



## The Correspondence Between Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Carlyle

### The Stage

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a.k.a. the 'Sage of Concord', is America's Founding Thinker. Born in 1803, a scant 14 years after George Washington's inauguration, Emerson inherits the torch of enlightened commonsense from Thomas Paine and holds high the blue flame of optimism, idealism and self-direction, illuminating all our pursuits of the realization and fulfillment of the American Dream. As Yale's Harold Bloom proclaims: "The whole phenomenon of American culture, on every level down to popular culture is a profoundly Emersonian affair. He has prophesied everything...He is the mind of America." In the genetic heredity of the American mind we are all Emerson's children. "Trust thyself, every heart vibrates to that iron string," is a trumpet call for independence and interdependence. Emerson, the self-proclaimed 'Appreciator', is a prism 'made in America' refracting the universal ideas of mankind. It is impossible, with eyes open, to read Emerson and not be elevated. In Emerson's rich prose "every word can be underlined". I love one writer's description of Emerson's essays and life as ½ epiphany & ½ cordwood. As the aphorisms resonate, the synapses fire and the pulse quickens. "The sun shines today." Emerson's essays are an open invitation to enter the mind of 'Man Thinking'. Like in admitting us into his orchard of over 100 fruit trees, he hands us a bushel basket to harvest his ripened insights. While the magic of his essays entrance us we are young again, endless seekers, no past at our backs, with the portals to the City of Man flung open. Aware or oblivious, the hopes and aspirations we share and strive towards have been sweetened by this great representative man's words. Thus it is fitting on this commemorative day of the principled founding of a commonwealth, a '*Res publica*' and the thirty-fifth anniversary of an institute of noble aims, to raise a toast to this friend of every man and celebrate his hearty friendship with a great English literary contemporary—Thomas Carlyle.

'Place' is man's deepest longing. For the disenfranchised seeking place, America is the world's 'lost and found'. On Christmas day in 1827, Emerson at 24, was for the first time finding place as he met and instantly fell in love with Ellen Tucker. A year later they were engaged and Emerson was ordained as the new Unitarian minister

of the Second Church in Boston following in the footsteps of six unbroken generations of Emerson ministers. He was, as he wrote in his journal, as happy as he would let himself be. Seven years her senior, Ellen jokingly called Waldo—Grandpa, and he nicknamed her Ellinelli; yet in his journal he always referred to Ellen as his angel. For Ralph Waldo Emerson everything seemed in place—he was blissfully in love and earning more than a full professorship at Harvard. On another Christmas day four years later (this one gray and stormy in 1832) in a circuitous twist of fate Emerson sailed for Europe, “homeless, tempest-tost”, a man adrift. The unsettler of all things was himself unsettled. Emerson’s life was in ruins and he was, to use his own words, “disunited with himself”. As his brother Charles wrote to their wise-counseling Aunt Mary, “Waldo is sick...I never saw him so disheartened...things seem flying to pieces.” Everything was out of place; Emerson had lost his angel to tuberculosis and relinquished his career as a minister.

For Emerson, like Milton, the mind is the primary place. In the search for real knowledge, it is better to stake one’s claim here and pan for flakes and nuggets than barter for the caratless feldspar of old. Arduous is the ascent to this spring-fed stream of inspiration. For Emerson it meant swimming against the current of reductionism that flows ever forcefully today with eminent scientists, like Stephen Hawking, comparing the mind to the software of a computer, and denouncing higher notions as “fairy tales for those afraid of the dark”. Thomas Carlyle in the ‘Everlasting No’ chapter of his early seminal book, *Sartor Resartus*, called the times that he and Emerson shared as ‘the Age of Down-Pulling’. Hardened rationalism was the foundation and the utilitarianism of Paley, Butler and Tucker; the empiricism of Francis Bacon and John Locke; and the skepticism of David Hume were the three pillars of Emerson’s Harvard curriculum. Emerson once said, “Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.” In a letter to his Aunt Mary, he bemoaned that this cold and prudent line-up of the best and brightest were ‘anti-enthusiasm’. While Locke’s white-on-white painting of the mind as a *tabula rasa* left him less than thrilled, Emerson actively took up arms against the skepticism of David Hume who devalued ideas to nothing but copies of sensory impressions. His Aunt Mary wrote Waldo once saying, you are “so imbued with his manner of thinking that you cannot shake him off.” Beyond the required school assignments, Emerson was a voracious reader. When he dusted off the *Dialogues of Plato* in the library he had found a friend for life. Emerson’s mind intuitively resonated to Plato’s Forms—universal ideas that could be traced within the mind like so many veins of gold—Truth, excavated by the Knower; Beauty, expressed by the Sayer; and Goodness exemplified by the Doer.

In his journals Emerson started to plumb the depths of his own mind, turning the power of reason back upon itself, in an inner quest to find the core of his being. Fundamentally, what is the nature of mind? Is it matter or is it spirit? Is thought merely

a continuation of a sensory impression, or is thought a divine power? Are we products of our environment or can we create ourselves? Can we exercise free will, or are our lives predominately controlled by Fate? Are there forces and laws at work in the mind comparable to those we witness at work in nature? What is the relationship of knowing to being? What is true genius? Is it possible to have “an original relation to the universe?” Reflections on questions like these coupled with observations on nature, daily life and a vast array of subjects filled his notebooks. When he had nothing to say, he would write about having nothing to say. In the margins he would write comments like “dead before it reached its subject”; and, “I shall resume this subject when I have more to say” to which later he wrote, “Spare me.” Eventually his journals and notebooks reached 230 volumes, filling four shelves of a good-sized bookcase. He called them his savings accounts. One writer compared the journals to a hand-pump which initially will bring up muddy water before it brings up clean. In studying Archimedes, Emerson was very moved by his dictum, “Give me a place to stand and I shall move the world.” Emerson metaphorically applied the ‘place to stand’ to his mind and entitled his next Journal, *A Place To Stand*. In it he writes, “We complain of change and vicissitude...the world, the universe is just the same; only each man’s mind undergoes a perpetual change.” Later in a startling entry of self-affirmation, Emerson takes on the universe:

*Who is he that shall control me? Why may not I act and speak and write and think with entire freedom? What am I to the universe, or, the universe, what is it to me? Who hath forged the chains of wrong and right, of Opinion and Custom? And must I wear them? I am solitary in the vast society of beings. I see the world, human, brute, and inanimate nature,--I am in the midst of them, but not of them; I hear the song of the storm...I see cities and nations and witness passions...but I partake it not...I disclaim them all.*

As Robert Richardson, the author of *Emerson—The Mind On Fire* comments on this journal entry:

*The outburst is not so much isolation as defiance, a redefining of what is center and what periphery. It reminds one of Thoreau’s hawk, which was not lonely but made everything lonely beneath it. It is a feeling of absolute and unquestioned self-validation, an extraordinary self-assertion, a wild romantic cogito that answers Hume not by logical argument but by felt experience. No matter what else existed, Emerson knew he existed.*

As Emerson concludes the entry,

*I say to the universe, Mighty One! Thou art not my mother. Return to chaos if thou wilt. I shall still exist. I live. If I owe my being, it is to a destiny greater than*

*thine. Star by star, world by world, system by system shall be crushed,--but I shall live.*

Emerging from a chrysalis of conformity, Emerson's mind began the formulation of a radical world view dissolving sharp distinctions between God, Man & Nature. As he said, "The best we can say of God is the mind as it is known to us." For Emerson the ancient Delphic injunction, "Know thyself" and the modern call to "study nature" were two sides of the same coin. In March of 1829, as his formal ordination day as a minister approached, Emerson would refer to it, in letters to his older brother William as his 'execution day'. The Unitarian church was not unitary enough. With God above and outside of both man and nature its progressive belief structure under the charismatic leadership of William Ellery Channing, who rejected the dogma of the Trinity, was still dualistic. Through his reading of the astronomer, John Herschel, and other scientists, Emerson developed a great interest in natural philosophy. As Herschel writes,

*We must never forget that it is principles not phenomena,--laws, not insulated, independent facts, which are the objects of inquiry of the natural philosopher. Accustomed to trace the operation of general causes, and the exemplification of general laws, in circumstances where the uniformed and unenquiring eye perceives neither novelty nor beauty, the natural philosopher walks in the midst of wonders.*

Emerson's crisis of faith was not of doubt but of affirmation, not of having too little faith but of having too much. Three years after his ordination, on May 27<sup>th</sup> of 1832, in a sermon to his congregation Emerson made the unorthodox declaration: "I regard it as the irresistible effect of the Copernican astronomy to have made the theological scheme of redemption absolutely incredible." Believing that a man's redemption could not be achieved through external agency, he told the church fathers he could no longer, in good conscience, perform the ritual of communion predicting they would balk and ask for his resignation. Debating the issue, the church fathers resolved that communion would continue, but Emerson their popular young minister would not have to perform it. Emerson's longing for intellectual freedom had been trumped.

