Ralph Waldo Emerson

Essays & Poems
Nature; Addresses, and Lectures
Essays: First and Second Series
Representative Men
The Conduct of Life
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The Fugitive Slave Law

I do not often speak to public questions. They are odious and hurtful and it seems like meddling or leaving your work. I have my own spirits in prison,—spirits in deeper prisons, whom no man visits, if I do not. And then I see what havoc it makes with any good mind this dissipated philanthropy. The one thing not to be forgiven to intellectual persons is not to know their own task, or to take their ideas from others and believe in the ideas of others. From this want of manly rest in their own, and foolish acceptance of other people's watchwords, comes the imbecility and fatigue of their conversation. For they cannot affirm these from any original experience, and, of course, not with the natural movement and whole power of their nature and talent, but only from their memory, only from the cram position of standing for their teacher.—They say, what they would have you believe, but which they do not quite know.

My own habitual view is to the well-being of students or scholars, and it is only when the public event affects them, that it very seriously affects me. And what I have to say is to them. For every man speaks mainly to a class whom he works with, and more or less fitsly represents. It is to them I am beforehand related and engaged,—in this audience or out of this audience,—to them and not to others. And yet when I say the class of scholars and students,—that is a class which comprises in some sort all mankind,—comprises every man in the best hours of his life:—and in these days not only virtually, but actually. For who are the readers and thinkers of 1854?

Owing to the silent revolution which the newspaper has wrought, this class has come in this country to take in all classes. Look into the morning trains, which, from every suburb carry the businessmen into the city, to their shops, counting-rooms, work-yards, and warehouses. With them, enters the car the humble priest of politics, philosophy, and religion in the shape of the newsboy. He unfolds his magical sheets, two pence a head his bread of knowledge costs, and instantly the entire rectangular assembly fresh from their
breakfast, are bending as one man to their second breakfast. There is, no doubt, chaff enough, in what he brings, but there is fact and thought and wisdom in the crudeness from all regions of the world.

Now I have lived all my life without suffering any kind of inconvenience from American slavery. I never saw it; never heard the whip; I never felt the check on my free speech and action; until the other day when Mr. Webster by his personal influence brought the Fugitive Slave law on the country. I say Mr. Webster, for though the bill was not his, yet it is notorious that he was the life and soul of it, that he gave all he had, it cost him his life. And under the shadow of his great name, inferior men sheltered themselves, and threw their ballots for it, and made the law. I say inferior men; there were all sorts of what are called brilliant men, accomplished men, men of high office, a President of the United States, senators, and of eloquent speech, but men without self-respect, without character, and it was droll to see that office, age, fame, talent, even a repute for honesty, all count for nothing. They had no opinions, they had no memory for what they had been saying like the Lord's prayer, all their lifetime; they were only looking to what their great captain did, and if he jumped, they jumped,—if he stood on his head, they did. In ordinary, the supposed sense of their district and state is their guide, and this keeps them to liberty and justice. But it is always a little difficult to decipher what this public sense is: and when a great man comes, who knits up into himself the opinions and wishes of his people, it is so much easier to follow him as an exponent of this. He, too, is responsible, they will not be. It will always suffice to say,—I followed him. I saw plainly that the great show their legitimate power in nothing more than in their power to misguide us. I saw that a great man, deservedly esteemed and admired for his powers and their general right direction, was able, fault of the total want of stamina in public men, when he failed, to break them all with him, to carry parties with him.

It showed much. It ended a great deal of nonsense we had been accustomed to hear and to repeat, on the 22nd December, 19th April, 17th June, and 4th July. It showed what reputations are made of; what straw we dignify by office and title, and how competent they are to give counsel and help in a day of trial: the shallowness of leaders; showed the divergence of parties from their alleged grounds, and that men would not stick to what they had said: that the resolutions of public bodies, and the pledges never so often given and put on record, of public men,—will not bind them. The fact comes out more plainly, that you cannot rely on any man for the defence of truth who is not constitutionally, or by blood and temperament, on that side.

