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# Part I

## Emerson

### 1. Building His Own World

A man must do the work with that faculty he has now. But that faculty is the accumulation of past days. . . . No rival can rival backwards. What you have learned and done, is safe and fruitful. Work and learn in evil days, in insulted days, in days of debt and depression and calamity. Fight best in the shade of the cloud of arrows.

—EMERSON, JMN 10:41<sup>1</sup>

### *A Moving World Without a Sun*

On February 8, 1831, Ellen Tucker Emerson, the wife of a young Boston minister, died of tuberculosis at home at nine in the morning. She was just nineteen. She had met her husband—who would

become a well-known writer, lecturer, and public figure—in Concord, New Hampshire, when she was sixteen and he was eight years older. Ellen was engaged at seventeen, married at eighteen, and now, a year and four months later, she was dead, and her young husband was devastated. His name was Ralph Waldo Emerson, known to friends and family as Waldo.

Five days after Ellen's death, this twenty-seven-year-old Unitarian minister turned to his journal and wrote:

Five days are wasted since Ellen went to heaven to see, to know, to worship, to love, to intercede . . . Reunite us, O thou father of our spirits. There is that which passes away and never returns. This miserable apathy, I know, may wear off. I almost fear when it will. Old duties will present themselves with no more repulsive face. I shall go again among my friends with a tranquil countenance. Again I shall be amused. I shall stoop again to little hopes and little fears and forget the graveyard. But will the dead be restored to me? Will the eye that was closed on Tuesday ever beam again in the fulness of love for me? Shall I ever again be able to connect

the face of outward nature, the mists of the morn, the stars of eve, the flowers, and all poetry, with the heart and life of an enchanting friend? No. There is one birth, and one baptism, and one first love, and the affections cannot keep their youth any more than men.<sup>2</sup>

This is a beautifully written entry with a memorable conclusion. But note also Emerson's rapid movement of thought, from conventional Christian pieties to a mild but embarrassed self-loathing; from questioning the idea of an afterlife to a final, blunt acceptance of mortality, of "one birth, and one baptism, and one first love," with the clear conclusion that there is one life and when it is over, it is over.

The entire passage is not only a forthright expression of grief, but also a premonition of the process young Emerson would go through over the next year and a half. Ellen's death plunged him into a "miserable apathy" that did not, in fact, wear off quickly. He was somber and preoccupied with his loss, walking out from Boston to Roxbury to visit her grave every day.

He was, in his own words, "unstrung, debilitated by grief." In the days just after her death he

imagined he could still hear her breathing, could see her dying. He called out to her, prayed to her as an intercessory saint. He wrote that his whole life was one of “unrepaired regret.” Everything was colored by the “heaviness of the fact of death.”

Ellen had wanted to be a poet, had called her dog “Byron,” and surviving examples of her writing show real promise.

So I, unless God’s guiding love  
Had brought thee to me from above,  
Might now have lived but half an one,  
A moving world without a sun.<sup>3</sup>

In June 1831, five months after her death, Emerson—himself a would-be poet—composed what we can read as a response to Ellen’s lines.

The days pass over me  
And I am still the same  
The Aroma of my life is gone  
Like the flower with which it came.<sup>4</sup>

As empty as he felt, however, he still had his job to do, his pastoral duties to perform. These included preaching and acting as spiritual guide to others just when he most needed one himself.

He managed to carry on, exhibiting a physical and intellectual resilience. He undertook a series of sermons that re-examined parts of the Bible using the method of the new German Higher Criticism, which his older brother William had studied with the great theologian Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), and which Waldo was now eager to learn and apply. This new method studied biblical texts by comparing them with each other, in their original languages. In this method the Bible was not something to venerate and accept uncritically as the word of God, but a set of historical documents like any other documents produced by men.

