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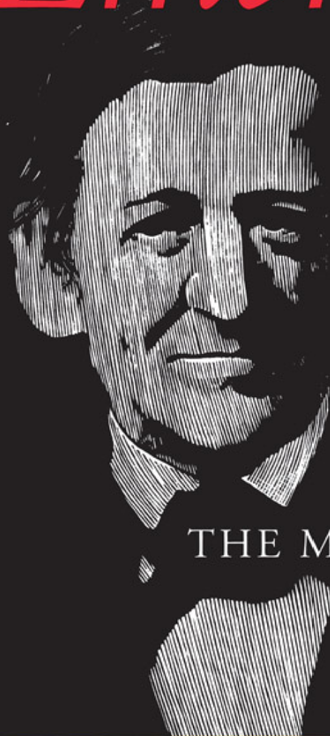
**MICHAEL DIRDA,** *Washington Post Book World*

# *Emerson*



## THE MIND ON FIRE

ROBERT D. RICHARDSON JR.

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# *The Mind on Fire*

A BIOGRAPHY BY

Robert D. Richardson Jr.

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# Preface

THIS BOOK WAS ORIGINALLY PLANNED AS AN INTELLECTUAL biography, a companion piece to *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986). My approach to both Thoreau and Emerson has been to read what they read and then to relate their reading to their writing. The story, however—and it is a story—of Emerson's intellectual odyssey turned out to be incomprehensible apart from his personal and social life. The result is an intellectual biography as well as a portrait of the whole man. A great deal of newly available material (the letters of Emerson's brothers, of his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, and of his friend Caroline Sturgis, for example) has brought to light an Emerson strikingly more lively than the plaster sage of Concord.

Emerson lived for ideas, but he did so with the reckless, headlong ardor of a lover. He associated the human mind and its capacity for thought with activity and energy. He hated the passive notion of the mind as a blank slate. He concentrated instead on the individual's sources of power, on access to the central fires that ignite the mind. His main image of the creative mind is of a volcano. "We must have not only hydrogen in balloons and steel springs under coaches," he wrote, "but we must have fire under the Andes at the core of the world."

Freed of his vast, unfortunate, and self-perpetuating reputation, Emerson steps forth as a complicated, energetic, and emotionally intense man who habitually spoke against the status quo and in favor of whatever was wild and free. The great spokesman for individualism and self-reliance turns out to have been a good neighbor, an activist citizen, a fond father, a loyal brother, and a man whose many friendships framed his life. Emerson's main project, never realized to his satisfaction, was to write a natural history of intellect; I have tried to honor this aim by reconstructing the natural history of his enthusiasms.

Biographies of Emerson appear at regular intervals because his life and work—like Jefferson's and Lincoln's—continue to shape American self-



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perception. Emerson never wrote for groups or classes or institutions; his intended audience was always the single hearer or reader. Where this biography parts company with its many worthy predecessors is in its lack of interest in institutional Emersonianism—in Emerson's influence—and in its concentration instead on the man. What kind of individual was this prophet of individualism?

I have had a great deal of help with this project. Many scholarly and critical debts are recorded in the notes. I wish also to thank, for their various services, the Ralph Waldo Emerson Association, Chris Steele of the Massachusetts Historical Society Library, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, David Wood of the Concord Museum, Marcia Moss of the Concord Free Public Library, the Thoreau Lyceum, the Boston Athenaeum, the Houghton Library at Harvard, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Liz Gwillam and Paul O'Pecko of Mystic Seaport, Elizabeth Swaim, curator of Special Collections, and Joan Jurale, reference librarian at Wesleyan University, Tina Furtado and the New Bedford Free Public Library, and Michael Preston, who is continuing work on Eugene Irey's mammoth computerized concordance to Emerson. Zhou Guangyuan, Beth Marsh, Gayle Smith, and Ida Walters taught me as students. For various kinds of aid and support, cheerfully given, I am also grateful to Susan Bardens, W. J. Bate, Delores Bird Carpenter, Victor Castellani, Gary Collison, Rebecca Frazier, Greg Gatenby, Joan Goodwin, Victor Gourevitch, Robert Gross, Philip Gura, Justin Kaplan, Phyllis Rose, David Schorr, and Paul Schwaber. Eleanor M. Tilton let me see typescripts of her new volumes of Emerson letters. Bob Burkholder shared his incomparable knowledge of Emerson bibliography. Al von Frank let me see typescripts of the new edition of Emerson's sermons. George Goodspeed let me read his collection of unpublished Emerson family letters. For help with identifying and reproducing photographs I am deeply indebted to the advice and expertise of Harry Orth and Daniel Jones.

No one can mention, let alone repay, all the intellectual debts one accumulates during an eight-year project. Roscoe Hill helped me with Plato, Phyllis Cole with the difficult and fascinating Mary Moody Emerson, Megan Marshall with Elizabeth Peabody. To Jere Surber I owe whatever grasp of German idealist thought I have. Burton Feldman and Allen Mandelbaum have kindly attended to my continuing education in too many areas to list; so have my daughters, Anne and Lissa. Stanley Holwitz has been



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a steady source of encouragement. The John Simon Guggenheim Foundation gave me a year's support, a very great boon, which came at just the right time.

Joel Myerson, the dean of American transcendentalist scholars, made an extraordinary contribution. With the generosity for which he is famous, he turned over to me several thousand pages of transcripts he had made of the letters and other writings of Emerson's brothers Charles, Edward, and William. This material has made possible a new level of understanding of the Emerson family. Joel also gave my entire manuscript a searching and profoundly helpful reading. Larry Buell, Annie Dillard, Amanda Clark Frost, and David Robinson also read the book in manuscript. I have profited from the incomparable knowledge of each; remaining lapses and gaffes are, of course, exclusively mine. The dedication inadequately records my greatest debt of all.



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We measure ourselves by many standards. Our strength
and our intelligence, our wealth and even our good luck,
are things which warm our heart and make us feel
ourselves a match for life. But deeper than all such
things and able to suffice unto itself without them,
is the sense of the amount of effort we can
put forth . . . He who can make none is but a shadow; he
who can make much is a hero.

William James

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# *The Student*

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# *1. Prologue*

On March 29, 1832, the twenty-eight-year-old Emerson visited the tomb of his young wife, Ellen, who had been buried a year and two months earlier. He was in the habit of walking from Boston out to her grave in Roxbury every day, but on this particular day he did more than commune with the spirit of the departed Ellen: he opened the coffin. Ellen had been young and pretty. She was seventeen when they were engaged, eighteen when married, and barely twenty when she died of advanced tuberculosis. They had made frantic efforts at a cure, including long open-air carriage rides and massive doses of country air. Their life together had been stained almost from the start by the bright blood of Ellen's coughing.

Opening the coffin was not a grisly gothic gesture, not just the wild aberration of an unhinged lover. What Emerson was doing was not unheard of. At least two of Emerson's contemporaries did the same thing. A Unitarian minister and good friend of Margaret Fuller's, James Freeman Clarke, once opened the coffin of the woman he had been in love with when he was an undergraduate. Edgar Allan Poe's literary executor, the anthologist Rufus Griswold, opened the coffin of his dead wife forty days after the funeral.[1]

Emerson opened not only the tomb or family vault but the coffin itself. The act was essential Emerson. He had to see for himself. Some part of him was not able to believe she was dead. He was still writing to her in his journals as though she was alive. Perhaps the very deadness of the body would help a belief in the life of the spirit. A modern writer has said that "beside the corpse of the beloved were generated not only the idea of the soul, the belief in immortality, and a great part of man's deep-rooted sense of guilt, but also the earliest inkling of ethical law." We do not know exactly what moved Emerson on this occasion, but we do know that he had a powerful craving for direct, personal, unmediated experience. That is what he meant when he insisted that one should strive for an original relation to the universe. Not a novel relation, just one's own. Emerson is the great American champion of self-reliance, of the adequacy of the individual, and of the importance of



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the active soul or spirit. Never content with mere assertion, he looked always for the sources of strength. Emerson's lifelong search, what he called his heart's inquiry, was "Whence is your power?" His reply was always the same: "From my nonconformity. I never listened to your people's law, or to what they call their gospel, and wasted my time. I was content with the simple rural poverty of my own. Hence this sweetness."[2]

Emerson's direct facing of death owed something to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, the brilliant and original sister of Emerson's father, who deliberately lived with death every day of her life and drew much of her own power from that grim helpmeet. Her jagged, combative prose uses death and pain as probes for faith. "Did I not assure good Lincoln Ripley, long since," she wrote, "that I should be willing to have limbs rot, and senses dug out, if I could perceive more of God?"[3]

Emerson had also by now learned to think of ideas not as abstractions but as perceptions, laws, templates, patterns, and plans. Ideas were not less real than the phenomenal world. If anything, ideas were more important than phenomena because they lay behind them, creating and explaining the visible world. Ideas for Emerson were tangible and had force. "Believe in magnetism, not in needles," he wrote. Ideas, even the idea of death, could not be separated from sense experience.

Emerson's own journal entry for this March day was terse: "I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin." They had been utterly in love, and for a moment, on September 30, 1829, their wedding day, the future had seemed clear. Notes and letters flew back and forth. They traveled and wrote verses together and laughed at the Shakers who tried to woo them to celibacy. She intended to be a poet, he a preacher. He had accepted a pulpit in Boston, and they had set up a home that became at once the center of the Emerson family, as both Waldo's mother and his younger brother Charles came to live with them. Now, a little more than a year after Ellen's death, Emerson's life was unraveling fast. He was so desolate and lonely that his mother tried to persuade his invalid brother Edward to come back from the West Indies to look after him. His professional life was also going badly. Though he was a much-loved minister in an important Boston church, he was having trouble believing in personal immortality, trouble believing in the sacrament of Communion, and trouble accepting the authority and historical accuracy of the Bible. The truth was that Emerson was in a fast-deepening crisis of vocation. He could not accept his ministerial role, he was unsure of his faith, and he felt bereft and empty. He was directionless.



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His brother Charles wrote to Aunt Mary that "Waldo is sick . . . I never saw him so disheartened . . . things seem flying to pieces."[4]

At Ellen's grave that day in Roxbury in 1832 Emerson was standing amidst the ruins of his own life. More than ten years had passed since he had left college. Love had died and his career was falling apart. He was not sure what he really believed, who he really was, or what he should be doing. He felt the "vanishing volatile froth of the present" turning into the fixed adamantine past. "We walk on molten lava," he wrote.

In the months immediately ahead he continued to walk to Ellen's grave every day, but now his concentration on death was broken and he wrote a sermon called "The God of the Living" and another on astronomy. He reached a major watershed in his long struggle with religion. "Astronomy irresistibly modifies all religion," he wrote. "The irresistible effect of Copernican astronomy has been to make the great scheme of the salvation of man absolutely incredible." He would live no longer with the dead. "Let us express our astonishment," he wrote in his journal in May, "before we are swallowed up in the yeast of the abyss. I will lift up my hands and say Kosmos."[5]

Before the year was out, Emerson had resigned his pulpit, moved his mother, sold his household furniture, and taken ship for Europe. He set out on Christmas Day, 1832. A northeast storm was on its way as the ship sailed from Boston, plunging into the grey expanse of the North Atlantic.



