Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) was a philosopher, educator, pastor, lecturer, and poet whose work represents the Transcendental movement in nineteenth-century American Romanticism. He was born in Boston to a Unitarian minister from an old Puritan family and was reared by his mother and a pious aunt after his father's death.

While studying at Harvard, he started the volumes of journals that served as seeds for his many essays and poems. He entered Harvard Divinity School but was plagued by ill health and religious doubts. His contention that he could not in good conscience administer communion led him to resign his popular pastorate at the Second Church of Boston. He made acquaintance with other literary giants of the nineteenth century, such as Carlyle, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and later Thoreau, Alcott, and Hawthorne, while he was on various tours of Europe. He became quite familiar with German idealism, transcendental thought, neo-Platonism, Eastern sacred texts, Montaigne's essays, British philosophy, and the mysticism of Swedenborg.

In 1840 Emerson and other Transcendentalists founded The Dial and he continued speaking on the lecture circuit which he had taken up after he resigned his pastorate. During the 1850s, Emerson's journals reveal his sympathy with the abolitionist movement. In the early 1870s, Emerson's mental health declined and he gradually became senile. Emerson represents the complexity of the American Renaissance, a man whose philosophical system was not complete but was influenced by his Puritan background as well as by many other philosophical and religious systems. His values included individualism; spirituality; self-reliance; optimism; and the existence of a wise, creative, and transcendent Over-Soul.

FROM Nature

Ralph Waldo Emerson

CHAPTER I. NATURE

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I’m not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and vulgar things. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

The stars awaken a certain reverence, because though always present, they are always inaccessible; but all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence. Nature never wears a mean appearance. Neither does the wisest man extort all her secret, and lose his curiosity by finding out all her perfection. Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected all the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.

When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural
objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the wood-cutter, from the tree of the poet. The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men’s farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.

To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature. Most persons do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood. His intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes part of his daily food. In the presence of nature, a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows. Nature says,—he is my creature, and maugre all his impertinent griefs, he shall be glad with me. Not the sun or the summer alone, but every hour and season yields its tribute of delight; for every hour and change corresponds to and authorizes a different state of the mind, from breathless moon to grimmest midnight. Nature is a setting that fits equally well a comic or a mourning piece. In good health, the air is a cordial of incredible virtue. Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Almost I fear to think how glad I am. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in streets or villages. In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature.

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me and I to them. The waving of the boughs in the storm, is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right.

Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both. It is necessary to use these pleasures with great temperance. For, nature is not always tricked in holiday attire, but the same scene
which yesterday breathed perfume and glittered as for the frolic of the nymphs, is
overspread with melancholy today. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit. To
a man laboring under calamity, the heat of his own fire hath sadness in it. Then, there
is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear
friend. The sky is less grand as it shuts down over less worth in the population.

CHAPTER II. COMMODITY

Whoever considers the final cause of the world, will discern a multitude of uses
that enter as parts into that result. They all admit of being thrown into one of the
following classes: Commodity; Beauty; Language; and Discipline.

Under the general name of Commodity, I rank all those advantages which our
senses owe to nature. This, of course, is a benefit which is temporary and mediate,
not ultimate, like its service to the soul. Yet although low, it is perfect in its kind, and
is the only use of nature which all men apprehend. The misery of man appears like
childish petulance, when we explore the steady and prodigal provision that has been
made for his support and delight on this green ball which floats him through the
heavens. What angels invented these splendid ornaments, these rich conveniences,
this ocean of air above, this ocean of water beneath, this firmament of earth between?
this zodiac of lights, this tent of dropping clouds, this striped coat of climates, this
fourfold year? Beasts, fire, water, stones, and corn serve him. The field is at once his
floor, his work-yard, his play-ground, his garden, and his bed.

“More servants wait on man
Than he'll take notice of.”—

Nature, in its ministry to man, is not only the material, but is also the process
and the result. All the parts incessantly work into each other's hands for the profit
of man. The wind sows the seed; the sun evaporates the sea; the wind blows the vapor
to the field; the ice, on the other side of the planet, condenses rain on this; the rain
feeds the plant; the plant feeds the animal; and thus the endless circulations of the
divine charity nourish man.

The useful arts are but reproductions or new combinations by the wit of man, of
the same natural benefactors. He no longer waits for favoring gales, but by means
of steam, he realizes the fable of Æolus' bag, and carries the two and thirty winds
in the boiler of his boat. To diminish friction, he paves the road with iron bars,
and, mounting a coach with a ship-load of men, animals, and merchandise behind
him, he darts through the country, from town to town, like an eagle or a swallow
through the air. By the aggregate of these aids, how is the face of the world changed,
from the era of Noah to that of Napoleon! The private poor man hath cities, ships,
canals, bridges, built for him. He goes to the post-office, and the human race run
on his errands; to the book-shop, and the human race read and write of all that
happens, for him; to the court-house, and nations repair his wrongs. He sets his house
upon the road, and the human race go forth every morning, and shovel out the snow,
and cut a path for him.
But there is no need of specifying particulars in this class of uses. The catalogue is endless, and the examples so obvious, that I shall leave them to the reader’s reflection, with the general remark, that this mercenary benefit is one which has respect to a farther good. A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work.