Along with his biblical studies, the bereft young Emerson was reading ever more deeply in what was then called natural philosophy but which we know as science. He read Mary Somerville's *Mechanism of the Heavens* (1831), an abridged English translation of Pierre Simon Laplace's French masterpiece on celestial mechanics. Somerville was a major scientist in her own right, proposing from her own observations of irregularities in the orbit of Uranus that there might be a hitherto unknown planet nearby: she was correct, and her research contributed to the discovery of Neptune. Emerson also found inspiration

in John Herschel's *Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy* (1831), which he was reading on the last day of December of that year. An investigator into natural phenomena, Herschel wrote, "cannot help perceiving that the insight he is enabled to obtain into this internal sphere of thought and feeling is in reality the source of all his power." Herschel described the natural philosopher as "Accustomed to trace the operation of general causes, and the exemplification of general laws, in circumstances where the uninformed and uninquiring eye perceives neither novelty nor beauty, he walks in the midst of wonders."

We can guess at the state of mind of the young minister when, in January 1832, not long after reading Herschel, he made this short journal entry: "It is the worst part of a man, I sometimes think, that is the minister."<sup>5</sup>

Not quite two months later, Emerson walked out to Roxbury to Ellen's tomb as usual, but this trip was very different, because this time he opened the coffin and looked at the body of his young wife, who had died fourteen months earlier. He wrote down nothing—or nothing that has survived—of what he saw. He wrote once

about the “vanishing volatile froth of the present,” and he would later say, of Thomas Carlyle: “his imagination, finding no nutriment in any creation, avenged itself by celebrating the majestic beauty of the laws of decay.”<sup>6</sup> What exactly met his eye that day cannot have been pleasant, but he had to see it for himself.

Two months later, in May, Emerson told his Boston congregation, “I regard it as the irresistible effect of the Copernican Astronomy to have made the theological scheme of Redemption absolutely incredible.” “Irresistible” and “absolutely incredible” do not suggest tentative or exploratory notions. The sentence is rock solid. As he had to see Ellen’s remains for himself, so he now realized and accepted that he had to think for himself as well.

### *The Lord’s Supper*

Seven short days after this bold declaration of independent thought, Emerson wrote a letter (now lost) resigning from his position as junior minister in Boston’s Second Church. The move signaled his separation from the ministry as a calling, and from Unitarian Christianity. Just as he was drafting his letter of resignation—maybe the very

same day—he noted in his journal, “I have sometimes thought that in order to be a good minister it was necessary to leave the ministry.”<sup>7</sup>

Emerson left formal, inherited, traditional Christianity in 1832 and never returned. But he did not want to walk away from the personal, the social, the human relations, the communion between and among like-minded people of faith—his parishioners. Emerson might no longer be a proper Christian, but he still had, and would always have, a religious nature. We can see this clearly in the sermon he gave as his farewell to his church on September 9, 1832, when he was twenty-nine years old.

The sermon discussed the Lord’s Supper, also known as Communion. Here is how Emerson presented his subject:

In the history of the Church no subject has been more fruitful of controversy than the Lord’s Supper. There never has been any unanimity in the understanding of its nature, nor any uniformity in the celebrating it. . . . Having recently given particular attention to this subject, I was led to the conclusion that Jesus did not intend to establish an institution for per-

petual observance when he ate the Passover with his disciples, and, further, to the opinion that it is not expedient to celebrate it as we do. Now observe the facts.

Emerson then laid out his argument, which looks at the subject critically rather than reverentially:

Two of the Evangelists, namely Matthew and John, were of the twelve disciples, and were present on that occasion. Neither of them drops the slightest intimation of any intention on the part of Jesus to set up anything permanent. John, especially, the beloved disciple, who has recorded with minuteness the conversation and the transactions of that memorable evening, has quite omitted such a notice. Neither does it appear to have come to the knowledge of Mark who, though not an eyewitness, relates the other facts. This material fact, that the occasion was to be remembered, is found in Luke alone, who was not present.

It is significant that Emerson chose the subject of Communion to make his break with the Church. What he is objecting to is Communion as a universal sacrament, something to be required of all

Christians forever, an action formally prescribed for all time. What he does not object to is communion with a small c, the bonds between people. No longer interested in the religion of people who lived many centuries ago, he very much wanted “a religion by revelation to *us* and not the history of theirs.”

He would develop these ideas in his 1836 book, *Nature*, but in 1832 he was still carving out his position, still reacting against formal, inherited, dogmatic Christianity. In October 1832, he was making comments on Christianity that have a bit of the saltiness and pithiness of the best of Thomas Carlyle, whose work Emerson was reading at the time. In his journal, Emerson imagined a little dialogue.