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# *2. Emerson at Harvard*

ELEVEN YEARS EARLIER, IN THE SPRING OF 1821, RALPH Emerson was in the last semester of his senior year at Harvard. He had just turned eighteen and had decided he wanted to be called Waldo. Graduation was set for August and he was to be class poet. The honor was less than meets the eye, for six other members of his class had already declined the post. And though he took poetry seriously enough, he was not otherwise a distinguished student. He ranked in the middle of his class; he was not elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He was tall and thin and had reached his height of nearly six feet awkwardly early, at fourteen. He had long arms and legs, a pale complexion, light sandy hair, a large roman nose, and blue eyes. He was full of high spirits and boyish silliness, but there was also an odd self-possession about him. No one ever saw him run and no one ever tried to slap him on the back. Josiah Quincy, a classmate of Emerson's and later president of Harvard, said that Emerson was only a fair scholar. Like many another young person, Emerson did not shine in the things Harvard then knew how to measure. His extracurricular reading was at least three times as extensive as his reading for courses, and he was already in the habit of getting up at 4:30 or 5 in the morning to tend his correspondence and write in his journals.

Emerson's Harvard was a small, nondescript place, half boys school, half center for advanced study. It had fewer than two hundred fifty students. Emerson's class had sixty, with most of the boys coming from Massachusetts and New England, and with 27 percent of the students coming from elsewhere. There was a marked southern presence. Eleven of Emerson's classmates, 18 percent of the class, were from South Carolina alone. In Emerson's day, a student commonly entered college at thirteen or fourteen, graduating at seventeen or eighteen. As a result, college life had at times a certain rowdiness. In Emerson's sophomore year an epic food fight broke out on the first floor of University Hall. The fight quickly got beyond the throwing of food and almost all the school's crockery was smashed. But it would be a mistake to assume this was the dominant tone of college life.



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Young people grew up faster then. Emerson could read before he was three; he taught his first class at fourteen. Girls were little women, boys little men. The curriculum shows that Harvard was not like either the high school or the college of today; it offered a combination of basic and advanced studies, functioning as a sort of early college.

Emerson took the same set of required courses everyone else did. He learned enough Greek to read both the *Iliad* and the New Testament. In Latin he read Livy, Horace, Cicero, Juvenal, and Persius as well as Hugo Grotius's *De veritate religionis Christianae.* He studied algebra, plane geometry, analytic geometry, and spherical geometry. He took Roman history in his freshman year and during his senior year he studied the principles of American constitutional government, reading the *Federalist Papers.* In science he did physics (matter, motion or mechanics, hydrostatics, pneumatics, electricity, and optics) and astronomy as a junior, chemistry as a senior. He studied political economy. In philosophy he took courses in formal logic as well as the broadly conceived and attractively written moral philosophy of Dugald Stewart and William Paley. He read Locke's *Essays.*

Harvard gave Emerson a solid education, liberal, not hidebound, and practical in a number of ways. Along with the expected heavy emphasis on Greek and Latin, there was also an interesting emphasis on English. As a freshman Emerson studied Robert Lowth's workaday *English Grammar* and also read John Walker's *Rhetorical Grammar,* a book devoted almost entirely to elocution, to reading aloud, and to public speaking. Walker is concerned with "correct" speaking. Emerson learned not to say "uppinion" for opinion, "sensubble" for sensible, or "terrubble" for terrible. As a sophomore Emerson studied Blair's classic *Lectures on Rhetoric* and wrote frequent compositions. Blair provided a lucid, reasonable, widely accepted approach to English style. Blair treated figurative language not as "the invention of schools" but as the natural clothing of the energetic and passionate speech of ordinary people.[1]

Much can be said against the prescribed course of study Emerson followed. Emerson himself said later that even though you knew the university was hostile to genius, you sent your children there and hoped for the best. But in some areas, and practical English is one, the college offered thorough, concrete, and useful training.

Religious education was another matter. Emerson read the great liberal defenses of Christianity by Paley and Butler, monuments of rational sober thought, postdeist defenses of revealed religion as not inconsistent with



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eighteenth-century scientific thought. Paley's most interesting proof of the existence of God is his detailed argument for design centering on the human eye. Butler's *Analogy* (1736) has been called the most famous volume of English theology, as important in its sphere as Bacon in the sciences. In Emerson's day the *Analogy* was as old, as widely accepted, and as outdated as Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) is in ours. Its argument is that the deist accepts his impersonal Creator or First Principle on essentially the same grounds and in the face of the same difficulties that make him reject revelation. Both Paley and Butler thus argue that revealed Christianity is at bottom perfectly compatible with natural religion and with the findings of modern science. In his defense of revelation, of the Bible, Butler already is subtly shifting the standard defensive grounds. There is more than a hint in the *Analogy* that the authenticating proofs of religion are to be sought in man's mind, not in books or institutions. "The proper motives of religion," Butler says, "are the proper proofs of it from our moral nature, from the presages of conscience." Paley's and Butler's books are not Calvinist, not jeremiads, not emotional or reactionary appeals. Like required religious texts everywhere, they stirred resentment. At the same time these books contained the seeds of a new approach to religion.[2]

The college text Emerson used for the study of the New Testament also contained the first stirrings of a theological revolution. Griesbach's edition of the Greek New Testament is the port of entry through which the new German biblical scholarship first reached a wide range of educated Americans. Griesbach bases his edition, with its copious notes, on the hypothesis that the Gospel of Matthew preceded the other gospels, which themselves were not eyewitness accounts but versions of Matthew. This suggestion was disturbing to many. If one or more of the gospels should be found not to be a reliable eyewitness account, if Luke's or Mark's gospel should turn out not to represent the writer's original relation of the events but something secondhand, then the absolute authority of the Bible becomes an open question.[3]

Emerson's college writings show him for the most part to have been a surprisingly conventional young man. He hated mathematics and did poorly in the subject. He preferred his literary soliloquies to chemistry and to the "accursed Enfield lessons" in physics. His own ideas were commonplace. He thought of history as the fall of successive empires; his standpoint is that of a moralized Gibbon. His undergraduate poem on India, "Indian Superstition," is a jejune, xenophobic, condescending, even racist overview of



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Indic mythology from the vantage of European Christianity. He expressed a vigorous puritan disapproval of theater and drama, and his religious remarks contain conventional references to the degradation of human nature and the coming Day of Judgment.[4]

Emerson was very poor while he was at Harvard. He felt his poverty keenly and later remarked that his life would have been quite different had he had money. His mother's rent, his younger brothers' schooling, and his own college tuition all depended now on the money his older brother William made teaching school in Maine. Other boys spent six hundred dollars a year at college; Emerson spent less than three hundred dollars during his four years. He held a work-study position as the "President's Freshman" his first year, running errands for the college president in return for tuition. Later he won a scholarship for poor boys which had been left to the college in the form of a rental home. As holder of the scholarship, Emerson was obliged to go and collect the rent from the tenant.

College life became more attractive to Emerson after his first year. Emerson joined a number of clubs, one of which he helped found. Along with classes, studying, outside reading, and club activities, he made time for daily walks to the rural area of Cambridge called, after the town in Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village,* "Sweet Auburn." His feeling for nature was already intense. He was exhilarated—his word—when the persistent spring clouds gave way to the blue skies of June. "I love the picturesque glitter of a summer's morning landscape," he wrote. "It kindles this burning admiration of nature and enthusiasm of mind."[5]

Back in the college yard, there was class football every day at noon. And there were new friendships. Emerson found himself strangely and powerfully attracted by a new freshman named Martin Gay. With an unembarrassed frankness he wrote in his journal about the disturbing power of the glances he and Gay exchanged. He would remain susceptible to such crushes, expressed at first through glances, all his life; most of them would involve women. Later he wrote about the quickness with which a glance could arouse a depth of interest. He had a sort of theory of "the glance." And while he heavily crossed out the Martin Gay journal notes at some later time, his initial recording of them indicates his essential emotional openness. He may have been quiet, he certainly did not cut a commanding figure, but he did not shrink from direct experience.

Since the Emerson boys were only a few years apart, they overlapped one another at Harvard. Since they were poor, they looked for ways to make a



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little extra money. Sometimes they wrote papers for others. His brother Edward once wrote a paper for another student, carefully adjusting the level of the writing to the skill of the buyer. The boy came down to the steps of his dorm and called a group over to read them the paper to see if it was really worth the fifty cents he had paid for it.[6]

Outside the college the country and the world were changing. On August 10, 1821, two weeks before Emerson's graduation, Missouri joined the Union. After a divisive, acrimonious debate, Missouri had been granted statehood despite its deliberately unconstitutional and insulting legislative exclusion of free blacks from other states. Far from being put to rest by the Missouri Compromise, the slavery issue in America would never sleep again. In South America revolt against Spain was afoot. Bolívar had become president of Greater Colombia (including Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama) in 1819. In 1820 revolution broke out in Naples, in the Piedmont, in Spain, and in Portugal. As Emerson's class graduated in 1821, Europe's autocrats were collaborating to crush the revolt in Naples. To the east the Greek war for independence broke out.[7]



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# 3. *The March of Mind*

EMERSON REACHED A MAJOR TURNING POINT MIDWAY THROUGH his junior year. In December of 1819 he began to keep a list of books he had read. In early January of 1820 he began to keep a notebook for quotations, comments on his reading, and original verses. He decided to write an essay for the Bowdoin Prize competition. Later in the month he began the first of what was to be a series of notebooks he called "Wide World." By February he was giving up the name Ralph and signing himself Waldo.

Emerson's sense of himself had changed during the past three months. He was now more organized and more ambitious, newly interested in imagination and newly committed to the business of writing. The new journals also marked a new originality. For example, in his reading of Abraham Tucker's *The Light of Nature Pursued,* an aptly named work that toiled after its subject through eight substantial volumes, Emerson found a point of interest far from the work's main focus. Tucker was out to explore "whether Reason alone be sufficient to direct us in all parts of our conduct, or whether Revelation and Supernatural aids be necessary." (The answer is the former.) From a few words Tucker drops by the way, Emerson constructs an elaborate paragraph about the parts of the world uninhabited by man being perhaps "the abodes of other orders of sentient beings invisible or unexperienced." In the strongest possible contrast to the rationalist curriculum, Emerson's journal shows a marked and steady interest in imagination, in fairyland, in legend, folktale, fiction, and poetry.[1]

Emerson was now feverishly active. He spent the end of his junior year "reading and writing and talking and walking." In addition to schoolwork and letters from his family, he read, between December 1819 and February 1820, Byron's *Don Juan,* Archibald Alison's *Essay on Taste,* Edward Channing's inaugural discourse, Ben Jonson's *Life, Every Man in His Humour,* and *Every Man Out of His Humour,* a volume of Joanna Baillie's plays, Samuel Rogers's poem "Human Life," Thomas Campbell's *Essay on English Poetry,* the new *North American Review,* Thomas Blackwell's *Life and Writ-*



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*ings of Homer,* Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews,* Washington Irving's *Sketch Book,* Bacon's *Essays,* the first volume of Dacier's *Dialogues of Plato,* Scott's *Bridal of Triermain,* a volume of Crabbe, and H. H. Milman's *Samor, Lord of the Bright City.* The list is weighted toward imaginative literature, from the satires of Jonson and Byron to the Tolkien-like fantasy of Milman's *Samor.* Threaded through the purely literary reading list this winter of 1819–1820 are books and ideas that were to become perennial with Emerson. Here is his interest in Plato and his interest in Bacon not as a father of modern experimental science but as stylist and essayist.