In what I have to say of Mr. Webster I do not confound him with vulgar politicians of his own time or since. There is always base ambition enough, men who calculate on the immense ignorance of masses of men;—that is their quarry and farm,—they use the constituencies at home only for their shoes. And of course they can drive out from the contest any honorable man. The low can best win the low, and all men like to be made much of. There are those too who have power and inspiration only to do ill. Their talent or their faculty deserts them when they undertake anything right.

Mr. Webster had a natural ascendancy of aspect and carriage, which distinguished him over all his contemporaries. His countenance, his figure, and his manners, were all in so grand a style, that he was, without effort, as superior to his most eminent rivals, as they were to the humblest, so that his arrival in any place was an event which drew crowds of people, who went to satisfy their eyes, and could not see him enough. I think they looked at him as the representative of the American continent. He was there in his Adamitic capacity, as if he alone of all men did not disappoint the eye and ear, but was a fit figure in the landscape. I remember his appearance at Bunker Hill. There was the monument, and here was Webster. He knew well that a little more or less of rhetoric signified nothing; he was only to say plain and equal things;—grand things, if he had them,—and, if he had them not, only to abstain from saying unfit things;—and the whole occasion was answered by his presence. It was a place for behavior, much more than for speech; and Webster walked through his part with entire success.

His wonderful organization, the perfection of his elocution,—and all that thereto belongs,—voice, accent, intona-
tion, attitude, manner, we shall not soon find again. Then he was so thoroughly simple and wise in his rhetoric,—he saw through his matter,—hugged his fact so close,—went to the principal or essential, and never indulged in a weak flourish, though he knew perfectly well how to make such orations, episodes, and perorations, as might give perspective to his harangue, without in the least embarrassing his march, or confounding his transitions. In his statement, things lay in daylight;—we saw them in order as they were. Though he knew very well how to present his own personal claims, yet in his argument he was intellectual, and stated his fact pure of all personality, so that his splendid wrath, when his eyes became lamps, was the wrath of the fact and cause he stood for. His power, like that of all great masters, was not in excellent parts, but was total. He had a great and everywhere equal propriety. He worked with that closeness of adhesion to the matter in hand, which a joiner or a chemist uses. And the same quiet and sure feeling of right to his place that an oak or a mountain have to theirs:

After all his talents have been described, there remains that perfect propriety which animated all the details of the action or speech with the character of the whole, so that his beauties of detail are endless. He seemed born for the bar, born for the senate, and took very naturally a leading part in large private and in public affairs; for his head distributed things in their right places, and what he saw so well, he compelled other people to see also. Ah! great is the privilege of eloquence. What gratitude does every human being feel to him who speaks well for the right,—who translates truth into language entirely plain and clear!

The history of this country has given a disastrous importance to the defects of this great man's mind. Whether evil influences and the corruption of politics, or whether original infirmity, it was the misfortune of this country that with this large understanding, he had not what is better than intellect, and the essential source of its health. It is the office of the moral nature to give sanity and right direction to the mind, to give centrality and unity.

Now it is a law of our nature that great thoughts come from the heart. It was for this reason I may here say as I have said elsewhere that the moral is the occult fountain of genius, the sterility of thought, the want of generalization in his speeches, and the curious fact, that, with a general ability that impresses all the world, there is not a single general remark, not an observation on life and manners, not a single valuable aphorism that can pass into literature from his writings.

Four years ago tonight, on one of those critical moments in history when great issues are determined,—when the powers of right and wrong are mustered for conflict, and it lies with one man to give a casting vote,—Mr. Webster most unexpectedly threw his whole weight on the side of slavery, and caused by his personal and official authority the passage of the Fugitive Slave Bill.

It is remarked of the Americans, that they value dexterity too much and honor too little. That the Americans praise a man by saying that he is smart than by saying that he is right.

