

from *Nature*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Background During the 1830s and 1840s, Emerson and a small group of like-minded friends gathered regularly in his study to discuss philosophy, religion, and literature. Among them were Emerson's protégé, Henry David Thoreau, as well as educator Bronson Alcott, feminist writer Margaret Fuller, and ex-clergyman and author George Ripley. The intimate group, known as the Transcendental Club, developed a philosophical system that stressed intuition, individuality, and self-reliance. In 1836, Emerson published *Nature*, the lengthy essay (excerpted here) that became the Transcendental Club's unofficial statement of belief.

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,¹ 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. I am glad to the brink of fear. 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.

1. common *n.* piece of open public land.

Literary Analysis

Transcendentalism

According to this passage, what is the relationship between Emerson and nature?

Vocabulary Builder

blithe (*blith*) *adj.* carefree

I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel 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 the 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

Sunset, Frederick E. Church, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York

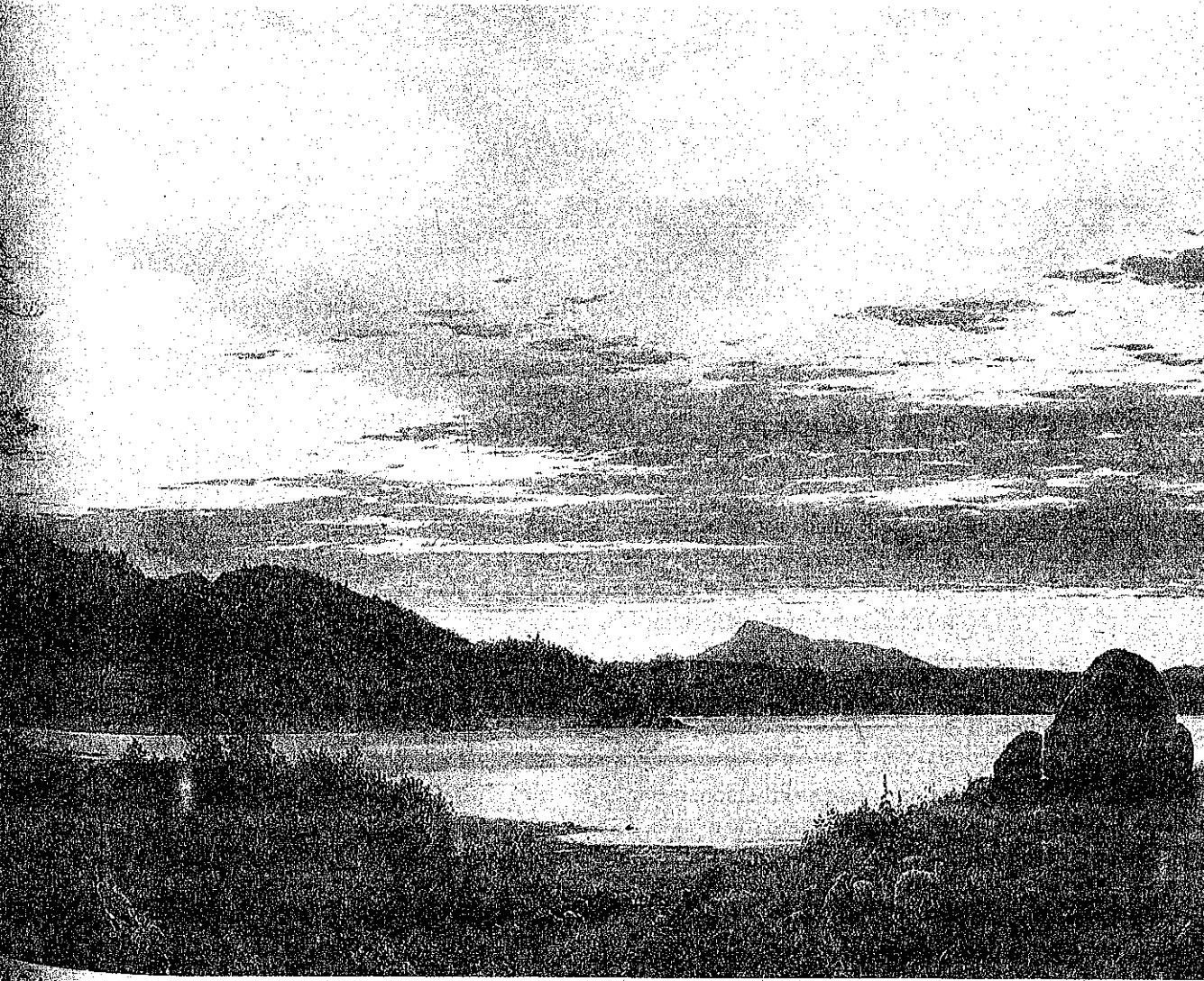
Vocabulary Builder

connate (kăn' āt') *adj.*
existing naturally; innate



Reading Check

Which emotions does Emerson experience when in the woods?



Critical Viewing Emerson says that nature often allows us to become transparent eyeballs, seeing all, but remaining detached from the business of the world. In what ways does this image reinforce his statement? [Support]

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 tricked² 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.

2. tricked v. dressed.

Critical Reading

1. **Respond:** Which of your experiences have made you "glad to the brink of fear"? Explain.
2. (a) **Recall:** Under what circumstances, according to Emerson, does "mean egotism" vanish? (b) **Define:** How would you define Emerson's idea of "mean egotism"? (c) **Analyze Cause and Effect:** In nature, with what emotional state does Emerson suggest that "mean egotism" is replaced?
3. (a) **Recall:** When does Emerson become a "transparent eyeball"? (b) **Analyze:** What are the characteristics of this experience? (c) **Connect:** In what ways does this description reflect the Transcendentalist belief in an Over-Soul?
4. (a) **Recall:** Where does the power to produce nature's delight come from? (b) **Define:** In stating that there is a harmony between human beings and nature, do you think Emerson means the relationship is always serene, or not? Explain.
5. (a) **Infer:** According to Emerson, is our experience with nature the same every time we go to the woods? Explain. (b) **Interpret:** What does Emerson mean when he says that "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit"?
6. (a) **Evaluate:** What is Emerson's main point in this essay? (b) **Assess:** Do you find Emerson's message convincing? Explain why you do or do not accept his ideas about nature.
7. **Take a Position:** Do you find any evidence of Emerson's reverence for nature in American culture today? Explain.

Reading Strategy

Challenging the Text Do you agree or disagree with this statement about a harmony between human beings and nature? Explain.

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