# 24 CRITICS DISCUSS

## *Nature* (1836)

## Ralph Waldo Emerson

## (1803-1882)

### INTRODUCTION

"From its publication in 1836 until the present day, Emerson's first book, *Nature*, has provoked sharp disagreement. Among his contemporaries, some thought it 'mere moonshine,' others praised it as a 'prose poem' or 'the effusion of a prophet-like mind,' and still others attacked it on doctrinal grounds, as disseminating 'infidel and insidious poison.' To Emerson's present-day interpreters, commonly less concerned with measuring its departures from orthodoxy than with weighing its literary merits, *Nature* appears variously as 'a fundamentally unsatisfactory piece of work' (R. P. Adams); a 'sober-sided rhapsody,' stiff, naif, and over-elaborate, yet an 'extraordinary' production (Stephen Whicher); and 'our primal book' in a major American literary tradition (Jonathan Bishop)....Representative comments on *Nature* made between 1836 and 1967 reveal how wide the divergence has been over how to read such a work--whether as doctrine or mysticism, philosophy or poetry....[As put by] George Fox, the seventeenth-century Quaker: 'Every scripture is to be interpreted by the same spirit which gave it forth,' is the fundamental law of criticism'."

Merton M. Sealts, Jr. & Alfred R. Ferguson, eds.
*Emerson's* Nature--*Origin, Growth, Meaning*
(Dodd, Mead 1969) v

### CRITICS

"Mr. Waldo Emerson...is now writing a book of a high intellectual character which he calls *Nature*. In beauty and finish of style he is unrivalled among American writers. There is also more philosophic depth than in any other writer. He is superior to Channing....I have just finished reading *Nature*...It is a beautiful work...It is the production of a spiritualist, subordinating the visible and outward to the inward and invisible. Nature becomes the transparent emblem of the soul. Psyche animates and fills the earth and external things...It is a gem throughout. I deem it the harbinger of an order of works given to the elucidation and establishment of the Spiritual."

Amos Bronson Alcott
from *Journals of Bronson Alcott* (1836)
(Little, Brown 1938) 77-78

"Your little azure-coloured *Nature* gave me a true satisfaction. I read it, and then lent it about to all my acquaintance that had a sense for such things; from whom a similar verdict always came back. You say it is the first chapter of something greater. I call it rather the Foundation and Ground-plan on which you may build whatsoever of great and true has been given you to build....I rejoice much in the glad serenity of soul with which you look out on this wondrous Dwelling-place of yours and mine...[1837] The people are beginning to quote you here."

Thomas Carlyle (1836)
*The Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle*, ed. Joseph Slater
(Columbia U 1964) 157, 223

"We find beautiful writing and sound philosophy in this little work; but the effect is injured by occasional vagueness of expression, and by a vein of mysticism, that pervades the writer's whole course of thought. The highest praise that can be accorded to it, is, that it is a *suggestive* book, for no one can read it without risking his faculties to the utmost, and relapsing into fits of severe meditation. But the effort of perusal is often painful, the thoughts excited are frequently bewildering, and the results to which they lead us, uncertain and obscure. The reader feels as in a disturbed dream, in which shows of surpassing beauty are around him, and he is conversant with disembodied spirits, yet all the time he is harassed by an uneasy

sort of consciousness, that the whole combination of phenomena is fantastic and unreal. In point of taste in composition, some defects proceed from over anxiety to avoid common errors. The writer aims at simplicity and directness, as the ancient philosopher aimed at humility, and showed his pride through the tatters of his cloak."

Francis Bowen
*The Christian Examiner* XXI
(January 1837) 371-85

"In our own bustling country, where banks, steam boats and rail roads seem to engross the nation's attention, we are happy to find some spirits, who keep aloof from the vulgar melee, and in calm of soul, live for Nature and for God. No greater exception to the common spirit of our nation, could be pointed out, than the author of a little work, recently published at the East. *Nature* is its title...The work is a remarkable one, and it certainly will be called remarkable by those, who consider it 'mere moonshine,' as well as those, who look upon it with reverence, as the effusion of a prophet-like mind. Whatever may be thought of the merits, or of the extravagances of the book, no one, we are sure, can read it, without feeling himself more wide awake to the beauty and meaning of Creation....

