

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

ESSAYS & POEMS

Nature; Addresses, and Lectures

Essays: First and Second Series

Representative Men

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Other Essays and Addresses

Poems 1847

May-Day and Other Pieces

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1996

has believed there was no vindication of right; it is horrible to think of, but it seemed so. I doubt not, that sometimes the negro's friend, in the face of scornful and brutal hundreds of traders and drivers, has felt his heart sink. Especially, it seems to me, some degree of despondency is pardonable, when he observes the men of conscience and of intellect, his own natural allies and champions,—those whose attention should be nailed to the grand objects of this cause, so hotly offended by whatever incidental petulances or infirmities of indiscreet defenders of the negro, as to permit themselves to be ranged with the enemies of the human race; and names which should be the alarums of liberty and the watchwords of truth, are mixed up with all the rotten rabble of selfishness and tyranny. I assure myself that this coldness and blindness will pass away. A single noble wind of sentiment will scatter them forever. I am sure that the good and wise elders, the ardent and generous youth will not permit what is incidental and exceptional to withdraw their devotion from the essential and permanent characters of the question. There have been moments, I said, when men might be forgiven, who doubted. Those moments are past. Seen in masses, it cannot be disputed, there is progress in human society. There is a blessed necessity by which the interest of men is always driving them to the right; and, again, making all crime mean and ugly. The genius of the Saxon race, friendly to liberty; the enterprise, the very muscular vigor of this nation, are inconsistent with slavery. The Intellect, with blazing eye, looking through history from the beginning onward, gazes on this blot, and it disappears. The sentiment of Right, once very low and indistinct, but ever more articulate, because it is the voice of the universe, pronounces Freedom. The Power that built this fabric of things affirms it in the heart; and in the history of the First of August, has made a sign to the ages, of his will.

Concord, Massachusetts, August 1, 1844

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 cramp 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 fitly 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 known 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 knots 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 exordiums, 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 History 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 decided for slavery; and *that*, when the aspect of the institution 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 conscience and become kidnappers for it. This was like the doleful 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 of 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 decision of Webster was accompanied with every thing offensive to freedom and good morals.

There was something like an attempt to debauch 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 something 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 decorums; but when allusion was made to the sanctions of morality, 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 becoming, a dead letter; and, by the genius and laws of Massachusetts inoperative. The new Bill made it operative; required me to hunt slaves; and it found citizens in Massachusetts willing 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, nay 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 culti-

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 had, and Mexico would be had, 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 reprieve, 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 *musts*; 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 exerts 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 nestles 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 wiles, 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-ravaging 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 perfectness 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,

yet better men in other parts of the country appreciate the service, and will rightly report him to his own age and to posterity. And without this assurance he will sooner sink; “if they do not care to be defended,” he may well say, “I too will decline the controversy, from which I only reap invectives and hatred.”

Yet the lovers of liberty may tax with reason the coldness and indifferentism of the scholars and literary men. They are lovers of liberty in Greece, and in Rome, and in the English Commonwealth, but they are very lukewarm lovers of the specific liberty of America in 1854. The universities are not now as in Hobbes’s time, the core of rebellion; no, but the seat of whiggery. They have forgotten their allegiance to the muse and grown worldly and political. I remember I listened, on one of those occasions when the university chooses one of her distinguished sons returning from the political arena believing that senators and statesmen are glad to throw off the harness and to dip again in the Castalian pools. But if audiences forget themselves statesmen do not. The low bows to all the crockery gods of the day were duly made. Only in one part of the discourse the orator allowed to transpire rather against his will a little sober sense. It was this. I am as you see a man virtuously inclined and only corrupted by my profession of politics. I should prefer the right side. You gentlemen of these literary and scientific schools have the power to make your verdict clear and prevailing. Had you done so, you would have found me its glad organ and champion. Abstractly, I should have preferred that side. But you have not done it. You have not spoken out. You have failed to arm me. I can only deal with masses as I find them. Abstractions are not for me. I go then for such parties and opinions as have provided me with a working apparatus. I give you my word, not without regret, that I was first for you, and though I am now to deny and condemn you, you see it is not my will, but the party necessity. Having made this manifesto, and professed his adoration for liberty in the time of grandfathers, he proceeded with his work of denouncing freedom and freemen at the present day, much in the tone and spirit with which Lord Bacon prosecuted his benefactor Essex. He denounced every name and aspect under which liberty and progress dared

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 oath and 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 incurious 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

- 912.11 "Tis . . . faults;"] Cf. *Measure for Measure*, v, i, 439.
- 944.30 Claude-Lorraines] Colored optical devices for viewing landscapes, named after the seventeenth-century painter.

OTHER ESSAYS AND ADDRESSES

- 955.15 fourth Lateran Council] In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council was convened by Pope Innocent III at the Lateran Palace, Rome, to define Eucharistic doctrine.
- 959.14 Sandemanians] Religious sect founded by Robert Sandeman (1718–71), Scottish theologian.
- 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.
- 968.30–31 Herodotus . . . four-horse-chariots] Cf. *Histories* 4.183.
- 969.22 buckra] Derogatory term for whites.
- 970.17–18 Granville Sharp] English abolitionist, pamphleteer, and scholar (1735–1813).
- 970.36 Talbot and Yorke] Charles Talbot (1685–1737) and Philip Yorke (1690–1764), English jurists.
- 974.7 prædial] A slave attached to an estate.
- 986.26–27 Lord Chancellor Northington] Robert Henley, First Earl of Northington (c. 1708–72). The citation is from his decision in the case *Shanley 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 67 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.
- 989.23 the sarcasm of Montesquieu] Cf. *Spirit of the Laws*, Book 15, Chapter 5.
- 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.
- 995.30–31 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.
- 998.14 *Vera pro gratis*] Latin: Truth rather than pleasantness.
- 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 Abdo'llah Ebu Jaafar (I, 164). It appears as the epigraph to "Heroism." Cf. p. 369 in this volume.
- 1010.30 *à l'outrance*] French: to the extreme.
- 1012.1–3 one of his friends] Emerson himself. Cf. his journals for July–August 1848.
- 1015.4 Scott's romance] Walter Scott's *The Betrothed* (1825).
- 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.
- 1020.12 Thomas Fuller] English clergyman and author (1608–61).
- 1023.3–13 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 quatrain is 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 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 Reny de Paulmy d'Argenson (1722–87), member of the French Academy.
- 1032.12–13 *Si l'Abbé . . . de tout*] French: "If the Abbé had told us a little about religion, he'd have told us about everything."