

M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Watercolors and Drawings, 1800–1875. Courtesy, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Girls' Evening School (c. 1840). American. Anonymous. Pencil and watercolor (13 1/2" x 18 1/8").

The American Renaissance

A Literary Coming of Age by Gary Q. Arpin

Literature the Americans have none . . . In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?

—Sydney Smith, English critic, 1818

We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe . . . The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself . . . We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds . . . A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson
from “The American Scholar,” 1837

A remarkable party took place on August 5, 1850, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Among those attending were a Boston publisher and two of his authors, Oliver Wendell Holmes (page 187) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (page 296), and a New York editor and two of *his* authors, Cornelius Mathews and Herman Melville (page 311). The party began in the morning with a climb in the Berkshire Mountains. The group was in good humor—in part, perhaps, because of a champagne picnic lunch. During the climb, Melville leaned out over the steep cliffs to demonstrate how sailors took in sail. Hawthorne, usually very restrained, loosened up enough to look wildly about for the great carbuncle (a deep-red gem), the subject of a tale, based on a local legend, that he had written many years before.

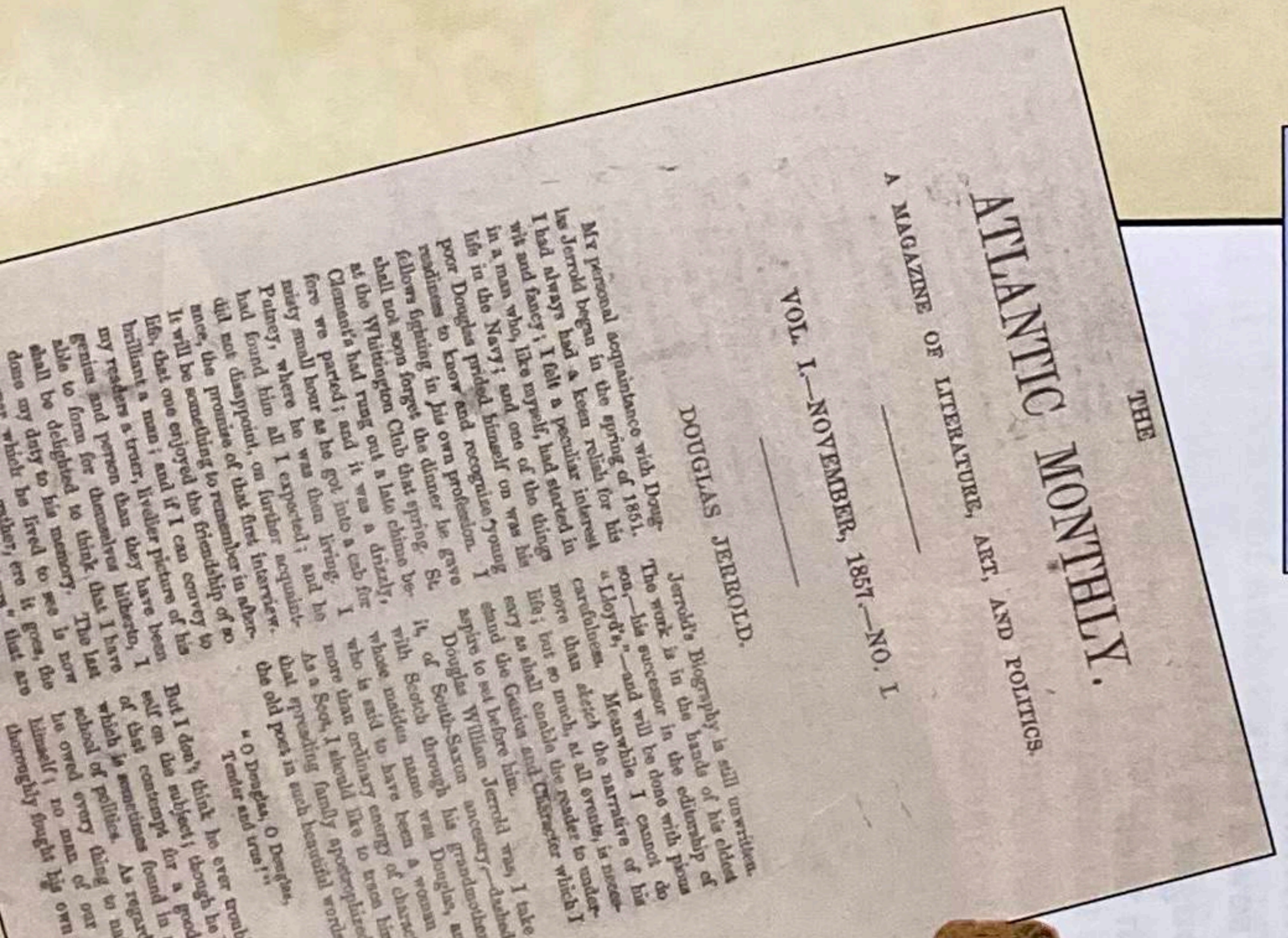
The hike in the Berkshires was followed in the evening by a long dinner. The table conversation turned to American literature. In response to a statement made by Holmes praising English writers, Melville vigorously defended American writers.