The unusual books here are Blackwell on Homer and Lowth on Hebrew poetry. These two works are among the most important foundations for modern criticism of Homer and the Bible and for the modern conception of the poet as prophet. Blackwell and Lowth wrote in England in the mid-eighteenth century. The founders of the so-called "higher criticism" in Germany built on the foundations provided by Blackwell and Lowth. In its German dress this new method of reading the Bible then returned to England, to be received to the United States in the early nineteenth century.[2]

Thomas Blackwell launches the historical critique of Homer. He tries to dislodge the notion that Greek myths are just fairy tales with the argument that Greek myth is Greek religion and that the Homeric poet is, like Orpheus, a true teacher-founder of philosophy, history, and politics. And just as Blackwell sees Greek myth and literature and religion in its historical context, so Lowth (in *The Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews,* 1747) argues that the Bible can fruitfully be approached as Hebrew poetry. He points out that the words for poet and prophet are the same in Hebrew; he treats the Old Testament prophets as the poets of their era—and thus made it possible for modern poets to claim the role of prophet for their era. The concept of the modern poet-prophet runs from Lowth to Blake, to Herder, and to Whitman. If we can approach Homeric poetry as Greek religion and Hebrew religion as Jewish poetry, the result is, on one side, skepticism about the historical reliability of either text, but on the other side, the elevation of the poet as the prophet of the present age, the truth teller, the gospel maker, the primary witness for his time and place. If Homer is now seen as essentially Greek and the Bible as properly Hebrew, then the modern English or American or German poet-prophet may legitimately ask, "Where is our scripture? Where are our witnesses?" The young Emerson formed his



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idea of the role of the poet partly from the challenge implicit in the writings of Blackwell and Lowth.[3]

Emerson did not come upon these books by accident this winter of 1819–1820. Lowth and Blackwell were important books for Edward Everett, the popular young Harvard teacher whose arrival was the great event in Cambridge in late 1819. Everett influenced Emerson more than any of his other Harvard teachers. He was more than Emerson's first intellectual hero; he was, for a time, his personal idol.[4]

Edward Everett was twenty-five when he returned to the United States from Göttingen to take up his professorship of Greek literature at Harvard. He was young, vital, forceful and eloquent, the very antithesis of Dr. Popkin, "Old Pop," the dull drillmaster who had been serving as Greek teacher. Emerson later recalled with warmth Everett's "radiant beauty of person," his large eyes, marble lids, and his rich and compelling voice. Everett knew the most up-to-date and disturbing scholarship. He was also interested in modern affairs and modern literature and he made the study of Greece seem like the high road to wisdom, power, and eloquence. As Emerson noted, Everett made his students "for the first time acquainted with Wolf's theory of the Homeric writings." (Careful analysis of the text convinced Wolf that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not the work of one poet but of several, perhaps many, over a long period of time.) Everett also brought the critical ideas of Christian Gottlob Heyne to Cambridge. Heyne taught that all religion, including Judaism and Christianity, begins in philosophy expressed mythologically.[5]

In introducing Heyne, Everett was bringing to New England the modern history-of-religions view that mythology precedes theology. In introducing Wolf, Everett brought to America the original deconstruction of Homer into oral folk epic. Everett also introduced American students to the work of J. G. Eichhorn, the founder of modern biblical scholarship, the so-called higher criticism that inaugurated modern disintegrative studies of the Bible, breaking the one book down into multiple narratives written at different times by different people. This was heady stuff, and Emerson was deeply impressed with the new professor and his messages. "The novelty of the learning lost nothing in the skill and genius of his relation," wrote Emerson, "and the rudest undergraduate found a new morning opened to him in the lecture room of Harvard Hall." Here was a minister-scholar-orator-editor-author, a leader of his generation. Emerson vowed in his journal: "I here make a resolution to make myself acquainted with the Greek



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language and antiquities and history with long and serious attention and study." His ambition had been touched and stirred. He wrote a poem for the Pythologian Club in April 1820 in which he recalled a great past "Made vocal once, alas no more / And why? ask not! the Muses blush to tell / Since gowned monks with censer crass and bell / Clogged the free step and mighty march of Mind." Fired with new ideas from Everett, Emerson's poem was about the liberation of poetry from rhyme, which, he said, had been invented by "monks in their cloisters in the Dark Ages" in order "to shackle poetry or the soarings of the mind."[6]

Emerson also decided at this point to enter the Bowdoin competition with an essay on the character of Socrates. Although Emerson here combined two of his great subjects, ethical thought and Plato, this earliest of his essays is disappointingly flat, and its flatness can only be partly explained by noting that philosophy at Harvard at this time was the rather flat utilitarianism of Paley, Butler, and Tucker. Emerson's prose shows promise when he writes of Socrates' studying nature "with a chastised enthusiasm." At the center of the essay, which did not win the prize, Emerson made an important point, one that characterizes his later thought. Socrates was more interested in mind than in knowledge. Socrates aimed, he said, "not to impart literary knowledge or information or science or Art, but to lay open to his own view the human mind." In the rest of the essay Emerson was able neither to speak his own mind forcefully nor to give a cogent or memorable account of Socrates' mind. Emerson's own mind was unfocused, his aim unclear. He was not uninterested in philosophy but he was also interested in eloqence, in oratory, in religion, in writing gothic fiction, and in being a poet.[7]

Emerson's religious notes during his last year and a half at Harvard range from conventional views of the awful immanence of the Day of Judgment to efforts to apprehend "the immediate presence of God," which he thought "a fine topic of sublimity." What these thoughts had in common was an interest not in dogma or theology but in the immediate personal experience of religion. More often, however, it was religious eloquence that Emerson hungered for. Everett was eloquent and talked about eloquence. The textbooks of Walker and Blair emphasized public speaking, and the new professor of oratory and rhetoric, the English teacher of Emerson—and later of Thoreau and Richard Henry Dana, Jr.—was also much interested in oratory. His name was Edward Channing.



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Edward Channing was twenty-eight. He was a younger brother of the famous Boston minister William Ellery Channing and had just joined the Harvard faculty in 1819. His inaugural talk on December 8, 1819, which Emerson read later, had for a theme the power and importance of the orator. Channing, like Everett, was involved in current literature, serving before Everett as editor of the *North American Review.* Channing was also young enough to be a sort of model for Emerson. Channing was quiet, far from being the blaze of energy Everett was. But Channing had interesting ideas about writing and fresh advice for writers. He encouraged students to write rapidly and impetuously. He was aware of the dangers involved in "constant association with great writers," and he was vehement about the folly of always comparing ourselves to others, which, Channing said, is the beginning not of wisdom but of weakness: "We gradually lose the power of discerning what is good and beautiful in the very writers who have gained this fatal possession of our admiration. They disown us, and we perceive it not." Channing's interest in oratory helped feed Emerson's sustained interest in eloquence. Channing also spoke to the condition of the young writer.[8]

In writing, as in other endeavors, Emerson did not find his characteristic voice while at college, although some traits begin to emerge. In prose he was working on wildly diverse projects. One was a lurid gothic tale about a Norse prophetess and sibyl and her magician son. The fantasy is overheated and overwritten—more dream than anything else, a sort of Norse *Vathek.* The heroine Uilsa speaks:

> Did I not wake the mountains with my denouncing scream—calling vengeance from the north? Odin knew me and thundered. A thousand wolves ran down by the mountain scared by the hideous lightning and baring the tooth to kill; they rushed after the cumbrous host. I saw when the pale faces glared back in terror as the black wolf pounced on his victim.[9]

Offsetting this Nordic riot is Emerson's second try at the Bowdoin Prize, his essay on "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy." After first praising the ancient Stoics for their "rational and correct views of ethics," he surveys the work of Hobbes, Cudworth, Clark, Price, Butler, Reid, Paley, Smith, and Stewart, concluding that the moderns are more practical than the ancients. He notes how paternal authority was extended in ancient Rome,



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how the father, empowered, becomes a tyrant, and he noted that such a thing "could not be tolerated at the present." Emerson's prose, even in this sober academic exercise, has become florid and purple in emulation of Everett:

> The commissioned apostles of peace and religion were seen arming the nations of Europe to a more obstinate and pernicious contest than had ever been known; and pursued with fatal hostility, with seven successions of bloodshed and horror, till its dye was doubled on the crimson cross.

In most respects these early writings serve mainly to take the temperature of Emerson's youthful fervor. The Uilsa story reveals his strong, almost violent emotional side and his ability to tap the Dionysian spirit; the ethics essay reflects his lifelong interest not in epistemology but in ethics. Already his question is not "What can I know?" but "How should I live?"[10]

During his last year and a half in college, Emerson thought of himself more as a poet than anything else. The idea of the poet, now and later, had for Emerson the larger sense of writer as well as the more limited sense of maker of verses. But none of his college poetry was good enough for him to want to print it later. There are passable lines ("Thy loud-voiced bards are murmuring tones of woe") and isolated images ("the silver fetters of old Rhyme"). He admired Milton and Shakespeare. Among modern poets he idolized Byron and made fun of Wordsworth, tastes he would later reverse. His college writings, like his college life, were full of contradictions. His long poem "Indian Superstition" was a Southey-inspired tirade against the Hindu religious tradition he would later come to admire. He wrote a rhymed attack on rhyme, and he wrote endless poems and sketches full of the schoolboy sublime, while he confessed in his journal to feeling sick, scared, and worried about his talent, not at all eager for college to be over.[11]

In August of 1821, during the same month that saw Missouri admitted as a state and revolution in Europe and just a few days before Emerson graduated, a young master's candidate named Sampson Reed delivered his "Oration on Genius" at Harvard. Reed was three years older than Emerson. His oration was better written by far than anything of which Emerson was capable. Reed made a strong impression on Emerson that August day. Years later in a letter to Margaret Fuller he still remembered the speech as his first—and still standing—benchmark for true genius or original force.



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Reed's oration was not a critique, an exercise, an endorsement, or an argument. It was no mere commentary. It was a primary statement, a personal affirmation of what the speaker himself believed. It was alight with passion and had the solidity and self-possession of conviction. "The human heart has always had love of some kind," Reed began. "There has always been fire on the earth." Reed takes for granted the importance of the individual. "Every man has a form of mind peculiar to himself." But what he had come to say was not that genius is the apotheosis of individual talent but the opposite, that geniuses are the means by which general truths are revealed to the rest of us. "The intellectual eye of man is formed to see the light, not to make it," Reed says. "When the power of divine truth begins to dispel the darkness," he goes on, "the first things we see are the geniuses, so-called, the people of strong understanding and deep learning." Completing his wonderful cosmological metaphor, Reed says that when truth begins to get through to us is when "Luther, Shakespeare, Milton, Newton, stand with their bright side toward us."[12]

Reed's vision is religious, but it is not narrow or sectarian. "Know, then," he says, "that genius is divine, not when the man thinks that he is God, but when he acknowledges that his powers are from God." He then looks to science and scientists, to the study of nature, for new truth. He shows no interest at all in the church. "It needs no uncommon eye to see," he observes, "that the finger of death has rested on the church."

