The Student
ON MARCH 29, 1832, THE TWENTY-EIGHT-YEAR-OLD EMERSON visited the tomb of his young wife, Ellen, who had been buried a year and two months earlier. He was in the habit of walking from Boston out to her grave in Roxbury every day, but on this particular day he did more than commune with the spirit of the departed Ellen: he opened the coffin. Ellen had been young and pretty. She was seventeen when they were engaged, eighteen when married, and barely twenty when she died of advanced tuberculosis. They had made frantic efforts at a cure, including long open-air carriage rides and massive doses of country air. Their life together had been stained almost from the start by the bright blood of Ellen’s coughing.

Opening the coffin was not a grisly gothic gesture, not just the wild aberration of an unhinged lover. What Emerson was doing was not unheard of. At least two of Emerson’s contemporaries did the same thing. A Unitarian minister and good friend of Margaret Fuller’s, James Freeman Clarke, once opened the coffin of the woman he had been in love with when he was an undergraduate. Edgar Allan Poe’s literary executor, the anthologist Rufus Griswold, opened the coffin of his dead wife forty days after the funeral.¹

Emerson opened not only the tomb or family vault but the coffin itself. The act was essential Emerson. He had to see for himself. Some part of him was not able to believe she was dead. He was still writing to her in his journals as though she was alive. Perhaps the very deadness of the body would help a belief in the life of the spirit. A modern writer has said that “beside the corpse of the beloved were generated not only the idea of the soul, the belief in immortality, and a great part of man’s deep-rooted sense of guilt, but also the earliest inkling of ethical law.” We do not know exactly what moved Emerson on this occasion, but we do know that he had a powerful craving for direct, personal, unmediated experience. That is what he meant when he insisted that one should strive for an original relation to the universe. Not a novel relation, just one’s own. Emerson is the great American champion of self-reliance, of the adequacy of the individual, and of the importance of
the active soul or spirit. Never content with mere assertion, he looked always for the sources of strength. Emerson’s lifelong search, what he called his heart’s inquiry, was “Whence is your power?” His reply was always the same: “From my nonconformity. I never listened to your people’s law, or to what they call their gospel, and wasted my time. I was content with the simple rural poverty of my own. Hence this sweetness.”

Emerson’s direct facing of death owed something to his aunt Mary Moody Emerson, the brilliant and original sister of Emerson’s father, who deliberately lived with death every day of her life and drew much of her own power from that grim helpmeet. Her jagged, combative prose uses death and pain as probes for faith. “Did I not assure good Lincoln Ripley, long since,” she wrote, “that I should be willing to have limbs rot, and senses dug out, if I could perceive more of God?”

Emerson had also by now learned to think of ideas not as abstractions but as perceptions, laws, templates, patterns, and plans. Ideas were not less real than the phenomenal world. If anything, ideas were more important than phenomena because they lay behind them, creating and explaining the visible world. Ideas for Emerson were tangible and had force. “Believe in magnetism, not in needles,” he wrote. Ideas, even the idea of death, could not be separated from sense experience.

Emerson’s own journal entry for this March day was terse: “I visited Ellen’s tomb and opened the coffin.” They had been utterly in love, and for a moment, on September 30, 1829, their wedding day, the future had seemed clear. Notes and letters flew back and forth. They traveled and wrote verses together and laughed at the Shakers who tried to woo them to celibacy. She intended to be a poet, he a preacher. He had accepted a pulpit in Boston, and they had set up a home that became at once the center of the Emerson family, as both Waldo’s mother and his younger brother Charles came to live with them. Now, a little more than a year after Ellen’s death, Emerson’s life was unraveling fast. He was so desolate and lonely that his mother tried to persuade his invalid brother Edward to come back from the West Indies to look after him. His professional life was also going badly. Though he was a much-loved minister in an important Boston church, he was having trouble believing in personal immortality, trouble believing in the sacrament of Communion, and trouble accepting the authority and historical accuracy of the Bible. The truth was that Emerson was in a fast-deepening crisis of vocation. He could not accept his ministerial role, he was unsure of his faith, and he felt bereft and empty. He was directionless.
His brother Charles wrote to Aunt Mary that “Waldo is sick . . . I never saw him so disheartened . . . things seem flying to pieces.”

