the mouths of Bruce, Lyons, Caillaud, Burckhardt, Belzoni, to the truth of the calumniated historian.

And yet men imagine that books are dice, and have no merit in their fortune; that the trade and the favor of a few critics can get one book into circulation, and defeat another; and that in the production of these things the author has chosen and may choose to do thus and so. Society also wishes to assign subjects and methods to its writers. But neither reader nor author may intermeddle. You cannot reason at will in this and that other vein, but only as you must. You cannot make quaint combinations, and bring to the crucible and alembic of truth things far fetched or fantastic or popular, but your method and your subject are foreordained in all your nature, and in all nature, or ever the earth was, or it has no worth. All that gives currency still to any book, advertised in the morning's newspaper in London or Boston, is the remains of faith in the breast of men that not adroit book makers, but the inextinguishable soul of the universe reports of itself in articulate discourse to-day as of old. The ancients strongly expressed their sense of the unmanageableness of these words of the spirit by saying, that the God made his priest insane, took him hither and thither as leaves are whirled by the tempest. But we sing as we are bid. Our inspirations are very manageable and tame. Death and sin have whispered in the ear of the wild horse of Heaven, and he has become a dray and a hack. And step by step with the entrance of this era of ease and convenience, the belief in the proper Inspiration of man has departed.

Literary accomplishments, skill in grammar and rhetoric, knowledge of books, can never atone for the want of things which demand voice. Literature is a poor trick when it busies itself to make words pass for things. The most original book in the world is the Bible. This old collection of the ejaculations of love and dread, of the supreme desires and contritions of men proceeding out of the region of the grand and eternal, by whatsoever different mouths spoken, and through a wide extent of times and countries, seems, especially if you add to our canon the kindred sacred writings of the Hindoos, Persians, and Greeks, the alphabet of the nations, – and all posterior literature either the chronicle of facts under very inferior ideas, or, when it rises to sentiment, the combinations, analogies, or degradations of this. The elevation of this book may be measured by observing, how certainly all elevation of thought clothes itself in the words and forms of speech of that book. For the human mind is not now sufficiently erect to judge and correct that scripture. Whatever is majestically thought in a great moral element, instantly approaches this old Sanscrit. It is in the nature of things that the highest originality must be moral. The only person, who can be entirely independent of this fountain of literature and equal to it, must be a prophet in his own proper person. Shakspeare, the first literary genius of the world, the highest in whom the moral is not the predominating element, leans on the Bible: his poetry supposes it. If we examine this brilliant influence – Shakspeare – as it lies in our minds, we shall find it reverent not only of the letter of this book, but of the whole frame of society which stood in Europe upon it, deeply indebted to the traditional morality, in short, compared with the tone of the Prophets, secondary. On the other hand, the Prophets do not imply the existence of Shakspeare or Homer, – advert to no books or arts, only to dread ideas and emotions. People imagine that the place, which the Bible holds in the world, it owes to miracles. It owes it simply to the fact that it came out of a profounder depth of thought than any other book, and the effect must be precisely proportionate. Gibbon fancied that it was combinations of circumstances that gave Christianity its place in history. But in nature it takes an ounce to balance an ounce.

All just criticism will not only behold in literature the action of necessary laws, but must also oversee literature itself. The erect mind disparages all books. What are books? it saith: they can have no permanent value. How obviously initial they are to their authors. The books of the nations, the universal books, are long ago forgotten by those who wrote them, and one day we shall forget this primer learning. Literature is made up of a few ideas and a few fables. It is a heap of nouns and verbs enclosing an intuition or two. We must learn to judge books by absolute standards. When we are aroused to a life in ourselves, these traditional splendors of letters grow very pale and cold. Men seem to forget that all literature is ephemeral, and unwillingly entertain the supposition of its utter disappearance. They deem not only letters in general, but the best books in particular, parts of a preestablished harmony, fatal, unalterable, and do not go behind Virgil and Dante, much less behind Moses, Ezekiel, and St. John. But no man can be a good critic of any book, who does not read it in a wisdom which transcends the instructions of any book, and treats the whole extant product of the human intellect as only one age revisable and reversible by him.

In our fidelity to the higher truth, we need not disown our debt in our actual state of culture, in the twilights of experience to these rude helpers. They keep alive the memory and the hope of a better day. When we flout all particular books as initial merely, we truly express the privilege of spiritual nature; but, alas, not the fact and fortune of this low Massachusetts and Boston, of these humble Junes and Decembers of mortal life. Our souls are not self-fed, but do eat and drink of chemical water and wheat. Let us not forget the genial miraculous force we have known to proceed from a book. We go musing into the vault of day and night; no constellation shines, no muse descends, the stars are white points, the roses brick-colored leaves, and frogs pipe, mice cheep, and wagons creak along the road. We return to the house and take up Plutarch or Augustine, and read a few sentences or pages, and lo! the air swarms with life; the front of heaven is full of fiery shapes; secrets of magnanimity and grandeur invite us on every hand; life is made up of them. Such is our debt to a book.