Now whether this defect be national or not, it is the defect and calamity of Mr. Webster and it is so far true of his countrymen that namely, they appeal to physical and mental ability, when his character is assailed. And his speeches on the 7th March, and at Albany, Buffalo, Syracuse, and Boston, are cited in justification. And Mr. Webster's literary editor believes that it was his own wish to rest his fame on the Speech of 7 March. Now, though I have my own opinions on this 7th March discourse, and those others, and think them very transparent, and very open to criticisms, yet the secondary merits of a speech (i.e. its logic, its illustration, its points,) are not here in question. The primary quality of a speech is its subject. Nobody doubts that Daniel Webster could make a good speech. Nobody doubts that there were good and plausible things to be said on the part of the south. But this is not a question of ingenuity, not a question of syllogisms, but of sides. How came he there? There are always texts and thoughts and arguments; but it is the genius and temper of the man which decides whether he will stand for Right or for Might.

Who doubts the power of any clever and fluent man to defend either of our parties, or any cause in our courts? There was the same law in England for Jeffreys and Talbot and Yorke to read slavery out of, and for Lord Mansfield to read freedom. And in this country one sees that there is always
margin enough in the statute for a liberal judge to read one
way, and a servile judge another. But the question which His-
tory will ask is broader.

In the final hour, when he was forced by the peremptory
necessity of the closing armies to take a side, did he take the
side of great principles, the side of humanity and justice, or
the side of abuse and oppression and chaos? Mr. Webster de-
cided for slavery; and that, when the aspect of the institu-
tion was no longer doubtful, no longer feeble and apologetic, and
proposing soon to end itself, but when it was strong and
aggressive and threatening an illimitable increase, then he
listened to state reasons and hopes and left with much
complacency, we are told, the testament of his speech to the
astonished State of Massachusetts. Vera pro gratis. A ghastly
result of all those years of experience in affairs, this, that there
was nothing better for the foremost man, the most American
man in America, to tell his countrymen, than, that slavery was
now at that strength, that they must beat down their con-
science and become kidnappers for it. This was like the dole-
ful speech falsely ascribed to the patriot Brutus, “Virtue, I
have followed thee through life, and I find thee but a
shadow.”

Here was a question of an immoral law, a question agitated
for ages, and settled always in the same way by every great
jurist, that an immoral law cannot be valid. Cicero, Grotius,
Coke, Blackstone, Burlamaqui, Vattel, Burke, Jefferson do all
affirm this, and I cite them not that they can give plainness to
what is so clear, but because though lawyers and practical
statesmen, they could not hide from themselves this truth.
Here was the question: Are you for man, and for the good
man; or are you for the hurt and harm of man? It was a
question, whether man shall be treated as leather? Whether
the negroes shall be, as the Indians were in Spanish America,
a species of money? Whether this institution, which is a kind
of mill or factory for converting men into monkeys, shall be
upheld and enlarged? And Mr. Webster and the country went
for quadruped law. Immense mischief was done. People were
all expecting a totally different course from Mr. Webster. If
any man had in that hour possessed the weight with the
country which he had acquired, he would have brought the
whole country to its senses. But not a moment’s pause was
allowed. Angry parties went from bad to worse, and the deci-
sion of Webster was accompanied with every thing offensive
to freedom and good morals.

There was something like an attempt to debase the moral
sentiment of the clergy and of the youth. The immense power
of rectitude is apt to be forgotten in politics. But they who
brought this great wrong on the country, did not forget it.
They wished to avail themselves of the names of men of
known probity and honor to endorse the statute. The ancient
maxim is still true, that never was any injustice effected except
by the help of justice. Burke said, “he would pardon some-
ting to the spirit of liberty”—but the opposition was sharply
called treason, by Webster and prosecuted so. He told the
people at Boston, “they must conquer their prejudices,” that
“agitation of the subject of Slavery must be suppressed.” He
did, as immoral men usually do, make very low bows to the
Christian Church, and went through all the Sunday deco-
rums; but when allusion was made to the sanctions of mo-
rality, he very frankly said, at Albany, “Some higher law,
something existing somewhere between here and the third
heaven,—I do not know where,”—and, if the reporters say
true, this wretched atheism found some laughter in the
company.

I said I had never in my life suffered before from the slave
institution. It was like slavery in Africa or in Japan for me.
There was a fugitive law, but it had become, or was fast be-
coming, a dead letter; and, by the genius and laws of Massa-
chusetts inoperative. The new Bill made it operative; required
me to hunt slaves; and it found citizens in Massachusetts will-
ing to act as judges and captors. Moreover, it disclosed the
secret of the new times; that slavery was no longer mendicant,
but was become aggressive and dangerous.