For a year Emerson daily walked from Boston to Roxbury to visit Ellen's tomb. As he wrote in his journal, "we walk on molten lava." Ellen's last words to Waldo were, "I have not forgot the peace and joy." These peripatetic walks were all that gave peace to Emerson's grieving heart. As he confided to himself, "when we have explored our desolate house for what shall never there be seen, we return with an eagerness to the tomb as the only place of healing and peace." In Emerson's longing to have an authentic, unfiltered relationship with all of nature, on this spring day he opened the coffin. His journal entry is terse: "I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin." Maybe this was an existential act of acceptance so that his life could move forward. He later

wrote that grief alone has no transformative power. Whatever the deeper reasons for this surprising act, this period of time was a tipping point in Emerson's life.

Of Robert Frost's two roads diverging in a wood, Emerson took the one less traveled; which for him and for us has made all the difference. Throwing new light upon the way was his expanded reading. Walking along the seashore he reflected on Victor Cousin's translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which he felt equaled the *Gospels*. He devoured the writings of the English Romantics—Blake, Wordsworth, Shelly, Keats and Byron. And yet, it was the German idealists (Kant, Fichte and Herder) and Romantics (Goethe, Schiller and Novalis) that became for Emerson what he called his new "lustres". Most of the translations of and essays on this group of German writers were contributed to the British quarterlies by a single anonymous source. Emerson and his close scholarly friends (George Ripley, Margaret Fuller and James Freeman Clarke) began to refer to this incognito essayist as their 'wild bugle call' to German literature. As Emerson wrote in his journal,

*I am cheered and instructed by my Germanick new-light writer, whoever he be. He gives us confidence in our principles. He assures the truth-lover everywhere of sympathy. Blessed art that makes books, and so joins me to that stranger by this perfect railroad.*

One of the 'railroad cars' that found its way to Emerson's study through this mysterious translator was Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* in which the young hero of the novel undergoes a journey of self-realization. For Emerson, this novel opened the door to the whole German *Bildung* school of thought on what constitutes true education. The *Bildung* approach to education is rooted in Kant's philosophic view that real knowledge is transcendental in nature, concerned less with objects and more with our mode of knowing objects. A *Bildung* education focusses on self-cultivation and self-transformation, not the gaining of skills. In this sense, *Bildung* hearkens back to the latin *educe* as 'to draw out', in the Socratic sense that 'learning is recollection'. *Bildung* is very much in keeping with the approach to education that Bronson Alcott, Emerson's good friend and neighbor, outlines in his 58 maxims on education. One such maxim is, "To teach, endeavoring to invigorate and bring into exercise all the intellectual, moral and physical powers".

With the publication of the essay *Characteristics* the identity of this Germanick new-light writer was revealed to Emerson as none other than Thomas Carlyle. In the article Carlyle emphasizes that the "healthy Understanding...is not the Logical, Argumentative, but the Intuitive." That the intuition was a creative force was a bold, new idea in an Age of Rationalism for a modern English writer to propound. As Carlyle continues,

*Of our Thinking, we might say, it is but the mere upper surface that we shape into articulate Thoughts;--underneath the region of argument and conscious discourse, lies the region of intuition; here, in its quiet mysterious depths, dwells what vital force is in us; here, if aught is to be created, and not merely manufactured and communicated, must the work go on.*

Emerson in a later letter to Carlyle referred to these early articles as “by far the most original and profound essays of the day.” And upon reading Carlyle’s review of the Goethe (whom Carlyle knew very well) and Schiller correspondence, Emerson fondly writes in his journal as if about a close friend:

*If Carlyle knew what an interest I have in his persistent goodness, would it not be worth one effort more, one prayer, one meditation? But will he resist the Deluge of bad example in England? One manifestation of goodness in a noble soul brings him in debt to all the beholders that he shall not betray their love and trust which he has awakened.*

## **The Journey**

With a cold northeaster on the horizon, with no family and no career to hold him back and sick as a dog, the 30 year old Emerson stepped aboard the brig, *Jasper*, and set sail for Europe; as he says at the beginning of *English Traits* “to see the faces of three or four writers...especially the latest and strongest contributor to the English journals—Thomas Carlyle.” Halfway through the journey the storm passed and his illness disappeared. With the ocean becalmed, Emerson went up on deck one evening and while looking up into the vastness of the night sky and the Milky Way fell into a reverie hitching his wagon to a star.

*[The stars] shone with light that shines on Europe, Africa, and the Nile, and I opened my spirit’s ear to their most ancient hymn. What, they said to me, goest thou so far to seek—painted canvas, carved marble, renowned towns? But fresh from us, new evermore, is the creative efflux from whence these works spring. You now feel in gazing at our fleecy arch of light the motions that express themselves in arts...This strong-winged sea-gull and striped sheer-water that you have watched as they skimmed the waves under our vault, they are works of art better worth your enthusiasm...strictly eternal because now active, and ye need not go so far to seek what ye would not seek at all if it were not within you.*

What an amazing insight that the primary Art is the fresh, creative efflux of Nature and that what motivates us to go seeking beauty without is the sensed Beauty within. The ship landed in Malta and Emerson spent the first five months of his trip in Italy and the initial month in Rome. Through a man named Eichthal he obtained a letter of

introduction to John Stuart Mill, who in turn would give him a letter to Thomas Carlyle. While in Rome Emerson penned an amazing letter to his Aunt Mary revealing that his main reason for coming to Europe was to find a teacher; and yet concludes that by transforming our own 'spotted selves' all others are likewise transformed. As he writes:

*God's greatest gift is a teacher & when will he send me one, full of truth & boundless benevolence & heroic sentiments. I can describe the man, & have done so already in prose and verse. I know the idea well, but where is its real blood warm counterpart.... I may as well set down what our stern experience replies with the tongue of all its days. Son of man, it saith, all giving & receiving is reciprocal; you entertain angels unawares, but they cannot impart more or higher things than you are in a state to receive. But every step of your progress affects the intercourse you hold with all others; elevates its tone, deepens its meaning, sanctifies its spirit, and when time & suffering & self-denial shall have transformed and glorified this spotted self, you shall find your fellows also transformed & their faces shall shine upon you with the light of wisdom & the beauty of holiness.*

From Italy, Emerson traveled through Switzerland to France. Paris he found to be a "loud modern New York of a place". "I stare and stare at the thousand thousand shop windows", he wrote his brother William. Paris is a city of mirrors, Emerson continues to his brother. "Even on the dessert service at the dinner table they set mirrors into the fruit stands to multiply whips, cherries and sugarplums, so that when I took one, I found two were gone." Emerson bemoaned in his journal that he had been in Europe for six months and if he doesn't meet Carlyle he is in danger of returning to America "without saying anything in earnest." While in Paris Emerson visited the botanic gardens at the old King's Garden and walking through their exhibits of flora and fauna had a powerful experience of insight into the interconnectedness of nature. The garden and museum were laid out through Jussieu's natural classification of genus and species. Where other visitors might see just the diversities, distinctions and differences, Emerson saw correspondences, similarities, interdependent relationships and analogies. As he wrote in his journal, "Not a form so grotesque, so savage, nor so beautiful but is an expression of some property inherent in man the observer... I feel the centipede in me—the cayman, carp, eagle and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say continually, I will be a naturalist."