Would there ever be an American writer as great as England’s William Shakespeare? This question started a heated discussion, with Melville again firmly supporting the American side. Hawthorne found himself agreeing with Melville, whom he had never met before.

It is that blackness in Hawthorne that . . . fixes and fascinates me.
—Herman Melville

By the mid-nineteenth century, learned people still debated whether America would ever produce great writing. At a celebrated gathering in 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville firmly agreed that it would.

Bandbox depicting Erie Canal. About 1830.
Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution/Art Resource, NY. Gift of Sarah and Eleanor Hewitt (1918–19–12a, b).



Hawthorne and Melville: Opposites Attract

It seemed highly unlikely that these two writers would become friends. Herman Melville was an ex-sailor with little formal education. He had lived in the South Seas and had

written a remarkable first novel, *Typee* (1846), about his adventures. At the time of the party, Melville was hard at work on his fifth novel, which, it appeared, would be very long.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who was fifteen years older than Melville, was well educated, reserved, and a bit of a loner. He had written many short stories and

had recently published *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a novel about sin and hypocrisy in Puritan New England.

Despite their different backgrounds, a friendship sprang up between the two writers. "I met Melville the other day," Hawthorne wrote to a friend, "and liked him so much that I have asked him to spend a few days with me before leaving these parts." This was the beginning of an association that came at a critical

point in Melville's life, when he was hard at work on his masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*.

After the meeting, Melville sat down and read Hawthorne's works—and was exposed for the first time to what he called the "power of blackness" in Hawthorne's writing.

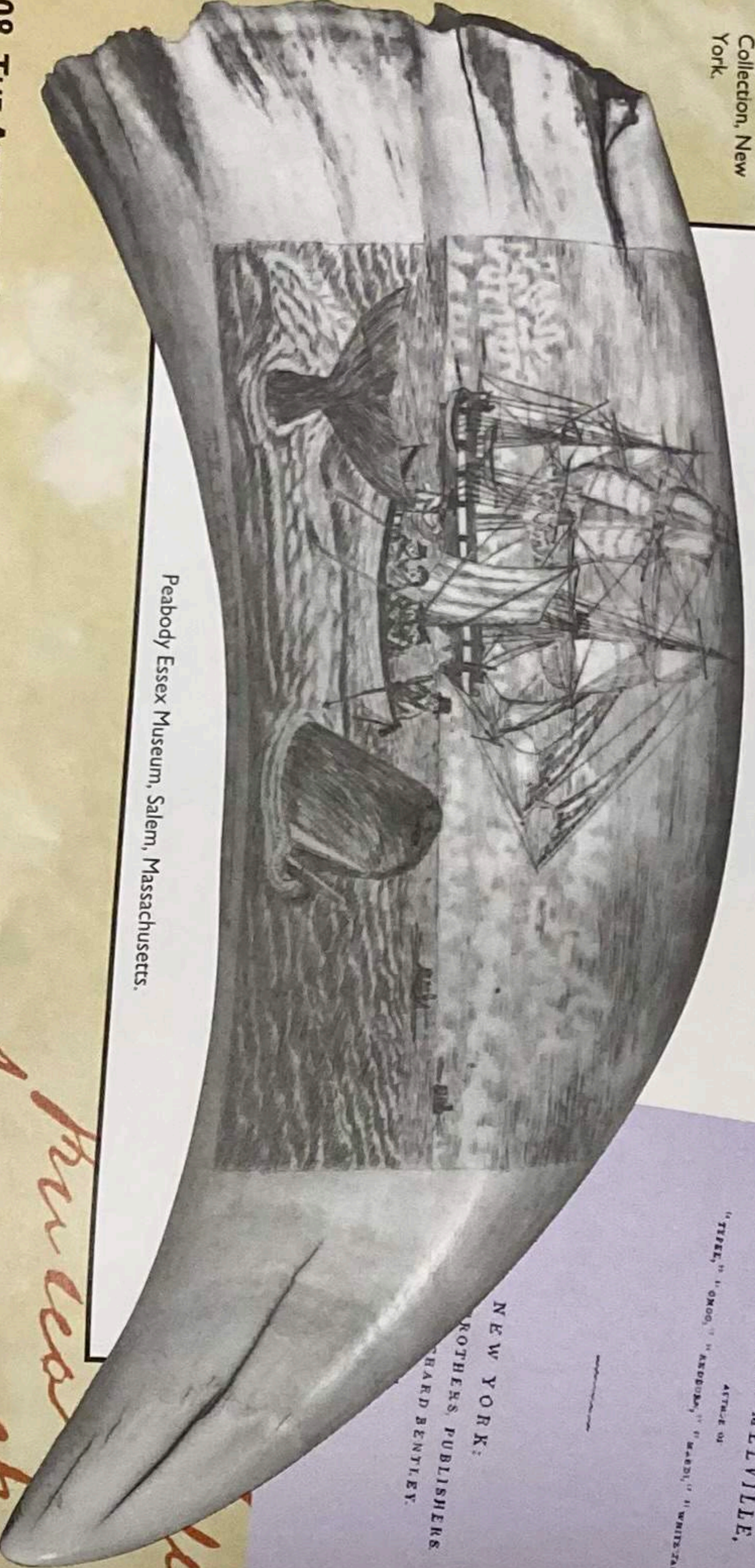
Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville discovered a common bond: They both saw a dark side to human existence, and they sought to record this aspect of human nature in their works.