“You must be humble because Christ says  
‘Be humble.’”

“But why must I obey Christ?”

“Because God sent him.”

“But how do I know God sent him?”

“Because your own heart teaches the same  
thing he taught.”

“Why then should I not go to my own heart  
first?”

On December 22, Emerson wrote a final letter to his church explaining his position: “To me, as one disciple, is the ministry of truth, as far as I can discern and declare it, committed, and I desire to live nowhere and no longer than that grace of God is imparted to me.” In other words, he is now committed to the truth *as he sees it*. And we can see from the tortured syntax how Emerson struggles to reconcile his need to pursue the truth as he sees fit with his desire to keep his connection, his communion, with his congregation: “I rejoice to believe, my ceasing to exercise the pastoral office among you, does not make any real change in our spiritual relation to each other.” Emerson’s intellectual and theological break with the Church was now complete, however strongly he hoped to keep his ordinary human, social bonds with his fellow men and women. Three days later he left Boston and boarded a ship bound for Europe.

## 2. I Will Be a Naturalist

Emerson’s physical condition at the end of December 1832 was so poor that Captain Ellis, of the brig *Jasper*, was reluctant to take him on board lest he not survive the voyage. But Emerson did go,

one of five passengers on a ship loaded with logwood, mahogany, tobacco, sugar, coffee, beeswax, and cheese. The first week was stormy and miserable, the passengers all confined below deck, experiencing “nausea, darkness, unrest, uncleanness, harpy appetite and harpy feeding,” but the next four weeks brought decent weather. Emerson enjoyed learning about sailing and navigation, and he registered newfound respect for experience as opposed to mere words. “The thing set down in words is not (thereby) affirmed,” he wrote in his journal on January 6. “It must affirm itself or no form of grammar and no verisimilitude can give it evidence.” And with a new and firm sense of conviction, he added, “This is a maxim which holds to the core of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

After five weeks at sea, the *Jasper* reached Malta, a small archipelago just south of Sicily. Now an independent country and part of the European Union, in February 1833, when Emerson landed there, it was a British colony. Emerson stayed a week, then moved on, first to Sicily and then to Naples. He spent most of March in Rome and most of April in Florence. On May 7, while he was still in Northern Italy, a letter from his brother Charles caught up with him and

flooded him with recollections of what he had left behind:

Today I heard by Charles's letter, of the death of Ellen's mother. Fast, fast the bonds dissolve that I was so glad to wear. She has been a most kind and exemplary mother, and how painfully disappointed! Happy now, and oh, what events and thoughts in which I should have deepest sympathy does this thin partition of flesh entirely hide! Does the heart in that world forget the heart that did beat with it in this? Do jealousies, do fears, does the observation of faults intervene? Dearest friends, I would be loved by all of you; dearest friend! We shall meet again.<sup>9</sup>

Emerson left Milan for Switzerland on June 11, then spent July in Paris, where he had a vocational epiphany. Pursuing his interest in science, he went to the Sorbonne to hear Louis-Jacques Thenard and Joseph-Louis Gay-Lussac lecture on chemistry. Then, on July 13, he visited the Jardin des Plantes, a major scientific center that aimed for completeness in botanical classification and much else. He was astounded at the ornithological collections, remarking, "I wish I had come only there," and he listed many of the birds there assembled—tiny

hummingbirds, birds-of-paradise, black swans, peacocks, ibis, flamingos, toucans, and vultures. He found himself deeply moved:

The fancy colored vests of these elegant beings made me as pensive as the hues and forms of a cabinet of shells formerly. It is a beautiful collection and makes the visitor as calm and genial as a bridegroom. The limits of the possible are enlarged.