Observe, moreover, that we ought to credit literature with much more than the bare word it gives us. I have just been reading poems which now in my memory shine with a certain steady, warm, autumnal light. That is not in their grammatical construction which they give me. If I analyze the sentences, it eludes me, but is the genius and suggestion of the whole. Over every true poem lingers a certain wild beauty, immeasurable; a happiness lightsome and delicious fills the heart and brain, – as they say, every man walks environed by his proper atmosphere, extending to some distance around him. This beautiful result must be credited to literature also in casting its account.

In looking at the library of the Present Age we are first struck with the fact of the immense miscellany. It can hardly be characterized by any species of book, for every opinion old and new, every hope and fear, every whim and folly has an organ. It prints a vast carcass of tradition every year, with as much solemnity as a new revelation. Along with these it vents books that breathe of new morning, that seem to heave with the life of millions, books for which men and women peak and pine; books which take the rose out of the cheek of him that wrote them, and give him to the midnight a sad, solitary, diseased man; which leave no man where they found him, but make him better or worse; and which work dubiously on society, and seem to inoculate it with a venom before any healthy result appears.

In order to any complete view of the literature of the present age, an inquiry should include what it quotes, what it writes, and what it wishes to write. In our present attempt to enumerate some traits of the recent literature, we shall have somewhat to offer on each of these topics, but we cannot promise to set in very exact order what we have to say.

In the first place, it has all books. It reprints the wisdom of the world. How can the age be a bad one, which gives me Plato and Paul and Plutarch, St. Augustine, Spinoza, Chapman, Beaumont and Fletcher, Donne and Sir Thomas Browne, beside its own riches? Our presses groan every year with new editions of all the select pieces of the first of mankind, –

meditations, history, classifications, opinions, epics, lyrics, which the age adopts by quoting them. If we should designate favorite studies in which the age delights more than in the rest of this great mass of the permanent literature of the human race, one or two instances would be conspicuous. First; the prodigious growth and influence of the genius of Shakspeare, in the last one hundred and fifty years, is itself a fact of the first importance. It almost alone has called out the genius of the German nation into an activity, which spreading from the poetic into the scientific, religious, and philosophical domains, has made theirs now at last the paramount intellectual influence of the world, reacting with great energy on England and America. And thus, and not by mechanical diffusion, does an original genius work and spread himself. Society becomes an immense Shakspeare. Not otherwise could the poet be admired, nay, not even seen; – not until his living, conversing, and writing had diffused his spirit into the young and acquiring class, so that he had multiplied himself into a thousand sons, a thousand Shakspeares, and so understands himself.

Secondly; the history of freedom it studies with eagerness in civil, in religious, in philosophic history. It has explored every monument of Anglo-Saxon history and law, and mainly every scrap of printed or written paper remaining from the period of the English Commonwealth. It has, out of England, devoted much thought and pains to the history of philosophy. It has groped in all nations where was any literature for the early poetry not only the dramatic, but the rudest lyric; for songs and ballads, the Nibelungen Lied, the poems of Hans Sachs and Henry of Alckmaer in Germany, for the Cid in Spain, for the rough-cast verse of the interior nations of Europe, and in Britain for the ballads of Scotland and of Robinhood.

In its own books also, our age celebrates its wants, achievements, and hopes. A wide superficial cultivation, often a mere clearing and whitewashing, indicate the new taste in the hitherto neglected savage, whether of the cities or the fields, to know the arts and share the spiritual efforts of the refined. The time is marked by the multitude of writers. Soldiers,

sailors, servants, nobles, princes, women, write books. The progress of trade and the facilities for locomotion have made the world nomadic again. Of course it is well informed. All facts are exposed. The age is not to be trifled with: it wishes to know who is who, and what is what. Let there be no ghost stories more. Send Humboldt and Bonpland to explore Mexico, Guiana, and the Cordilleras. Let Captain Parry learn if there be a northwest passage to America, and Mr. Lander learn the true course of the Niger. Puckler Muskau will go to Algiers, and Sir Francis Head to the Pampas, to the Brunnens of Nassau, and to Canada. Then let us have charts true and Gazeteers correct. We will know where Babylon stood, and settle the topography of the Roman Forum. We will know whatever is to be known of Australasia, of Japan, of Persia, of Egypt, of Timbuctoo, of Palestine.