At Ellen’s grave that day in Roxbury in 1832 Emerson was standing amidst the ruins of his own life. More than ten years had passed since he had left college. Love had died and his career was falling apart. He was not sure what he really believed, who he really was, or what he should be doing. He felt the “vanishing volatile froth of the present” turning into the fixed adamantine past. “We walk on molten lava,” he wrote.

In the months immediately ahead he continued to walk to Ellen’s grave every day, but now his concentration on death was broken and he wrote a sermon called “The God of the Living” and another on astronomy. He reached a major watershed in his long struggle with religion. “Astronomy irresistibly modifies all religion,” he wrote. “The irresistible effect of Copernican astronomy has been to make the great scheme of the salvation of man absolutely incredible.” He would live no longer with the dead. “Let us express our astonishment,” he wrote in his journal in May, “before we are swallowed up in the yeast of the abyss. I will lift up my hands and say Kosmos.”

Before the year was out, Emerson had resigned his pulpit, moved his mother, sold his household furniture, and taken ship for Europe. He set out on Christmas Day, 1832. A northeast storm was on its way as the ship sailed from Boston, plunging into the grey expanse of the North Atlantic.
2. Emerson at Harvard

Eleven years earlier, in the spring of 1821, Ralph Emerson was in the last semester of his senior year at Harvard. He had just turned eighteen and had decided he wanted to be called Waldo. Graduation was set for August and he was to be class poet. The honor was less than meets the eye, for six other members of his class had already declined the post. And though he took poetry seriously enough, he was not otherwise a distinguished student. He ranked in the middle of his class; he was not elected to Phi Beta Kappa. He was tall and thin and had reached his height of nearly six feet awkwardly early, at fourteen. He had long arms and legs, a pale complexion, light sandy hair, a large roman nose, and blue eyes. He was full of high spirits and boyish silliness, but there was also an odd self-possession about him. No one ever saw him run and no one ever tried to slap him on the back. Josiah Quincy, a classmate of Emerson’s and later president of Harvard, said that Emerson was only a fair scholar. Like many another young person, Emerson did not shine in the things Harvard then knew how to measure. His extracurricular reading was at least three times as extensive as his reading for courses, and he was already in the habit of getting up at 4:30 or 5 in the morning to tend his correspondence and write in his journals.

Emerson’s Harvard was a small, nondescript place, half boys school, half center for advanced study. It had fewer than two hundred fifty students. Emerson’s class had sixty, with most of the boys coming from Massachusetts and New England, and with 27 percent of the students coming from elsewhere. There was a marked southern presence. Eleven of Emerson’s classmates, 18 percent of the class, were from South Carolina alone. In Emerson’s day, a student commonly entered college at thirteen or fourteen, graduating at seventeen or eighteen. As a result, college life had at times a certain rowdiness. In Emerson’s sophomore year an epic food fight broke out on the first floor of University Hall. The fight quickly got beyond the throwing of food and almost all the school’s crockery was smashed. But it would be a mistake to assume this was the dominant tone of college life.
Young people grew up faster then. Emerson could read before he was three; he taught his first class at fourteen. Girls were little women, boys little men. The curriculum shows that Harvard was not like either the high school or the college of today; it offered a combination of basic and advanced studies, functioning as a sort of early college.

Emerson took the same set of required courses everyone else did. He learned enough Greek to read both the Iliad and the New Testament. In Latin he read Livy, Horace, Cicero, Juvenal, and Persius as well as Hugo Grotius’s De veritate religionis Christianae. He studied algebra, plane geometry, analytic geometry, and spherical geometry. He took Roman history in his freshman year and during his senior year he studied the principles of American constitutional government, reading the Federalist Papers. In science he did physics (matter, motion or mechanics, hydrostatics, pneumatics, electricity, and optics) and astronomy as a junior, chemistry as a senior. He studied political economy. In philosophy he took courses in formal logic as well as the broadly conceived and attractively written moral philosophy of Dugald Stewart and William Paley. He read Locke’s Essays.