Coming to the chapter on Idealism, many will be tempted to shut the book in disgust, and lament, that so sensible a man as the writer has before shown himself to be, should show such folly. And we ourselves doubt much the wisdom of the speculation in this chapter, although we would not call him insane, who thinks the material world only ideal, believing as we do, that as Turgot has said, 'He who has never doubted the existence of matter, may be assured, he has no aptitude for metaphysical inquiries'....We are unable to perceive the bearing of the writer's argument, in proof of Idealism, or to allow the advantage, which he claims for his theory. All his arguments, it seems to us, go to prove merely the superiority of mind over matter. And all the advantage, which he claims for Idealism, is owned by that common spiritual philosophy, which subordinates matter to mind. We own there is much fine thought and good writing in this chapter, little as the sentiments agree with our Eclecticism....There are some things in this book, which we do not understand. The Orphic sentences at the end, 'which a certain poet sang to the author,' are especially dark to our misty vision. But probably the fault lies in ourselves."

Samuel Osgood
*The Western Messenger* II
(January 1837) 385-93

"The Philosophy of Mr Emerson is an Idealistic Pantheism. It would hardly be fair to pronounce it superficial on merely negative proof, for these writings are in nowise of a controversial character; and the exposition and illustration of his system, as far as it is given, is as earnest and sincere as if the soul of the very man were laid bare before us. But, at the same time, we cannot but regard the confidence with which he proffers his doctrine, the axiomatic character with which he invests his conclusions, and the solemnity with which he urges his hearers to act them out fully and immediately, as evidence that he has not probed the depth of the ground on which he is standing, but that, knowing it to be strong enough to bear himself at that moment, he has believed it capable of supporting the world."

Richard Monckton Milnes
"American Philosophy—Emerson's Works"
*The Westminster Review* XXXIII (March 1840) 345-72

"The section entitled the 'Religious Philosophy of Nature,' is written by an American Unitarian; consequently the divinity of the Lord is not recognized, and Swedenborg is alluded to in the usual language of the Transcendentalists. Why, then, it will be asked, has the Editor introduced it? He answers, because the whole subject is so beautifully replete with correspondence. The Editor rejoices to behold these evidences of approximation to a purer state of things, and hails them as harbingers to a more accurate knowledge of the Scripture; he anticipates a period when many of those who are now against us will be for us. The few errors which this section contains will be more than counter-balanced by their unquestionable beauties. The Editor will, however, in a second edition...take care to remove them, and he feels sorry that so much pure wisdom should be obscured, even by the few dark spots which this section undoubtedly contains."

David George Goyder, ed.

Editor's “Advertisement”
*The Biblical Assistant, and Book of Practical Piety* (1841)

“It is with extreme reluctance that we insert the following remarks upon *Nature*...Since the work has not only been commended...but republished by Mr. Goyder, in a series of papers especially designed for the use of the young and inexperienced, who are thus exposed to the deadly influence of its infidel and insidious poison...We find nowhere any reference to the Lord...That ‘the religious philosophy of nature’ will some day be written for the New Church, we have no doubt. But it will be by some one who receives her doctrines, whose spirituality consists in something more than the mere vaporization of self, and whose theology, rejecting the Pantheism sublimated in the alembic of fancy, which now passes under the imposing name of Transcendentalism, will be derived from the Word, as the source of all truth, the pillar and ground of Faith.”

John Westall
*The New Jerusalem Magazine* (Boston) XV, CLXX
(October 1841) 48-52

“It differed in some respects from anything he had hitherto written. It talked a strange sort of philosophy in the language of poetry. Beginning simply enough, it took more and more the character of a rhapsody, until, as if lifted off his feet by the deepened and stronger undercurrent of his thought, the writer dropped his personality and repeated the words which 'a certain poet' sang to him. This little book met with a very unemotional reception. Its style was peculiar....It was vague, mystic, incomprehensible, to most of those who call themselves common-sense people. Some of its expressions lent themselves easily to travesty and ridicule. But the laugh could not be very loud or very long, since it took twelve years, as Mr. Higginson tells us, to sell five hundred copies....