By ferry Emerson travelled across the English Channel and up the Thames to London. After visiting the house of John Milton, Emerson went to see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who at 61 was in his last year of life. Beyond his poetry, Emerson was especially inspired by Coleridge's book, *Aids to Reflection*, which makes a vivid distinction between reason and understanding. While understanding is dependent upon the senses and is acted upon from without, writes Coleridge, reason is an innate living

power residing within the mind and fused with the creative human Will taps its source of inspiration and energy within. Coleridge's ideas on human reason--harkening back to the ancient Greek teachings on *Nous* and *Dianoia*--gave a clear basis for human self-determination and this had an electric effect on Emerson. To Emerson, Coleridge was a citizen of the universe, one who believed "the mind was made to be spectator of all, inquisitor of all; taking post at the center and as from a specular mount sending sovereign glances at the circumference of things." Coleridge, known to command a conversation, held Emerson bound for over an hour as he listed all the flaws of Unitarianism. When Coleridge finally came up for breath, Emerson gingerly interjected that he himself was a Unitarian. "Yes", mused Coleridge, "I supposed so", and then marched on.

## **Craigenputtock**

Let us stand beside Emerson as he reached out with one hand and grasped the knocker on the old wood front door of Jane and Thomas Carlyle's farmhouse, close to the border with Scotland, sixteen miles from the small town of Dumfries "amid the wild and desolate heathery hills". In his other hand Emerson held the letter of introduction he received a few weeks before from John Stuart Mill at the India House where he worked for the East India Company. Emerson's pilgrimage had been long and arduous with many changes of carriage and inquiries for directions. It was August 25<sup>th</sup>, 1833. Both men, Emerson 30 and Carlyle 37, were still relatively unknown, obscure writers trying to find or establish their place in the world. Both were destined to be ministers but renounced the profession. Both tried their hands at teaching, but found it not to be their calling. Both had recently lost someone close to their heart—Emerson, his wife Ellen and Carlyle, his father. Both had uncompromising, fearless minds in the search for truth. Both had, to use Carlyle's phrase, "great antique hearts", devotional, reverential and brim full of brotherly love. John Sterling wrote of Carlyle in this manner saying that, "his passionate sorrow for the common people throughout history, their sufferings, press upon his soul like personal calamities." While both relished solitude, each longed for real intellectual companionship. The loneliness of solitary foreign travel was getting to Emerson. "It will not do"—he wrote in his journal. Carlyle the night before Emerson's visit penned in his journal:

*I am left here the solitariest, stranded, most helpless creature that I have been for many years...Nobody asks me to work at articles. The thing I want to write is quite other than an article...In all times there is a word which spoken to men, to the actual generation of men, would thrill their inmost soul. But the way to find that word? The way to speak it when found?"*



Mill had written Carlyle of the American's intended visit, but could not have developed great expectations in Carlyle's mind about meeting Emerson since Mill had professed, "I do not think him a very hopeful subject."

Looking at their photographs, both Emerson and Carlyle had intensely powerful eyes which as Plato taught, emanate as well as receive light. Nathaniel Hawthorne's son Julian wrote of how penetrating Emerson's eyes were during his lectures when for emphasis he would clench his right fist—knuckles upward, arm bent at the elbow—then deliver a downward blow of the forearm, full of power bridled. Emerson would accompany this dramatic flair with, "such a glance of the eye as no one ever saw except from Emerson: a glance like the reveille of a trumpet." So, what was the shared experience when these two intellectual giants locked eyes for the first time? Emerson emphasizes the nature of the eye and its powers throughout his writings, calling the eye the first circle. Earlier in his trip he wrote in his journal, "To an instructed eye the universe is transparent." He congratulated the astronomer who was able to make the earth his moveable observatory,—enabling him to change his place in the universe "as if this planet were a living eye sailing through space to watch the stars and planets." He loved the saying by Tacitus that, "in battle the eye is first conquered." For Emerson the eye was the great symbol for wisdom. In an oft-quoted passage from his first recognized written work, *Nature*, where he shares a mystical experience, his whole being morphs into a floating, spherical eye-ball:

*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.*

For Emerson the knowing glance of spiritual recognition was one of the most transcendental of human experiences. As he wrote, "One of the most wonderful things in nature is a glance of the eye; it transcends speech; it is the bodily symbol of identity." Perhaps it is an experience of soul recollection, of *déjà vu*, of having crossed paths sometime long ago. As Emerson writes in another place,

*There are some occult facts in human nature that are natural magic. The chief of these is the glance. The mysterious communication that is established across a house between two entire strangers, by this means moves all the springs of wonder.*

Jane and Thomas were sitting down for dinner when Emerson arrived. Carlyle with his gleaming Scottish glance embraced Emerson immediately, invited him to stay the night, and sent the driver back to Dumfries. As Carlyle reported to his mother, "Of course we could do no other than welcome him; the rather as he seemed to be one of

the most lovable creatures in himself we had ever looked upon.” Later, Carlyle wrote Mill on “Emerson, your Presentee”:

*A most gentle, recommendable, amiable, wholehearted man...A good ‘Socinian’ understanding, the clearest heart; above all, what I loved in the man was his health, his unity with himself; all people and all things seemed to find their quite peaceable adjustment with him, not a proud domineering one, as after doubtful contest, but a spontaneous-looking, peaceable, even humble one.*

To further enhance the mental picture of Emerson the man there is this description by a newspaper editor who went to hear one of his lectures:

*...tall, angular, loose-limbed, with an olive complexion, large features, especially the nose, and a blue or grey eye that has a mysterious and undefinable light in its depth...He is not graceful, but he carries a weight grace and culture alone could never supply. He stands at an acute angle towards his audience, and limberly, and has barely a gesture beyond the motion of the left hand at his side, as if the intensity of his thoughts was escaping, like the electricity of a battery, at that point.*

Emerson in writing to a friend described Carlyle as

*...tall and gaunt, with a cliff-like brow, self-possessed, and holding his extraordinary powers of conversation in easy command; clinging to his northern accent with evident relish; full of lively anecdote, and with a streaming humor, which floated everything he looked upon.*

In my mind, comparing the stature of their character to the mountainous formations of the Earth, Emerson stands as breath-taking and majestic as Yosemite’s sweeping golden granite face of El Capitan, and Carlyle rises as formidable and intimidating as the dark, precipitous cliffs of the north face of the Eiger. As John Nichols, a friend and biographer of Carlyle’s wrote:

*I knew Carlyle, and I aver to you that his heart was as large and generous as his brain was powerful; that he was essentially a most lovable man, and that there were depths of tenderness, kindliness, benevolence, and most delicate courtesy in him, with all his seeming ruggedness and sternness, such as I have found throughout my life rarely in any human being.*

Both men loved to walk and as they hiked over hill and dale their talk flowed freely, covering the gamut from the ingenuity of Carlyle’s pig to the immortality of the soul. In twenty-four hours they went, as Carlyle said, “thro’ the whole Encyclopedia.” As Emerson wrote his friend Alexander Ireland a week later:

*I found him one of the most simple and frank of men, and became acquainted with him at once. We walked over several miles of hills, and talked upon all the great questions that interest us most. The comfort of meeting a man is that he speaks sincerely; that he feels himself to be so rich, that he is above the meanness of pretending to knowledge which he has not, and Carlyle does not pretend to have solved the great problems, but rather to be an observer of their solution as it goes forward in the world.*

The sky was so clear that day that, as Carlyle pointed out, you could see all the way down into Wordsworth country. It was Carlyle's prophetic voice denouncing the materialism of the age and calling for a new age of the mind, a new age of "dynamism" that drew Emerson on this odyssey. He had to meet the man who wrote in Signs of the Times, "The truth is men have lost their belief in the Invisible, and believe only in the Visible; or to speak it in other words: This is not a Religious age. Only the material, the immediately practical, not the divine and spiritual is important to us."

Finally after walking over long green hills the two men sat down and Emerson, somewhat cautiously and embarrassingly began to talk about the immortality of the soul. As Emerson wrote later,

*It was not Carlyle's fault that we talked on the topic, for he has the natural disinclination of every nimble spirit to bruise itself against the walls, and did not like to place himself where no step can be taken. But he was honest and true, and cognizant of the subtle links that bind ages together, and saw how every event affects all the future. 'Christ died on the tree,' said Carlyle, 'that built Dunscore kirk yonder: that brought you and me together. Time has only a relative existence.'*

For both these men in a formative stage this was the beginning of a friendship of true minds that over the next forty years of correspondence was capable of transcending numerous impediments. When the gig from town arrived Carlyle chose not to ride with his guest to the top of the hill, but "preferred to watch him mount and vanish like an angel." Jane felt the same way and in writing to a friend said that, "It was like the visit of an angel...and though he staid with us hardly twenty four hours, yet when he left us I cried—I could not help it." Emerson's one day visit etched so deeply in Carlyle's mind that over forty years later he asked an American friend to, "Give my love to Emerson. I still think of his visit to us at Craigenputtock as the most beautiful thing in our experience there." That night when Emerson returned to the inn in Dumfries he wrote, "A white day in my years, I found the youth I sought in Scotland, and good and wise and pleasant he seems to me."