Think of it. To go down to posterity as a "man who lived among the cannibals."

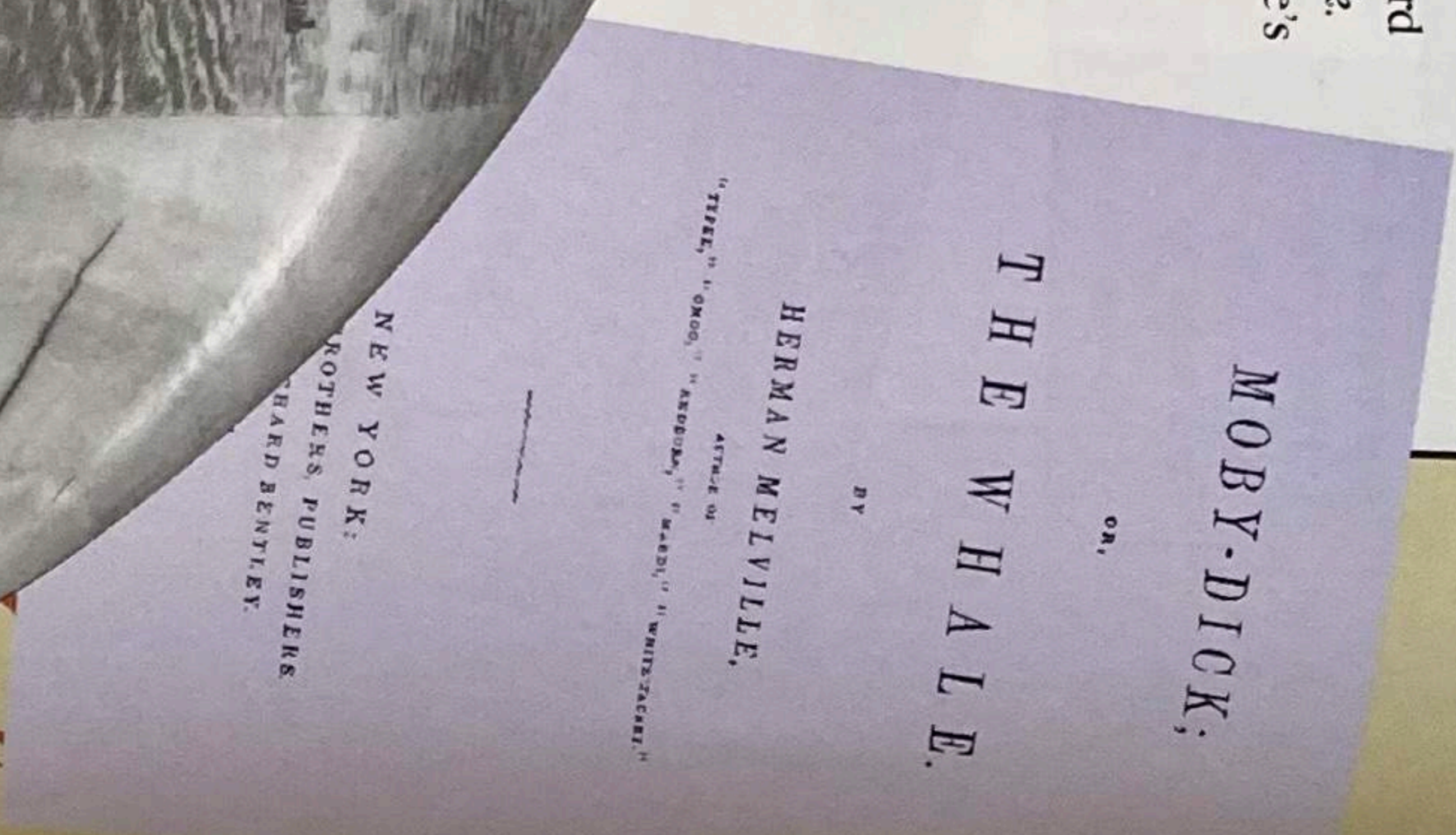
—Herman Melville, writing about himself to Hawthorne



Puritan neighbors avoiding Hester Prynne. From *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Lithograph after a painting by George H. Boughton. The Granger Collection, New York.



Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.



First Flowering: A Declaration of Literary Independence

The immediate result of Melville's meeting with Hawthorne was a magazine essay in which Melville passionately defended American literature. Stating that England was in many ways "alien to us," Melville urged American readers to "prize and cherish" their own writers. In a burst of literary patriotism, Melville claimed that, in Hawthorne, America was very close to producing its own Shakespeare.

Melville's horn blowing for American writing coincided with a vital period in American literature. It was a time when the American landscape and American culture would finally find their place in a literature distinct from European models. Writers were aware of this, and they sometimes used the word *renaissance* (ren'ə·sɑns'), meaning "rebirth," to describe this extraordinary explosion of American literary genius.