Thus Christendom has become a great reading-room; and its books have the convenient merits of the newspaper, its eminent propriety, and its superficial exactness of information. The age is well bred, knows the world, has no nonsense, and herein is well distinguished from the learned ages that preceded ours. That there is no fool like your learned fool, is a proverb plentifully illustrated in the history and writings of the English and European scholars for the half millenium that preceded the beginning of the eighteenth century. The best heads of their time build or occupy such card-house theories of religion, politics, and natural science, as a clever boy would now blow away. What stuff in Kepler, in Cardan, in Lord Bacon. Montaigne, with all his French wit and downright sense, is little better: a sophomore would wind him round his finger. Some of the Medical Remains of Lord Bacon in the book for his own use, "Of the Prolongation of Life," will move a smile in the unpoetical practitioner of the Medical College. They remind us of the drugs and practice of the leeches and enchanterers of Eastern romance. Thus we find in his whimsical collection of astringents:

"A stomacher of scarlet cloth; whelps or young healthy boys applied to the stomach; hippocratic wines, so they be made of austere materials.

"8. To remember masticatories for the mouth.

"9. And orange flower water to be smelled or snuffed up.

"10. In the third hour after the sun is risen to take in air from some high and open place with a ventilation of rosae moschatae and fresh violets, and to stir the earth with infusion of wine and mint.

"17. To use once during supper time wine in which gold is quenched.

"26. Heroic desires.

"28. To provide always an apt breakfast.

"29. To do nothing against a man's genius."

To the substance of some of these specifics we have no objection. We think we should get no better at the Medical College to-day: and of all astringents we should reckon the best, "heroic desires," and "doing nothing against one's genius." Yet the principle of modern classification is different. In the same place, it is curious to find a good deal of pretty nonsense concerning the virtues of the ashes of a hedgehog, the heart of an ape, the moss that groweth upon the skull of a dead man unburied, and the comfort that proceeds to the system from wearing beads of amber, coral, and hartshorn; – or from rings of sea horse teeth worn for cramp; – to find all these masses of moonshine side by side with the gravest and most valuable observations.

The good Sir Thomas Browne recommends as empirical cures for the gout:



"To wear shoes made of a lion's skin.

"Try transplantation: Give poultices taken from the part to dogs.

"Try the magnified amulet of Muffetus, of spiders' legs worn in a deer's skin, or of tortoises' legs cut off from the living tortoise and wrapped up in the skin of a kid."

Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy is an encyclopaedia of authors and of opinions, where one who should forage for exploded theories might easily load his panniers. In daemonology, for example; "The air," he says, "is not so full of flies in summer as it is at all times of invisible devils. They counterfeit suns and moons, and sit on ships' masts. They cause whirlwinds on a sudden and tempestuous storms, which though our meteorologists generally refer to natural causes, yet I am of Bodine's mind, they are more often caused by those aerial devils in their several quarters. Cardan gives much information concerning them. His father had one of them, an aerial devil, bound to him for eight and twenty years; as Agrippa's dog had a devil tied to his collar. Some think that Paracelsus had one confined in his sword pommel. Others wear them in rings. At Hammel in Saxony, the devil in the likeness of a pied piper carried away 130 children that were never after seen."

All this sky-full of cobwebs is now forever swept clean away. Another race is born. Humboldt and Herschel, Davy and Arago, Malthus and Bentham have arrived. If Robert Burton should be quoted to represent the army of scholars, who have furnished a contribution to his moody pages, Horace Walpole, whose letters circulate in the libraries, might be taken with some fitness to represent the spirit of much recent literature. He has taste, common sense, love of facts, impatience of humbug, love of history, love of splendor, love of justice, and the sentiment of honor among gentlemen; but no life whatever of the higher faculties, no faith, no hope, no aspiration, no question touching the secret of nature.

The favorable side of this research and love of facts is the bold and systematic criticism, which has appeared in every department of literature. From Wolf's attack upon the authenticity of the Homeric Poems, dates a new epoch in learning. Ancient history has been found to be not yet settled. It is to be subjected to common sense. It is to be cross examined. It is to be seen, whether its traditions will consist not with universal belief, but with universal experience. Niebuhr has sifted Roman history by the like methods. Heeren has made good essays towards ascertaining the necessary facts in the Grecian, Persian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Ethiopic, Carthaginian nations. English history has been analyzed by Turner, Hallam, Brodie, Lingard, Palgrave. Goethe has gone the circuit of human knowledge, as Lord Bacon did before him, writing True or False on every article. Bentham has attempted the same scrutiny in reference to Civil Law. Pestalozzi out of a deep love undertook the reform of education. The ambition of Coleridge in England embraced the whole problem of philosophy; to find, that is, a foundation in thought for everything that existed in fact. The German philosophers, Schelling, Kant, Fichte, have applied their analysis to nature and thought with an antique boldness. There can be no honest inquiry, which is not better than acquiescence. Inquiries, which once looked grave and vital no doubt, change their appearance very fast, and come to look frivolous beside the later queries to which they gave occasion.