This is not a man who uses words carelessly. The phrase “calm and genial as a bridegroom” seems to mark Emerson’s recovery of a state that had vanished with Ellen’s death, and it sounds as though the young Emerson is indeed finally—exuberantly—back among the living. Wandering in this Paris museum of natural history, with its vast and orderly collections of animals, plants, minerals, shells, insects, and more, he is struck by “the upheaving principle of life everywhere incipient in the very rock aping organized forms.” In Emerson’s moment of connection with the natural world in the Jardin des Plantes, the force of life entirely overpowers the feelings of loss and despair he had so recently plumbed. His admiration for the French collections bursts through again

and again: “In the other rooms I saw amber containing perfect mosquitoes, grand blocks of quartz, native gold in all its forms of crystallization, threads, plates, crystals, dust and silver, black as from fire. Ah! Said I, this is philanthropy, wisdom, taste, to form a cabinet of natural history.”<sup>10</sup> “I feel the centipede in me,” he wrote, “cayman, carp, eagle and fox. I am moved by strange sympathies. I say continually, I will be a naturalist.”<sup>11</sup>

### 3. The Gallantry of the Private Heart

By August 5, 1833, Emerson had left France and crossed the Channel to England, where he met the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who spent much of their time together abusing Unitarianism. Later that same month, Emerson met Thomas Carlyle at his home, Craigenputtock (roughly translatable as Hawk Hill, puttocks being small hawks), in Scotland. The family home of Carlyle’s wife, Jane Welsh, the estate is in the district of Dumfries, southwest of Edinburgh and just across the Solway Firth from the English Lake country.

When Emerson was working himself out of the ministry, he had read an article about a book of

poetry, *Corn Law Rhymes*, in the *Edinburgh Review*. The name of the poet, Ebenezer Elliott, was not given, nor was the name of the reviewer, Thomas Carlyle, whose language is salty, brisk, unconventional. The piece Emerson read in early October 1832 begins with these fetching sentences:

Smelfungus Redivivus, throwing down his critical assaying balance some years ago, and taking leave of the Belles-Lettres function, expressed himself in this abrupt way: The end having come, it is fit that we end. Poetry having ceased to be read, or published, or written, how can it continue to be reviewed?

The anonymous review goes on, arch, elevated, sardonic, and punchy:

Strange as it may seem, it is nevertheless true, that here we have once more got sight of a Book calling itself Poetry, yet which actually is a kind of Book, and no empty pasteboard Case, and simulacrum or “ghost-defunct” of a Book, such as is too often palmed on the world, and handed over Booksellers’ counters with a demand of real money for it, as if it too were a reality.<sup>12</sup>

Emerson had found out the author's name and whereabouts, and now, on August 26, 1833, he arrived at Craigenputtock. He wrote about the meeting as "a White day in my years. I found the youth I sought" (Emerson was now 30, Carlyle 38), "and good and wise and pleasant he seems to me." Jane Welsh Carlyle thought Emerson's visit was like that of "an angel" and the best thing that happened while the Carlyles lived there, before they moved to London in 1834.

On August 26, 1833, Thomas Carlyle and his American visitor talked and walked for hours on end. By August 28, Emerson had left Craigenputtock to meet William Wordsworth at his home in England's Lake District. Carlyle later wrote about Emerson to his friend John Stuart Mill that what he "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." Emerson had come a long way from the sickly exparson who had crept onto a ship in Boston eight months earlier.

Carlyle had a great deal to offer Emerson, and Emerson was now, finally, open enough to be able to take it all in. To begin with, there was friendship. They had hit it off immediately and would

remain good friends and correspondents for the rest of their lives. Carlyle was old enough to teach Emerson things, but young enough for them to be, more or less, equals.

Carlyle's language had captured Emerson's interest before he knew who was writing the articles he so admired in the *Edinburgh Review*. And Carlyle's language was always full of energy, whether it was the enthusiasm of his younger days or the angry, mordant pessimism of his later work. Carlyle's prose was intelligent without being academic and pungent without coarseness.

Carlyle was the flag carrier of the new transcendentalism, and he praised—and imitated—the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who said, “There is a Divine Idea pervading the visible universe; which visible universe is indeed but a symbol and sensible manifestation.” Carlyle believed in the essential unity of all things; he found the idea also in Schelling and in Hinduism. According to this line of thought, there is a fundamental unity, a basic similarity in all human experience, which is finally more important than the many obvious differences.