Reed's advice to his hearers has an edge. They were not to take comfort in existing forms of college or church but must "take care that the life which is received be genuine." He looked, he said, for a "unison of spirit and nature"; he knew that for the present generation as for any other, "thought falls to the earth with power, and makes a language out of nature." And as he looked ahead Reed predicted that "science will be full of life, as nature is full of God." The time was now. The night was over; the morning was at hand.[13]



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# *4. Home and Family*

The Boston to which Emerson returned after college in 1821 was a prosperous, growing, commercial seaport of just over 40,000 people. It was organized as a town and run by town meeting. After remaining stable at around 20,000 for most of the eighteenth century, the town's population had grown by 30 percent in each of the first two decades of the nineteenth century. By 1820 the pace of growth had quickened further. Boston was to grow by 40 percent to 61,000 persons by 1830. The din and clutter of construction was universal. The tidal flats surrounding the original pear-shaped peninsula were filled in, beginning in 1804. In the mid-twenties six hundred Boston house carpenters went on strike (unsuccessfully) for a ten-hour workday. In 1822, having grown too large to function as a town, Boston reorganized itself as a city.[1]

Emerson had been born, on May 25, 1803, in a house at the corner of Summer and Chauncy streets. Nearby were sheds, woodhouses, barns, and a pond; as late as 1815 there was a two-acre pasture near Summer street. But the town had already essentially replaced the countryside. Emerson remembered that as a child he had felt "imprisoned in streets and hindered from the fields and woods."[2]

Emerson's father was a minister; his salary, after 1809, was twenty-five dollars a week, thirty cords of wood a year, and the use of a house. The family was too poor for dancing and horseback riding. Emerson never had a sled and would have been afraid to use one on account of neighborhood toughs. He later recalled how he had once lost the money he had been given to buy new shoes and his "being sent to look among the fallen leaves under the poplar trees opposite the house for the lost bank note." The Emersons were bookish. They prized education, and Emerson had warm memories of the studious family circle, "the eager blushing boys discharging as they can their little chares [chores], and hastening into the parlor to the study of tomorrow's merciless lesson yet stealing time to read a novel hardly smuggled in to the tolerance of father and mother and atoning for the same by some pages of Plutarch or Goldsmith." He recalled too "the warm affectionate delight



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with which they behold and greet the return of each after the early separation of school, or business." Three days a week they had chocolate for breakfast, with toasted bread, but no butter. On Saturdays it was "salt-fish dinner, with all its belongings of vegetables, melted butter, pork scraps etc."[3]

Ralph was the third of six sons. Like some other middle children, he was the silly one. His father called attention to his levity, a trait that marks his letters well into college. He wrote cheerful verse letters to Aunt Sarah Alden Bradford, a rebus letter to older brother William which starts out "[deer] Brother: [eye] [hoop] [yew] [last *will* and testament scroll] [knot] [bee] offend [head] if [eye] attempt . . ." He wrote verses about doing dishes ("melodious knife! and thou harmonious sand / Tuned by the Poet-scourer's rugged hand"), and he loved Byron's "They grieved for those who perished in the cutter, / And likewise for the biscuit tubs and butter." In general, however, Ralph was thought by his relatives to be the least promising of the Emerson children. There are many fond anecdotes, written down after he became famous, about his early poems and recitation pieces, but in one of the few surviving documents from his childhood, the boy's father is seen complaining, some time before his son was three, that "Ralph does not read very well yet." Looking back later, Emerson said, "The advantage in education is always with those children who slip up into life without being objects of notice."[4]

If the boy was unobserved, he was not unobserving. He remembered wartime Boston, when, during the War of 1812, he and the other nine-year-olds were ferried out to Noddle's Island in Boston Harbor to help dig fortifications. What he chiefly remembered was how intolerably thirsty he got that day.

He also remembered going up on the roofs with the rest of Boston to watch the *Chesapeake* sail out of the harbor to do battle with the British frigate *Shannon.* June 1, 1813, was a beautiful summer day. There was little or no swell; a light breeze rippled the water. The *Shannon,* with thirty-eight guns, had sailed into the outer harbor hoping to provoke a fight and Captain Lawrence of the American frigate *Chesapeake* obliged. Lawrence set out after the *Shannon* and both ships silently drew away from the shore, looking for fighting room accompanied by an enthusiastic spectator fleet of small boats. At four P.M. the *Chesapeake* opened fire. Fifteen minutes later the fight was over. The *Shannon* had boarded and captured the *Chesapeake.* Lawrence was mortally hurt. Both ships looked like floating hospitals. There were twenty-four dead and fifty wounded on the *Shannon,* forty-seven dead and ninety-



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nine wounded on the *Chesapeake,* which was sailed off as a prize to Halifax. It was a black day in Boston.[5]

Emerson's father, the Reverend William Emerson, is an indistinct and minor figure in his son's life. He was minister of the First Church in Boston, where he played an active role in public affairs. Emerson remembered him as a "somewhat social gentleman" who was severe with the children. Emerson recalled how his father tried to teach him to swim: he "put me in mortal terror by forcing me into the salt water off some wharf or bathing house." The experience was so strong that after more than forty years Emerson could "still recall the fright with which, after some of this salt experience, I heard his voice one day (as Adam that of the Lord God in the garden) summoning us to a new bath, and I vainly endeavoring to hide myself."[6]

William Emerson died in 1811, when Ralph was eight. He had been a Federalist, that is to say, a conservative in politics, and a Unitarian, or liberal, in religion. He was interested in science, had read Priestley and Paine, and his characteristic writing has a bland, correct, rational tone. He was much interested in literature, helped pick out selections for *The Polyanthos,* a magazine for young people, and he was active in founding *The Christian Monitor* and *The Monthly Anthology,* the latter of which was a forerunner of the *North American Review.* William Emerson also edited *A Selection of Psalms and Hymns* (1808), the first American hymnbook to give the name of a tune and a suggested key for singing each psalm. He also wrote a *Historical Sketch of the First Church in Boston,* a minor *Magnalia* that includes the entire history of the Massachusetts Bay colony. His characteristic tone is a calm deism, modern but uninsistent: "Yes, my brethren, the vast creation is the dwelling place of the most High. Every ray of light is a proof of His presence. The awful womb of night is the pavillion of his rest. You feel his breath in every wind that blows." When he died at age 42 of a "consuming marasmus," a large scirrhous tumor of the lower intestine, his sister Mary Moody Emerson found it impossible to grieve for him, so deeply did she disapprove of his religious views. Later, however, she regretted the response. It is typical of Emerson's lack of interest in his father that in later years he paid more attention to his aunt's response than to his father's death.[7]

Emerson's mother, born Ruth Haskins, kept the family together after her husband's death. She took in boarders and found ways to get her sons educated. Later she lived in her middle son's house in Concord until her



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death in 1853. She had been born a British subject, Emerson liked to recall, and she was the middle child of thirteen. A strongly religious woman, she married William Emerson before his move to Boston. For years she kept a diary to "write down minutely the dealings of God toward me." She was a calm undisturbed woman, never impatient, never heard to express dissatisfaction. She was undemonstrative but not unfeeling. Emerson recalled a time when he and his older brother William were late getting home. Their mother exclaimed, "My sons, I have been in agony for you." "I went to bed in bliss," Emerson remembered, "at the interest she showed."[8]

One event that hit Ruth Emerson very hard was the death in 1807—when Ralph was four—of her eldest child, John Clarke, then aged eight. She was devastated, writing to her sister three months later, "I feel daily the agonizing pain arising from his loss but little diminished by the length of time elapsed since his death." She struggled to reconcile her grief with the knowledge that all things come from God. It would be a mistake to think that Ruth Emerson turned to religion only in times of trial. She led a deeply religious life. Every day after breakfast she retired to her room for reading and contemplation, and she was not to be disturbed.[9]

The religious strain in Emerson can be traced to his mother. Emerson's father showed "a studied reserve on the subject of the nature and offices of Jesus." Emerson thought later that his father had not been able to make up his mind about religion, but his mother had no such reservation. She was a strong believer and a practicing, observing Christian. She expected her children to be kind "to all animals and insects." She read Fénelon, William Wogan's *An Essay on the Proper Lessons of the Church of England,* John Flavel's *On Keeping the Heart,* and John Mason's *Self-Knowledge.* These books are not academic, polemical, or controversial. They are not about theology or church history or church government. Nor are they books of formal prayer and structured devotion, though she kept and read all her life the Church of England prayerbook with which she was raised. These books are works of consolation and comfort; they teach spiritual self-help. They are intended to be useful and practical guides to living a spiritual life in a material world. Ruth Emerson's books are not Unitarian, nor are they Puritan, or even exclusively Protestant. Her great favorite, Fénelon, is Catholic. Wogan is Church of England, Flavel is Presbyterian, and Mason was an early Methodist.[10]

What these books have in common is an intense interest in religious thought and feeling, in personal, immediate religious experience. They



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emphasize religious self-knowledge and religious self-cultivation. Fénelon insists that we must conquer self-love. Flavel says the main business of Christian life is "keeping the heart" in the face of prosperity, adversity, danger and public distraction, outward want, injury, injustice, and death. His entire book is on how to keep whole the inner person or soul, how to face life by working up one's inner resources of heart. Mason teaches a religious tending of one's own self. "Self-knowledge," he says, "is that acquaintance with ourselves, which shows us what we are, and do, and ought to be, and do, in order to live comfortably and usefully here, and happily hereafter." The means urged is self-examination, the purpose self-government and "self-fruition." These books share a consuming interest in the daily quality of the personal religious life, in the possibility of everyday spirituality, and in the authenticating feelings of individual religious experience. This introduction to the life of the spirit was not something Emerson could have got from his father, even had his father lived longer.[11]

Emerson was raised, as was Nietzsche, by and among women of notable intellectual and spiritual accomplishments. First of all, there was his thoughtful mother. There were frequent visitors such as Hannah Adams, author of the first American *Dictionary of Religion* and of the first history of Judaism by an American. There was Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, in whose husband's school Emerson first began teaching. She knew Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and German. She knew the literatures as well as the languages, and she tutored boys for entrance to Harvard. She read Homer, Plato, mathematics, natural philosophy, psychology, and theology, including the modern and revolutionary developments in German criticism and German theology. She was, said Emerson, "absolutely without pedantry." Above all, more brilliant and original than all, was Emerson's aunt, his father's sister, Mary Moody Emerson.[12]



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# 5. *The Angel of Death*

THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF EMERSON'S EDUCATION was that provided by his aunt Mary Moody Emerson. It was she and not the Boston ministers or Harvard professors who set the real intellectual standards for the young Emerson and his brothers. Her correspondence with him is the single best indicator of his inner growth and development until he was well over thirty. Emerson said that in her prime his aunt was "the best writer in Massachusetts." He noted that she set an "immeasurably high standard" and that she fulfilled a function "which nothing else in his education could supply." She was widely read and formidably articulate. She could be damagingly candid. She possessed enormous force of character and limitless energy, and she had a gift for attracting young people. She was a tireless controversialist; she was a vigorous theologian. Above all, she was an original religious thinker, almost a prophet. Her writing, which has been shamefully ignored, is personal and testamentary; her strange style has great energy, beauty, and intensity. She is "no statute book or orderly digest," said Emerson, "but a Bible." Mary Moody Emerson was an American Jakob Boehme. Her everyday life was spent wrestling with angels.[1]