When Americans referred to themselves as living in a renaissance, they were comparing their times to the European Renaissance, a period of extraordinary cultural vitality that lasted from about the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. A better term, however, for what happened in the still-raw America of the mid-1800s might be "coming of age." From 1849 to 1855, American writers produced a remarkable body of work, enough masterpieces for a national literature.

In the mid-nineteenth century, writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Herman Melville produced some of the early masterpieces of American literature.

Intellectual and Social Life in New England

This burst of American literature can be traced in large measure to the intellectual and social ferment in New England. New England had long been known for its interest in self-improvement and intellectual inquiry. This interest found expression in the Lyceum (li·sē'am) movement, begun in 1826 in Millbury, Massachusetts. Lyceum organizations, soon established in many communities, had a number of goals, including educating adults, training teachers, establishing museums, and instituting social reforms. A typical part of a Lyceum program was a course of lectures in winter. These became immensely popular in New England and the Midwest. One of the most popular speakers was Ralph Waldo Emerson (page 216).

This was a time of social improvement in other ways too. New England was a center of many reform movements. Horace Mann dedicated

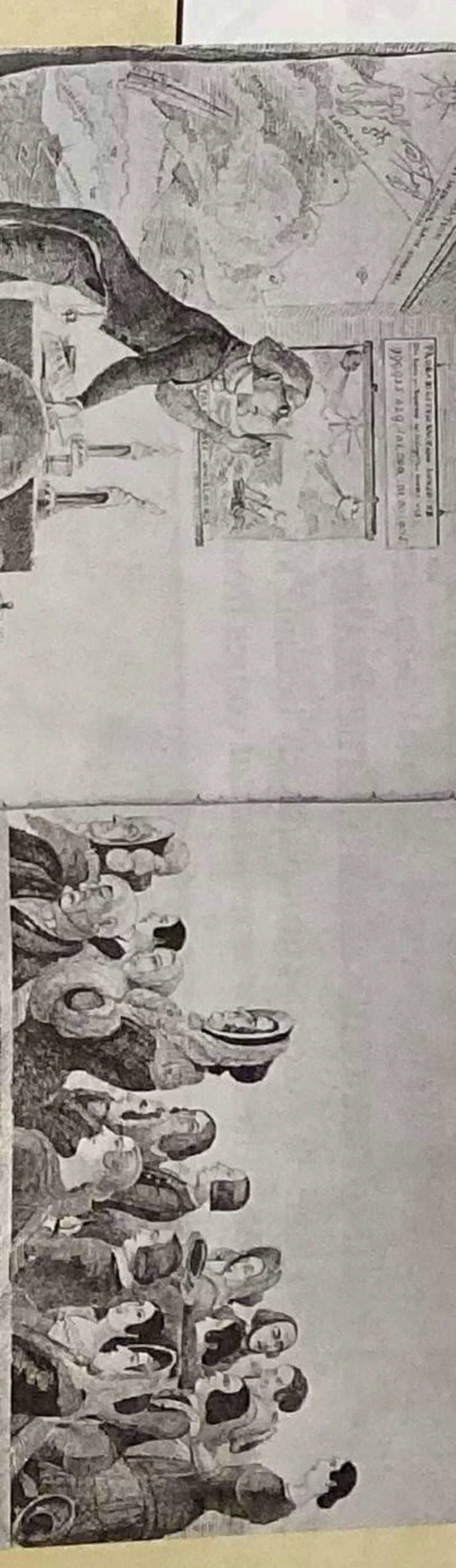
Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Lyceum Lecture by James Pollard Espy at Clinton Hall (1841) by an unknown artist. Pen and ink.

Museum of the City of New York.

There has been a great change in the way we think about the world.