The way in which the country was dragged to consent to
this, and the disastrous defection on the miserable cry of
Union, of the men of letters, of the colleges, of educated men,
may of some preachers of religion shows that our prosperity
had hurt us; and we can not be shocked by crime. It showed
that the old religion and the sense of right had faded and
gone out; that, whilst we reckoned ourselves a highly cul-

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vated nation, our bellies had run away with our brains, and the principles of culture and progress did not exist. For I suppose that liberty is a very accurate index in men and nations of general progress.

The theory of personal liberty must always appeal to the most refined communities and to the men of the rarest perception and of delicate moral sense. For these are rights which rest on the finest sense of justice, and with every degree of civility,—it will be more truly felt and defined. A barbarous tribe of good stock will by means of their best heads secure substantial liberty. But when there is any weakness in race, as is in the black race, and it becomes in any degree matter of concession and protection from their stronger neighbors, the incompatibility and offensiveness of the wrong will, of course, be most evident to the most cultivated.

For it is, is it not? the very nature of courtesy, of politeness, of religion, of love, to prefer another, to postpone oneself, to protect another from oneself? That is the distinction of the gentleman, to defend the weak, and redress the injured, as it is of the savage and the brute to usurp and use others.

In Massachusetts, as we all know, there has always existed a predominant conservative spirit. We have more money and value of every kind than other people, and wish to keep them. The plea on which freedom was resisted was Union. I went to certain serious men who had a little more reason than the rest, and inquired why they took this part. They told me candidly that they had no confidence in their strength to resist the democratic party in this country; that they saw plainly that all was going to the utmost verge of licence; each was vying with his neighbor to lead the party by proposing the worst measure, and they threw themselves on the extreme right as a drag on the wheel; that they knew Cuba would be bad, and Mexico would be bad, and they stood stiffly on conservatism, and as near to monarchy as they could, only to moderate the velocity with which the car was running down the precipice: in short, their theory was despair; the whig wisdom was only reprise, a waiting to be the last devoured. They sided with Carolina or with Arkansas, only to make a show of whig strength, wherewith to resist a little longer this general ruin.

Gentlemen, I have a respect for conservatism. I know how deeply it is founded in our nature, and how idle are all attempts to shake ourselves free of it. We are all conservatives; all half whig, half democrat, in our essences; and might as well try to jump off our planet or jump out of our skins, as to escape from our whiggery. There are two forces in nature by whose antagonism we exist: the power of Fate, of Fortune, the laws of the world, the order of things, or, however else we choose to phrase it,—the material necessities, on the one hand; and Will, or Duty, or Freedom, on the other. May and must: the sense of right and duty, on one hand; and the material necessities, on the other. May and must. In vulgar politics, the Whig goes for what has been, for the old necessities, the must; the reformer goes for the better, for the ideal good, for the mays.

But each of these parties must of necessity take in, in some manner, the principle of the other. Each wishes to cover the whole ground, to hold fast, and to advance: only, one lays the emphasis on keeping; and the other, on advancing. I, too, think the musts are a safe company to follow, and even agreeable. But if we are whigs, let us be whigs of nature and science, and go for all the necessities. Let us know that over and above all the musts of poverty and appetite, is the instinct of man to rise, and the instinct to love and help his brother.

Now, Gentlemen, I think we have in this hour instruction again in the simplest lesson. Events roll, millions of men are engaged, and the result is some of those first commandments which we heard in the nursery. We never get beyond our first lesson; for really the world exists, as I understand it, to teach the science of liberty which begins with liberty from fear. The events of this month are teaching one thing plain and clear, the worthlessness of good tools to bad workmen, that papers are of no use, resolutions of public meetings, platforms of conventions, no nor laws nor Constitutions any more. These are all declaratory of the will of the moment and are passed with more levity and on grounds much less honorable than ordinary business transactions in the street. You relied on the Constitution. It has not the word slave in it and very good argument has shown that it would not warrant the crimes that are done under it. That with provisions so vague, for an
object not named, and which would not be suffered to claim a barrel of sugar or a bushel of corn, the robbing of a man and all his posterity,—is effected. You relied on the Supreme Court. The law was right; excellent law for the lambs. But what if, unhappily, the judges were chosen from the wolves? and give to all the law a wolfish interpretation?