Mary Emerson's oddities have made her a Dickensian figure for us. She was four feet three inches tall. She had her bed made in the shape of a coffin. She wore her burial shroud when she traveled, and she traveled so much she wore out several shrouds. Her energy was phenomenal. "She could keep step with no human being," her nephew recalled. "She would tear into the chaise or out of it, into the house or out of it." She was amazingly outspoken. The obituary writer for the *Boston Commonwealth* said "she was thought to have the power of saying more disagreeable things in half an hour than any person living." Emerson commented, "I see he was well acquainted with Aunt Mary." She left a trail of anecdotes behind her, all vivid enough, but mostly serving to replace her original genius with an eccentric caricature. She was at bottom not an amusing maiden aunt but a visionary.[2]

Mary Emerson came frequently to visit Ruth and her sons, and when she was away she directed a stream of high-energy correspondence at each one,



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catechizing, informing, probing, tearing apart ideas and texts, and recommending reading. She expressed herself on every conceivable topic and obliged the boys to do the same. She took the most serious interest in young people. "When she met a young person who interested her, she made herself acquainted and intimate with him or her at once, by sympathy, by flattery, by raillery, by anecdote, by wit, by rebuke, and stormed the castle." "She gave herself full swing in these sudden intimacies," as Emerson wrote, "for she knew she should disgust them soon, and resolved to have their best hours." In Waldo's case, she eventually came to disapprove of his new ideas and she withdrew from her position of unofficial spiritual adviser, but her effect on him was permanent.[3]

Mary Emerson was brought up outside her own family, as was common then, and she lived her entire life in calamitous poverty. Destitution was her muse, said Emerson. She never married, though she was asked. Sometimes she lived alone, sometimes with others. Much of her life she lived in Maine, at a farm called Vale, near Waterford. She was, she said, "surrounded in every instant of my journey by little means, less virtues, and less vices." Her daily life involved both books and housework. Looking back over a typical week, she wrote when she was thirty,

> Rose before light every morn; visited from necessity once, and again for books; read Butler's *Analogy;* commented on the Scriptures; read in a little book,—Cicero's letters,—a few; touched Shakespeare,—washed, carded, cleaned house, and baked.[4]

She was self-educated. One of her earliest enthusiasms was a book-length poem her copy of which lacked both cover and title page. When she later looked up the works of famous poets, she found that the anonymous poem she had so admired was called *Paradise Lost.* Her early reading also included the English poets Young and Akenside. She read Samuel Clarke and Jonathan Edwards. Later, as her nephew noted, she read Plato, Plotinus, Marcus Aurelius, Stewart, Coleridge, Cousin, Herder, Locke, Mme. de Staël, Channing, Mackintosh, and Byron. Every one of these writers was also to be important to Emerson. Mary Emerson was more learned than most of the New England ministers she talked with. She had read Spinoza, Wollstonecraft, Rousseau, Eichhorn, Boehme, William Law, and Goethe. As she said of herself, she read zigzag through fields, authors, and even single books. The cardinal points of her intellectual compass were New



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England's old Puritan religion, Samuel Clarke's reconciliation of revelation with the discoveries and world view of Newton, Richard Price's *Review of Morals,* with its Kantian assertion—made independently of Kant—of the objective content of moral consciousness, and the work of Germaine de Staël. Mary Emerson particularly admired *Corinne,* with its sympathetic portrait of the gifted, doomed heroine of intellect, imagination, and feeling, and her *Germany,* with its powerful defense of enthusiasm.[5]

When her brother was editing *The Monthly Anthology* in 1804 and 1805, Mary Emerson contributed a piece on the importance of imagination in religious life and one on natural history and its connection with natural theology. Her work is as good as anything in the magazine, but her genius did not flourish in the polite epistolic and dialogic forms favored by the Federalist literary mind. She also disagreed with her brother in religious matters. His religion was a nonreligious Unitarianism, a rational, science-oriented but churchy deism that was more social cement than inspiration. Mary Emerson, like the best of the Puritans before her, and like Melville and Emily Dickinson later, could neither believe completely nor be comfortable in her unbelief. She vastly preferred Calvinism to Unitarianism, though, as Emerson later observed, she "was not a Calvinist, but wished everybody else to be one, like Dr. Johnson's minister to the Hebrides, who wished Dr. Johnson to believe in Ossian, but did not himself." She describes herself as a "deistic pietist"; it is a good label. She embraced Christ as a mediator but looked forward to the time when she could do without him. She could imagine, she said, a higher being, a greater prophet, than Christ.[6]

Mary Emerson's unpublished writings became one of Emerson's most important books. Over a period of time, beginning probably in his early thirties, he carefully copied out the best of her letters, her conversation, and her table-talk into four substantial notebooks, totaling some 870 manuscript pages, all carefully paginated and indexed. He returned at regular intervals to the study of her work. Its effect on him was always the same. "Aunt Mary, whose letters I read all yesterday," he wrote in 1841, "is a Genius always new, subtle, frolicsome, judicial, unpredictable. All your learning of all literatures and states of society of Platonistic, Calvinistic, English or Chinese, would never enable you to anticipate one thought or expression." Everything about her was bold, vigorous, extravagant. She advised the Emerson boys: "Always do what you are afraid to do." Her active mind and strong imagination served a personality that was emotionally open. "I never



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expected matrimony," she wrote to her favorite nephew, Charles, youngest of the Emerson brothers. "My taste was formed in romance, and I knew I was not destined to please."[7]

Emerson copied out a number of his aunt's letters to Charles which record her growing uncertainty about the development of Waldo's thought. He could watch himself being discussed and dismissed. "As to Waldo's letter," she told Charles in January, 1832, "say nothing to him. It is time he should leave me. His sublime negations, his non-informations I have no right in the world to complain of. His letters are always elegantly spiced with flattery, which I love. What he thinks . . . or intends, time and report may unfold."[8]

Mary Emerson also had a deep current of feeling for the natural world and for its connection with crucial moments of human experience. In 1828, looking back on the death of her brother, Emerson's father, she wrote:

> This day, seventeen years since, was the last day of the man I first loved and admired. Different words, education and faith led us to view each other with indifference, but the remembrance of that death, of that day in which I erred, will not cease to pain in this life. While he lay dead, I fasted and prayed, but not with fervor. This morning I have been playing with the goslings,—how astonishing is nature! They have no parent—yet discover a strange instinct for each other's society, though there is no protection from it.

Her life was one of destitution, pain, and anticipation of death, but there is a seventeenth-century vigor to her morbidity. Pain was for her the epitome of strong feeling, and feelings were her principal index to life itself. She once wrote: "Give me, my God, to know that it is thy immediate agency touches each nerve with pain, or digs the eye, or severs the bone. I can then, *with thee,* joy and praise for all the heights to which men and angels climb." She uses the imagery of the body with unnerving force. Of gossip she said, "Society is like a corpse that purges at the mouth." On great subjects she could write greatly. The following passage on immortality may be contrasted with the cool reasonableness of Paley, Butler, Tucker, or Price. To the twenty-four-year-old Emerson, she writes:

> Would I could die today. That this aching sense of immortality might be satisfied or cease to ache. The difficulty remains the same when I



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> struggle with the extension of never, never, never, just as I repeated the exercize in childhood,—can't form an idea, can't stretch myself to that which has no ending. . . . Is it because of these lumps of matter which move with us and above us, of their perpetual changes and influences, that we cannot form an idea of the identical immortal substance which is to remain essentially and absolutely the same without end? Had it a beginning? or was it always an idea of God like Plato's notion,—after ages of individuality will it be reabsorbed? New Orders rise. In those orders will transmigrate this immortal (but what is immortal?) this identical essence, principle, within this coffined case,—these excrements of the inhabitant. I'll go to the woods—but there I shall see a sort of immortal matter,—a reproduction of seeds. Well but I shall not think, don't think, only feel pleasantly abroad, rather don't try,—can never think, there's this crazy yeast-like matter which makes the task unwholesome.[9]

No one, not even Carlyle, ever wrote Emerson letters that better combined philosophical acuity and passionate personal statement. Her letters give her essential style, a style that, Emerson said, "admits of all the force of colloquial domestic words, and breaks, and parenthesis, and petulance—has the kick and inspiration of that,—has humor, affection, and a range from the rapture of prayer down to the details of farm and barn and *help.* All her language in writing was happy but inimitable as if caught from some dream." Although she never achieved formal control of her language, she used strong physical imagery. She was, for Emerson, the Angel of Death, death being for her, as for Dickinson, the ultimate experience of life. Above all, her hunger for personal experience of the strongest, most direct kind must have pushed Waldo to settle for nothing less authentic, less direct, or less original in his own life.[10]

Mary Moody Emerson taught the dangers of prosperity, the uses of poverty, the necessity of doing what you are afraid to do, and the defiant right of the individual reader to bring all texts to judgment. Nothing Mary Moody Emerson felt or communicated was secondhand. Her example explains why Emerson later was so open to Alcott, to Margaret Fuller, to Sampson Reed, to Jones Very, to Jakob Boehme, and to Swedenborg. Because of his aunt's failures, Emerson knew there was "an innavigable sea of silent waves between us and the things we aim at." Because of her presence and example, he was pushed onward by her undrownable spirit,



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which was perpetually reaching farther up the beach than the last wave of language had taken it. Principally through the vivid example of the seer Tnamurya, as he always anagrammed "Aunt Mary" in his journals, Emerson was from early on at home with that very select company of the always failing and never defeated creators of the world's half-born gospels.[11]



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# 6. *Scottish Common Sense*

AFTER GRADUATION FROM HARVARD, EMERSON RETURNED TO his mother's home on Federal Street in Boston and went to work as a teacher in the school for girls his brother William ran out of their home. He was eighteen. In his spare time he wrote drafts of essays on a wide variety of topics. By January 1822 he was again filling commonplace books, as he had in college, with scraps and sketches at the rate of almost a notebook a month. He was reading Sismondi's huge works *The Literature of Southern Europe* and *The History of the Italian Republics.* He loyally read a book on Europe by Edward Everett's brother Alexander and praised it to friends. He read a good deal of fiction. And for the next two years he read more or less continuously the writings of the Scottish philosophers of common sense, Adam Smith, Thomas Brown, James Mackintosh, Thomas Reid, and especially Dugald Stewart. One of Emerson's students later remembered that the way to please the young schoolmaster was to praise Dugald Stewart.