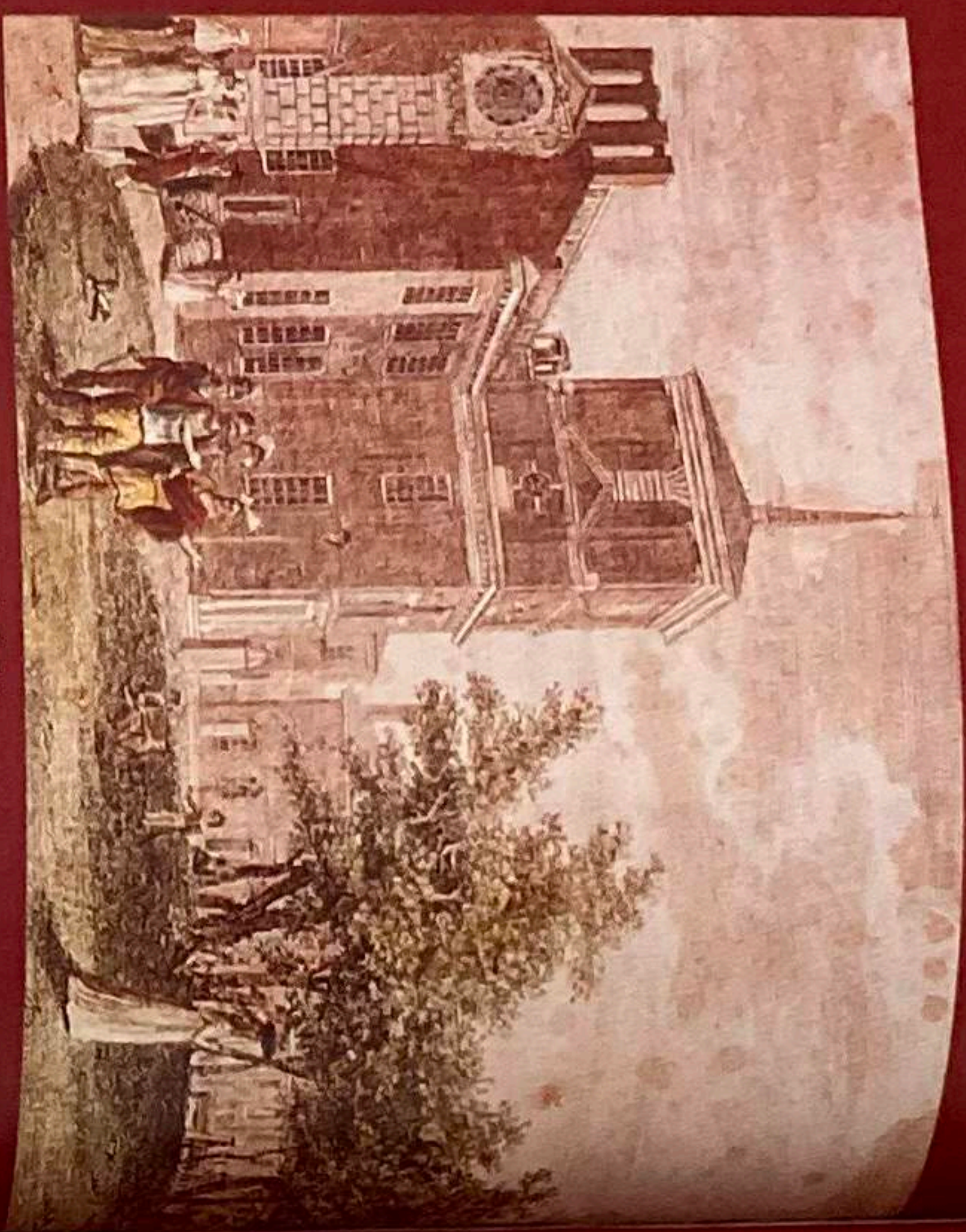


THAT WAS THEN...

What would your life be like if you lived in the 1840s?

For one thing, it probably would be shorter. On average, you could expect to live only about forty years. A quarter of your friends would die relatively young, many of them victims of tuberculosis, the nineteenth-century plague.

Your world would be far less crowded than it is now. In 1840, there were about 17 million people living in the United States. (In contrast, by 1995 there were about 260 million Americans.) Some 3 million of them were of African heritage, and of those, only about half a million were not enslaved.



Back of the State House in Philadelphia by William Birch. Library of Congress.

Cities were rapidly expanding in the 1840s. The five largest were Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston. Visitors to New York were stunned by the filth there. There was no citywide garbage collection, and pigs moved freely about the streets.

Chances are you'd live in the country, though, in a house heated by wood or coal fires and lit by oil lamps. Your father most likely would be a farmer, and your mother probably would concentrate on taking care of the home but would help out with the farm. You would probably have several brothers or sisters. If you went to school (many young people didn't), you'd likely walk to a one-room schoolhouse. There, side-by-side with students of varying ages, you'd be taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and proper behavior. It's possible

you'd already be married at your age. Both rich and poor married quite young—as

early as thirteen or fourteen in the South.

What would you do for fun? In rural areas, you'd probably go dancing on weekend nights or attend cornhusking contests or quilting bees. You might start learning about a new pastime called baseball—the first game closely resembling the modern sport took place in 1846. You might read for entertainment. But wherever you lived, your main form of entertainment would probably be visiting friends and neighbors. Who would be your heroes? Probably not athletes or entertainers. The main heroes were politicians, especially those with military backgrounds. Just about everyone's favorite hero was George Washington.

himself to improving public education: Dorothea Dix sought to relieve the horrible conditions in institutions for the mentally ill; William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists struggled to put an end to slavery; feminists like Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and Emma Willard campaigned to increase women's rights.

Social causes, both reasonable and crackpot, abounded during this time. Numerous utopian (yoo·tō'pē·ən) projects—plans for creating a more perfect society—were developed. In 1840, Emerson wryly remarked that every man who could read had plans in his pocket for a new community. Emerson was speaking from personal experience, for he was a member of one of the most influential of these utopian groups.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a primary force behind the flowering of American culture. He helped inspire numerous reform movements that aimed to improve public education, end slavery, elevate the status of women, and generally smooth the edges off the rough social conditions of the time. Various utopian groups drew up comprehensive plans for a better society.

The Transcendentalists: True Reality Is Spiritual

Emerson's utopian group quickly became known as "The Transcendental Club." The term *transcendental* comes from the eighteenth-century

German philosopher Immanuel Kant. The word refers to the idea that in determining the ultimate reality of God, the universe, the self, and other important matters, one must transcend, or go beyond, everyday human experience in the physical world. Intuition is an important tool for discovering truth.