This skeptical activity, at first directed on circumstances and historical views deemed of great importance, soon penetrated deeper than Rome or Egypt, than history or institutions, or the vocabulary of metaphysics, namely, into the thinker himself, and into every function he exercises. The poetry and the speculation of the age are marked by a certain philosophic turn, which discriminates them from the works of earlier times. The poet is not content to see how "fair hangs the apple from the rock," "what music a sunbeam awoke in the groves," nor of Hardiknute, how "stately steppes he east the way, and stately steppes he west," but he now revolves, What is the apple to me? and what the birds to me? and what is Hardiknute to

me? and what am I? And this is called subjectiveness, as the eye is withdrawn from the object and fixed on the subject or mind.

We can easily concede that a steadfast tendency of this sort appears in modern literature. It is the new consciousness of the one mind which predominates in criticism. It is the uprise of the soul and not the decline. It is founded on that insatiable demand for unity – the need to recognise one nature in all the variety of objects, – which always characterizes a genius of the first order. Accustomed always to behold the presence of the universe in every part, the soul will not condescend to look at any new part as a stranger, but saith, – "I know all already, and what art thou? Show me thy relations to me, to all, and I will entertain thee also."

There is a pernicious ambiguity in the use of the term subjective. We say, in accordance with the general view I have stated, that the single soul feels its right to be no longer confounded with numbers, but itself to sit in judgment on history and literature, and to summon all facts and parties before its tribunal. And in this sense the age is subjective.

But, in all ages, and now more, the narrow-minded have no interest in anything but its relation to their personality. What will help them to be delivered from some burden, eased in some circumstance, flattered, or pardoned, or enriched, what will help to marry or to divorce them, to prolong or to sweeten life, is sure of their interest, and nothing else. Every form under the whole heaven they behold in this most partial light or darkness of intense selfishness, until we hate their being. And this habit of intellectual selfishness has acquired in our day the fine name of subjectiveness.

Nor is the distinction between these two habits to be found in the circumstance of using the first person singular, or reciting facts and feelings of personal history. A man may say I, and never refer to himself as an individual; and a man may recite passages of his life with no

feeling of egotism. Nor need a man have a vicious subjectiveness because he deals in abstract propositions.

But the criterion, which discriminates these two habits in the poet's mind, is the tendency of his composition; namely, whether it leads us to nature, or to the person of the writer. The great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us always to themselves. The great man, even whilst he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from him to an universal experience. His own affection is in nature, in What is, and, of course, all his communication leads outward to it, starting from whatsoever point. The great never with their own consent become a load on the minds they instruct. The more they draw us to them, the farther from them or more independent of them we are, because they have brought us to the knowledge of somewhat deeper than both them and us. The great never hinder us; for, as the Jews had a custom of laying their beds north and south, founded on an opinion that the path of God was east and west, and they would not desecrate by the infirmities of sleep the Divine circuits, so the activity of the good is coincident with the axle of the world, with the sun and moon, with the course of the rivers and of the winds, with the stream of laborers in the street, and with all the activity and well being of the race. The great lead us to nature, and, in our age, to metaphysical nature, to the invisible awful facts, to moral abstractions, which are not less nature than is a river or a coal mine; nay, they are far more nature, but its essence and soul.

But the weak and evil, led also to analyze, saw nothing in thought but luxury. Thought for the selfish became selfish. They invited us to contemplate nature, and showed us an abominable self. Would you know the genius of the writer? Do not enumerate his talents or his feats, but ask thyself, What spirit is he of? Do gladness and hope and fortitude flow from his page into thy heart? Has he led thee to nature because his own soul was too happy in beholding her power and love; or is his passion for the wilderness only the sensibility of the sick, the exhibition of a talent, which only shines whilst you praise it; which has no root in the

character, and can thus minister to the vanity but not to the happiness of the possessor; and which derives all its eclat from our conventional education, but would not make itself intelligible to the wise man of another age or country? The water we wash with never speaks of itself, nor does fire, or wind, or tree. Neither does the noble natural man: he yields himself to your occasion and use; but his act expresses a reference to universal good.