CHAPTER III. BEAUTY

A nobler want of man is served by nature, namely, the love of Beauty.

The ancient Greeks called the world κόσμος, beauty. Such is the constitution of all things, or such the plastic power of the human eye, that the primary forms, as the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal, give us a delight in and for themselves; a pleasure arising from outline, color, motion, and grouping. This seems partly owing to the eye itself. The eye is the best of artists. By the mutual action of its structure and of the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded globe, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape which they compose, is round and symmetrical. And as the eye is the best composer, so light is the first of painters. There is no object so foul that intense light will not make beautiful. And the stimulus it affords to the sense, and a sort of infinitude which it hath, like space and time, makes all matter gay. Even the corpse hath its own beauty. But beside this general grace diffused over nature, almost all the individual forms are agreeable to the eye, as is proved by our endless imitations of some of them, as the acorn, the grape, the pine-cone, the wheat-ear, the egg, the wings and forms of most birds, the lion’s claw, the serpent, the butterfly, sea-shells, flames, clouds, buds, leaves, and the forms of many trees, as the palm.

For better consideration, we may distribute the aspects of Beauty in a threefold manner.

1. First, the simple perception of natural forms is a delight. The influence of the forms and actions in nature, is so needful to man, that, in its lowest functions, it seems to lie on the confines of commodity and beauty. To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone. The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon. We are never tired, so long as we can see far enough.

But in other hours, Nature satisfies the soul purely by its loveliness, and without any mixture of corporeal benefit. I have seen the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from day-break to sun-rise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea. I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria, the sun-set and moon-rise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams.
Not less excellent, except for our less susceptibility in the afternoon, was the
charm, last evening, of a January sunset. The western clouds divided and subdivided
themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness; and the air
had so much life and sweetness, that it was a pain to come within doors. What was
it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind
the mill, and which Homer or Shakespeare could not re-form for me in words? The
leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for the back-
ground, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stub-
ble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music.

The inhabitants of cities suppose that the country landscape is pleasant only half
the year. I please myself with observing the graces of the winter scenery, and believe
that we are as much touched by it as by the genial influences of summer. To the atten-
tive eye, each moment of the year has its own beauty, and in the same field, it beholds,
every hour, a picture which was never seen before, and which shall never be seen
again. The heavens change every moment, and reflect their glory or gloom on the
plains beneath. The state of the crop in the surrounding farms alters the expression
of the earth from week to week. The succession of native plants in the pastures and
road-sides, which make the silent clock by which time tells the summer hours, will
make even the divisions of the day sensible to a keen observer. The tribes of birds
and insects, like the plants punctual to their time, follow each other, and the year
has room for all. By water-courses, the variety is greater. In July, the blue pontede-
ria or pickerel-weed blooms in large beds in the shallow parts of our pleasant river,
and swarms with yellow butterflies in continual motion. Art cannot rival this pomp
of purple and gold. Indeed, the river is a perpetual gala, and boasts each month a new
ornament.

But this beauty of Nature which is seen and felt as beauty, is the least part. The
shows of day, the dewy morning, the rainbow, mountains, orchards in blossom, stars,
moonlight, shadows in still water, and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows
merely, and mock us with their unreality. Go out of the house to see the moon, and
it is mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines upon your necessary jour-
ney. The beauty that shimmers in the yellow afternoons of October, who ever could
clutch it? Go forth to find it, and it is gone: ‘t is only a mirage as you look from the
windows of diligence.