For Emerson, **Transcendentalism** was not a new philosophy but "the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mold of these new times." That "oldest of thoughts" was Idealism, which had already been articulated by the Greek philosopher Plato in the fourth century B.C. Idealists said that true reality involved ideas rather than the world as perceived by the senses. Idealists sought the permanent reality that underlay physical appearances. The Americans who called themselves Transcendentalists were idealists, but in a broader, more practical sense. Like many Americans today, they believed in human perfectibility, and they worked to achieve this goal.

To recall these village lyceums, these rude country halls, evening meetings in odd churches, barns, schools, and banquet rooms, tents spread in preparation for the idyllic summer's opening of the college year . . . is to imagine a time when people still looked to literary men for guidance. . . . Emerson made a thousand appearances, crossed the Mississippi on ice in dead winter to deliver a lecture in Iowa, was bumped, jostled, frozen in wagons, carriages, flatboats, steamboats, trains (where he felt so solitary that he vowed he would go over to any man reading a book and hug him).

—Alfred Kazin,
from *An American Procession*

A Transcendentalist's View of the World

- Everything in the world, including human beings, is a reflection of the Divine Soul.
- The physical facts of the natural world are a doorway to the spiritual or ideal world.
- People can use their intuition to behold God's spirit revealed in nature or in their own souls.
- Self-reliance and individualism must outweigh external authority and blind conformity to custom and tradition.
- Spontaneous feelings and intuition are superior to deliberate intellectualism and rationality.

Emerson and Transcendentalism: The American Roots

Though Emerson was skeptical of many of the Transcendentalists' ideas and projects, he was the most influential and best-known member of the group, largely because of his lectures and books. His writing and that of his friend Henry David Thoreau (page 230) clearly and forcefully expressed Transcendental ideas. As developed by Emerson, Transcendentalism grafted ideas from Europe and Asia onto a home-grown American philosophical stem. Its American roots included Puritan thought, the beliefs of the eighteenth-century religious revivalist Jonathan Edwards (page 77), and the Romantic tradition exemplified

I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.

—Walt Whitman

by William Cullen Bryant (page 169).

The Puritans believed that God revealed himself to people through the Bible and through the physical world. William Bradford (page 26), for example, saw the death of an abusive sailor on the *Mayflower* as the direct action of God in the human world. Anne Bradstreet (page 68) saw evidence of God in the grandeur of nature. Jonathan Edwards found God's wisdom, purity, and love in the sun, moon, and stars—in fact, in all of nature. This native mysticism—also typical of **Romanticism**—reappears in Emerson's thought.

"Every natural fact," Emerson wrote, "is a symbol of some spiritual fact."

Transcendentalism was based partly on the philosophy of Idealism, which dated back to ancient Greece. It was based also on the ideas of American thinkers ranging from the Puritans to the nineteenth-century Romantics. Transcendentalists viewed nature as a doorway to a mystical world holding important truths.

Emerson's Optimistic Outlook

Emerson's mystical view of the world sprang not from logic but from intuition. Intuition is our capacity to know things spontaneously and immediately through our emotions rather than through our reasoning abilities. Intuitive thought—the

Ralph Waldo Emerson.
Drawing by David Levine.
Reprinted with permission from
The New York Review of Books.
Copyright ©1968 NYREV, Inc.



kind Emerson believed in—contrasts with the rational thinking of someone like Benjamin Franklin (page 84). Franklin did not gaze on nature and feel the presence of a Divine Soul; Franklin looked at nature and saw something to be examined scientifically and used to help humanity.

An intense feeling of optimism was one product of Emerson's belief that we can find God directly in nature. God is good, and God works through nature, Emerson believed. Therefore, even the natural events that seem most tragic—disease, death, disaster—can be explained on a spiritual level. Death is simply a part of the cycle of life. We are capable of evil because we are separated from a direct, intuitive knowledge of God, according to Emerson. But if we simply trust ourselves—that is, trust in the power each of us has to know God directly—then we will realize that each of us is also part of the Divine Soul, the source of all good.

Emerson's sense of optimism and hope appealed to audiences who lived in a period of economic downturns, regional strife, and conflict over slavery. Your condition today, Emerson seemed to tell his readers and listeners, may seem dull and disheartening, but it need not be. If you discover the God within you, he suggested, your lives will partake of the grandeur of the universe.

Emerson believed in the power of intuition, our ability to learn directly without conscious use of reasoning. He emphasized the importance of each individual, and his outlook was optimistic.