Another element of the modern poetry akin to this subjective tendency, or rather the direction of that same on the question of resources, is, the Feeling of the Infinite. Of the perception now fast becoming a conscious fact, – that there is One Mind, and that all the powers and privileges which lie in any, lie in all; that I as a man may claim and appropriate whatever of true or fair or good or strong has anywhere been exhibited; that Moses and Confucius, Montaigne and Leibnitz are not so much individuals as they are parts of man and parts of me, and my intelligence proves them my own, – literature is far the best expression. It is true, this is not the only nor the obvious lesson it teaches. A selfish commerce and government have caught the eye and usurped the hand of the masses. It is not to be contested that selfishness and the senses write the laws under which we live, and that the street seems to be built, and the men and women in it moving not in reference to pure and grand ends, but rather to very short and sordid ones. Perhaps no considerable minority, perhaps no one man leads a quite clean and lofty life. What then? We concede in sadness the fact. But we say that these low customary ways are not all that survives in human beings. There is that in us which mutters, and that which groans, and that which triumphs, and that which aspires. There are facts on which men of the world superciliously smile, which are worth all their trade and politics, the impulses, namely, which drive young men into gardens and solitary places, and cause extravagant gestures, starts, distortions of the countenance, and passionate exclamations; sentiments, which find no aliment or language for themselves on the wharves, in court, or market, but which are soothed by silence, by darkness, by the pale stars, and the presence of nature. All over the modern world the educated and susceptible have betrayed their discontent with the limits of our municipal life, and with the

poverty of our dogmas of religion and philosophy. They betray this impatience by fleeing for resource to a conversation with nature – which is courted in a certain moody and exploring spirit, as if they anticipated a more intimate union of man with the world than has been known in recent ages. Those who cannot tell what they desire or expect, still sigh and struggle with indefinite thoughts and vast wishes. The very child in the nursery prattles mysticism, and doubts and philosophizes. A wild striving to express a more inward and infinite sense characterizes the works of every art. The music of Beethoven is said by those who understand it, to labor with vaster conceptions and aspirations than music has attempted before. This Feeling of the Infinite has deeply colored the poetry of the period. This new love of the vast, always native in Germany, was imported into France by De Stael, appeared in England in Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Felicia Hemans, and finds a most genial climate in the American mind. Scott and Crabbe, who formed themselves on the past, had none of this tendency; their poetry is objective. In Byron, on the other hand, it predominates; but in Byron it is blind, it sees not its true end – an infinite good, alive and beautiful, a life nourished on absolute beatitudes, descending into nature to behold itself reflected there. His will is perverted, he worships the accidents of society, and his praise of nature is thieving and selfish.

Nothing certifies the prevalence of this taste in the people more than the circulation of the poems, – one would say, most incongruously united by some bookseller, – of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. The only unity is in the subjectiveness and the aspiration common to the three writers. Shelley, though a poetic mind, is never a poet. His muse is uniformly imitative; all his poems composite. A good English scholar he is, with ear, taste, and memory, much more, he is a character full of noble and prophetic traits; but imagination, the original, authentic fire of the bard, he has not. He is clearly modern, and shares with Richter, Chateaubriand, Manzoni, and Wordsworth, the feeling of the infinite, which so labors for expression in their different genius. But all his lines are arbitrary, not necessary. When we read poetry, the mind asks, – Was this verse one of twenty which the author might have

written as well; or is this what that man was created to say? But, whilst every line of the true poet will be genuine, he is in a boundless power and freedom to say a million things. And the reason why he can say one thing well, is because his vision extends to the sight of all things, and so he describes each as one who knows many and all.

The fame of Wordsworth is a leading fact in modern literature, when it is considered how hostile his genius at first seemed to the reigning taste, and with what feeble poetic talents his great and steadily growing dominion has been established. More than any other poet his success has been not his own, but that of the idea which he shared with his coevals, and which he has rarely succeeded in adequately expressing. The Excursion awakened in every lover of nature the right feeling. We saw stars shine, we felt the awe of mountains, we heard the rustle of the wind in the grass, and knew again the ineffable secret of solitude. It was a great joy. It was nearer to nature than anything we had before. But the interest of the poem ended almost with the narrative of the influences of nature on the mind of the Boy, in the first book. Obviously for that passage the poem was written, and with the exception of this and of a few strains of the like character in the sequel, the whole poem was dull. Here was no poem, but here was poetry, and a sure index where the subtle muse was about to pitch her tent and find the argument of her song. It was the human soul in these last ages striving for a just publication of itself. Add to this, however, the great praise of Wordsworth, that more than any other contemporary bard he is pervaded with a reverence of somewhat higher than (conscious) thought. There is in him that property common to all great poets, a wisdom of humanity, which is superior to any talents which they exert. It is the wisest part of Shakspeare and of Milton. For they are poets by the free course which they allow to the informing soul, which through their eyes beholdeth again and blesseth the things which it hath made. The soul is superior to its knowledge, wiser than any of its works.