No writer is more deeply imbued with the spirit of Wordsworth than Emerson, as we cannot fail to see in turning the pages of *Nature*, his first thoroughly characteristic Essay. There is the same thought in the Preface to 'The Excursion' that we find in the Introduction to *Nature*....*Nature* is a reflective prose poem. It is divided into eight chapters, which might almost as well have been called cantos.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes
*Ralph Waldo Emerson*
(Houghton 1884) 91-107

“Emerson had become so well known that although *Nature* was published anonymously, he was recognized as the author. Many people had heard of him at the time he resigned his charge, and the story went abroad that the young minister of the Second Church had gone mad. The lectures had not discredited the story, and *Nature* seemed to corroborate it. Such was the impression which the book made upon Boston in 1836. As we read it today, we are struck by its extraordinary beauty of language. It is a supersensuous, lyrical, and sincere rhapsody, written evidently by a man of genius. It reveals a nature compelling respect--a Shelley, and yet a sort of Yankee Shelley, who is mad only when the wind is nor’-nor’ west...The deliverance of his thought is so perfect that this work adapts itself to our mood and has the quality of poetry. This fluency Emerson soon lost; it is the quality missing in his poetry. It is the effervescence of youth. The pamphlet called *Nature* showed the clouds of speculation in which Emerson had been walking. With what lightning they were charged was soon seen.”

John Jay Chapman
“Emerson, Sixty Years Later”
*The Atlantic Monthly* LXXIX (Jan-Feb 1897) 27-41, 222-240

“The outer world embarrassed him; it baffled his idealism. Emerson adroitly juggled it away. His tactics toward the universe might be called caressing. He began by adopting the outer world and doing it the honor of believing it real....He declared that he embraced the universe. But he did not remain faithful to it for long. In the chapter on language the outer world begins to evaporate. It is no longer anything but a dictionary of metaphors for the use of poets. And suddenly, disloyally, Emerson gives it the slip. Three final stages, where the lyricism ascends proportionally as we approach the denouement, plunge us into the heart of pantheism, of mythology. The world is nothing more than a fiction of the mind. It is man who has

created the sun, woman the moon. In the age of innocence the universe was the irradiation of our thoughts, but through our fault it has petrified on the surface. The universe crushes man, its inventor. Emerson does not consider this fall as of the universe. What the discursive reason has destroyed, let divine instinct reconstruct. Let the rejuvenated soul render to the world its primitive beauty and its unity. Let wisdom and love join hands and transfigure the ever youthful, the plastic universe.

There is recognizable beneath these beautiful myths a translation of the Christian dogma. It was Calvin set to music and transposed by Plato, Plotinus, and Swedenborg....Emerson juggles away God as serenely as the world. For Jehovah he boldly substitutes Prometheus. In the land of the Puritans such audacity and poetry had never been seen, but a whole generation of youth thrilled at the voice of the Enchanter."

Regis Michaud
*Emerson the Enraptured Yankee*
(Harper 1930) 133-35

"Based on his early lectures, this first book expresses the main principles of Transcendentalism. An introduction states that 'Our age is retrospective,' seeing God and nature at second hand through the ideas and experiences of previous generations, and asks, 'Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?' The eight brief chapters discuss the 'lover of Nature,' the rare poetic person 'whose inward and outer senses are still truly adjusted to each other'; the 'uses' of Nature; the idealist philosophy in relation to Nature; and the potential expansion of human souls and works that will result from a general return to direct, immediate contact with the natural environment.

The four uses of Nature are (1) 'Commodity,' or its utilitarian and sensuous contributions to the life of mankind; (2) 'Beauty,' or the delight in the perception of natural forms, of the high and noble spiritual elements essential to them, and of the intellectual truths inherent in them; (3) 'Language,' or the symbolic character of natural facts, which convey transcendental meanings to minds prepared for their reception; and (4) 'Discipline,' or the function of natural environment in educating 'both the Understanding and the Reason.' In expressing his belief in the mystical 'unity of Nature--the unity, in variety,--which meets us everywhere,' the author develops his concept of the 'Over-Soul' or 'Universal Mind.' Nature is 'to us, the present expositor of the divine mind,' which is the spiritual essence everywhere present in, and represented by, material nature, and in which man himself shares."

James D. Hart
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"For us Emerson's first book remains the hardest. *Nature* is shot through with insights but many portions are murky. When writing it Emerson was in the process of formulating his ideas and amalgamating them with his omnivorous reading. The insights are worth our trouble, though. Take his theory of signs, which foreshadows some of today's semiotics. He tells us that, because certain words are signs of natural facts, moral ideas stem from material appearances. 'Right' originally meant 'straight,' while 'wrong' originally meant 'twisted.' His main lines of thought emerge clearly enough from among the obscurities. Nature is our guide, mentor, and woodland god."