What is the use of admirable law forms and political forms if a hurricane of party feeling and a combination of monied interests can beat them to the ground? What is the use of courts, if judges only quote authorities, and no judge excerts original jurisdiction, or recurs to first principles? What is the use of guaranties provided by the jealousy of ages for the protection of liberty,—if these are made of no effect, when a bad act of Congress finds a willing commissioner? You relied on the Missouri Compromise: that is ridden over. You relied on state sovereignty in the free states to protect their citizens. They are driven with contempt out of the courts, and out of the territory of the slave states, if they are so happy as to get out with their lives. And now, you relied on these dismal guaranties infamously made in 1850, and before the body of Webster is yet crumbled, it is found that they have crumbled: this eternal monument at once of his fame and of the common Union, is rotten in four years. They are no guaranty to the free states. They are a guaranty to the slave states; that as they have hitherto met with no repulse, they shall meet with none. I fear there is no reliance to be had on any kind of form or covenant, no, not on sacred forms,—none on churches, none on bibles. For one would have said that a Christian would not keep slaves, but the Christians keep slaves. Of course, they will not dare read the bible. Won't they? They quote the bible and Christ and Paul to maintain slavery. If slavery is a good, then is lying, theft, arson, incest, homicide, each and all goods and to be maintained by union societies. These things show that no forms, neither Constitutions nor laws nor covenants nor churches nor bibles, are of any use in themselves; the devil nests comfortably into them all. There is no help but in the head and heart and hamstrings of a man. Covenants are of no use without honest men to keep them. Laws are of no use, but with loyal citizens to obey them. To interpret Christ, it needs Christ in the heart. The teachings of the spirit can be apprehended only by the same spirit that gave them forth. To make good the cause of Freedom you must draw off from all these foolish trusts on others. You must be citadels and warriors, yourselves Declarations of Independence, the charter, the battle, and the victory. Cromwell said, "We can only resist the superior training of the king's soldiers, by having godly men." And no man has a right to hope that the laws of New York will defend him from the contamination of slaves another day, until he has made up his mind that he will not owe his protection to the laws of New York, but to his own sense and spirit. Then he protects New York. He only who is able to stand alone, is qualified for society. And that I understand to be the end for which a soul exists in this world, to be himself the counterbalance of all falsehood and all wrong. "The army of unright is encamped from pole to pole, but the road of victory is known to the just." Everything may be taken away, he may be poor, he may be homeless, yet he will know out of his arms to make a pillow and out of his breast a bolster. Why have the minority no influence? because they have not a real minority of one.

I conceive that thus to detach a man, and make him feel that he is to owe all to himself, is the way to make him strong and rich. And here the optimist must find if anywhere the benefit of slavery. We have many teachers. We are in this world for nothing else than Culture: to be instructed in nature, in realities; in the laws of moral and intelligent nature; and surely our education is not conducted by toys and luxuries,—but by austere and rugged masters,—by poverty, solitude, passions, war, slavery,—to know that paradise is under the shadow of swords; that divine sentiments, which are always soliciting us, are breathed into us from on high and are a counterbalance to an universe of suffering and crime,—that self-reliance, the height and perfection of man, is reliance on God. The insight of the religious sentiment will disclose to him unexpected aids in the nature of things. The Persian Saadi said "Beware of hurting the orphan. When the orphan sets a crying the throne of the Almighty is rocked from side to side."

Whenever a man has come to this mind, that there is no
church for him but his humble morning prayer; no constitution, but his talent of dealing well and justly with his neighbor; no liberty, but his invincible will to do right, then certain aids and allies will promptly appear. For the Eternal constitution of the universe is on his side. It is of no use to vote down gravitation or morals. What is useful will last; whilst that which is hurtful to the world will sink beneath all the opposing forces which it must exasperate. The terror which the Marseillaise thunders against oppression, thunders today,—

"Tout est soldat pour vous combattre."