Strong winds postponed Emerson's sail from Liverpool. He had been away from America for nine months and was anxious to return home. As he wrote in his journal, "If the vessel do sail they say we shall be drowned on the lee shore; if she do not sail I perish waiting." Amidst the wind and the rain he thought of his new friend and wished he were there to keep him company, as Emerson writes in his journal, "Ah me! Mr. Thomas Carlyle, I would give a gold pound for your wise company this gloomy eve." Emerson had met the best and brightest that England could offer (Coleridge, Mill, Wordsworth and Carlyle) and felt that he could easily hang with the British home-boys. In fact, in his journal he made the uncharitable estimation that "not one of them is a mind of the very first class." Yet, Emerson always had high expectations and found flaws in all his representative men. He had come to Europe initially looking for a teacher and a guide, but in Carlyle he had found an intellectual friend and a spiritual companion. Uprooted from career and family life, Emerson also came seeking purpose and place. As he sat waiting for his ship to set sail gleamings of purpose and crystallizations of place began to shimmer and formulate in his mind. The vision of cosmic harmony that Emerson experienced looking up at the starry heavens on his journey over, opened up the mystic path of the poet; and his penetrating perception into the order of nature's kingdoms at the French botanic gardens encouraged him to follow the path of the naturalist. Like two serpents intertwined around a central caduceus, Emerson was being called to liberate divinity from established religion on the one hand, and reason from empirical science on the other. The monumental task he sensed before him was the divine reconciliation of man and nature. As he waited in his room in Liverpool he began to sketch ideas and principles that would direct his thinking and life's course:

*I feel myself pledged to demonstrate that all necessary truth is its own evidence: that no doctrine of God need appeal to a book; that Christianity is wrongly received by all such as take it for a system of doctrines...it is a rule of life not a rule of faith...the eminent men of each [tradition], Socrates, á Kempis, Fenelon, Butler, Penn, Swedenborg, Channing, all say the same thing.*

*The purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself.*

These ruling aphorisms rise to an affirming crescendo of democratic individualism: "The **highest** revelation is that God is in every man." Finally the winds relented and the ship sailed. As he wrote:

*I saw the last lump of England receding without the least regret. I am bound home to a land without nobility or wigs or debt / No castles, no cathedral and no kings / Land of the forest.*

## The Correspondence

When ship set anchor in Boston Harbor, Emerson hit the shore running. He committed to giving the inaugural lecture to the Boston Society of Natural History. He was asked to preach at his old church and did so on his own terms free of doctrine, as demonstrated in one of his sermons, “know thyself a man and be a God—Revere thyself.” A new form of adult education was developing in America called the Lyceum Movement which eventually spurred the establishment of our country’s system of public education. There was a demand for traveling lecturers on science and natural philosophy. Much of the freshest thinking of the time had a scientific rather than religious bent. Emerson would have heartily agreed to Thomas Paine’s pithy remark that “science is the true theology”. The career of a secular traveling lecturer suited Emerson and at first he received \$5.00 a lecture plus oats for his horse. Over the span of forty years Emerson gave over 1,500 public lectures to a diverse audience he viewed as a microcosm of humanity. Most of Emerson’s finished essays were first delivered as Lyceum lectures. During the 1830’s and 1840’s both Emerson and Carlyle felt they were living in a transitional time on the eve of a new era. Behind the soot and the smoke of the Industrial Revolution there was a burning fire of self-reflection. Comparable to the 1960’s, it was a time of experimentation in new patterns of living with utopian communities like Brook Farm and Fruitlands springing up. Emerson came within a hair’s breath of joining Brook Farm, and Carlyle said of one of the founders, George Ripley that he planned to save mankind by becoming an onion farmer. Emerson said of the collective consciousness of the times that,

*...the mind had become aware of itself. Men grew reflective and intellectual. There was a new consciousness...The young men were born with knives in their brain, a tendency to introversion, self-dissection, anatomizing of motives.*

And likewise, Carlyle wrote of this time of awakening in his essay Characteristics,

*The state of Society in our days is, of all possible states, the least an unconscious one: this is specially the Era when all manner of Inquiries into what was once the unfelt, involuntary sphere of man’s existence, find their place, and, as it were, occupy the whole domain of thought.*

Both men were finding their place and task in their respective worlds as harbingers and midwives to this heightened state of self-consciousness. It took nine months before Emerson sat down to write Carlyle his first epistle beginning the most extensive and window-opening correspondence between two great literary figures of the nineteenth century. This first letter is quite the kick-off to the 38 years of transatlantic communiqués. In elevated language, unmatched in today’s forms of messaging—tweets, texts, face-book posts, emails & blogs—Emerson (after reading the first four

installments of the metaphorical *Sartor Resartus*) critiques and chides Carlyle to be less satirical and more direct in his delivery of celestial truths.

*I look for the hour with impatience when the vehicle will be worthy of the spirit,-- when the word will be as simple, and so resistless, as the thought,--and, in short, when your words will be one with things.*

Feeling that he may have gone too far and offended his new friend, Emerson recants his criticism.

*And yet before I come to the end of my letter I may repent of my temerity and unsay my charge. For are not all our circlets of will as so many little eddies rounded in by the great Circle of Necessity, and could the Truth-speaker, perhaps now the best Thinker of the Saxon race, have written otherwise.*

Certainly it is a bit cocky for the younger and yet unpublished Emerson to be coaching Carlyle on his writing style. Emerson hopes that by over-stepping his bounds he may trigger Carlyle to write a return letter as he concludes the initial epistle, “If any word in my letter should provoke you to a reply, I shall rejoice in my sauciness.”

Upon receiving Emerson’s letter, Carlyle writes in his diary, “a letter I got to-day from Emerson, of Boston in America; sincere, not baseless, of most exaggerated estimation.” In New England, Emerson and his loosely-knit body of free-thinking friends loved Carlyle’s effort to strip modern man from a worn-out wardrobe of old modes of thinking. In Old England his readers were still too attached to their clothes, and *Sartor Resartus* received only critical reviews. As Carlyle writes Emerson, “the sorriest nettle or hemlock seed, one would think, had been more welcome.” Carlyle admits to Emerson that his ‘treatise on the philosophy of clothes’ is an experimental style and, “since I saw you I have been trying, am still trying, other methods, and shall surely get nearer the truth, as I honestly strive for it.” The styles of expression of these two men seem widely divergent to me. Emerson style is like that of a master archer releasing a precisely directed volley of sharp-tipped arrows at a sublime target which penetrate and spark the reader’s mind; Carlyle’s, like a centaur-fusion of Vincent Van Gogh and a mounted gunnery sergeant ordering a barrage of artillery-fire which pulverize a reader’s defenses with multi-colored impressionistic shock & awe. As Emerson said in his essay on Carlyle, “this man is a hammer that crushes mediocrity and pretension....If his pistol missed fire, he would knock you down with the butt-end.”

In Carlyle’s first letter he swallows Emerson’s criticism well saying, “with regard to style and so forth, what you call your ‘saucy’ objections are not only most intelligible to me, but welcome and instructive.” Towards the end of the letter Carlyle tells Emerson that he is working with his whole might on a new book—*The French Revolution*, which eventually becomes one of Carlyle’s greatest works. Carlyle believes

that the telling of history in its highest form reaches the level of poetry, as is certainly the case with the great Indian epics, *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. It is interesting to note that by the time Emerson writes his second letter he has moved from the city to the small town of Concord in the country; whereas Carlyle has moved from the isolated farmlands of Northern England to London; as if their one-day encounter in Craigenputtock inspired the one to seek solitude and the other relationship. Regardless of physical address, both affirm to the other that their real place in the world is not as a sooth-sayer for the future, but as a Truth-Sayer for the present. As Emerson says in his second letter, "One thing I believe,--that Utterance is place enough: and should I attain through any inward revelation to a more clear perception of my assigned task, I shall embrace it with joy and praise."