Carl Bode, ed.
with Malcolm Cowley
Introduction, *The Portable Emerson*
(Penguin 1946-81) 3

"Emerson's critics, understandably, seized the central and striking image of the eyeball. Cranch has left us nothing that will give him as much fame, perhaps, as his good-natured sketch of this passage. But the Very Rev. Henry A. Braun, reviewing *Nature* in *The Catholic World*, cited the passage as evidence of insanity: 'We wonder, when he wrote that, whether he was not bilious and his eyeball bloodshot as he looked at it in the glass?' He was using this 'critical' bludgeon to prove that 'Nature is not the correlative of the mind'....What these and other critics have often failed to see is that the transparent eyeball is only representative for Emerson of one aspect of the mind, and that the angle of vision as a metaphor of inspiration has its origin in Emerson's thought in the religious affirmation of compensation....Emerson was

not a mystic in the usual 'visionary' sense of the word. He was not seeking in the angle of vision an escape from the world; as it formed, the angle of vision was to make use of the world. But mystical union, for him, was an epistemological necessity."

Sherman Paul
*Emerson's Angle of Vision*
(Harvard 1952) 83-87

"Emerson's inquiry into the meaning and purpose of Nature is at bottom an effort to assimilate Nature into himself, to reduce the NOT ME to the ME. The effort took two directions: one, toward the conquest of Nature intellectually, by achieving her Idea or theory; the other, toward a practical conquest, a kingdom of man, by learning the lesson of power. Through most of the book the first is dominant; the aim of the book is to indicate an answer to the question, To what end is Nature? His chief weapon for this conquest of Nature is idealism, a word he uses in two senses: the Ideal Theory of the Locke-Berkeley-Hume tradition; and a more Platonic conception. The first five chapters are designed to establish the dominion of Platonic Ideas over Nature. A soon discarded Swedenborgian notion of Nature as a kind of divine cryptogram, a mute gospel which man is to decipher, somewhat obscures this purpose in *Nature*, but it emerges clearly in a summary entered in his journals...

The full revolutionary force of what Emerson in these later chapters is saying is obscured by his Platonic and moralistic language, even in the exposition of his least orthodox thoughts. He himself, perhaps, does not fully appreciate the newness of what he is trying to say and wavers ambiguously between transcendental egoism and Platonic idealism. His originality remains impressive. One cannot demonstrate any important influence of Fichte or of any other source of German idealism on Emerson, although hints and echoes of this way of thinking were of course in the air. Though presumably he would not have moved in this direction if he had not been prompted to do so by some indirect German influences, he still comes to this faith independently, his will to believe such doctrine allowing him, without altogether understanding his own thought, to expand a few imperfect hints into a whole worldview."

Stephen E. Whicher
*Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson*
(U Pennsylvania 1953) 52

"It was published in 1836 and soon became the bible of New England Transcendentalism. Emerson called it, in a letter to Carlyle, 'an entering wedge, I hope, for something more worthy and significant.' It contains, at least by implication, most of the ideas which Emerson was to develop later. *Nature* has been called the most seminal book in American literature. Many writers--Thoreau and Whitman among them--have been influenced by its teachings, for it is probably the most important single statement in our literature of the idealistic viewpoint. Everywhere Emerson drives home the primacy of spirit, everywhere he insists eloquently upon the infinitude of the private man, drawing his texts impartially from Plato, the Christian *Bible*, Shakespeare, and other high sources. 'Once inhale the upper air,' he tells his readers, 'being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite.' Idealism like this is inspiring, because it opens the door to many practical uses. The practicality of Emerson's idealism is perhaps its distinctive American trait."

Randall Stewart
*The Literature of the United States* I, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1040

"*Nature* has always seemed to me, in spite of its many brilliant passages, a fundamentally unsatisfactory piece of work....Its lack of unity may be explainable partly by the persistence of the sermon structure, with its firstly, secondly, and so on, which is poorly suited to the subject. But a more important reason, it seems to me, is that its language also fails to assimilate the organic idea which it struggles to express...His point of view was not steady enough; it shifted uncomfortably and unpredictably between something like Platonic idealism and something like Romantic organicism, doing justice to neither.