Harvard gave Emerson a solid education, liberal, not hidebound, and practical in a number of ways. Along with the expected heavy emphasis on Greek and Latin, there was also an interesting emphasis on English. As a freshman Emerson studied Robert Lowth’s workaday English Grammar and also read John Walker’s Rhetorical Grammar, a book devoted almost entirely to elocution, to reading aloud, and to public speaking. Walker is concerned with “correct” speaking. Emerson learned not to say “uppinion” for opinion, “sensubble” for sensible, or “terrubble” for terrible. As a sophomore Emerson studied Blair’s classic Lectures on Rhetoric and wrote frequent compositions. Blair provided a lucid, reasonable, widely accepted approach to English style. Blair treated figurative language not as “the invention of schools” but as the natural clothing of the energetic and passionate speech of ordinary people.¹

Much can be said against the prescribed course of study Emerson followed. Emerson himself said later that even though you knew the university was hostile to genius, you sent your children there and hoped for the best. But in some areas, and practical English is one, the college offered thorough, concrete, and useful training.

Religious education was another matter. Emerson read the great liberal defenses of Christianity by Paley and Butler, monuments of rational sober thought, postdeist defenses of revealed religion as not inconsistent with
eighteenth-century scientific thought. Paley's most interesting proof of the existence of God is his detailed argument for design centering on the human eye. Butler's *Analogy* (1736) has been called the most famous volume of English theology, as important in its sphere as Bacon in the sciences. In Emerson's day the *Analogy* was as old, as widely accepted, and as outdated as Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904) is in ours. Its argument is that the deist accepts his impersonal Creator or First Principle on essentially the same grounds and in the face of the same difficulties that make him reject revelation. Both Paley and Butler thus argue that revealed Christianity is at bottom perfectly compatible with natural religion and with the findings of modern science. In his defense of revelation, of the Bible, Butler already is subtly shifting the standard defensive grounds. There is more than a hint in the *Analogy* that the authenticating proofs of religion are to be sought in man's mind, not in books or institutions. "The proper motives of religion," Butler says, "are the proper proofs of it from our moral nature, from the presages of conscience." Paley's and Butler's books are not Calvinist, not jeremiads, not emotional or reactionary appeals. Like required religious texts everywhere, they stirred resentment. At the same time these books contained the seeds of a new approach to religion.²

The college text Emerson used for the study of the New Testament also contained the first stirrings of a theological revolution. Griesbach's edition of the Greek New Testament is the port of entry through which the new German biblical scholarship first reached a wide range of educated Americans. Griesbach bases his edition, with its copious notes, on the hypothesis that the Gospel of Matthew preceded the other gospels, which themselves were not eyewitness accounts but versions of Matthew. This suggestion was disturbing to many. If one or more of the gospels should be found not to be a reliable eyewitness account, if Luke's or Mark's gospel should turn out not to represent the writer's original relation of the events but something secondhand, then the absolute authority of the Bible becomes an open question.³

Emerson's college writings show him for the most part to have been a surprisingly conventional young man. He hated mathematics and did poorly in the subject. He preferred his literary soliloquies to chemistry and to the "accursed Enfield lessons" in physics. His own ideas were commonplace. He thought of history as the fall of successive empires; his standpoint is that of a moralized Gibbon. His undergraduate poem on India, "Indian Superstition," is a jejune, xenophobic, condescending, even racist overview of
Indie mythology from the vantage of European Christianity. He expressed a vigorous puritan disapproval of theater and drama, and his religious remarks contain conventional references to the degradation of human nature and the coming Day of Judgment.4

Emerson was very poor while he was at Harvard. He felt his poverty keenly and later remarked that his life would have been quite different had he had money. His mother’s rent, his younger brothers’ schooling, and his own college tuition all depended now on the money his older brother William made teaching school in Maine. Other boys spent six hundred dollars a year at college; Emerson spent less than three hundred dollars during his four years. He held a work-study position as the “President’s Freshman” his first year, running errands for the college president in return for tuition. Later he won a scholarship for poor boys which had been left to the college in the form of a rental home. As holder of the scholarship, Emerson was obliged to go and collect the rent from the tenant.