*Sartor Resartus* was slowly released through Fraser's Magazine as quarterly installments. In America it was hugely popular, and with enough promised subscriptions an American publisher brought it out in book form with a preface by Emerson. For the next 14 years Emerson did Herculean work as agent, editor, accountant and banker for Carlyle's writings in America. Along with Emerson trying every means to convince Carlyle to visit America during this 14 year period, the publishing business of Carlyle's writings are the engine and chassis of the correspondence. Carlyle even coined a word, bibliopoly, for their business enterprise. The money earned, for which Emerson placed himself in financial risk and received not a penny, moved the Thomas and Jane Carlyle away from the brink of poverty at a time in their lives nearing financial desperation. This bibliopoly, and other highly entertaining observations into their personal lives, serve as the shell of the correspondence; with the philosophic, aesthetic, moral and political ideas the meat. As Joseph Slater writes in a preface to the correspondence, "There are few subjects under the nineteenth-century sun that are not reflected in it, and there are few works of fiction or fact which tell a fuller story of the life of the mind in the nineteenth century."

Besides moving to Concord and getting his writing and lecturing career going, the next two years through 1836 were a white-water river rafting experience for Emerson. He fell in love with, became engaged to and married Lidian Jackson in September of 1835; two of his very close four brothers died (Edward in October of 1834 and Charles in May of 1836); his first son, Waldo, was born in October of 1836; his first book *Nature* was published; and, on top, he was planning a new magazine and forming a new club for the expression and discussion of transcendental ideas in protest to the stultifying intellectual climate of Harvard and Cambridge. In his typically close-buttoned way, Emerson shared his family joys and sorrows with Carlyle. To get a sense of Carlyle's vast-hearted ability to empathize with Emerson's suffering and rejoice in his good fortune, I would like to share a couple of passages from his letters. In response to

Emerson's mentioning that his brother Edward had died, "whose loss to me will be a lifelong sorrow", Carlyle responds,

*Alas! I can too well fancy the bereavement you allude to, the sorrow that will so long be painful before it can become merely sad and sacred. Brothers, especially in these days, are much to us: had one no brother, one could hardly understand what it was to have a Friend; they are the Friends whom Nature chose for us; Society and Fortune, as things now go, are scarcely compatible with Friendship, and contrive to get along, miserably enough, without it. Yet sorrow not above measure for him that is gone. He is, in very deed and truth, with God,--where you and I both are. What a thin film it is that divides the Living from the Dead! In still nights, as Jean Paul says, "the limbs of my Buried Ones touched cold on my soul, and drove away its blots, as dead hands heal eruptions of the skin." Let us turn back into Life.*

To the briefest five word report that he is getting married, in probably Emerson's longest letter (an eleven pager), Carlyle responds,

*That you will take to yourself a wife is the cheerfulest tidings you could send us. It is in no wise meet for man to be alone; and indeed the beneficent Heavens in creating Eve, did mercifully guard against that. May it prove blessed, this new arrangement! I delight to prophesy for you peaceful days in it; peaceful, not idle; filled rather with that best activity which is the stillest. To the future, or perhaps at this hour actual Mrs. Emerson, will you offer true wishes from two British Friends; who have not seen her with their eyes, but whose thoughts need not be strangers to the Home she will make for you. Nay, you add the most chivalrous summons: which who knows but one day we may actually stir ourselves to obey! It may hover for the present among the gentlest of our day-dreams; mild-lustrous; an impossible possibility. May all go well with you, my worthy Countryman, Kinsman, and brother Man!*

Charles death came with no warning. He was engaged to be married and Emerson was adding rooms to his house for the newlyweds. His sudden departure from the world was a tremendous blow for Emerson as he writes to Carlyle, "I have put so much dependence on his gifts that we made but one man together; for I needed never to do what he could do by noble nature much better than I." Out of the grief of his loss thoughts of concern reach across the waters to his friend on the other side:

*I fear Nature has not inlaid fat earth enough into your texture to keep the ethereal blade from whetting it through. I write to implore you to be careful with your health. You are property of all whom you rejoice in heart and soul, and you must not deal with your body as your own.*



On the other side of the ocean shortly before Charles death Carlyle the writer was experiencing a sudden loss of his own, “the saddest, I think, of the kind called Accidents I ever had to front.” Emerson knew from a visit William Ellery Channing made what a toll on Carlyle’s health the writing of his great work on the French Revolution had been. For over a year on end, Carlyle applied his whole being to the project. Carlyle’s good friend, John Stuart Mill asked to read and critique the first volume, and his cleaning lady, mistaking the Manuscript for scrap paper, threw the whole thing in the fire. In a letter to Emerson, Carlyle describes Mill coming to their door one evening with a look of “distraction (literally) in his aspect”. “I could not complain”, says Carlyle, “or the poor man seemed as if he would have shot himself: we had to gather ourselves together, and show a smooth front to it; which happily, though difficult, was not impossible to do.” When Emerson shared this letter with George Ripley, Ripley said that Carlyle should have been more compassionate and loaned him the gun.

At the end of August in 1837 Emerson gave the legendary American Scholar Address to Harvard’s Phi Beta Kappa Society which branded with fire the ideal of the scholar as ‘Man Thinking’ in the American psyche. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, a fellow student with Emerson, who attended the event said fifty years later in his biography of Emerson, “This grand Oration was our intellectual Declaration of Independence. Nothing like it had been heard in the halls of Harvard...the young men went out from it as if a prophet had been proclaiming to them, “Thus saith the Lord.” In simply reading the words you can hear Emerson’s voice ringing as it rises toward the finale,

*If there be one lesson more than another, which should pierce his ear, it is, The world is nothing, the man is all; in yourself is the law of all nature, and you know not yet how a globule of sap ascends; in yourself slumbers the whole of Reason; it is for you to know all, it is for you to dare all. Mr. President and Gentlemen, this confidence in the unsearched might of man belongs, by all motives, by all prophecy, by all preparation, to the American Scholar.*

Carlyle’s assessment was unbridled praise.

*And so now by a direct transition I am got to the Oration. My friend! You know not what you have done for me there. It was long decades of years that I had heard nothing but the infinite jangling and jabbering, and inarticulate twittering and screeching, and my soul had sunk down sorrowful, and said there is no articulate speaking then any more, and thou art solitary among stranger-creatures? And lo, out of the West comes a clear utterance, clearly recognizable as a man’s voice, and I have a kinsman and brother: God be thanked for it! I could have wept to read that speech; the clear high melody of it went tingling through my heart; I said to my wife, “There, woman!”...But for you my dear friend, I say and pray heartily: May God grant you strength; for you have a fearful work*

*to do! Fearful I call it; and yet it is great, and the greatest. O for God's sake keep yourself still quiet!*

Riding on the heels of this great address, Emerson was asked by the students of Harvard's Divinity School of 1837 (all six of them) to give their commencement address. Emerson could never resist a request from the young, intelligent and idealistic. Pulling no punches, Emerson, in a radically rebellious temper used the occasion to make a break from and take a stand against organized religion (in particular Christianity, and more pointedly—Unitarianism), admonishing the students “to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred to the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil.” Emerson believed that if we traced words to their roots we would find poems. The beginning of the Divinity School Address is pure poetic prose that reminds the listener that spirit and matter are intertwined, that throughout nature the divine runs through and through. Speaking on a day much like this one we have enjoyed in Santa Barbara, he begins:

*In this refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted with fire and gold in the tint of flowers. The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine, the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay. Night brings no gloom to the heart with its welcome shade. Through the transparent darkness the stars pour their almost spiritual rays. Man under them seems a young child, and his huge globe a toy. The cool night bathes the world as with a river, and prepares his eyes again for the crimson dawn. The mystery of nature was never displayed more happily.*

Emerson outlines the first great evil of the church as the extracting from humanity and the elevating of Jesus to the unreachable status of demigod. The higher his image is raised the lower our own self-image falls 'til we're pygmies underfoot. The more the divine nature is reserved for a select few the more it is denied to the rest of us, and “denied with fury”. Probably with clenched fist and electric glance, Emerson's voice resounds,

*That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen. There is no longer a necessary reason for my being. Already the long shadows of untimely oblivion creep over me, and I shall decease forever.*

The second sin against humanity, Emerson goes on, is that divine revelation happened in the past and our experience of the divine will at best be second-hand, “as if God is dead”. As Emerson continues,