With the name of Wordsworth rises to our recollection the name of his contemporary and friend, Walter Savage Landor – a man working in a very different and peculiar spirit, yet one

whose genius and accomplishments deserve a wiser criticism than we have yet seen applied to them, and the rather that his name does not readily associate itself with any school of writers. Of Thomas Carlyle, also we shall say nothing at this time, since the quality and the energy of his influence on the youth of this country will require at our hands ere long a distinct and faithful acknowledgment.

But of all men he, who has united in himself and that in the most extraordinary degree the tendencies of the era, is the German poet, naturalist, and philosopher, Goethe. Whatever the age inherited or invented, he made his own. He has owed to Commerce and to the victories of the Understanding, all their spoils. Such was his capacity, that the magazines of the world's ancient or modern wealth, which arts and intercourse and skepticism could command – he wanted them all. Had there been twice so much, he could have used it as well. Geologist, mechanic, merchant, chemist, king, radical, painter, composer, – all worked for him, and a thousand men seemed to look through his eyes. He learned as readily as other men breathe. Of all the men of this time, not one has seemed so much at home in it as he. He was not afraid to live. And in him this encyclopaedia of facts, which it has been the boast of the age to compile, wrought an equal effect. He was knowing; he was brave; he was clean from all narrowness; he has a perfect propriety and taste, – a quality by no means common to the German writers. Nay, since the earth, as we said, had become a reading-room, the new opportunities seem to have aided him to be that resolute realist he is, and seconded his sturdy determination to see things for what they are. To look at him, one would say, there was never an observer before. What sagacity, what industry of observation! to read his record is a frugality of time, for you shall find no word that does not stand for a thing, and he is of that comprehension, which can see the value of truth. His love of nature has seemed to give a new meaning to that word. There was never man more domesticated in this world than he. And he is an apology for the analytic spirit of the period, because, of his analysis, always wholes were the result. All conventions, all traditions he rejected. And yet he felt his entire right and duty to stand before and try and judge every fact in nature. He



thought it necessary to dot round with his own pen the entire sphere of knowables; and for many of his stories, this seems the only reason: Here is a piece of humanity I had hitherto omitted to sketch; – take this. He does not say so in syllables, – yet a sort of conscientious feeling he had to be up to the universe, is the best account and apology for many of them. He shared also the subjectiveness of the age, and that too in both the senses I have discriminated. With the sharpest eye for form, color, botany, engraving, medals, persons, and manners, he never stopped at surface, but pierced the purpose of a thing, and studied to reconcile that purpose with his own being. What he could so reconcile was good; what he could not, was false. Hence a certain greatness encircles every fact he treats; for to him it has a soul, an eternal reason why it was so, and not otherwise. This is the secret of that deep realism, which went about among all objects he beheld, to find the cause why they must be what they are. It was with him a favorite task to find a theory of every institution, custom, art, work of art, which he observes. Witness his explanation of the Italian mode of reckoning the hours of the day, as growing out of the Italian climate; of the obelisk of Egypt, as growing out of a common natural fracture in the granite parallelopiped in Upper Egypt; of the Doric architecture, and the Gothic; of the Venetian music of the gondolier originating in the habit of the fishers' wives of the Lido singing to their husbands on the sea; of the Amphitheatre, which is the enclosure of the natural cup of heads that arranges itself round every spectacle in the street; of the coloring of Titian and Paul Veronese, which one may verify in the common daylight in Venice every afternoon; of the Carnival at Rome; of the domestic rural architecture in Italy; and many the like examples.

But also that other vicious subjectiveness, that vice of the time, infected him also. We are provoked with his Olympian self-complacency, the patronizing air with which he vouchsafes to tolerate the genius and performances of other mortals, "the good Hiller," "our excellent Kant," "the friendly Wieland," &c. &c. There is a good letter from Wieland to Merck, in which Wieland relates that Goethe read to a select party his journal of a tour in Switzerland with the Grand Duke, and their passage through Valois and over the St. Gothard. "It was," says

Wieland, "as good as Xenophon's Anabasis. The piece is one of his most masterly productions, and is thought and written with the greatness peculiar to him. The fair hearers were enthusiastic at the nature in this piece; I liked the sly art in the composition, whereof they saw nothing, still better. It is a true poem, so concealed is the art too. But what most remarkably in this as in all his other works distinguishes him from Homer and Shakspeare, is, that the Me, the Ille ego, everywhere glimmers through, although without any boasting and with an infinite fineness." This subtle element of egotism in Goethe certainly does not seem to deform his compositions, but to lower the moral influence of the man. He differs from all the great in the total want of frankness. Whoso saw Milton, whoso saw Shakspeare, saw them do their best, and utter their whole heart manlike among their brethren. No man was permitted to call Goethe brother. He hid himself, and worked always to astonish, which is an egotism, and therefore little.