Carlyle and his writing also helped Emerson think through his own specific religious problem

with new clarity. By September 8, 1833, Emerson was on the ship headed for home, setting down in his journal some of what he had figured out: “Carlyle deprecated the state of a man living in rebellion, as he termed it, with no worship, no reverence for anybody. Himself, he said, would worship anybody who should show him more truth.”<sup>13</sup> Emerson goes on to signal that he is going “back to myself”:

I believe that the error of religionists lies in this, that they do not know the extent, or the harmony or the depth of their moral nature: that they are clinging to little, positive, verbal, formal versions of the moral law, and very imperfect versions too, while the infinite laws, the laws of the Law, the great circling truths whose only adequate symbol is the material laws [physics, chemistry] the astronomy etc. are all unobserved and sneered at when spoke of, as frigid and insufficient.

Then he calls Calvinism and Unitarianism each “such an imperfect version of the moral law.”<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the greatest of Carlyle’s gifts to the young American was his pessimism about the present age and its materialism and utilitarianism, together with his advocacy for the heroic individual spirit. Much

later, in a chapter on literature in *English Traits*, Emerson will come back around to describe Carlyle in a passage astonishing for its depth and nuance:

In the decomposition and asphyxia that followed all this materialism, Carlyle was driven by his disgust at the pettiness and the cant, into the preaching of Fate. In comparison with all this rottenness, any check, any cleansing, though by fire, seemed desirable and beautiful. He saw little difference in the gladiators or the “causes” for which they combatted; the one comfort was, that they were all going speedily into the abyss together. And his imagination, finding no nutriment in any creation, avenged itself by celebrating the majestic beauty of the laws of decay. The necessities of mental structure force all minds into a few categories, and where impatience of the tricks of men makes Nemesis amiable, and builds altars to the negative Deity, the inevitable recoil is the heroism or the gallantry of the private heart, which decks its immolation with glory, in the unequal combat of will against fate.<sup>15</sup>

The phrase “the majestic beauty of the laws of decay” is worth lingering over. Was Emerson thinking back to Ellen’s coffin?

## 4. The Green World

The thirty-year-old Emerson who came ashore back in Boston on October 9, 1833, was a different person from the sickly wreck who had boarded the *Jasper* in that same port nine months earlier. The Emerson who returned had a new intellectual and philosophical focus, new beliefs, a new profession, a new subject to write on, and lots of energy and enthusiasm for it all. He was a tall man, standing six feet in his shoes. He had narrow, sloping shoulders and a long neck, and he carried himself erectly. His eyes were very blue, his hair dark brown. He wore loose-fitting clothes and struck some observers as looking like a prosperous farmer. He carried his money in an old wallet wrapped in twine.

Less than a month after returning to Boston, Emerson had arranged for and delivered his first lecture for a general audience, “The Uses of Natural History.”

The piece is a clear departure from the scholarly, theological bible-centered analysis of the ministerial world. It is an unapologetic embrace of what we would now call the green world. Emerson gave his listeners a rapturous account of the Jardin des

Plantes as “a grammar of botany where the plants rise each in its class, its order, its genus. . . . Imagine,” he told his audience, “how much more exciting and intelligent is this natural alphabet, this green and yellow and crimson dictionary, on which the sun shines and the winds blow.”<sup>16</sup>

This first lecture of Emerson’s new career points directly to his first and, for many readers, his greatest book, *Nature*, which he would publish just three years later, in 1836. “The Uses of Natural History” is a kind of exploratory flight, a first rough sketch. Gone is the preacherly woe of Ecclesiastes (“The eye is not filled with seeing nor the ear with hearing”). Instead, says this new Emerson, “the eye is filled with seeing”—seeing Nature, that is. And now Emerson rushes to list and discuss what he calls the uses of Natural History. He lists five main uses, which are as true now as they were at the time.

1. Health. Taking an interest in Nature pushes us toward an outdoor life.
2. Commodity. Nature is useful to farmers and to everybody. It is the source of many of the things we need.
3. Delight. Nature delights the mind: “It needs only to have the eye informed to

make everything we see, every plant, every spider, every moss, every patch of mould upon the bark of a tree, give us the idea of fitness.”

4. Education. Nature has an educative, disciplining effect on the mind.
5. “It is the effect of science to explain man to himself. . . . The knowledge of all the facts of all the laws of Nature will give man his true place in the system of beings.”