Scottish Common Sense philosophy was the prevailing mode of thought at Emerson's Harvard. It was, in Stewart's hands, a broad and generous way of thinking, centered in moral issues and problems. Stewart's thought was unusually coherent, both in itself and in relation to other schools of thought, because Stewart himself wrote a full-length history of modern thought, which, like Hegel's account of German idealism, explained prior philosophy as a sort of background and preparation for his own work. Stewart also wrote a graceful, lucid English prose that made his views widely accessible. What William Gass says of Thomas Reid is also true of Stewart, that he not only wrote about common sense, he used it. Stewart was, above all, current. The second half of his history of modern thought, called—formidably—*Dissertation: Progress of Metaphysical, Ethical, and Political Philosophy,* appeared in 1821. What Emerson got from this book was a kind of roadmap of modern ideas, a framework within which to think or from which to depart. The intellectual universe of Dugald Stewart provided Emerson with a set of working ideas and assumptions, some of which he retained all his life.[1]



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Stewart's *Dissertation* traces the modern era in thought to Francis Bacon. Stewart explains, at the beginning of this five-hundred-page piece written for the *Encyclopedia Britannica,* that he set out at first simply to complete Bacon's own sketchy but grand outline of modern knowledge. But Stewart found he had to reject Bacon's breakdown of knowledge into history (based on memory), philosophy (based on reason), and poetry (based on imagination). Stewart also rejected Locke's taxonomy, which divided knowledge into physics (or natural philosophy), ethics (or moral philosophy), and logic, including rhetoric. In place of these tripartite schemes, Stewart proposed two main divisions, matter and mind, as the "two most general heads which ought to form the groundwork of an Encyclopedical classification of the arts and sciences." This is Stewart's starting point, and it shows how close Scottish Common Sense and German idealism are in their fundamentals.[2]

For Stewart much of the history of modern thought is the history of the arguments over whether the human mind possesses innate ideas and whether the mind is essentially active or passive. Stewart's clear and now somewhat neglected argument gives a surprisingly sophisticated version of all this, starting with Descartes, whom Stewart regards as the real "Father of the Experimental Philosophy of the Human Mind." More important, Stewart shows how Locke was misunderstood and simplified, even by his followers and disciples. Stewart shows that the blunt belief that "all our knowledge appears plainly to derive its origin from the senses" reflects the position of Locke's followers Gassendi, Condillac, and Diderot, but not Locke. Locke himself, says Stewart, believed that our knowledge arises from both sensation *and* reflection, and he carefully cites Locke's description of the latter power:

> The other function, from which experience furnishes the understanding with ideas, is the perception of the operations of our own mind within us, as it is employed about the ideas it has got: which operations, when the soul comes to reflect on and consider, do furnish the understanding with another set of ideas, which could not be had from things without.

If this is not quite a pure insistence on a noumenal self, existing apart from experience, space, and time, it is a far more complex and qualified view of the mind than the often cited image Locke once offered of the mind as a blank slate on which sense experience writes.[3]

The real enemy for Stewart is not Locke but David Hume. Stewart understood Hume to have claimed that "all the objects of our knowledge



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are divided into two classes, impressions and ideas." Impressions are sense impressions; ideas are "copies of impressions." Hume thus directly doubts the existence of such a thing as mind. He doubts what Descartes said could not be doubted, "the existence of a thinking percipient I." Not only did Hume consider mind an imaginary substance, he also thought matter to be "an imaginary and exploded substance." Further yet, and most dramatically, Hume denied the existence of cause and effect, maintaining that "physical causes and effects are known to us merely as antecedents and consequents." In other words, there is no cause and effect; there is only sequence. The result of this rupture between cause and effect is radical skepticism. "As we can have no idea of anything which never appeared to our outward senses or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion seems to be, that we have no idea of connexion or power at all." In Stewart's view Hume aimed "to establish a universal skepticism, and to produce in the reader a complete distrust of his own faculties."[4]

Taking his lead from Stewart, Emerson was to struggle against Hume for years. To a great extent Emerson's life and work—indeed, transcendentalism itself—constitutes a refutation of Hume. It is therefore important to recognize how fully Emerson and his contemporaries confronted and recognized the potential for nihilism in Hume. As a writer in the *Edinburgh Review* put it in a long article on Stewart that Emerson read,

> the doctrine of Mr Hume . . . is not that we have not reached the truth, but that we can never reach it. It is an absolute and universal system of scepticism, professing to be derived from the very structure of the understanding, which, if any man could seriously believe it, would render it impossible for him to form any opinion upon any subject—to give the faintest assent to any proposition—to ascribe any meaning to the words Truth and Falsehood,—to believe, to inquire, or to reason: and, on the very same ground, to disbelieve, to dissent or to doubt—to adhere to his own principle of universal doubt; and, lastly, if he be consistent with himself, even to think.[5]

Scottish Common Sense philosophy is itself a series of answers to Hume. The ground shared by Reid, Mackintosh, Smith, Brown, and Stewart is the belief, as Stewart puts it, in the "universality of moral perceptions as an essential part of the human constitution." Frances Hutcheson, an early figure in the movement, asserted that "moral distinctions are apprehended



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directly by means of, or as the consequence of, a special capacity of the soul, designated as the moral sense." The idea is that moral distinctions do not depend on reason or intellection but on our feelings or emotions. Adam Smith goes furthest with this link between morality and feeling in a book Emerson read in July 1824, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* Smith argues that "as we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation." Through our imagination we can place ourselves in the situations of others. By our fellow feeling for the misery of others, we can imagine how we would feel in similar circumstances and can act accordingly. In other words, the moral sentiment arises from sympathy and from sympathetic identification.[6]

The first teaching of Scottish Common Sense then is that we all possess something called the moral sense or the moral sentiment, which is anchored in the emotional, feeling, sympathetic part of human nature. This ability to prefer good actions to bad, to prefer some values (as they are now called) to others, is shared by all people in all times. The second great teaching of these thinkers is what Reid calls common sense and what Stewart calls the fundamental laws of human belief, or the primary elements of human reason. These primary elements arise from a belief in our own identity and the evidence of memory. What comes first, for Stewart, is consciousness, which assures us we exist. Then comes memory. The fundamental laws of human belief follow. First, I exist. Second, I am the same person today I was yesterday. Third, the material world has an existence independent of my mind. Fourth, the general laws of nature will continue in future to operate uniformly, as in time past.[7]

Scottish Common Sense philosophy avoids both the pure materialism of Gassendi, Diderot, Holbach, and la Mettrie and the pure idealism of Leibniz and Berkeley. Affirmative rather than skeptical, it insists on the reality of morality; it asks, "How should I live my life?" It also affirms the reality and importance of consciousness. "As all our knowledge of the material world rests ultimately on facts ascertained by observation," says Stewart, "so all our knowledge of the human mind rests ultimately on facts for which we have the evidence of our own consciousness." Stewart goes further, claiming that "the capacities of the human mind have been in all ages the same, and that the diversity of phenomena exhibited by our species is the result merely of the different circumstances in which men are placed." If mind or consciousness has been essentially the same in all ages and places, so has the



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moral sense. "The universality of moral perceptions are an essential part of the human constitution." What makes consciousness and morality universal is our "susceptibility of education, which is acknowledged to belong universally to the race." In respect to these three qualities, then, morality, consciousness, and educability, not only all times and places but all persons are essentially the same, that is to say, essentially equal.[8]

Scottish Common Sense had limitations for Emerson. As a system it left little place for imagination, art, or literature. It was too exclusively moral. It left room for, but put no great emphasis on, original force or insight, and it vastly underrated the rival philosophy of Kant and his followers. Kant is dismissed by Stewart as being no real advance on Cudworth. Emerson would have to fight to appreciate Kant. Nevertheless, the body of ideas and the historical approach taken by the Scottish thinkers gave Emerson a world view that emphasized ethical—rather than epistemological or metaphysical—thought, an outlook that was predisposed to affirmation, that was remarkably comprehensive (Stewart had read Sir William Jones and was able to compare Hindu thought and Berkeleian idealism), and that was open both to science and to religion.[9]

Outside Emerson's books and beyond his schoolroom, the world at the end of 1821 and the beginning of 1822 seemed headed for increasing turmoil. Napoleon died on far-off St. Helena. The independence movement in Naples was utterly crushed by a coalition of European monarchies. In Milan Silvio Pellico wrote against the Austrians and was confined in the jails he would write about in *My Prisons.* A movement to repatriate American blacks created Liberia. Bolívar and San Martin, the liberator of Peru, met at Guayaquil in Ecuador to determine, they hoped, the future of South America. The movement for Greek independence widened into a major war, calling up a wave of popular sympathy all over Europe. Byron, at the height of his fame, celebrated and ennobled the Greeks in his lyrics.

Emerson was feeling other stirrings besides intellectual ones. At the end of February 1822 he noted that he had been unable to achieve the "cold, frigid tone" necessary for oracular writing. He was experiencing, he thought, the beginnings of love. He recorded, in Latin, a wave of feeling for two friends, one male, one female, neither named. He hoped, with an ardor known only to himself, that they both would become "a part of life, a part of me."[10]



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# *7. The Brothers Emerson*

THE YOUNG MAN WAS PROBABLY MARTIN GAY FROM COLLEGE days. As the year 1822 progressed, Emerson—who was nineteen—noted how the ardor of his friendship with Gay declined and then became very nearly extinct. Living in the pre-Freudian era, Emerson was rather innocent and essentially unembarrassed by his feelings for Gay. He easily acknowledged his "ardor" to himself and put only some of his journal comments into Latin, a common device to keep sexual matters secret, but only from children. There is no hint who the young woman was. Emerson tutored Elizabeth Peabody in Greek for a while in 1821, when she was eighteen and he nineteen; the two of them were so shy "they never lifted their eyes from their books." For one day he tutored Elizabeth Hoar, also in Greek, but she was only eleven.[1]

What we do know about Emerson's emotional life during the years just after college is that he was deeply involved in his immediate family, especially with his accomplished, ambitious brothers. They supported, encouraged, and criticized one another; they were extremely close and open with one another and with Aunt Mary. There are several contexts or backgrounds against which we can see young Emerson's emergence. There is Boston in the 1820s, the world of Harvard and Unitarianism; there is the intellectual background of Scottish Common Sense and its account of the preceding two centuries; and there is his astonishing aunt. But it is impossible to understand Emerson's motives and feelings during this period without knowing something about the brothers. Just as Simone de Beauvoir's life really began when her friend Zaza died and just as John Thoreau's death somehow set Henry Thoreau free to write, so Emerson's growth—and the difficult ups and downs of his early years—are very tightly interwoven with the tragic failures of his gifted and ambitious brothers.

Eight children were born to Ruth and the Reverend William Emerson. Phebe, born in 1798, lived two years. Second was John Clarke, born in 1799. It was his death in 1807 at age eight that so shattered his mother. The last born, Mary Caroline, lived only three years, from 1811 to 1814.



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In between John Clarke and Mary Caroline came five boys, all of whom lived to grow up. William was the oldest, born in 1801. Ralph came next, in 1803, followed by Edward in 1805, Robert Bulkeley in 1807, and Charles in 1808. There was only a seven-year spread among them. They went to school together, roomed together at college, taught together, shared books, wrote letters, sent money to each other, and they all put forth their best efforts for Aunt Mary. They were a close family group, holding frequent meetings to decide whose turn it was to work and whose to study or travel. Their future lives and careers were a matter of constant mutual concern. All through college and for quite a few years afterward, Ralph was the least interesting, the least enterprising, the least promising, and the most fortunate.[2]

William had the usual advantages and burdens of being the eldest. He started college at Harvard when he was thirteen and graduated in 1818, by which time Ralph had finished his freshman year. William went at once to Kennebunk, Maine, to teach high school. He taught steadily for the next five and a half years, seeing Ralph and Edward through college and Charles into his second year. The "heroic burdens assumed and sacrifices made by him in youth and early manhood" became part of family legend. William had a good deal of dignity. His brothers called him "his Deaconship" and "the Mogul" and "our Sultan." Emerson said William had "personal ascendency" and "the temperamental eye of a soldier or a schoolmaster." Emerson's son later recalled that the early burden of cares and responsibilities "left its stamp on [William] through all his days."[3]

William's great chance came in December 1823 when he was released from his labors to go to Germany to study theology at Göttingen to prepare for the ministry. What he learned there impressed and amazed him at first. But the coldly analytical and dispassionately historical world of German religious studies soon undermined William's faith in Christianity and derailed his ambition to become a minister. After all his sacrifices, delays, hopes, and planning, he returned home demoralized. For sixty dollars more he could have had a German doctorate, but it was no longer worth it to him. He decided without much enthusiasm to move to New York and go into law. There he struggled to get established, teaching school and writing and translating for the *Journal of Commerce* in addition to reading law. Over the years he succeeded in the law and eventually he became a judge. But his intellectual interests and ambitions had been permanently numbed by his experience in Germany.[4]



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William Emerson married, had children, and lived to be sixty-seven, remaining on close, warm terms with his New England relatives. He was always the honored older brother. It was never said—but always felt—that the respectable, established figure William cut represented a defeat, a taking refuge in the standing order of things after his personal faith and force had failed. Certainly the law was not what Aunt Mary wanted for any of the boys. She wanted them all to go into the ministry, not for respectability or position or fame but from the kind of heroic faith and the personal sense of mission she herself felt.