If we try Goethe by the ordinary canons of criticism, we should say that his thinking is of great altitude, and all level; – not a succession of summits, but a high Asiatic table land. Dramatic power, the rarest talent in literature, he has very little. He has an eye constant to the fact of life, and that never pauses in its advance. But the great felicities, the miracles of poetry, he has never. It is all design with him, just thought and instructed expression, analogies, allusion, illustration, which knowledge and correct thinking supply; but of Shakspeare and the transcendant muse, no syllable. Yet in the court and law to which we ordinarily speak, and without adverting to absolute standards, we claim for him the praise of truth, of fidelity to his intellectual nature. He is the king of all scholars. In these days and in this country, where the scholars are few and idle, where men read easy books and sleep after dinner, it seems as if no book could so safely be put in the hands of young men as the letters of Goethe, which attest the incessant activity of this man to eighty years, in an endless variety of studies with uniform cheerfulness and greatness of mind. They cannot be read without shaming us into an emulating industry. Let him have the praise of the love of truth. We think, when we contemplate the stupendous glory of the world, that it were life enough

for one man merely to lift his hands and cry with St. Augustine, "Wrangle who pleases, I will wonder." Well, this he did. Here was a man, who, in the feeling that the thing itself was so admirable as to leave all comment behind, went up and down from object to object, lifting the veil from everyone, and did no more. What he said of Lavater, may trulier be said of him, that "it was fearful to stand in the presence of one, before whom all the boundaries within which nature has circumscribed our being were laid flat." His are the bright and terrible eyes, which meet the modern student in every sacred chapel of thought, in every public enclosure.

But now, that we may not seem to dodge the question which all men ask, nor pay a great man so ill a compliment as to praise him only in the conventional and comparative speech, let us honestly record our thought upon the total worth and influence of this genius. Does he represent not only the achievement of that age in which he lived, but that which it would be and is now becoming? And what shall we think of that absence of the moral sentiment, that singular equivalence to him of good and evil in action, which discredits his compositions to the pure? The spirit of his biography, of his poems, of his tales, is identical, and we may here set down by way of comment on his genius the impressions recently awakened in us by the story of Wilhelm Meister.

All great men have written proudly, nor cared to explain. They knew that the intelligent reader would come at last, and would thank them. So did Dante, so did Machiavel. Goethe has done this in Meister. We can fancy him saying to himself; – There are poets enough of the ideal; let me paint the Actual, as, after years of dreams, it will still appear and reappear to wise men. That all shall right itself in the long Morrow, I may well allow, and my novel may easily wait for the same regeneration. The age, that can damn it as false and falsifying, will see that it is deeply one with the genius and history of all the centuries. I have given my characters a bias to error. Men have the same. I have let mischances befall instead of good fortune. They do so daily. And out of many vices and misfortunes, I have let a great success

grow, as I had known in my own and many other examples. Fierce churchmen and effeminate aspirants will chide and hate my name, but every keen beholder of life will justify my truth, and will acquit me of prejudging the cause of humanity by painting it with this morose fidelity. To a profound soul is not austere truth the sweetest flattery?

Yes, O Goethe! but the ideal is truer than the actual. That is ephemeral, but this changes not. Moreover, because nature is moral, that mind only can see, in which the same order entirely obtains. An interchangeable Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, each wholly interfused in the other, must make the humors of that eye, which would see causes reaching to their last effect and reproducing the world forever. The least inequality of mixture, the excess of one element over the other, in that degree diminishes the transparency of things, makes the world opaque to the observer, and destroys so far the value of his experience. No particular gifts can countervail this defect. In reading Meister, I am charmed with the insight; to use a phrase of Ben Jonson's, "it is rammed with life." I find there actual men and women even too faithfully painted. I am, moreover, instructed in the possibility of a highly accomplished society, and taught to look for great talent and culture under a grey coat. But this is all. The limits of artificial society are never quite out of sight. The vicious conventions, which hem us in like prison walls, and which the poet should explode at his touch, stand for all they are worth in the newspaper. I am never lifted above myself. I am not transported out of the dominion of the senses, or cheered with an infinite tenderness, or armed with a grand trust.