2. The presence of a higher, namely, of the spiritual element is essential to its
perfection. The high and divine beauty which can be loved without effeminacy, is
that which is found in combination with the human will, and never separate. Beauty
is the mark God sets upon virtue. Every natural action is graceful. Every heroic act
is also decent, and causes the place and the bystanders to shine. We are taught by
great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. Every ration-
al creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will. He may divest
himself of it; he may creep into a corner, and abdicate his kingdom, as most men
do, but he is entitled to the world by his constitution. In proportion to the energy
of his thought and will, he takes up the world into himself. “All those things for which
men plough, build, or sail, obey virtue,” said an ancient historian. “The winds and
waves,” said Gibbon, are always on the side of the ablest navigators.” So are the
sun and moon and all the stars of heaven. When a noble act is done,—perchance in a scene of great natural beauty; when Leonidas and his three hundred martyrs consume one day in dying, and the sun and moon come each and look at them once in the steep defile of Thermopylae, when Arnold Winkelried, in the high Alps, under the shadow of the avalanche, gathers in his side a sheaf of Austrian spears to break the line for his comrades; are not these heroes entitled to add the beauty of the scene to the beauty of the deed? When the bark of Columbus nears the shore of America,—before it, the beach lined with savages, fleeing out of all their huts of cane; the sea behind; and the purple mountains of the Indian Archipelago around, can we separate the man from the living picture? Does not the New World clothe his form with her palm-groves and savannahs as fit drapery? Ever does natural beauty steal in like air, and envelope great actions. When Sir Harry Vane was dragged up the Tower-hill, sitting on a sled, to suffer death, as the champion of the English laws, one of the multitude cried out to him, “You never sate on so glorious a seat.” Charles II., to intimidate the citizens of London, caused the patriot Lord Russell to be drawn in an open coach, through the principal streets of the city, on his way to the scaffold. “But,” to use the simple narrative of his biographer, “the multitude imagined they saw liberty and virtue sitting by his side.” In private places, among sordid objects, an act of truth or heroism seems at once to draw to itself the sky as its temple, the sun as its candle. Nature stretcheth out her arms to embrace man, only let his thoughts be of equal greatness. Willingly does she follow his steps with the rose and the violet, and bend her lines of grandeur and grace to the decoration of her darling child. Only let his thoughts be of equal scope, and the frame will suit the picture. A virtuous man is in unison with her works, and makes the central figure of the visible sphere. Homer, Pindar, Socrates, Phocion, associate themselves fitly in our memory with the whole geography and climate of Greece. The visible heavens and earth sympathize with Jesus. And in common life, whosoever has seen a person of powerful character and happy genius, will have remarked how easily he took all things along with him,—the persons, the opinions, and the day, and nature became ancillary to a man.

3. There is still another aspect under which the beauty of the world may be viewed, namely, as it becomes an object of the intellect. Beside the relation of things to virtue, they have a relation to thought. The intellect searches out the absolute order of things as they stand in the mind of God, and without the colors of affection. The intellectual and the active powers seem to succeed each other in man, and the exclusive activity of the one, generates the exclusive activity of the other. There is something unfriendly in each to the other, but they are like the alternate periods of feeding and working in animals; each prepares and certainly will be followed by the other. Therefore does beauty, which, in relation to actions, as we have seen, comes unsought, and comes because it is unsought, remain for the apprehension and pursuit of the intellect; and then again, in its turn, of the active power. Nothing divine dies. All good is eternally reproductive. The beauty of nature reforms itself in the mind, and not for barren contemplation, but for new creation.

All men are in some degree impressed by the face of the world; some men even to delight. This love of beauty is Taste. Others have the same love in such excess,
that, not content with admiring, they seek to embody it in new forms. The creation of beauty is Art.

The production of a work of art throws a light upon the mystery of humanity. A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It is the result or expression of nature, in miniature. For although the works of nature are innumerable and all different, the result or the expression of them all is similar and single. Nature is a sea of forms radically alike and even unique. A leaf, a sun-beam, a landscape, the ocean, make an analogous impression on the mind. What is common to them all,—that perfectness and harmony, is beauty. Therefore the standard of beauty is the entire circuit of natural forms,—the totality of nature; which the Italians expressed by defining beauty “il piu nell’ uno.” Nothing is quite beautiful alone; nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace. The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point, and each in his several work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce. Thus is Art, a nature passed through the alembic of man. Thus in art, does nature work through the will of man filled with the beauty of her first works.

The world thus exists to the soul to satisfy the desire of beauty. Extend this element to the uttermost, and I call it an ultimate end. No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty, and is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must therefore stand as a part and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature.

Questions for Discussion
1. What is the relationship among nature, commodity, and beauty? How does Emerson define each of them?
2. Why is solitude important?
3. What is the “Universal Being” (Paragraph 4)? How is this being related to Nature? to God?
4. What is the “occult relation between man and the vegetable” (Paragraph 5)? Look up “occult.” How is Emerson using it in this context?
5. What benefits does Nature provide for humans? Do you find anything odd about these benefits?
6. How is beauty a part of Nature? Does beauty supersede Nature? Which has precedence over the other?
7. How can beauty be part of intellect?

Questions for Reflection and Writing
1. Pick out sentences you really like and would like to remember. (If you did not find anything to like, find sentences that seem most important in the context of the essay.) Describe why these sentences get you thinking.
2. How do Emerson's definitions of nature, commodity, and beauty differ from the standard or from your own definitions of these words? Write an essay, comparing definitions of these words and concepts. You might need to focus on only one of the three terms.

3. Read the rest of Nature, especially the sections on Language and Discipline, the two classes omitted in this excerpt. How are those two terms defined? Write an essay in which you explore how all four classes—Commodity, Beauty, Language, and Discipline—can be applied to our times.