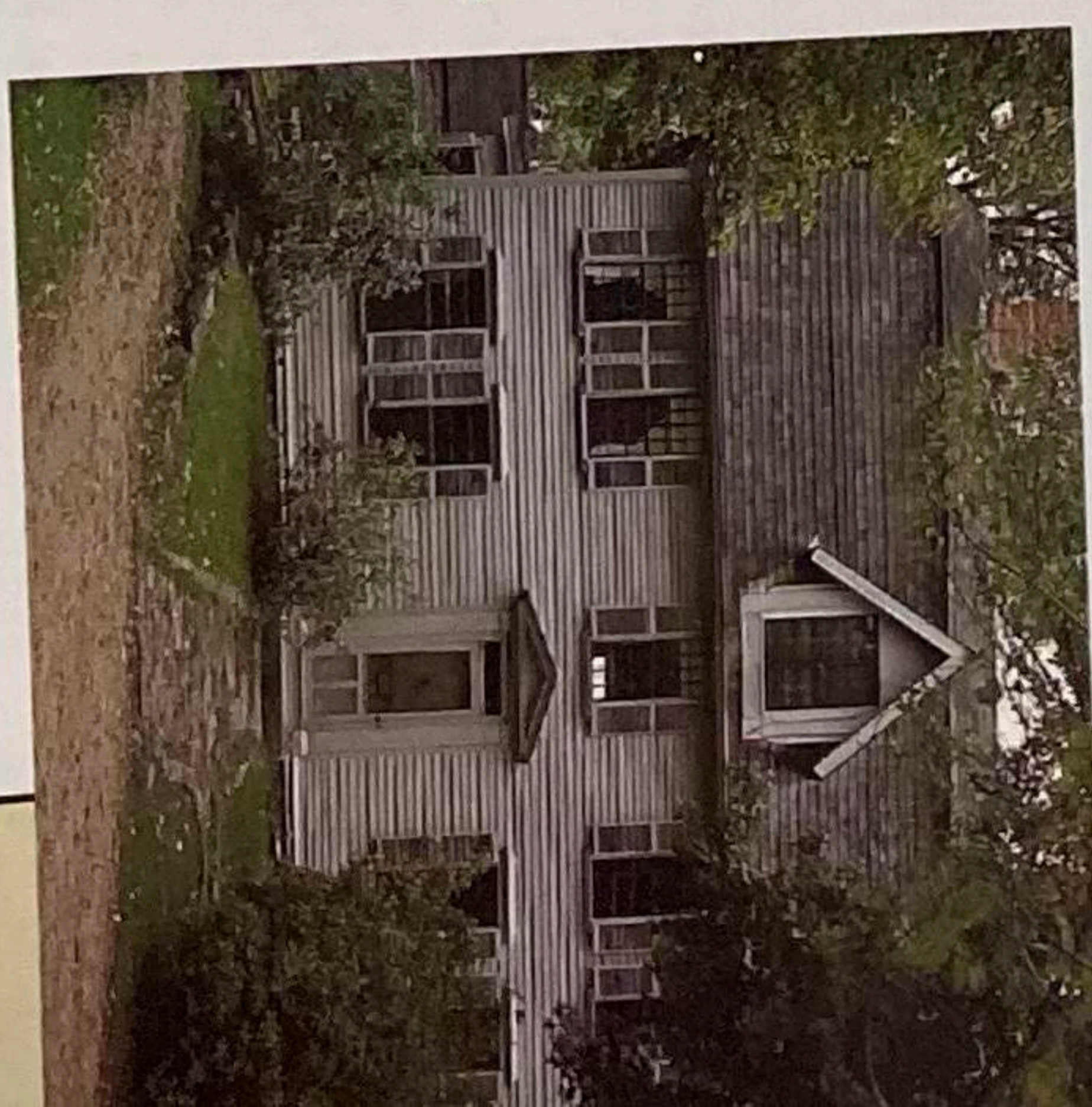
Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe: A Challenge to the Transcendentalists

Emerson's idealism was exciting for his audiences, but not all the writers and thinkers of the time agreed with Transcendentalist thought. "To one who has weathered Cape Horn as a common sailor," Herman Melville wrote of Emerson's ideas, "what stuff all this is."

Some people think of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe (page 260) as anti-Transcendentalists, because their view of the world seems so profoundly opposed to the optimistic view of Emerson and his followers. But these Dark Romantics, as they are

"What do you think of the world to come?" an admirer asked the philosopher.
"One world at a time," Thoreau replied.

Old Manse in Concord, where first Emerson and then Hawthorne lived.
Steve Solum/
Bruce Coleman, Inc.



Collection 5

Emerson
Thoreau

I find I live quite happily without those things I think necessary in winter in the North. And as I write these words, I remember, with some shock at the disparity in our lives, a similar statement made by a friend of mine in France who spent three years in a German prison camp. Of course, he said, qualifying his remark, they did not get enough to eat, they were sometimes atrociously treated, they had little physical freedom. And yet, prison life taught him how little one can get along with, and what extraordinary spiritual freedom and peace such simplification can bring. I remember again, ironically, that today more of us in America than anywhere else in the world have the luxury of choice between simplicity and complication of life. And for the most part, we, who could choose simplicity, choose complication. War, prison, survival periods, enforce a form of simplicity on man. The monk and the nun choose it of their own free will. But if one accidentally finds it, as I have for a few days, one finds also the serenity it brings.

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh,
from *Gift from the Sea*

... in certain moods, no man can weigh this world without throwing in something, somehow like Original Sin, to strike the uneven balance.