*My friends, in these two errors, I think, I find the causes of a decaying church and a wasting unbelief. And what greater calamity can fall upon a nation, than the loss of worship? Then all things go to decay. Genius leaves the temple, to haunt the senate, or the market. Literature becomes frivolous. Science is cold. The eye of youth is not lighted by the hope of other worlds, and age is without honor. Society lives to trifles, and when men die, we do not mention them.*

Though the audience was small word spread like wildfire through New England of the blasphemous ideas that Emerson was disseminating among the youth at Harvard. Emerson had kicked a hornet's nest and was to be stung many times, as he said, "the very mud boils." Andrews Norton, who was once Emerson's Divinity School Professor at Harvard, wrote a violent attack on Emerson partially blaming "that hyper-Germanized Englishman, Carlyle," for his influence on Emerson's thinking. Norton considered the address an "incoherent rhapsody" and an "insult to religion". Christianity comes to man through the church and through the *Bible*, he declares; continuing, "there can be no intuition, no direct perception of the truths of Christianity." The universally liked Emerson had now gained such notoriety that he wrote Carlyle to indefinitely postpone any plans for coming to America. As he writes to Carlyle,

*At this moment I would not have you here, on any account. The publication of my Address to the Divinity College (copies of which I sent you) has been the occasion of an outcry in all our leading local newspapers against my "infidelity," pantheism," and "atheism." The writers warn all and sundry against me, and against whatever is supposed to be related to my connection of opinion, &c.; Transcendentalism, Goethe and Carlyle. I am heartily sorry to see this last aspect of the storm in our washbowl. For, as Carlyle is nowise guilty, and has unpopuliarities of his own, I do not wish to embroil him in my parish differences.*

In a return letter, Carlyle writes, this "'tempest in a washbowl' is all according to nature, and will be profitable to you, not hurtful...I find in this speech that noblest self-assertion, and believing originality, which is like sacred fire."

Both Emerson and Carlyle studied deeply, wrote extensively and fervently admired the lives of great men. Both shared a view of history that it was embodied ideas that rule the world and affected change. Carlyle once said that when it comes to the lives of great men we want to know what time they wake up in the morning, what they have for breakfast and what kind of socks and shoes they wore. Both men believed that the best way to read history was as a biography of great men. Emerson saw great men as representative of the mind and character of the epoch they lived in; Carlyle saw, "the Great Man to have been the indispensable savior of his epoch; the lightening, without which the fuel never would have burnt." Carlyle gave a series of lectures on *Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* which Emerson helped

compile into a book that was published in America as part of the transatlantic bibliopoly. It was not until Carlyle gained renown in America due to Emerson's efforts that his own country began to appreciate his literary talents. Emerson gave talks that were crafted into essays on what he called representative men. He believed we learn best about the mind and character of a time, as well as about ourselves, by studying great men.

Napoleon was Napoleon because he lived in a society of little Napoleons.

Representative Men was Emerson's attempt to find congruence between the reality of unequal distribution of talent and the democratic belief in the fundamental equality of all mankind. Great persons are not superior to us; they represent the full flowering of powers and abilities more latent in the rest. As he said, "What can Shakespeare tell in any way but to Shakespeare in us?"

Emerson studied all 55 volumes of Goethe's works in the original, at the bidding of Carlyle, before composing his representative thesis on Goethe, The Writer. Unlike Carlyle and Thoreau, Emerson normally read translations justifying himself by saying, "why swim across the Concord River to get to Boston when you can take the bridge." One of Emerson's great ambitions was to write the Natural History of the Intellect. Emerson believed, "The soul of God is poured into the world through the thoughts of men." For Emerson, every man was an imperfect reflection of a universal prototype (a Platonic Form) of the Perfect Man which the thrust of all of Nature was moving towards. In trees he saw Prometheus Bound struggling to be free. At the end of every essay on a representative man, Emerson provided a laundry list of their limitations and flaws. No incarnated man was entirely Perfect, each was a work in progress towards perfectability. Heretically, even Jesus (who was not chosen as one of the representative men) was not entirely perfect. "I do not see in him the love of Natural Science: I see in him no kindness for Art; I see in him nothing of Socrates, of Laplace, of Shakespeare." Emerson, the self-proclaimed Appreciator, was not a critic trying to cut a great man down to assuage an inferiority complex; he knew the dangerous tendency of unconditional adulation leading to deification to the point that "I will kill you if you say he was a man." Like a designed imperfection in a beautifully woven Navaho rug, in the context of greatness an exposed flaw does not limit, it humanizes. In his opening essay entitled The Uses of Great Men, Emerson writes,

*IT IS NATURAL to believe in great men...Nature seems to exist for the excellent. The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome. They who lived with them found life glad and nutritious. Life is sweet and tolerable only in our belief in such society; and, actually or ideally, we manage to live with superiors. We call our children and our lands by their names. Their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of*

*them...The search after the great man is the dream of youth and the most serious occupation of manhood.*

Carlyle's view of heroes was different from Emerson's. In spite of their flaws Carlyle believed that men of genius, heroes in one form or another, men of "deep, great, genuine sincerity", *original* men, were sent down to Earth like lightening from Heaven to illuminate our minds and lead us to the Promised Land. They were our natural superiors. In our celebration of their value to mankind we should, in large part, overlook their flaws. Criticism of a great man Carlyle called 'valetism' from the expression 'no man is a hero to his *vale*'. Carlyle believed that all times, and especially the time that he and Emerson lived in, needed strong leaders to take control over the competing forces erupting in society—the Myoxies and Thyoxies. For Emerson society was like a large hand divided into fingers to increase its usefulness. For Carlyle society analogically was family writ large and a society's leaders were its father-figures. There is considerable truth and value to Carlyle's ideas on Great Men; however, if carried to an extreme in an Iron Age his firm position could become in itself a dangerous doctrine. One problem that Carlyle could never work out was how to find and establish authentic, sincere paternal heroes in positions of power.

As their relationship enters the 1840's each is more cognizant of increased tensions in their respective countries; and, thou unwished for, enters into their friendship. One historian said of this acquaintance between Emerson and Carlyle that a lot of foolishness has been written. Most of the foolishness would be of this later period of their friendship, so I ask in advance forgiveness for the foolishness I may be about to utter.

Like Dickens, Carlyle had deep, heart-felt sympathy for the inhuman plight of the working poor in England. Forty percent of the population could not write their own name, compared to 1/2 of 1 percent in Massachusetts. As a manifestation of the theory of utilitarianism and *laissez faire* economics (which Carlyle was the first to call the 'dismal science') the Industrial Age was for Carlyle 'the worst of times'. For one who had studied the French Revolution so deeply, the proletarian Chartist movement in England presaged full-blown rebellion and mobocracy. While he surgically dissects the political and social diseases, his cure of finding a true leader to move England away from the precipice is, as Emerson puts it in a letter, too "concise to a question so grave and humane."

In America, simultaneously, the movement for the abolition of slavery was gathering steam. Unlike Thoreau, Emerson, the thinker, evaded social and political causes as much as possible believing that utterance was action enough. Yet, in times that try men's souls the reclusive thinker cannot refuse the call of the volatile arena. Probably the most sustained call-to-arms came from home. Lidian was a strong

abolitionist since 1837. Eventually, their home, along with the Thoreau household, became part of the Underground Railroad. They financially supported the courageous reactionary John Brown and they protested vehemently against the Fugitive Slave Act; which, disappointedly Daniel Webster argued for as a compromise measure to hold the Union together. As the Emerson's daughter, Ellen, recalled of her mother, "She learned all the horrors of slavery and dwelt upon them, so that it was as if she continually witnessed the whippings and the selling away of little children from their mothers." Lidian became so dismayed with her Country that every Fourth of July she draped the front picket fence—which lies prominently along Paul Revere's famous route—with large quantities of black cambric cloth.

Emerson had always been against slavery and in 1844 delivered in Concord his first of many fiery, emotional speeches calling for its abolition. Atypical for Emerson up to then, the speech, like Anthony's over the dead body of Caesar, was meant to whip his audience into action. He begins by saying, "If any cannot speak, or cannot hear the words of freedom, let him go hence,—I had almost said, creep into your grave, the Universe has no need of you." Emerson goes on to tell stories of the horrors of slavery including one of "a planter throwing his negro into a copper of boiling cane-juice." He adds with extreme black humor, "The sugar they raised was excellent. Nobody tasted blood in it." He points out how insignificant is the color of a person's skin saying, "Why, at night all men are black." Inspired by the examples of prominent blacks like Frederick Douglas and others, Emerson tells his hometown audience, "The black man carries in his bosom an indispensable element of a new and coming civilization... There have been moments, I said when men might be forgiven who doubted. Those moments are past... America is the idea of emancipation."