"Everything that can walk turns soldier to fight you down." The end for which man was made, is not stealing, nor crime in any form. And a man cannot steal, without incurring all the penalties of the thief; no, though all the legislatures vote that it is virtuous, and though there be a general conspiracy among scholars and official persons to hold him up, and to say, "Nothing is good but stealing." A man who commits a crime defeats the end of his existence. He was created for benefit, and he exists for harm. And as well-doing makes power and wisdom, ill-doing takes them away. A man who steals another man's labor, (as a planter does,) steals away his own faculties; his integrity, his humanity is flowing away from him.

The habit of oppression cuts out the moral eyes, and though the intellect goes on stimulating the moral as before, its sanity is invaded, and gradually destroyed. It takes away the presentiments.

I suppose, in general, this is allowed; that, if you have a nice question of right and wrong, you would not go with it to Louis Napoleon; or to a political hack; or to a slave-driver. The habit of mind of traders in power would not be esteemed favorable to delicate moral perception. It is not true that there is any exception to that in American slavery, or that the system here has called out a spirit of generosity and self-sacrifice. No excess of good nature and of tenderness of moral constitution in individuals has been able to give a new character to the system, to tear down the whipping house. The plea that the negro is an inferior race sounds very oddly in my ear from a slave-holder. "The masters of slaves seem generally anxious to prove that they are not of a race superior in any noble

quality to the meanest of their bondmen." And indeed when I hear the southerner point to the anatomy of the negro, and talk of chimpanzee,—I recall Montesquieu's remark, "It will not do to say, that negroes are men, lest it should turn out that whites were not."

I know that when seen near, and in detail, slavery is disheartening. But nature is not so helpless but it can rid itself at last of every wrong. An Eastern poet, in describing the world God made pure in the beginning, said, "that God had made justice so dear to the heart of nature, that, if any injustice lurked anywhere under the sky, the blue vault would shrivel to a snakeskin and cast it out by spasms." But the spasms of nature are centuries and ages and will tax the faith of short-lived men. Slowly, slowly the avenger comes, but comes surely. The proverbs of the nations affirm these delays, but affirm the arrival. They say, "God may consent, but not forever." The delay of the Divine Justice,—this was the meaning and soul of the Greek Tragedy,—this was the soul of their religion. "There has come, too, one to whom lurking warfare is dear,—Retribution,—with a soul full of viles, a violator of hospitality, guileful without the guilt of guile, limping, late in her arrival." "This happiness at its close begets itself an offspring, and does not die childless, and instead of good fortune, there sprouts forth for posterity ever-ravening calamity."

For evil word, shall evil word be said, 
For murderstroke, a murderstroke be paid, 
Who smites must smart.

These delays,—you see them now in the temper of the times. The national spirit in this country is so drowsy, preoccupied with interest, deaf to principle. The Anglo-Saxon race is proud and strong but selfish. They believe only in Anglo-Saxons. Greece found it deaf, Poland found it so, Italy found it so, Hungary found it so. England goes for trade, not for liberty; goes against Greece, against Hungary; against Schleswig-Holstein; against the French Republic whilst it was yet a republic. To faint hearts the times offer no invitation. And the like torpor exists here throughout the active classes on the subject of domestic slavery and its appalling aggressions.
Yes, that is the stern edict of Providence, that liberty shall be no hasty fruit, but that event on event, population on population, age on age, shall cast itself into the opposite scale, and not until liberty has slowly accumulated weight enough to countervail and preponderate against all this, can the sufficient recoil come. All the great cities, all the refined circles, and the statesmen,—Guizot, Palmerston, Webster, Calhoun, are sure to be found banded against liberty; they are all sure to be found befriending liberty with their words; and crushing it with their votes.

Liberty is never cheap. It is made difficult because freedom is the accomplishment and perfection of a man. He is a finished man, earning and bestowing good, equal to the world, at home in nature and dignifying that; the sun does not see anything nobler and has nothing to teach him. Therefore mountains of difficulty must be surmounted, stern trials met, wiles of seduction, dangers, healed by a quarantine of calamities to measure his strength by before he dare say, I am free.