College life became more attractive to Emerson after his first year. Emerson joined a number of clubs, one of which he helped found. Along with classes, studying, outside reading, and club activities, he made time for daily walks to the rural area of Cambridge called, after the town in Goldsmith’s poem The Deserted Village, “Sweet Auburn.” His feeling for nature was already intense. He was exhilarated—his word—when the persistent spring clouds gave way to the blue skies of June. “I love the picturesque glitter of a summer’s morning landscape,” he wrote. “It kindles this burning admiration of nature and enthusiasm of mind.”5

Back in the college yard, there was class football every day at noon. And there were new friendships. Emerson found himself strangely and powerfully attracted by a new freshman named Martin Gay. With an unembarrassed frankness he wrote in his journal about the disturbing power of the glances he and Gay exchanged. He would remain susceptible to such crushes, expressed at first through glances, all his life; most of them would involve women. Later he wrote about the quickness with which a glance could arouse a depth of interest. He had a sort of theory of “the glance.” And while he heavily crossed out the Martin Gay journal notes at some later time, his initial recording of them indicates his essential emotional openness. He may have been quiet, he certainly did not cut a commanding figure, but he did not shrink from direct experience.

Since the Emerson boys were only a few years apart, they overlapped one another at Harvard. Since they were poor, they looked for ways to make a
little extra money. Sometimes they wrote papers for others. His brother Edward once wrote a paper for another student, carefully adjusting the level of the writing to the skill of the buyer. The boy came down to the steps of his dorm and called a group over to read them the paper to see if it was really worth the fifty cents he had paid for it.\textsuperscript{6}

Outside the college the country and the world were changing. On August 10, 1821, two weeks before Emerson’s graduation, Missouri joined the Union. After a divisive, acrimonious debate, Missouri had been granted statehood despite its deliberately unconstitutional and insulting legislative exclusion of free blacks from other states. Far from being put to rest by the Missouri Compromise, the slavery issue in America would never sleep again. In South America revolt against Spain was afoot. Bolívar had become president of Greater Colombia (including Venezuela, Ecuador, and Panama) in 1819. In 1820 revolution broke out in Naples, in the Piedmont, in Spain, and in Portugal. As Emerson’s class graduated in 1821, Europe’s autocrats were collaborating to crush the revolt in Naples. To the east the Greek war for independence broke out.\textsuperscript{7}
Emerson reached a major turning point midway through his junior year. In December of 1819 he began to keep a list of books he had read. In early January of 1820 he began to keep a notebook for quotations, comments on his reading, and original verses. He decided to write an essay for the Bowdoin Prize competition. Later in the month he began the first of what was to be a series of notebooks he called “Wide World.” By February he was giving up the name Ralph and signing himself Waldo.

Emerson’s sense of himself had changed during the past three months. He was now more organized and more ambitious, newly interested in imagination and newly committed to the business of writing. The new journals also marked a new originality. For example, in his reading of Abraham Tucker’s The Light of Nature Pursued, an aptly named work that toiled after its subject through eight substantial volumes, Emerson found a point of interest far from the work’s main focus. Tucker was out to explore “whether Reason alone be sufficient to direct us in all parts of our conduct, or whether Revelation and Supernatural aids be necessary.” (The answer is the former.) From a few words Tucker drops by the way, Emerson constructs an elaborate paragraph about the parts of the world uninhabited by man being perhaps “the abodes of other orders of sentient beings invisible or unexperienced.” In the strongest possible contrast to the rationalist curriculum, Emerson’s journal shows a marked and steady interest in imagination, in fairyland, in legend, folktale, fiction, and poetry.1

Emerson was now feverishly active. He spent the end of his junior year “reading and writing and talking and walking.” In addition to schoolwork and letters from his family, he read, between December 1819 and February 1820, Byron’s Don Juan, Archibald Alison’s Essay on Taste, Edward Channing’s inaugural discourse, Ben Jonson’s Life, Every Man in His Humour, and Every Man Out of His Humour, a volume of Joanna Baillie’s plays, Samuel Rogers’s poem “Human Life,” Thomas Campbell’s Essay on English Poetry, the new North American Review, Thomas Blackwell’s Life and Writ-
ings of Homer, Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*, Bacon's *Essays*, the first volume of Dacier's *Dialogues of Plato*, Scott's *Bridal of Triermain*, a volume of Crabbe, and H. H. Milman's *Samor, Lord of the Bright City*. The list is weighted toward imaginative literature, from the satires of Jonson and Byron to the Tolkien-like fantasy of Milman's *Samor*. Threaded through the purely literary reading list this winter of 1819–1820 are books and ideas that were to become perennial with Emerson. Here is his interest in Plato and his interest in Bacon not as a father of modern experimental science but as stylist and essayist.