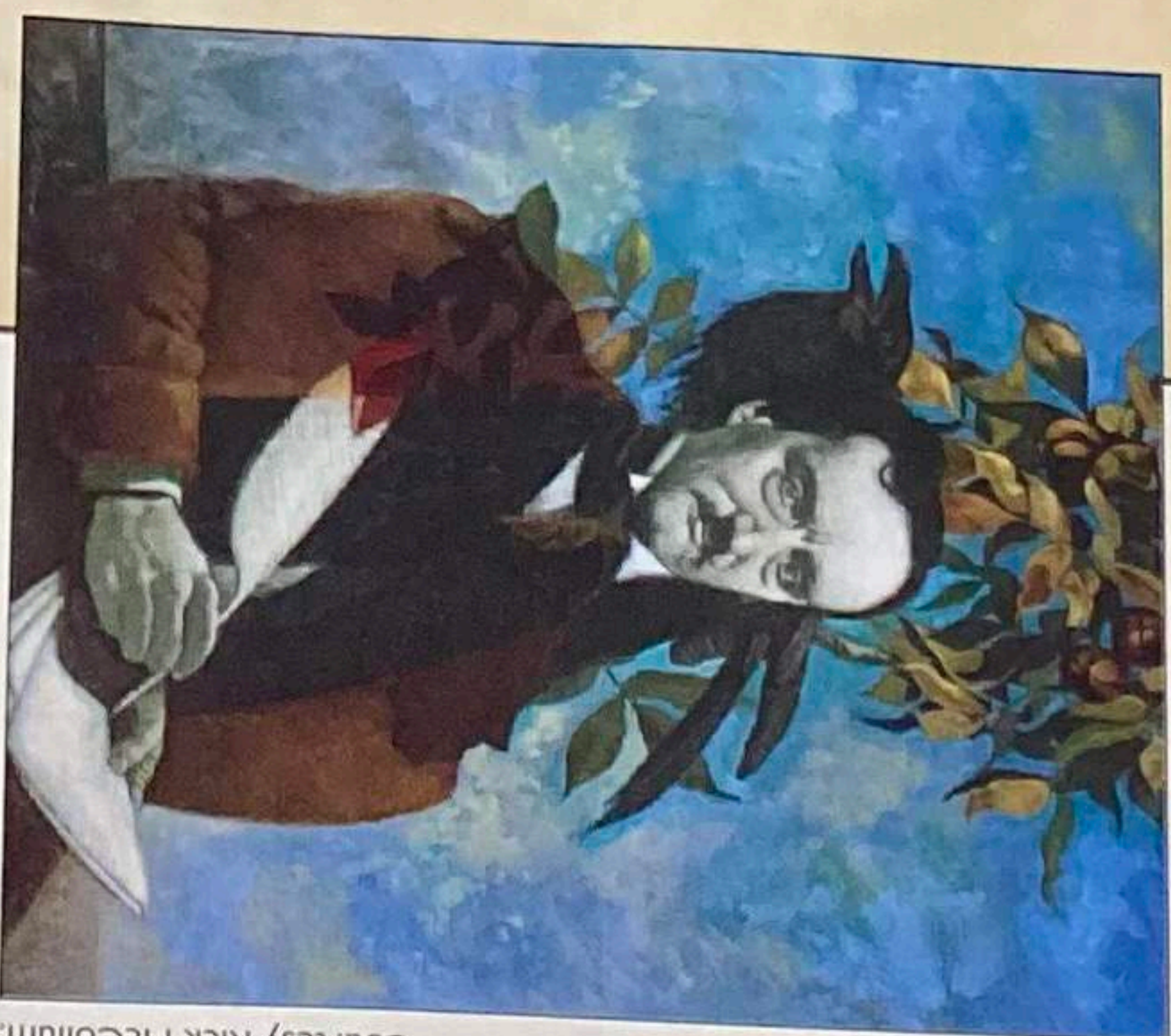
—Herman Melville

That blue-eyed darling Nathaniel knew disagreeable things in his inner soul. He was careful to send them out in disguise.

—D. H. Lawrence,
on Hawthorne

known, had much in common with the Transcendentalists. Both groups valued intuition over logic and reason. Both groups, like the Puritans before them, saw signs and symbols in human events—as Anne Bradstreet found spiritual significance in the fire that destroyed her house (page 69). (Not surprisingly, the Dark Romantics used the literary technique of **symbolism** to great effect in their works.) The Dark Romantics didn't disagree with Emerson's belief that spiritual facts lie behind the appearances of nature; they disagreed with the premise that those facts are necessarily good, or harmless. Emerson, they felt, had taken the ecstatic, mystical elements of Puritan thought and ignored its dark side—its emphasis on Original Sin, its sense of the innate depravity of human beings, and its Calvinistic notions of predestination. The Dark Romantics came along to redress the balance. Their view of existence developed from both the mystical and the melancholy aspects of Puritan thought. In their works, they explored the conflict between good and evil, the psychological effects of guilt and sin, and even madness and derangement in the human psyche. Behind the pasteboard masks of social respectability, the Dark Romantics saw the blankness and the horror of evil. From this imaginative, unflinching vision they shaped a uniquely American literature.

The works of writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe acknowledged the existence of sin, pain, and evil in human life and formed a counterpoint to the optimism of the Transcendentalists.



Portrait of Edgar Allan Poe (1985) by Rick McCollum. Oil on linen board with oil pencil.

**Quickwrite****How Do You See Yourself?**

Do you agree with the Transcendentalists' optimistic views of human perfectibility? Or are you more like the Dark Romantics, believing that the world has a dark, irrational side that can't be ignored? Write down your own opinions about the ideas of the Transcendentalists and the Dark Romantics. How do you see yourself in relation to them?