Whilst the inconsistency of slavery with the principles on which the world is built guarantees its downfall, I own that the patience it requires is almost too sublime for mortals and seems to demand of us more than mere hoping. And when one sees how fast the rot spreads,—it is growing serious,—I think we demand of superior men that they shall be superior in this, that the mind and the virtue give their verdict in their day and accelerate so far the progress of civilization. Possession is sure to throw its stupid strength for existing power; and appetite and ambition will go for that. Let the aid of virtue and intelligence and education be cast where they rightfully belong. They are organically ours. Let them be loyal to their own. English Earl Grey said, on a memorable occasion, "he should stand by his order." And I wish to see the instructed or illuminated class know their own flag, and not stand for the kingdom of darkness. We should not forgive the clergy of a country, for taking on every issue the immoral side. Nor the Bench, if it throw itself on the side of the culprit. Nor the Government, if it sustain the mob against the laws. It is an immense support and ally to a brave man standing single or with few for the right, to know, when, outvoted and discountenanced and ostracised in that hour and place,
show itself in this age and country, but with a lingering conscience which qualified each sentence with a recommendation to mercy, death with a recommendation to mercy.

But I put to every noble and generous spirit in the land; to every poetic; to every heroic; to every religious heart; that not so is our learning, our education, our poetry, our worship to be declared, not by heads reverted to the dying Demosthenes, Luther, or Wallace, or to George Fox, or to George Washington, but to the dangers and dragons that beset the United States at this time. It is not possible to extricate oneself from the questions in which your age is involved. I hate that we should be content with standing on the defensive. Liberty is aggressive. Liberty is the Crusade of all brave and conscientious men. It is the epic poetry, the new religion, the chivalry of all gentlemen. This is the oppressed Lady whom true knights on their oaths of honor must rescue and save.

Now at last we are disenchanted and shall have no more false hopes. I respect the Anti-Slavery Society. It is the Cassandra that has foretold all that has befallen, fact for fact, years ago,—foretold it all, and no man laid it to heart. It seemed, as the Turks say, “Fate makes that a man should not believe his own eyes.” But the Fugitive Law did much to unglue the eyes of men, and now the Nebraska Bill leaves us staring. The Anti-Slavery Society will add many members this year. The Whig party will join it. The Democrats will join it. The population of the Free States will join it. I doubt not, at last, the Slave States will join it. But be that sooner or later,—and whoever comes or stays away,—I hope we have come to an end of our unbelief, have come to a belief that there is a Divine Providence in the world which will not save us but through our own co-operation.

New York City, March 7, 1854.

Thoreau

Henry D. Thoreau was the last male descendant of a French ancestor who came to this country from the isle of Guernsey. His character exhibited occasional traits drawn from this blood in singular combination with a very strong Saxon genius.

He was born in Concord, Massachusetts, on the 12th of July, 1817. He was graduated at Harvard College, in 1837, but without any literary distinction. An iconoclast in literature, he seldom thanked colleges for their service to him, holding them in small esteem, whilst yet his debt to them was important. After leaving the University, he joined his brother in teaching a private school, which he soon renounced. His father was a manufacturer of lead pencils, and Henry applied himself for a time to this craft, believing he could make a better pencil than was then in use. After completing his experiments, he exhibited his work to chemists and artists in Boston, and having obtained their certificates to its excellence and its equality with the best London manufacture, he returned home contented. His friends congratulated him that he had now opened his way to fortune. But he replied, that he should never make another pencil. “Why should I? I would not do again what I have done once.” He resumed his endless walks, and miscellaneous studies, making every day some new acquaintance with Nature, though as yet never speaking of zoology or botany, since, though very studious of natural facts, he was inconstant of technical and textual science.

At this time, a strong, healthy youth fresh from college, whilst all his companions were choosing their profession, or eager to begin some lucrative employment, it was inevitable that his thoughts should be exercised on the same question, and it required rare decision to refuse all the accustomed paths, and keep his solitary freedom at the cost of disappointing the natural expectations of his family and friends. All the more difficult that he had a perfect probity, was exact in securing his own independence, and in holding every man to the like duty. But Thoreau never faltered. He was a born
NOTES

912.11 “Tis... faults;”) Cf. Measure for Measure, v, i, 439.