Goethe, then, must be set down as the poet of the Actual, not of the Ideal; the poet of limitation, not of possibility; of this world, and not of religion and hope; in short, if I may say so, the poet of prose, and not of poetry. He accepts the base doctrine of Fate, and gleans what straggling joys may yet remain out of its ban. He is like a banker or a weaver with a passion for the country, he steals out of the hot streets before sunrise, or after sunset, or on a rare holiday, to get a draught of sweet air, and a gaze at the magnificence of summer, but dares not break from his slavery and lead a man's life in a man's relation to nature. In that

which should be his own place, he feels like a truant, and is scourged back presently to his task and his cell. Poetry is with Goethe thus external, the gilding of the chain, the mitigation of his fate; but the muse never essays those thunder-tones, which cause to vibrate the sun and the moon, which dissipate by dreadful melody all this iron network of circumstance, and abolish the old heavens and the old earth before the free-will or Godhead of man. That Goethe had not a moral perception proportionate to his other powers, is not then merely a circumstance, as we might relate of a man that he had or had not the sense of tune or an eye for colors; but it is the cardinal fact of health or disease; since, lacking this, he failed in the high sense to be a creator, and with divine endowments drops by irreversible decree into the common history of genius. He was content to fall into the track of vulgar poets, and spend on common aims his splendid endowments, and has declined the office proffered to now and then a man in many centuries in the power of his genius – of a Redeemer of the human mind. He has written better than other poets, only as his talent was subtler, but the ambition of creation he refused. Life for him is prettier, easier, wiser, decenter, has a gem or two more on its robe, but its old eternal burden is not relieved; no drop of healthier blood flows yet in its veins. Let him pass. Humanity must wait for its physician still at the side of the road, and confess as this man goes out that they have served it better, who assured it out of the innocent hope in their hearts that a Physician will come, than this majestic Artist, with all the treasuries of wit, of science, and of power at his command.

The criticism, which is not so much spoken as felt in reference to Goethe, instructs us directly in the hope of literature. We feel that a man gifted like him should not leave the world as he found it. It is true, though somewhat sad, that every fine genius teaches us how to blame himself. Being so much, we cannot forgive him for not being more. When one of these grand monads is incarnated, whom nature seems to design for eternal men and draw to her bosom, we think that the old wearinesses of Europe and Asia, the trivial forms of daily life will now end, and a new morning break on us all. What is Austria? What is England? What is our graduated and petrified social scale of ranks and employments? Shall not a poet

redeem us from these idolatries, and pale their legendary lustre before the fires of the Divine Wisdom which burn in his heart? All that in our sovereign moments each of us has divined of the powers of thought, all the hints of omnipresence and energy which we have caught, this man should unfold and constitute facts.

And this is the insatiable craving which alternately saddens and gladdens men at this day. The Doctrine of the Life of Man established after the truth through all his faculties; – this is the thought which the literature of this hour meditates and labors to say. This is that which tunes the tongue and fires the eye and sits in the silence of the youth. Verily it will not long want articulate and melodious expression. There is nothing in the heart but comes presently to the lips. The very depth of the sentiment, which is the author of all the cutaneous life we see, is guarantee for the riches of science and of song in the age to come. He, who doubts whether this age or this country can yield any contribution to the literature of the world, only betrays his own blindness to the necessities of the human soul. Has the power of poetry ceased, or the need? Have the eyes ceased to see that which they would have, and which they have not? Have they ceased to see other eyes? Are there no lonely, anxious, wondering children, who must tell their tale? Are we not evermore whipped by thoughts;

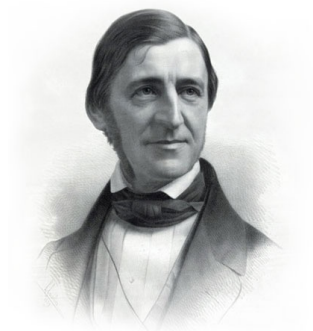
**"In sorrow steeped and steeped in love**

**Of thoughts not yet incarnated?"**

The heart beats in this age as of old, and the passions are busy as ever. Nature has not lost one ringlet of her beauty, one impulse of resistance and valor. From the necessity of loving none are exempt, and he that loves must utter his desires. A charm as radiant as beauty ever beamed, a love that fainteth at the sight of its object, is new to-day.

"The world does not run smoother than of old,  
There are sad haps that must be told."

Man is not so far lost but that he suffers ever the great Discontent, which is the elegy of his loss and the prediction of his recovery. In the gay saloon he laments that these figures are not what Raphael and Guercino painted. Withered though he stand and trifler though he be, the august spirit of the world looks out from his eyes. In his heart he knows the ache of spiritual pain, and his thought can animate the sea and land. What then shall hinder the Genius of the time from speaking its thought? It cannot be silent, if it would. It will write in a higher spirit, and a wider knowledge, and with a grander practical aim, than ever yet guided the pen of poet. It will write the annals of a changed world, and record the descent of principles into practice, of love into Government, of love into Trade. It will describe the new heroic life of man, the now unbelieved possibility of simple living and of clean and noble relations with men. Religion will bind again these that were sometime frivolous, customary, enemies, skeptics, self-seekers, into a joyful reverence for the circumambient Whole, and that which was ecstasy shall become daily bread.



Ralph Waldo Emerson  
(1803-1882)