The unusual books here are Blackwell on Homer and Lowth on Hebrew poetry. These two works are among the most important foundations for modern criticism of Homer and the Bible and for the modern conception of the poet as prophet. Blackwell and Lowth wrote in England in the mid-eighteenth century. The founders of the so-called “higher criticism” in Germany built on the foundations provided by Blackwell and Lowth. In its German dress this new method of reading the Bible then returned to England, to be received to the United States in the early nineteenth century.²

Thomas Blackwell launches the historical critique of Homer. He tries to dislodge the notion that Greek myths are just fairy tales with the argument that Greek myth is Greek religion and that the Homeric poet is, like Orpheus, a true teacher-founder of philosophy, history, and politics. And just as Blackwell sees Greek myth and literature and religion in its historical context, so Lowth (in *The Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, 1747) argues that the Bible can fruitfully be approached as Hebrew poetry. He points out that the words for poet and prophet are the same in Hebrew; he treats the Old Testament prophets as the poets of their era—and thus made it possible for modern poets to claim the role of prophet for their era. The concept of the modern poet-prophet runs from Lowth to Blake, to Herder, and to Whitman. If we can approach Homeric poetry as Greek religion and Hebrew religion as Jewish poetry, the result is, on one side, skepticism about the historical reliability of either text, but on the other side, the elevation of the poet as the prophet of the present age, the truth teller, the gospel maker, the primary witness for his time and place. If Homer is now seen as essentially Greek and the Bible as properly Hebrew, then the modern English or American or German poet-prophet may legitimately ask, “Where is our scripture? Where are our witnesses?” The young Emerson formed his
idea of the role of the poet partly from the challenge implicit in the writings of Blackwell and Lowth.³

Emerson did not come upon these books by accident this winter of 1819–1820. Lowth and Blackwell were important books for Edward Everett, the popular young Harvard teacher whose arrival was the great event in Cambridge in late 1819. Everett influenced Emerson more than any of his other Harvard teachers. He was more than Emerson's first intellectual hero; he was, for a time, his personal idol.⁴

Edward Everett was twenty-five when he returned to the United States from Göttingen to take up his professorship of Greek literature at Harvard. He was young, vital, forceful and eloquent, the very antithesis of Dr. Popkin, “Old Pop,” the dull drillmaster who had been serving as Greek teacher. Emerson later recalled with warmth Everett’s “radiant beauty of person,” his large eyes, marble lids, and his rich and compelling voice. Everett knew the most up-to-date and disturbing scholarship. He was also interested in modern affairs and modern literature and he made the study of Greece seem like the high road to wisdom, power, and eloquence. As Emerson noted, Everett made his students “for the first time acquainted with Wolf’s theory of the Homeric writings.” (Careful analysis of the text convinced Wolf that the Iliad and the Odyssey were not the work of one poet but of several, perhaps many, over a long period of time.) Everett also brought the critical ideas of Christian Gottlob Heyne to Cambridge. Heyne taught that all religion, including Judaism and Christianity, begins in philosophy expressed mythologically.⁵

In introducing Heyne, Everett was bringing to New England the modern history-of-religions view that mythology precedes theology. In introducing Wolf, Everett brought to America the original deconstruction of Homer into oral folk epic. Everett also introduced American students to the work of J. G. Eichhorn, the founder of modern biblical scholarship, the so-called higher criticism that inaugurated modern disintegrative studies of the Bible, breaking the one book down into multiple narratives written at different times by different people. This was heady stuff, and Emerson was deeply impressed with the new professor and his messages. “The novelty of the learning lost nothing in the skill and genius of his relation,” wrote Emerson, “and the rudest undergraduate found a new morning opened to him in the lecture room of Harvard Hall.” Here was a minister-scholar-orator-editor-author, a leader of his generation. Emerson vowed in his journal: “I here make a resolution to make myself acquainted with the Greek
language and antiquities and history with long and serious attention and
study.” His ambition had been touched and stirred. He wrote a poem for
the Pythologian Club in April 1820 in which he recalled a great past “Made
vocal once, alas no more / And why? ask not! the Muses blush to tell / Since
gowned monks with censer crass and bell / Clogged the free step and mighty
march of Mind.” Fired with new ideas from Everett, Emerson’s poem was
about the liberation of poetry from rhyme, which, he said, had been
invented by “monks in their cloisters in the Dark Ages” in order “to shackle
poetry or the soarings of the mind.”