As the years advanced, Carlyle became more distraught and pessimistic of any real social amelioration occurring in England. In response his voice was becoming more resounding and thunderous. Emerson once said that Carlyle uses language, "like a protean engine which can cut, thrust, saw, rasp, tickle or pulverize as occasion may require." Unlike his father the stone mason, Thomas was now more like the Norse god Thor—a hurler of stones. Beginning with his book *Past and Present*, through *Oliver Cromwell*, *The Later-Day Pamphlets*, *The Negro Question*, *Frederick the Great* and *Shooting Niagara*, Carlyle's later writings were peppered with bursts of anti-Americanism, frequent denunciations of democracy, attacks on pseudo-philanthropy, and anti-abolition leanings. Fundamentally disagreeing with Carlyle's expressed political views, Emerson found it increasingly impossible to defend Carlyle to his New England friends so he zipped his lips and stayed mum. As he wrote, "I have long ceased to apologize for or explain your savage sayings about American or other republics, and am willing that anointed men bearing with them authentic charters shall be laws to themselves, as Plato willed." While Carlyle maintained his side of the

correspondence, often asking Emerson to forgive him his ferociousness, there were long pauses between Emerson's return letters—at one point as long as three years. As Emerson wrote in his journal, "I have neglected badly Carlyle, who is so steadily good to me. Like a Catholic in Boston, he has put himself by his violent anti-Americanism in false position, and it is not quite easy to deal with him." Still they exchanged daguerreotypes (photographs), Emerson chatted about his fruit orchard of over 100 trees and sent a barrel of Concord corn with Lidian's recipes for making it into bread and popping it.

## Stonehenge

In 1847 Emerson was invited to give a lecture tour in England, so leaving his household in the hands of Thoreau he sailed for Liverpool. As he wrote to Carlyle, "In my old age I am coming to see you." When he finally reached their house in Chelsea late one night the door was opened "by Jane Carlyle, and the man himself was behind her with a lamp in the entry." Talk began immediately continuing into the wee-hours resuming in the morning as they strolled from the house, "Carlyle melting all Westminster & London down into his talk & laughter as he walked." Emerson stayed for five days and their relations stayed amicable. A few months later on a return visit, Carlyle was holding forth on the importance of Oliver Cromwell as a model leader when, as Emerson was to relate to George Searle Phillips,

*I differed from him in his estimate of Cromwell's character and he rose like a great Norse giant from his chair—and drawing a line with his finger across the table, said, with terrible fierceness, 'Then sir, there is a line of separation between you and me as wide as that, and as deep as the pit'.*

Emerson knew of Carlyle's fluctuating moods, often caused by the stomach ailment, dyspepsia, which he suffered from his whole life. But he had never been in Carlyle's direct line of fire before. Emerson was not seriously wounded because he knew by pointing to the wart in Cromwell's portrait, he was also poking Carlyle in the under belly. The scene does bring to the fore the widening crevasse of viewpoint in, what Emerson described in his essay, *Friendship* as "an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity which, beneath these disparities, unites them." A squall on the surface could not up-anchor a friendship moored so deep. As Carlyle wrote in a later letter to Emerson,

*...and tho' I see well enough what a great deep cleft divides us, in our ways of practically looking at this world,—I see also (as probably you do yourself) where the rock-strata, miles deep, unite again; and the two poor souls are at one. Poor devils!—Nay if there were no point of agreement at all, and I were more intolerant of "ways of thinking" than I even am,—yet has not the man Emerson, from old*

*years, been a Human Friend to me? Can I ever forget, or think otherwise than lovingly of the man Emerson?*

As proof of the resilience of their friendship, when Emerson concluded his speaking tour the two men conspired to go on a kind of sight-seeing trip to Stonehenge (which neither had seen) before Emerson set sail. It seems so fitting to me that these two great modern thinkers, who each tapped into the vault of golden wisdom of by-gone cultures and found fresh original expression of humanity's ancient truths, should spend their last significant days together communing amidst the magnetic and mysterious stones of an inscrutable Druid temple to the sun. For Emerson the excursion had, as he writes in *English Traits*,

*...the double attraction of the monument and the companion. It seemed a bringing together of extreme points, to visit the oldest religious monument in Britain, in company with her latest thinker, and one whose influence may be traced in every contemporary book...a man on whose genius I set a very high value, and who had as much penetration, and as severe a theory of duty, as any person in it.*

For Emerson, who had thought long on the ever-recurring theme of circles in nature, standing in the center of this mysterious circle of ancient massive stones must have ignited his imagination. As he writes,

*We counted and measured by paces the biggest stones, and soon knew as much as any man can suddenly know of the inscrutable temple...The chief mystery is that any mystery should have been allowed to settle on so remarkable a monument, in a country on which all the muses have kept their eyes now for eighteen hundred years...We walked in and out, and took again and again a fresh look at the uncanny stones. The old sphinx put our petty differences of nationality out of sight. To these conscious stones we two pilgrims were alike known and near...My philosopher was subdued and gentle.*

It was July the 8<sup>th</sup>, 163 years ago and the sky was clear. Amidst the carpeting grass, Emerson made note of the flowers within the enclosure—buttercups, daisies, meadowsweet and goldenrod. “Earth laughs in flowers,” Emerson once said. The simple regenerating pleasure of being in the quiet presence of one you admire and respect, allowed the joyful companionship of Craigenputtock to return for both men. Like two ancient Druids following the course of the sun, these aging fellow travelers had each in their own way uncovered the hidden path and with their inspired writings had strewn violets on all the stony places to help guide and cheer mankind on its way.

On their return to London they stayed with Arthur Help, a mutual friend. The next day while wind and rain beat against the window the three sat in armchairs in the study,



as Emerson wrote “disagreeing to the utmost, amicably.” As the British with their provocative and sarcastic wit are known to do, Mr. C & Mr. H (as Emerson calls them in *English Traits*) double-teamed Emerson to voice one original thing as an American idea. As Emerson relates,

*Thus challenged, I bethought myself neither of caucuses nor congress, neither of presidents nor of cabinet-ministers, nor of such as would make of America another Europe. I thought only of the simplest and purest minds; I said, ‘Certainly yes;—but those who hold it are fanatics of a dream which I should hardly care to relate to your English ears, to which it might be only ridiculous,—and yet it is the only true.’*

Egged on, knowing full-well that Mr. C would scoff at him for his naivety, Emerson spoke of the idealistic, utopian dream of a society, without the need of government, based upon non-resistance. Expecting strong pragmatic and realistic objections, Emerson intrepidly advanced forward visualizing this transformation affected by a clean revolution, not dependant on vulgar musket-worship, utilizing the law of love and justice alone (the gun that does not need another gun). Emerson wraps up his piece by saying, “no less valor than this can command my respect”, and then as he puts it sits back anticipating the objections and awaiting the fun. Surprisingly, Mr. C seemed to enjoy the bright brush-strokes of Emerson’s fanciful dream. When dinner was called, since Emerson had taken the saint’s part in their discussion, C. refused to leave the room before E. because, “he was altogether too wicked.” To which, as Emerson relates, “I planted my back against the wall, and our host wittily rescued us from the dilemma, by saying, he was the wickedest, and would walk out first, then C. followed, and I went last.”