The same awkwardness may be seen in the slight but irritating inappropriateness of diction that permeates the essay, especially in the chapter on 'Language,' where Emerson tried to make use of the

Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence, the theory that the world objectifies the mind of God and therefore also the similarly formed, though smaller, mind of man. The Swedenborgian correspondence, with its one-to-one ratio of idea and object, is not the same thing as the organic theory of functional and universal relationship, as Emerson himself later pointed out. His eclectic use of it in *Nature* was a stepping-stone to the pure organic idea for which he had not yet mastered an effective vocabulary."

Richard P. Adams
"Emerson and the Organic Metaphor"
*PMLA* LXIX (March 1954) 117-30

"Despite the physical and material strenuousness of American society at the time, or because of it, a canopy of conventionality, of oppressive stuffiness, hung over its intellectual and spiritual life; and all the dissatisfied minds that were longing to see the canopy lifted were on the alert to recognize any voice that would speak out against the prevailing grayness. *Nature* did this; and the result was that Emerson was invited, almost at once, to deliver the annual Phi Beta Kappa oration at Harvard the following summer....It remains true that Emerson was a skilled and studious rhetorician, and that his sense of the architecture of an essay normally, and beautifully, triumphed over the tendency to dispersion or looseness. He had begun, after all, as a preacher in the tradition, however relaxed, of the Puritan homily, and his own early sermons are sometimes models of orderly discourse....

*Nature* may have had, during those years, very *few* readers, but they were important readers, the right readers; and the influence of the work was, as so often happens, quite out of proportion to its success in the bookshops. This was not because the insights expressed in it were all, in the literal sense, 'original' with Emerson: They were the results primarily, it is true, of his own musings, but they had been strongly affected by the reading he had done during the preceding years, in Plato and the Neoplatonists, in such English Platonists as Ralph Cudworth (1617-88), in Swedenborg (1688-1772) and such American disciples of his as Sampson Reed (*Observations on the Growth of the Mind*, 1826), in Wordsworth and Coleridge, in Goethe, and, mostly at second hand, in the German idealist philosophers.

In that sense the book represented a kind of shimmering synthesis of ideas that had been floating about in the European and American mind for a generation or two, and indeed, in one sense, for many centuries; but the synthesis had, nevertheless, a powerful effect of freshness and novelty. It expressed a view of Nature and the relations of the human spirit to it that seemed incomparably truer, to some men, than the views that had been dominant for a hundred years and more; and it became, for such men, a Prophetic Book. It is easy, even now, to see why this was true."

Newton Arvin
*Major Writers of America* I
(Harcourt 1962) 479, 485, 490

"*Nature* is our primal book, and...the tradition of prophecy and art descending from it leads not only through Emerson's later work and through Alcott and Thoreau to Dickinson and Frost, but most strongly through the vital center of Melville, Whitman, William James, Henry Adams, and Wallace Stevens...But the good and bad remarks do stand out. The bad one presumably, is the 'transparent eyeball' sentence, perhaps the best known sentence of Emerson's among readers who wish to make fun of him."

Jonathan Bishop
Introduction, *Emerson on the Soul*
(Harvard 1964) 9-15

"An enemy might want to rate this early essay of Emerson's as hardly other than a Happiness Pill. But I admit: I find it so charming, I'd be willing to defend it even on that level, it is so buoyant...It has a kind of exaltation, thanks in large part to Emerson's profuse mixing of his ideas with ingratiating imagery. And we can readily understand why he was so enthusiastic about Whitman, before a more quizzical look at Whitman's poetic evangelism led him to see that it was beckoning 'Come hither' to much more than a highly respectable vendor of uplift such as Emerson had bargained for. Both approached the conflicts of the century in terms that allowed for a joyous Transcendental translation....

If only like loving a pleasant dream, love him for his idealistic upsurge. For *it reads well*. It is medicine. Even in those days, I feel sure, both he and Whitman suspected that they might be whistling in the dark. But they loved the gesture (if whistling is a gesture)--and it is an appealing gesture. Albeit a gesture much more plausible then than now. Emerson's scheme for transcendence (like Whitman's variant) was propounded before his fellow-townsmen had lost their sense of a happy, predestined future."