Emerson also decided at this point to enter the Bowdoin competition
with an essay on the character of Socrates. Although Emerson here com­
bined two of his great subjects, ethical thought and Plato, this earliest of his
essays is disappointingly flat, and its flatness can only be partly explained
by noting that philosophy at Harvard at this time was the rather flat
utilitarianism of Paley, Butler, and Tucker. Emerson’s prose shows promise
when he writes of Socrates’ studying nature “with a chastised enthusiasm.”
At the center of the essay, which did not win the prize, Emerson made an
important point, one that characterizes his later thought. Socrates was more
interested in mind than in knowledge. Socrates aimed, he said, “not to
impart literary knowledge or information or science or Art, but to lay open
to his own view the human mind.” In the rest of the essay Emerson was
able neither to speak his own mind forcefully nor to give a cogent or
memorable account of Socrates’ mind. Emerson’s own mind was unfocused,
his aim unclear. He was not uninterested in philosophy but he was also
interested in eloquence, in oratory, in religion, in writing gothic fiction, and
in being a poet.

Emerson’s religious notes during his last year and a half at Harvard range
from conventional views of the awful immanence of the Day of Judgment
to efforts to apprehend “the immediate presence of God,” which he thought
“a fine topic of sublimity.” What these thoughts had in common was an
interest not in dogma or theology but in the immediate personal experience
of religion. More often, however, it was religious eloquence that Emerson
hungered for. Everett was eloquent and talked about eloquence. The text­
books of Walker and Blair emphasized public speaking, and the new
professor of oratory and rhetoric, the English teacher of Emerson—and later
of Thoreau and Richard Henry Dana, Jr.—was also much interested in
oratory. His name was Edward Channing.
Edward Channing was twenty-eight. He was a younger brother of the famous Boston minister William Ellery Channing and had just joined the Harvard faculty in 1819. His inaugural talk on December 8, 1819, which Emerson read later, had for a theme the power and importance of the orator. Channing, like Everett, was involved in current literature, serving before Everett as editor of the *North American Review*. Channing was also young enough to be a sort of model for Emerson. Channing was quiet, far from being the blaze of energy Everett was. But Channing had interesting ideas about writing and fresh advice for writers. He encouraged students to write rapidly and impetuously. He was aware of the dangers involved in “constant association with great writers,” and he was vehement about the folly of always comparing ourselves to others, which, Channing said, is the beginning not of wisdom but of weakness: “We gradually lose the power of discerning what is good and beautiful in the very writers who have gained this fatal possession of our admiration. They disown us, and we perceive it not.” Channing’s interest in oratory helped feed Emerson’s sustained interest in eloquence. Channing also spoke to the condition of the young writer.

In writing, as in other endeavors, Emerson did not find his characteristic voice while at college, although some traits begin to emerge. In prose he was working on wildly diverse projects. One was a lurid gothic tale about a Norse prophetess and sibyl and her magician son. The fantasy is overheated and overwritten—more dream than anything else, a sort of Norse *Vathek*. The heroine Uilsa speaks:

Did I not wake the mountains with my denouncing scream—calling vengeance from the north? Odin knew me and thundered. A thousand wolves ran down by the mountain scared by the hideous lightning and baring the tooth to kill; they rushed after the cumbrous host. I saw when the pale faces glared back in terror as the black wolf pounced on his victim.

Offsetting this Nordic riot is Emerson’s second try at the Bowdoin Prize, his essay on “The Present State of Ethical Philosophy.” After first praising the ancient Stoics for their “rational and correct views of ethics,” he surveys the work of Hobbes, Cudworth, Clark, Price, Butler, Reid, Paley, Smith, and Stewart, concluding that the moderns are more practical than the ancients. He notes how paternal authority was extended in ancient Rome,