944.30 Claude-Lorraine] Colored optical devices for viewing landscapes, named after the seventeenth-century painter.

OTHER ESSAYS AND ADDRESSES

935.18 fourth Lateran Council] In 1139, the Fourth Lateran Council was convened by Pope Innocent III at the Lateran Palace, Rome, to define Eucharistic doctrine.


964.16–17 the kingdom... meat and drink.) Cf. Romans 14:17.

966.22–23 I am about... to me.] Emerson's resignation from the Second Church, Boston, was accepted on October 28, 1832.


969.22 buckra] Derogatory term for whites.


970.30 Talbot and Yorke] Charles Talbot (1685–1737) and Philip Yorke (1690–1764), English jurists.

974.7 prædial] A slave attached to an estate.

980.26–27 Lord Chancellor Northington] Robert Henley, First Earl of Northington (c. 1708–72). The citation is from his decision in the case Shelley v. Harvey.

988.38–989.2 In the case of the ship Zong... they had done.] The Zong was a slave ship sailing from São Tomé to Jamaica under the command of Capt. Luke Collingwood. The first nine weeks of the voyage claimed 197 lives. On November 29, 1781, Collingwood ordered 133 slaves who had fallen ill to be cast into the sea during the succeeding three days, with all but one perishing. According to insurance arrangements, the underwriters would bear the financial loss if the slaves were thrown alive into the sea under pretext that the ship's safety had been threatened. If slaves died of natural causes during transport the loss would fall on the ship's owners and the captain.


993.1 The Fugitive Slave Law] The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a more stringent version of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, imposed heavy penalties on persons who helped runaway slaves, but was resisted by abolitionists and countered in many Northern states by the passage of “personal liberty laws.” The 1850 law denied alleged fugitives any jury trial; their cases were instead heard by federal commissioners who received $5 if they decided for the defendant and $10 if they decided for the claimant.

999.30–31 his appearance at Bunker Hill] On June 17, 1825, Webster delivered one of his most famous orations at the laying of the Bunker Hill monument.


998.20–22 Virtue... but a shadow.] The origin of this citation is uncertain. Edward Waldo Emerson, commenting in the Centenary Edition of Emerson's works (1904), ascribes it to the Greek writer Dio Cassius.

1002.15 the Missouri Compromise] In 1820, Congress admitted Maine, a free state, and Missouri, a slave state, into the Union on the condition that slavery be prohibited north of latitude 36° 30' N, excepting Missouri.

1003.30–31 paradise is under the shadow of swords] In Simon Ockley's The History of the Saracens (2 vols. [London, 1718]), this saying is attributed to Mohammed by Abdollah Ebu Ja'far (I, 164). It appears as the epigraph to "Heroism." Cf. p. 369 in this volume.

1010.30 a jouissance] French: to the extreme.

1012.1–3 one of his friends] Emerson himself. Cf. his journals for July–August 1848.

1016.4 Scott's romance] Walter Scott's The Betrothed (1824).

1016.4 Arnica mollis] A medicinal herb used for bruises and sprains.

1018.10 Annursnuc] A hill in Concord.

1018.12 Victoria regia] Water-lily native to Guiana and Brazil.


1021.3–13 I hearing get... brought] These lines are from Thoreau's poem "Inspiration," quoted from selections which appeared in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers. The quatrains are from the "Friday" chapter (New York: The Library of America, 1985, p. 284) and appeared intact in the completed version of the poem; the six-line verse is from the "Monday" chapter (p. 140) and appeared, with changes, in two distinct quatrains of the completed version. Cf. The Collected Poems of Henry T. Thoreau, ed. Carl Bode (Baltimore, 1964), pp. 230–33.

1028.12–13 he is... period] The "disciple" is Phaedrus. Cf. Plato's Phaedrus, 247d.

1031.22 the witty D'Argenson] Marc Antonie René de Paulmy d'Argenson (1722–87), member of the French Academy.

1031.12–13 Si l'Abbé... de tous] French: "If the Abbé had told us a little about religion, he'd have told us about everything."