Kenneth Burke
*Transcendentalism and Its Legacy*
Myron Simon & Thornton H. Parsons, eds.
(U Michigan 1966) 3-24

"Unlike Edwards, who, as Perry Miller tells us, quoted 'Scripture to confirm the meaning of natural phenomena,' Emerson argued from Nature to Scripture: 'All things with which we deal, preach to us. What is a farm but a mute gospel?' And, again unlike Edwards, Emerson had small use for that art which amounted to no more than an imitation or description of Nature, since he considered the latter to be intrinsically of little value. Emerson, for example, continually criticized Wordsworth for being 'foolishly inquisitive about the essence and body of what pleased him, of what all sensible men feel to be, in its nature, evanescent'; and although the youthful desire to 'abuse' Wordsworth...was to disappear, Emerson's attitude toward 'Nature in poetry' would not change substantially....Unlike Edwards, who was a religious phenomenologist, Emerson was a pious Platonist who went to Nature for confirmation and illustration of his *a priori* ethical system, not for mystic ecstasy inseparable from its ineffable meaning....

Emerson's idealism, then, is simply an affirmation of the supreme importance of the moral law and a restatement of the notion...that Nature exists (or ceases to exist) as a discipline in ethics. The essentially mundane nature of Emerson's idealism is perhaps made clearer in 'Circles'...God is clearly the conscience, which is certainly practical and efficient when it organizes the natural world in the service of an ordered society. Idealism, to return to *Nature*, 'presents the world in precisely that view which is most desirable to the mind'--to the mind, we should add, of the moralist, for whom ethics is infinitely more important than sensuous experience....

In 1849, Emerson attempted to define the modern era in a journal entry which, perhaps better than anything else, helps us to summarize his attitude toward idealism and the true function of Nature:

> *The Modern*: When the too idealistic tendencies of the Christian period running into the diseases of cant, monarchism, and a church, demonstrating the impossibility of Christianity, have forced men to retrace their steps, and rally again on Nature; but now the tendency is to marry mind to Nature, and to put Nature under the mind, convert the world into the instrument of Right Reason. Man goes forth to the dominion of the world by commerce, by science, and by philosophy.

Nature is certainly substantial here, yet it hardly seems important in detail. Communion and ecstasy are replaced by progress, and arts finds no honored place beside commerce, science, and philosophy. Instructed by such a passage, and bearing in mind that for Emerson 'poetry and prudence should be coincident,' the student may notice that *Nature* ends as a hymn to progress under the moral law. It predicts the 'kingdom of man over Nature,' rather than the perfection of man in himself through a renewed contact with the physical world."

Joel Porte
*Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict*
(Wesleyan U 1966) 61-67

"One chapter, 'Language,' seems to command more attention than the others, undoubtedly because its organization and development seem more transparent and conventional than in the other chapters. Its very centrality in the essay and the nature of its definitions have led some critics to argue that the platonic aspect of the essay, underscored by the original motto of 1836, creates a division at this point between the first five chapters and the last four, that with this chapter we cross over the famous divided line of Plato from

the world of impressions to the world of ideas. But there is a particular aspect of the chapter, 'Language,' which provides us with a clue to Emerson's strategy in the essay. For...the entire essay is an elaborate exercise in definition of the sort that the chapter, 'Language,' enumerates--that is, a movement from phenomenal experience to symbolic comprehension of nominal experience in the phenomenal world...

The chapter 'Spirit' dissolves the fluidity by which so much of the essay had moved and presents us with the mass of unity that is to be seen in the prospects before us. It achieves the condition of 'frozen music'....We observe a notable distinction between the kinds of voices heard in the individual chapters. If we turn to the musical metaphor for a moment we might liken the various chapters of the essay to the parts of a baroque cantata. The theoretical chapters we have examined are like chorales, intricately contrapuntal but moving toward a great harmonic final unity (which in this case is the final chapter). Intermingled with these chorales are the recitatives, which as the term itself denotes, are linear statements essentially singular in voice....Thus we encounter a series of chapters that modulate between rather singular, linear statements and extremely complex contrapuntal ones. Just as the baroque chorales are more exciting and memorable than the recitatives, so too the chapters devoted to mind are more intricate, more challenging and revealing, than those recitative passages devoted to aspects of matter. The weight of our interest is thrown stylistically toward those chapters whose ideas Emerson, for all his meticulous dialectical construction, more fully valued....