Waldo was two years younger than William; Edward was two years younger than Waldo. Edward was handsome and graceful. He was five feet ten inches tall with light hair, blue eyes, and a sharp nose. He carried himself like a soldier and was in fact an officer in the college militia. He had confidence, executive ability, and eloquence. Waldo had a "romantic admiration" for Edward, who seemed to have all the qualities he lacked. Waldo was embarrassed by his own sluggish life, passive actions, and flippant speech when he compared himself to Edward, who "lived, acted, and spoke with preternatural energy." Edward had great ambitions and was propelled by an unsleeping, goading conscience. He was at the head of his class, not only first, but first by a wide margin. His graduation from Harvard in 1824 was his moment of glory. The aged Lafayette, hero of the Revolution, sat on the platform while Edward Emerson gave the oration and addressed the hero.[5]

Some hint of Edward's enormous drive can be picked up from a letter he wrote during January of his triumphant senior year to Charles, then a freshman and also at or near the head of his class. Edward warned Charles that he had to be first, that being second meant nothing, for after graduation, in the real world,

> those who had taken first place in a *thousand* little classes, in the academies and colleges, come forward, and upon entering the great School of the world, take their places in the first rank, and the poor number two who flattered himself, with the idea of having but *one* above him, now finds a *thousand* to whom he must "give the wall."[6]

After his brilliant commencement oration, Edward was offered a tutorship in the college, but he had now chosen the law over teaching or the ministry and so entered the law office of the already famous Daniel Webster, who had taken a personal interest in him. Edward drove himself hard, as



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William had, teaching on the side for the money. He had never enjoyed really good health. As a boy of fourteen, teaching in his uncle Ripley's school in Waltham, he had complained of persistent coughing and headache. There was no heat in his part of the house, even when it got down to 26 degrees above zero, and he told his mother he had violent fits of uncontrollable perspiration for an hour every night. He was sent to Alexandria, Virginia, for half a year to get strong enough for college. One year out of college his health broke again and he spent a year traveling in Europe. He returned in October 1826 more exhausted than when he left. He continued to push himself. He began to have premonitions that he was nearing the end of his strength, grimly noting that he was going to become a lawyer, "if I live." He wrote William that he felt tired, adding, "I think however it will require a few more years to exhaust the vital bowl, albeit the shallow liquor betrays the near bottom." His brother Charles also saw trouble coming for Edward, and he wrote William that "Edward hardly seems to have the strength necessary for the race he ought to run." Charles added, "It would be a dark dispensation to us if he should be cut off . . ." In the spring of 1828, when he was twenty-three, Edward finally let up on himself, writing to William, "I read no law, almost no letters. I have ceased to resist God and Nature." He confided that "from the moment of surrender, I am wiser, healthier, happier."[7]

Ten days later Edward suffered a complete mental collapse. He behaved crazily. He came downstairs and derided kindly old Dr. Ripley. He became violent. "Edward is very sick," Charles wrote. After a lucid interval, Edward's mind collapsed again in late June and he was taken to McLean's Asylum. His mother was so devastated and appalled that she thought he would be better off dead.[8]

Edward recovered his sanity but not his energy or decisiveness. He vacillated about continuing in the law, cautiously seeking advice and approval from all sides. "His main spring seemed broken," his nephew and namesake Edward Waldo Emerson wrote years later. His physical health was still poor as well. The tuberculosis that had probably been there since boyhood worsened. He took ship for Puerto Rico, took a job as a clerk, and in 1834, at age twenty-nine, he died.[9]

Robert Bulkeley—or Bulkeley, as he was always called—was the next youngest. Born in 1807, he was retarded, and though he lived to be fifty-two, he came to have a child's mind in a man's body. As a boy his voice was too loud, his manners embarrassing. Later he became irritable and garrulous. He



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had periodic breakdowns that required him to be institutionalized. He was cared for all his life, often at home, sometimes in Maine, sometimes at McLean's. For a while he lived with a family in Roxbury, for a long time with a farm family in Chelmsford. Family correspondence refers to him often. He is usually reported as well, and once in a while we get a glimpse of a sort of god's fool, leading a simple life, and far from unhappy. He even played at his version of the family business. He got away one time, for fourteen days, Emerson wrote William, and made his way from Chelmsford to Mount Vernon, New Hampshire, where "he carried about a paper proposing to teach a singing school and succeeded in getting fifteen or sixteen subscribers, ere the wise men of Gotham found him out."[10]

Charles, born in 1808, was the youngest. He was of medium height, had a full head of hair and less of the large Emerson nose than his brothers. He was very bright and a general favorite—especially with Aunt Mary. He won the Latin prize in high school, found the college admission examination much less formidable than expected, and won the Bowdoin Prize his sophomore year at Harvard. Things came easily to him—too easily, his brothers thought. His letters speak casually of expected future honors. At bottom Charles was not in the least sure of himself. But he felt, as he told his aunt, that it was his duty to strive to be first. One part of him, the Cinderella part, thought he was as good as any, if only the truth were known. "I see none whom my vanity acknowledges as more intelligent than myself," he confided to her, while in a later letter he acknowledged how difficult it was to be humble and how hard it was "to draw away my thoughts from being absorbed in those petty honors I receive or anticipate." But underneath he felt differently: "At home where they surely ought to know best, why they think but little of me." Aunt Mary had Charles writing to her every week, and to her he told both sides. Defending his preference for law over the ministry, he explained to her, "I greatly distrust my fitness for the sacred office . . . my mind is of a very secondary order."[11]

However precarious Charles's expressed self-esteem may have been, it irritated both Edward and Waldo. Edward sternly pushed Charles to greater exertions when he was an easy-going freshman, and throughout college Charles continued, Waldo thought, to be the "same honey catcher of pleasure, favor, and honor that he hath been and without paying for it like Edward with life and limb." Edward's horrifying mental collapse occurred just before Charles's graduation. Charles was valedictorian; he was to deliver one of the commencement orations. With Edward confined



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at McLean's, Waldo listened to Charles and wrote him a long, blunt letter, cast in the form of a negative review, and referring to Charles in the third person. The speaker's great error, said Waldo, was in taking his audience for granted, in assuming the listeners were interested in him, instead of assuming that it was his job to interest them. The speech was beautiful, conceded Waldo, but never eloquent. It did not reach out to people, did not try to act on them, did not address them: "Instead, therefore of feeling that the audience was an object of attention from him, he [Charles] felt that he was an object of attention from the audience." Emerson's lengthy, detailed critique says a good deal about what he had himself learned about public speaking by 1828. Its effect on Charles can be imagined. In the letdown after his oration and after Waldo's letter, Charles wrote his aunt, "I need a long Sabbath, and yet my silly and volatile spirit derives no growth or lasting spring from Sabbaths, and new moon or spiritual festivals. I almost despair."[12]

Charles's life changed after graduation. He read law in the office of Charles Upham. Later he enrolled in the new Harvard Law School. Although Daniel Webster thought him good enough to attract clients even if he practiced in the backwoods of Maine, Charles found the law hard going. His cockiness disappeared. His literary interests deepened. Waldo not only let up on him but became an ever closer and more admiring friend and companion. In 1832, just as he was graduating from law school, Charles became seriously interested in Elizabeth Hoar, the young, intelligent, and extraordinarily beautiful daughter of Rockwood Hoar of Concord. Charles's interest was returned. They fell deeply in love. It was the great event of Charles's life; by far the largest part of his literary remains are his letters to Elizabeth. They became engaged and eventually planned a wedding for September 1836.

There had always been a dark side to Charles. Beneath the ambition, the yearning for eminence and greatness—for *notice* of some kind—was an ominous feeling of emptiness. Charles struggled for years, first with religious belief, then with the idea of a philosophy based on the self. He came to the conclusion that the latter was nothing but confusion: "When we look at the world from Self as center, nothing can be more perplexed." Like his mother's beloved Fénelon, Charles yearned for the self to be swallowed up in something greater. But his path appeared to him always darker and headed downward. "Every step I advance into the crowd," he wrote Aunt Mary when he was not yet a year out of college, "the atmosphere grows thicker



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and fouler, the further my soul seems to have wandered from its nature and proper place."[13]

Along with this brooding, Hamlet-like despondency went genuine literary ability. Emerson kept a notebook of Charles's sayings. Charles once described his sense of alienation: "I am an American coin in a Spanish country, the metal is the same, but it doesn't pass current." He felt that "the nap is worn off the world" and noted with weary elegance that he could "see no reason why the world should not burn up. The play has been over, some time." He loved Milton. Emerson said he was Milton's reader and recalled the "diamond sharpness of his poetic recitation of *Samson Agonistes.*"[14]

Charles's health worsened. He had the same underlying tuberculosis that had killed Edward in 1834. His life was lighted only by his love for his adored Lizzie, who completely reciprocated it. But he could not escape his premonitions and his mind ran more and more on death. "Life wears away," he wrote; "day follows day, night after night. Blessed emancipation from flesh, and all the ills that flesh is heir to—may I desire it unblamed?" Like Aunt Mary, he could see himself dead. He noted in his diary, "It shall be nothing then to me that the cold rains of November drench the bare fields."[15]

In the spring of 1836 Charles's health, never robust, worsened suddenly. He went to New York, to William's house, for rest. On May 9, four months before the wedding, he went for a walk in the morning, came in, lay down, and was dead by nightfall. Among his papers were a number of poems, including one called "Thekla's Song," which ends:

> For the world feels cold, and the heart gets old
> And reflects the bright aspect of nature no more.
>   Then take back the child, Holy Virgin, to thee
>   I have plucked the one Blossom that hangs on Earth's tree
> I have lived, and have loved, and die.[16]



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another series of notebooks in 1820 called "Wide World." He filled two the first year. After a lapse in 1821—graduation year—he began again in earnest in 1822, filling "Wide World" notebooks 3 through 9 with his own thoughts and observations on a wide range of subjects. He filled three more in 1823.