Emerson is also very interested in language, which fills its own chapter in *Nature*. Here, in the “Uses of Natural History,” he talks about the “power of expression which belongs to external nature, or that correspondence of the outward world to the inner world of thought and emotions.” He also talks about the “secret sympathy which connects men to all the animals, and to all the inanimate world around him.” And it is here that he first says, “the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.”<sup>17</sup> He ends the lecture with this insistence on the connection between humans and the natural:

Nature is a language and every fact one learns is a new word; but it is not a language taken to

pieces and dead in the dictionary. But the language put together into a most significant and universal sense. I wish to learn this language, not that I may know a new grammar, but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue.<sup>18</sup>

### *Action Proportioned to Nature*

With his new subject, his new profession, and his new energy, Emerson's life must have seemed recovered, fully restored from the previous depths. And it was, though more changes lay just ahead. In April 1834, Emerson was feeling an infusion of energy from his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, from Carlyle, and from the memory of the "delicious day when I woke to a strain of highest melody" (the moment of revelation in the Jardin des Plantes). He moved that year from Boston to Concord, and in 1835 he would marry again, to Lydia Jackson of Plymouth, Massachusetts.

But on the first day of October 1834, his brother Edward died at age twenty-nine. In July 1835, Emerson's comments on Christianity in his journal have a real edge as he lists the defects of Jesus.

He wrote, "I do not see in him cheerfulness. I do not see the love of natural science. I see in him no kindness for art, I see in him nothing of Socrates, of La Place, of Shakespeare."

On May 9, 1836, Emerson's younger brother Charles died at age twenty-eight. But in September of the same year, Emerson published his first and arguably greatest book, *Nature*, and on October 30, his first child, Waldo, was born.

*Nature* is the full flowering of the seeds planted in "The Uses of Natural History." The opening paragraph is a gentle dismissal of Christianity as a revelation that might have been relevant to earlier generations, but asks innocently, if pointedly, "why should not we *also* enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not *we* have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to *us*, and not the history of theirs?" He invites his readers to regeneration and redemption not through Christianity, but through "action proportioned to nature." And in the closing and climactic paragraph of the book, Emerson urges his readers to undertake the construction operation he himself has just been through. In his case it was a re-construction.

Know then that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect. What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his house Heaven and earth; Caesar called his house Rome; you perhaps call yours a cobbler's trade; a hundred acres of ploughed land; or a scholar's garret. Yet line for line and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs, though without the fine names. Build therefore your own world.

This is powerful, often quoted, livable and testable stuff. The present age is as good as any other if we only know how to take advantage of it. But the closing paragraph of *Nature* doesn't end here, with the emphasis on the strong individual. Emerson insists on a vision not of heaven but of a saved and regenerated world of nature.

As when the summer comes from the south, the snow banks melt and the face of the earth becomes green before it, so shall the advancing spirit create its ornaments along its path and carry with it the beauty it visits and the song which enchants it; it shall draw beautiful faces, warm hearts, wise discourse and

heroic acts, around its way, until evil is no more seen.

The vision of the centrality and all-encompassing quality of nature that came to Emerson most spectacularly in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris unites Emerson's earliest and latest works. It is the theme not only of "The Uses of Natural History" and *Nature*, but also of the last—unfinished—project Emerson undertook, the "Natural History of Intellect."

## 5. Regeneration Through Nature

Regeneration, not through Christ but through Nature, is the great theme of Emerson's life, and it came to him as a response to the death of his young wife Ellen. Emerson uses the language of redemption, regeneration, and revelation—terms for what we would now call resilience. We can see three major points at which the conventional young minister of Unitarian Christianity transformed himself into the apostle of Nature. First comes the opening of Ellen's coffin. No resurrection there, just visual evidence of decay and the finality of death. Next—and quickly—comes

the flat statement about the absolute impossibility of the “scheme of redemption” (through Christ), for Emerson an inescapable intellectual conclusion. Third, after a pause, came the thunderstroke, the revelation in the Jardin des Plantes of the wonder and power and interconnectedness of Nature, a religion of Nature that would shape the rest of his life.

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