*Nature* is, then, a blueprint, an architectonic, for the construction of the self out of the world's body.... *Nature* works toward that important end of baroque art--the active sense of exultation....Nature is the divine order; art is man's effort to make that order spiritually comprehensible. Not only then in terms of its subject matter but by means of its artfully structured style, *Nature* is a sophisticated anticipation of the world that Emerson was to build for himself in the lectures and the essays that followed, a spherical world of transparent symmetry."

Richard Lee Francis
"The Architectonics of Emerson's *Nature*"
*American Quarterly* XIX (Spring 1967) 39-53

"His scheme was based on a strategy--or two strategies: one, illustrating the relation of matter to spirit by tracing a hierarchy in the uses of nature; and, at the same time, enabling the reader to participate in the unfolding of the author's thought, *feeling* it as well as following the argument. To do this, Emerson used the language not of philosophy but of poetry. The anonymous critic was right who called the little book a 'prose poem.' This subtle method also illustrates the spiral evolution which Emerson saw as the natural process, in which all living things are climbing a ladder to the divine....

He feels a 'wild delight' in the presence of Nature. This wild delight resembles what is often called a 'mystical experience': ...'Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egotism vanished. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all.' This description has all the essentials of William James's famous definition of the 'mystical experience' in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (XVI): the sudden compelling exhilaration, the shrinking and, paradoxically, at the same time expanding of the ego—'nothing,' yet 'particle of God'; the vanishing of worldly distinctions and attractions; and the vision of 'immortal beauty' (for some mystics it is love, for others compassion, or wisdom)....

Hyperbole is common in mystical writings. Emerson used extravagant imagery not only to describe the ineffable but also deliberately to shock and impress. As a 'transparent eye-ball' he *sees* inwardly and outwardly simultaneously, and becomes a passive conductor of the 'currents of the Universal Being'.... Things are also emblematic of the Spirit or Soul that creates and sustains them. In 'Language' Emerson elaborates the theory which he had borrowed from Oegger. This is the longest chapter in *Nature*, and Emerson needed to write it to aid his own self-development. The argument is now too familiar to need detailed exposition: natural objects are but symbols of archetypes preexisting in the mind of God, 'and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit....The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world'….

Unlike some of the Neoplatonists ('Plotinus was ashamed of his body' because it was not spirit), Emerson does not want to escape from the material world into a completely spiritual one....'Idealism sees the world in God.' This statement proves that Emerson was not, as he was already being accused of being, a pantheist, who sees *God in the world*....However, pure Idealism does not satisfy Emerson, because 'It leaves God out of me.' The mind is also part of Nature, and 'many truths arise to us out of the recesses of consciousness.' The Supreme Being, therefore, 'does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old.' This process gives man access to the mind of the Creator, and makes him a collaborator....Elsewhere Emerson would suggest that the unconscious is the doorway to God....

The final chapter, on 'Prospects,' recapitulates the 'relation between things and thoughts' and the artist's copying the 'invisible archetype' in his images of material objects....The important question is: How can puny man mend his world and unite himself again with his spiritual source. This question Emerson would continue trying to answer for years to come....Emerson himself...was not satisfied with his little book, and called it a mere 'multiplication table' when a friend complained that it lacked connection. Actually *Nature* is deficient in conventional transitions, but has its own structural and stylistic coherence. The flowing images and details imply rather than state explicitly, and have a logic of their own."

Gay Wilson Allen
*Waldo Emerson*
(Penguin 1981) 276-82

"*Nature* provides the theoretical underpinnings for developing what became an indigenous American literature in the nineteenth century. The essay is Emerson's most dramatic effort to reject the Old World and build anew...He builds into his essay a strikingly bold proposition: to substitute Nature for what was generally regarded to be the new nation's lack of a distinctive cultural heritage. In Emerson's view, Nature--the land itself--should be the source for articulating and developing a unique American cultural identity. He would have Nature become the gravitational field for defining American experience. Like his counterparts in art--most notably the painter Thomas Cole, who figured so prominently in the Hudson River school--Emerson revered Nature and saw in America the finest expression of what has been called 'Nature's nation.' In contrast to the many Americans who viewed Nature as something to exploit in their relentless push westward, Emerson and Cole venerated Nature not for the economic but for the spiritual and artistic opportunities inherent in it. For Emerson and Cole, Nature would replace the Bible as the greatest spiritual text, capable of being read by anyone....'Make your own Bible'."

Justin Kaplan
*The Harper American Literature* I
(Harper 1987) 974-75

Michael Hollister (2015)