As the correspondence moves through the 1850’s, with an average of one letter shared per year, there are some wonderful exchanges. As Emerson writes in 1852,

*I like that Thor should make comets and thunder, as well as Iduna apples, or Heimdal his rainbow bridge, and your wrath and satire has all too much realism in it, than that we can flatter ourselves by disposing of you as partial and heated. Nor is it your fault that you do a hero’s work, nor do we love you less if we cannot help you in it. Pity me, O strong man! I am of a puny constitution half made up...*

And Carlyle replies,

*Dear Emerson.....You are a born enthusiast, as quiet as you are; and it will continue so, at intervals, to the end. I admire your sly low-voiced sarcasm too;-- in short, I love the sternly-gentle close-buttoned man very well...*

In another letter Carlyle relates that he visited Luther's little room in Wartburg, Germany, and with tears in his eyes kissed the old oak table "being in a flurried state of nerves." The first epistle was written by Emerson in May of 1834. Thirty-eight years later in April of 1872 Carlyle pens the last praising John Ruskin saying, "no other man in England that I meet has in him the divine rage against iniquity, falsity, and baseness that every man ought to have." The postal service in those days charged per page so each writer would often bring their letters to an abrupt halt to avoid additional charges. As Carlyle's quill reaches the bottom of the page he writes,

*Alas, alas, here is the end of the paper, dear Emerson; and I had still a whole wilderness of things to say. Write to me, or even do not write, and I will surely write again.*

*I remain as ever Your Affectionate Friend, T. Carlyle*

Carlyle died first in February of 1881. More like Providence than coincidence, like the simultaneous death of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson (two antagonists turned friends) on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1826 (the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence); the day Carlyle was being buried in Ecclefechan, Emerson was delivering a speech on Carlyle to the Massachusetts Historical Society. Feeble in constitution, unable to muster oratorical force, his audience gathered in a tight circle around him. Pausing often to catch his breath and gather his thoughts he said,

*Carlyle has, best of all men in England, kept the manly attitude in his time. He has stood for scholars, asking no scholar what he should say. Holding an honored place in the best society, he stood for the people, for the Chartist, for the pauper, intrepidly, and scornfully, teaching the nobles their peremptory duties...His guiding genius is his moral sense, his perception of the sole importance of truth and justice; but that is a truth of character, not of catechisms...He has carried himself erect, made himself a power confessed by all men, and taught scholars their lofty duty. He never feared the face of man.*

This was Emerson's last public talk. At 79 years, the candle of Emerson's own physical life was burning low. Two weeks before his death, the next spring, he pointed to a picture of Carlyle on the wall and told his son Edward, "That's my man. That's my good man." He was fighting a cold. On April 19<sup>th</sup> Emerson went walking and got soaked in a sudden shower. His cold turned to pneumonia. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, against Edward's pleading he went to his study as usual to work. Finishing his afternoon tea, Emerson refused help in closing up his study. As was his custom, he went from window to window closing the shutters and carefully extinguished the fire. Taking his study lamp in his hand and steadying himself with the handrail he ascended the flight of stairs for the last time.

## Reflections

As we prepare to celebrate the 235<sup>th</sup> year since the birth of our Country by the courageous signing of the Declaration of Independence (which the Founders knew could be their own death-warrant), the second aim of the Institute of World Culture reminds us of the need to, “Renew the Universal Vision behind the American Dream.” Emerson declared (echoing *Proverbs*) that, “Where there is no vision a people perish.” The renewal of this vision begins, says the second aim, with “authentic affirmations of Freedom, Excellence and Self-Transcendence”. How can reflections on this great friendship between Emerson and Carlyle help us refresh and reinvigorate our own aspirations for true freedom, excellence and self-transcendence?

**Freedom:** America is called the land of the free, yet from ‘sea to shining sea’ we have shackled ourselves in chains. We live on the ‘surfaces’, said Emerson; and, “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.” Freedom is not the ability to choose between more than one type of eggplant in the produce section. Freedom is achieved through the finding of place. As these men taught: Place is initially to be sought within. Stillness proceeds movement. To meaningfully transform the world we must purify and elevate thought. As Emerson said, "To different minds, the same world is a hell or a heaven."

As these men exemplified, real freedom comes through responsibility. Only when we translate creative thought into beneficial action are we truly free. Human will wisely aligned with the ways and wholeness of nature annuls fate. As Emerson beautifully expresses,

*And so I think that the last lesson of life, the choral song which rises from all elements and all angels, is a voluntary obedience, a necessitated freedom. Man is made of the same atoms as the world is; he shares the same impressions, predispositions, and destiny. When his mind is illuminated, when his heart is kind, he throws himself joyfully into the sublime order, and does, with knowledge, what the stones do by structure.*

America, the world’s melting pot, is a gunny sack of mutants and misfits. We may all be lemons; yet with the sugar of kindness and understanding we can still make lemonade. In a living culture every person holds a special place and is embraced and appreciated for their uniqueness. As Emerson said, "Each man has his own vocation; his talent is his call. There is one direction in which all space is open to him." In celebrating our diversity we find our commonality. There is dignity in all forms of work. Each is integral to the whole. Everything we do is more important than we think it is. As a wise person once said, “The work at hand has the abstract claim of duty.” To use

Emerson's analogy of society as a functioning hand; what good is the multi-talented opposable thumb if the humble little finger does not meet it half-way?

**Excellence:** Emerson said, "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please; you can never have both." Both Emerson and Carlyle chose the rugged path of truth over the safe haven of comforting conformity. As such, their lives became a tireless and relentless pursuit of excellence in the expression of truth. The rock-strata of their friendship was their shared love of truth, and with one another they rarely pulled their punches. True friendships need not be dainty said Emerson, but can be treated with 'roughest courage'. A real friend is as yeast to our highest accomplishments. As Emerson said, "Let him be to thee for ever a sort of beautiful enemy, untamable, devoutly revered, and not a trivial conveniency to be soon outgrown and cast aside." Let not all our friends be comfort-friends, but like Emerson and Carlyle let's choose (and encourage our children to choose) friends which spur us to strive for excellence and challenge us to our finest efforts. To quote Emerson, "Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us do what we can."

The life-blood of any society is its culture. A culture is only as alive as the health of the relationships in it. In the interwoven fabric of its friendships shines the luster and richness of a living culture. "The essence of friendship", said Emerson, "is entireness". As unconditional friends of Man, Emerson and Carlyle embodied in their uncompromising friendship an archetypal expression of universal culture.

**Self-Transcendence:** We, too, live in an 'Age of Down-Pulling'. We need daily to keep healthy our idealism and protect it from the societal germs and diseases of cynicism, skepticism, negativism and all other forms of human reductionism. Both Carlyle and Emerson harbored great hopes for social transformation in their respective countries. Emerson quietly hoped that the Civil War, fought for moral principles, would catalyze the collective will and transcend America to a New Order of the Ages. The City of Man's almost tangible realization was shattered by a bullet in Ford's theatre. Knocked down but not out, Emerson rebounded with his fundamental faith in each man's potential for moral and spiritual growth. Asked once what his creed was, Emerson said he had no creed. Pressed further, Emerson declared, "I have only one doctrine, the infinitude of the private man." Carlyle's central hope for social amelioration and advancement was in the leadership of heroic individuals. When such leaders did not step to the fore Carlyle fumed and to some degree lost heart.

Hope and love flow from the same source and fear is the shadow of both. "Fear", said Emerson, "always springs from ignorance." Emerson drew up a list of the fears of his time: Catholicism, Pauperism, Immigration, Manufacturing Processes, Radicalism & Democracy. We could draw up a similar list of fears for our own time: Climate Change, Economic Collapse, The Tea-Party, Terrorism, Xenophobia (the fear of other peoples).

What a wonderful, harmonious world it would be if there were **no** people in it—or at least not **that** set of people. As Emerson said, "These times of ours are serious and full of calamity, but all times are essentially alike. As soon as there is life there is danger." He also wrote that we are born in the best of times, if we know what to do with them. Throughout the ages, if we look close enough, all apocalyptic fears have the worm of mortality at their core. Emerson timelessly saw, "Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it." We live on what Emerson called 'the surfaces', buffeted by the flotsam and jetsam of the Heraclitean flux. Yet behind all the suffocating smoke of discontent, still smolders the glowing, golden ember of divinity. If we listen we can still hear Emerson's enthusiastic voice reminding us that, "The sun shines today"; and, "Nothing is secure but life, transition, and the energizing spirit."

The Republic of Conscience is not far off. It exists today in all sincere and noble friendships. Its raised foundation is daily revealed in the sincere and creative expressions of authentic minds and loving hearts. This parapolitical polis counts as its current citizenry: Tenzin Gyatso of Tibet; Nelson Mandela of South Africa; Liu Xiaobo of China; Shirin Ebadi of Iran; the fifty Fukushima nuclear plant workers who volunteered in Japan; Muhammad Yunus of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh; Aung San Suu Khi of Myanmar; and countless millions more who listen to 'the still small voice within' and live for the welfare of others. As the Self-reliant Emerson showed us through his life and his utterance, there is no greater hope than every man's ability for self-transcendence. To quote the Emersonian axiom of the Institute of World Culture,

*The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end.*

Cliff Tillotson, Member, Institute of World Culture  
July, 2011