

**LITTLE MASTERPIECES; RALPH
WALDO EMERSON: HISTORY,
SELF-RELIANCE, NATURE,
SPIRITUAL LAWS, THE AMERICAN
SCHOLAR**

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Little Masterpieces; Ralph Waldo Emerson: History, Self-Reliance, Nature, Spiritual Laws, the American Scholar by Bliss Perry

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BLISS PERRY

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Little Masterpieces

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON

History Self-Reliance
Nature Spiritual Laws
The American Scholar



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1901

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Editor's Introduction

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OF the five complete productions of Emerson which appear in this volume, three ("History," "Self-Reliance," and "Spiritual Laws") are chosen from the first series of his "Essays," published in 1841. The essay on "Nature," reprinted here, was first published in the second series of "Essays" in 1844, and is not to be confused with the more enigmatic essay on "Nature," in eight brief "books," which appeared in 1836. The later essay is based, after a fashion, upon the first, but it is more winning in its method. These four representative papers are followed by the famous Phi Beta Kappa address of 1837 on "The American Scholar"; an oration which Lowell declared to be "an event without any parallel in our literary annals," and which Holmes characterized as "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."

Emerson was thirty-four when he delivered this address upon "The American Scholar." His literary productiveness continued unabated for about thirty years longer. After 1867 he produced little, though his calm life was prolonged until 1882, within a few days of his eightieth year. All the selections in this volume, it will be observed, are chosen

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from the period of his earlier manhood, when his thought had a morning freshness and his language was that of a new, delicious poetry. None of his later writings give a more perfect display of the essential qualities of his genius.

If Emerson passed logically and systematically from one subject to another, and during the elucidation of his themes kept strictly to the business in hand, it would be interesting to summarize the judgments of this acute and dispassionate mind upon such perennially significant topics as History, Self-Reliance, Nature, Spiritual Laws, and Scholarship. But Emerson smilingly avoided any sequential, formal treatment of his themes. To make an abstract of one of his essays is as difficult as it is unprofitable. He drifts serenely from cape to inlet, from island to promontory, surveying some new or old domain of thought and experience. The reports he brings back to us are "the words we wish to hear," but he is not bent, after all, upon making a topographical chart of sea and shore. Passages from his essay on "History" read like paragraphs belonging in "Self-Reliance" or "Nature." Indeed, we know that Emerson's essays were pieced together out of random entries in his notebooks, and it is idle to seek for a superficial unity for which the author himself never cared.

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It is enough that there is a fundamental unity in the great idealist's scheme of the world. Witness these sentences, chosen from each of the essays in this volume:

"Let it suffice that in the light of these two facts, namely, that the mind is One, and that Nature is its correlative, history is to be read and written."—"History.")

"Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles."—"Self-Reliance.")

"Let a man believe in God, and not in names and places and persons."—Spiritual Laws.")

"The world is mind precipitated. . . . So poor is Nature with all her craft, that from the beginning to the end of the universe she has but one stuff,—but one stuff with its two ends, to serve up all her dream-like variety. Compound it how she will, star, sand, fire, water, tree, man, it is still one stuff, and betrays the same properties."—"Nature.")

"The ancient precept 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim."—"The American Scholar.")

Emerson's claim to an enduring place among American men of letters is that he can say things like these, and say them so well. Yet most persons who have once come under the spell of that radiant and vivifying personality see in Emerson something other

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and rarer than a mere man of letters. To them he is a "friend and helper," a personal force. Some readers think they outgrow him, as the transcendental days of youth go by; but the wiser ones keep coming back to him to borrow something of his indefeasible optimism, his serene courage. This little volume will introduce him no doubt, to new readers. They are to be envied. But to the greater number of those who turn the pages of this book, it will serve as a reminder and pledge of an ennobling intellectual companionship. Not a few of them, re-reading these brave and beautiful essays written more than sixty years ago, will murmur to themselves those words of Emerson's master which sprang to the lips of Faust:

*Die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen;
Dein Sinn ist zu, dein Herz ist todt!
Auf! bade, Schüler, unverdrossen,
Die ird'sche Brust im Morgenroth!"*

BLISS PERRY.