Emerson's organized, persistent, purposeful journal keeping is one of the most striking aspects of his early intellectual life. He wrote constantly, he wrote about everything, he covered hundreds of pages. When he had nothing to say, he wrote about having nothing to say. He read and indexed and reread what he had written. He copied letters into his journals and prose from his journals into his letters. He laughed at much of it when he read it over, inserting comments such as "dead before it reached its subject," but he kept at it. These early journals are mostly dross and largely unoriginal, but they are impressive in their fluent persistency. They are efforts, *essayings* at original composition, first reachings for the essay that became his lifelong form.[2]

Dreaming in the attic of the house on Federal Street, Emerson accumulated notes, ideas, and passages on a wide range of topics. On the question of what is evil, he wrote: "There is an answer from every corner of the globe . . . the enslaved, the sick, the disappointed, the poor, the unfortunate, the dying, the surviving cry out, it is here." He wrote on contrast as "a law of the human mind" and on power as an idea that "seems to have been every where at the bottom of the theology." He wrote of social feelings that "man was as evidently intended for society as the eye for vision," and later, "It is the social, not the solitary state under which man in fact lives." He was interested in greatness and thought that the highest kind of greatness was "that which abandons earthly consanguinity, and allies itself to immortal minds . . . which exists in obscurity and is least known among mankind." He wrote a good deal about the decline of civilization. "There is a tendency in all things to decay." Some of his worst writing came in a long and oddly impassioned diatribe against "the evil influence of dramatic exhibitions." He railed against the "poison and rottenness" and the "existing viciousness of the drama," concluding that "theatre is the sewer in which the rebellious vices exhaust themselves."[3]

He wrote about prophecy, being less interested in predictions than in the state of mind of the prophet. Of martyrdom he said it "proves the existence of a consistency and force of character which might else to common minds appear chimerical." He wrote on the populace, wondering whether it was



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# 9. *The Paradise of Dictionaries and Critics*

As William was preparing to leave for Germany, Waldo was becoming more and more interested in the ideas and example of William Ellery Channing. Channing, a Boston minister and the greatest of the founding figures of American Unitarianism, was at the height of his powers. In 1819 he had delivered a sermon in Baltimore called "Unitarian Christianity" which was at once recognized as the defining scripture of the new movement, institutionalized as a separate denomination in 1825. Channing's Baltimore sermon asserted a belief in one and only one God. He objected to the doctrine of the Trinity as "subverting the unity of God." According to Channing, Unitarians believed in "Jesus Christ as a being distinct from and inferior to God." They also believed in the "parental character" of God and in this world as a place not of penance and mourning but of education. Unitarians broke sharply with Calvinism, were opposed to emotional excesses in religion, and founded their faith on a belief in that moral sense that Scottish Common Sense said could be found in all persons. Unitarianism looked on itself as the true reformation come at last. Channing himself possessed both moral force and intellectual energy. He was an accomplished and effective speaker, and he ended "Unitarian Christianity" with a call for revolution: "Our earnest prayer to God is, that he will overturn, and overturn, and overturn the strong-holds of spiritual usurpation."[1]

The strength of the Unitarian movement lay partly in its intellectual emphasis on the moral teachings of Jesus, partly in its modernizing of deism to shape a religion that embraced modern science, and partly in its impassioned rejection of key elements of Calvin. In 1820, when Emerson was a junior at Harvard, Channing wrote "The Moral Argument against Calvinism," an angry, ringing call to arms against Calvinism's roots in fear and terror. Channing rehabilitated fallen natural man. "It is an important truth," Channing says, "that the ultimate reliance of a human being must be on his own mind." Our moral sense might not be as clear and as uniform as we would like, Channing argued, but if we cannot trust our



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own moral sense, then God can be totally malignant. Channing delivers the high point and conclusion of the argument with the offended anger of an Ivan Karamazov. "If God's justice and goodness are consistent with those operations and modes of government [eternal damnation, hellfire, vengeance] which Calvinism ascribes to him, *of what use* is our belief in these perfections?" Channing asks. "If it consist with divine rectitude to consign to everlasting misery beings who have come guilty and impotent from his hand, we beg to know what interest we have in this rectitude, what pledge of good it contains, or what evil can be imagined which may not be its natural result?"[2]

On March 14, 1821, just a few months before Emerson graduated from college, he heard Channing give the lecture "Evidences of Revealed Religion," which made a profound impression. Emerson used the talk as a sort of standard or touchstone for years. Channing was forty-one now, about twice Emerson's age. Like Everett, he represented to Emerson the best of the generation immediately before his. In this vigorous talk Channing took up Hume's argument about our being unable to prove cause and effect, and Channing helps us see why the argument was so momentous. Channing speaks for the other side, of course. "All the evidences of Christianity may be traced to this great principle—that every effect must have an adequate cause," Channing says, and, he goes on, "We claim for our religion a divine original because no adequate cause for it can be found in the powers or passions of human nature, or in the circumstances under which it appeared."[3]

Channing was quite content to say that the Bible was a book like any other, subject to interpretation like any other, but the result of his own extensive biblical studies had been to persuade him that the Bible was thoroughly trustworthy. He observed that the Gospels give a perfectly consistent and unified view of Christ's character and that the Epistles show precisely "the very state of mind which must have been generated by the peculiar conditions of the first propagation of the religion." In all crucial matters then, the Gospels and the Epistles completely fulfilled their function, which was to explain the rise, nature, and early spread of Christ's message. Channing regards the Bible as an authentic account, one that is essentially consistent and to be trusted as the exclusive source of our ideas of Christianity. In October of 1823, just as William was preparing to leave for Germany, Emerson heard Channing deliver another sermon on the reliability of biblical revelation. When the Emerson family asked his opinion



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on the matter, Channing counseled William against going to Germany to study theology. Germany might be well enough for the study of history, well enough for a George Bancroft, but it would not do for theology.

Channing was fearful of the effect of the vigorous new German historical criticism of the Bible because it was mostly negative and destructive. Year after year, scholar after scholar showed how this or that portion of the Bible was open to charges of myth, miracle, magic, folklore, superstition, self-contradiction and inconsistency. Channing's own beliefs had been formed before he became aware of the powerful questionings of German biblical research. As a result, Channing's faith remained intact, but it was deprived of the insights of the equally powerful counterattack, the romantic rebirth of Christianity in the early nineteenth century, which also had its sources in Germany, in the work of Kant, Herder, and Schleiermacher.

William Emerson sailed for Europe on December 5, 1823, on the brig *Ocean.* Much of what he had to report from Germany was discouraging. Pulpit eloquence of the kind Waldo found so impressive and important seemed not to exist in Germany. The university at Göttingen was huge. With fifteen hundred students, it was five times the size of Harvard. William wrote home that he had no desire to import a German university. The sheer size of the crowd of students was "an obstacle to their improvement," he thought. The students were rowdy; they drank, fought duels incessantly, and had virtually no contact with the professors. The theology students were the worst. They drank more, fought more, and had less self-respect, William reported. Despite all this, William worked up his German and in May 1824 went to hear the first of a series of lectures on the first three Evangelists by J. G. Eichhorn.[4]

Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), the "father of modern Old Testament criticism," was in 1824 nearing the end of his long and distinguished career. With formidable scholarly inclusiveness, including patient systematic consideration of all opposing evidence and viewpoints, Eichhorn effectively converted the central text of the Jewish and Christian tradition to a more or less unreliable set of stories, myths, and legends, mixed with historical events in a way that made the resulting narrative no more reliable than, say, Herodotus. (To be sure, it is also no less reliable than Herodotus.) With steady, good-natured intelligence, Eichhorn studied the Bible as one would study any other text, checking for sources and analogs, alert to internal inconsistencies and contradictions, borrowings, and scribal errors. He looked for changes of diction, imagery, or rhetoric that might signal



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"hideous inactivity" made all the worse because he felt a need for action. His journals are full of preacherly dispirited comments. He fretted that "we put up with time and chance because it costs too great an effort to subdue them to our wills," and he noted the "coldness and poverty of our views of heaven . . . the meagerness and hollow declamation of all uninspired descriptions of the same."[8]

But something about William's departure stirred Waldo. Instead of continuing to complain about his lot, about feeling left at home, provincial and superfluous, Emerson responded to William's good fortune by insisting—almost paradoxically—on his own. By late December 1823 his journal has, in addition to the Hamlet-like plaintiveness and Byronic sense of isolation, a new and extraordinary note of exultation. Like Ahab standing on the deck in the storm, Emerson takes on the universe: "Who is he that shall control me? Why may not I act and speak and write and think with entire freedom? What am I to the universe, or, the universe, what is it to me? Who hath forged the chains of wrong and right, of Opinion and Custom? And must I wear them?" Accompanying his sense of detachment was a remarkable surge of power, a wonderful feeling of strength and liberation. "I am solitary in the vast society of beings," he wrote. "I see the world, human, brute, and inanimate nature,—I am in the midst of them, but not of them; I hear the song of the storm . . . I see cities and nations and witness passions . . . but I partake it not . . . I disclaim them all."[9]

The outburst is not so much isolation as defiance, a redefining of what is center and what periphery. It reminds one of Thoreau's hawk, which was not lonely but made everything lonely beneath it. It is a feeling of absolute and unquestioned self-validation, an extraordinary self-assertion, a wild romantic cogito that answers Hume not by logical argument but by felt experience. No matter what else existed, Emerson knew *he* existed: "I say to the universe, Mighty One! thou art not my mother. Return to chaos if thou wilt. I shall still exist. I live. If I owe my being, it is to a destiny greater than thine. Star by star, world by world, system by system shall be crushed,—but I shall live."[10]



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the "depraved details of the theology under whose chains Calvin of Geneva bound Europe down." Christianity is, for the writer of this letter, a falling off from Plato and Socrates. His aunt's spirited and impassioned reply has never been printed. With superb scorn Mary Moody Emerson, writing as "Plato," sweeps past poor Waldo's critique, arguing in effect that his opinions of both Plato and Christianity are ludicrously low. She makes a quick, forceful defense of the *Republic.* Then, in a breathtaking passage that rivals the close of the *Republic* itself, she describes Plato's death, his enlightening in the afterlife, and his astonished perception of how close he had come to the great truths of Christianity. Aunt Mary's letter is an unacknowledged classic of Christian humanism. Her urgent, vivid, fable-making belief is irresistible. While Waldo was still measuring himself by his skeptical skill, by his capacity to doubt, his aunt, through her fable of Plato, was showing him the vastly superior power of belief.[10]

In November 1824 Emerson decided to give up teaching. He turned, with sharply increased seriousness, to the study of divinity. He saw Channing weekly and was evidently told that he might, by independent study, cut a year off the usual three-year divinity course offered at Harvard. He obtained a second reading list from Channing, this one a thirty-four-page comprehensive syllabus and book list. The character of this list is important both for Emerson's study of religion and for early Unitarianism. The entire syllabus is clearly dominated by Bible study. Channing lists editions, concordances, lexicons, historical and geographical aids, harmonies (books that undertake to show the essential congruence of all four Gospels, or of the Old and New Testaments), chronologies, and commentaries. Channing's course in divinity is devoted entirely to exhaustive study of the Bible in its original languages and with full scholarly apparatus. Since the Bible is the key document and source of Christianity, he argued, it alone should be studied by the Christian minister. Only when the Bible and its interpretation had been mastered could one look into theological controversy or church history. Faced with this mass of demanding professional reading, Emerson set up schedules for himself. He read Leland *On the Advantages and Necessity of Revelation,* he bought Thomas Newton's *Dissertation on the Prophecies,* he worked on LeClerc's *Letters Concerning Inspiration,* and he studied with minute care the text of the prophets and the Epistles with the aid of a Bible he carefully interleaved with blank pages for notes.[11]

But Emerson did not or could not give himself entirely to this sort of committed, focused, professional study, at least not yet. In December his



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