

Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson



“Gnothi Seauton” by RWE 1831

I

If thou canst bear
Strong meat of simple truth
If thou durst my words compare
With what thou thinkest in my soul's free youth,
Then take this fact unto thy soul,-----
God dwells in thee.
It is no metaphor nor parable,
It is unknown to thousands, and to thee;
Yet there is God.

II

He is in thy world,
But thy world knows him not.
He is the mighty Heart
From which life's varied pulses part.
Clouded and shrouded there doth sit
The Infinite
Embosomed in a man;
And thou art stranger to thy guest
And know'st not what thou doth invest.
The clouds that veil his life within
Are thy thick woven webs of sin,
Which his glory struggling through
Darkens to thine evil hue.

III

Then bear thyself, O man!
Up to the scale and compass of thy guest;
Soul of thy soul.
Be great as doth beseem
The ambassador who bears
The royal presence where he goes.

IV

Give up to thy soul-----
Let it have its way-----
It is, I tell thee, God himself,
The selfsame One that rules the Whole,
Tho' he speaks thro' thee with a stifled voice,
And looks through thee, shorn of his beams.
But if thou listen to his voice,
If thou obey the royal thought,
It will grow clearer to thine ear,
More glorious to thine eye.
The clouds will burst that veil him now
And thou shalt see the Lord.

V

Therefore be great,
Not proud,-----too great to be proud.
Let not thine eyes rove,
Peep not in corners; let thine eyes
Look straight before thee, as befits
The simplicity of Power.
And in thy closet carry state;
Filled with light, walk therein;
And, as a king
Would do no treason to his own empire,
So do not thou to thine.

VI

This is the reason why thou dost recognize
Things now first revealed,
Because in thee resides
The Spirit that lives in all;
And thou canst learn the laws of nature
Because its author is latent in thy breast.

VII

Therefore, O happy youth,
Happy if thou dost know and love this truth,
Thou art unto thyself a law,
And since the soul of things is in thee,
Thou needest nothing out of thee.
The law, the gospel, and the Providence,
Heaven, Hell, the Judgement, and the stores
Immeasurable of Truth and Good,
All these thou must find
Within thy single mind,
Or never find.

VIII

Thou art the law;
The gospel has no revelation
Of peace and hope until there is response
From the deep chambers of thy mind thereto,-----
The rest is straw.
It can reveal no truth unknown before.
The Providence
Thou art thyself that doth dispense
Wealth to thy work, want to thy sloth,
Glory to goodness, to neglect, the moth.
Thou sow'st the wind, the whirlwind reapest,
Thou payest the wages
Of thy own work, through all ages.
The almighty energy within
Crowneth virtue, curseth sin.
Virtue sees by its own light;
Stumbleth sin in self-made night.

IX

Who approves thee doing right?
God in thee.
Who condemns thee doing wrong?
God in thee.
Who punishes thine evil deed?
God in thee.
What is thine evil deed?
Thy worse mind, with error blind
And more prone to evil
That is, the greater hiding of the God within:
The loss of peace
The terrible displeasure of this inmate
And next the consequence
More faintly as more distant wro't
Upon our outward fortunes
Which decay with vice
With Virtue rise.

X

The selfsame God
By the same law
Makes the souls of angels glad
And the souls of devils sad
See
There is nothing else but God
Where e'er I look
All things hasten back to him
Light is but his shadow dim.

XI

Shall I ask wealth or power of God, who gave
An image of himself to be my soul?
As well might swilling ocean ask a wave,
Or the starred firmament a dying coal,-----
For that which is in me lives in the whole.

Gnōthi seauton — “Know Thyself”

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Greek Spelling, Transliteration, Pronunciation, Translation

- γνῶθι σεαυτόν (σαῦτόν with contraction — σαῦτόν blends the epsilon into the alpha-upsilon sound)
- Upper-case with letter names:

Γ Ν Ω Θ Ι
gamma nu omega theta iota
Σ Ε Α Υ Τ Ο Ν
sigma epsilon alpha upsilon tau omicron nu

- Pronounced **gnōthi seauton** (or **sauton**) — “au” as in “ouch!”
- Translate as “Know thyself!” (*gnōthi*, a command form, = “get to know,” “become acquainted with,” “learn [about],” “know”)

Basic Information

- Along with *mēden agan* (“Nothing to excess!”), *gnōthi seauton* for many just about sums up what ancient Greek culture and thought were all about
- The phrase is said to have been inscribed, along with *mēden agan*, on the entry porch (the *pronaos*) of Apollo’s temple at Delphi (see Pausanias *Travels* 10.24.1)
- Traditionally attributed to, among others, Chilon of Sparta (ca. 550 BCE) — older certainly than either Socrates or Plato, with whom the saying is, nevertheless, closely associated

Mini-Essay

In the 1999 film *The Matrix*, there is a scene in the apartment of the character known as the Oracle. Above her kitchen door hangs a plaque with the following inscription: *temet nosce*. Latinists will recognize that as a translation of *gnōthi seauton*, Greek for “Know thyself,” from the temple of Apollo at Delphi. The fitness of the proverb in either setting should be fairly obvious. Those seeking to understand how any given prophecy applies to their lives need first to know themselves. Or as Socrates might have said, “The unexamined life is not worth the living” (Plato *Symposium*).

As originally written, the saying *could* have looked something like this — archaic Greek alphabet, backwards writing, etc., no more than a guess:



This saying, which neither Socrates nor Plato came up with originally, plays an important part in the Socratic writings (ancient writings featuring/focused on Socrates) of Plato. (What little Socrates wrote, and none of it philosophy, has not survived.) For Socrates, the most important knowledge to be pursued was *self*-knowledge. As for his own self-knowledge, what set him apart was that he knew that he didn't know — that he acknowledged, in other words, that he had much to learn.¹ He could, therefore, boast — and we're told that the Delphic Oracle backed him up on this — of being wiser than anyone else: no one Socrates knew was as willing as he was to own up to his or her own ignorance. To face one's ignorance honestly becomes, then, the beginning of true knowledge. So, for instance, in Plato's *First Alcibiades*, the title character, impatient to enter politics, is forced to admit his poor preparation and general ignorance — his need to unlearn the ignorance of the many, to seek out the wisdom of the few.

This theme of self-knowledge comes vividly to life in Greek tragedy. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the chorus declares that Zeus "has laid it down as law: from suffering, knowledge." In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, tragic events unfold as the title character gradually learns the horrible truth of his own identity. Thus Oedipus the arrogant tyrant can see with his eyes but cannot even begin to fathom who he is or the things he has done. True, he once traveled to Delphi to consult the oracle, as he had his doubts about his supposed parentage. But when the oracle announced that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother, Oedipus, without actually knowing who his parents were, indeed, who *he* was, vainly sought to escape what was, in effect, his defining destiny. And so, near the end of the play, when he can no longer deny the truth, when finally he knows and accepts himself *as he really is*, that truth, too terrible to contemplate, prompts him to gauge out his eyes. A humbler but wiser Oedipus, he abdicates his throne and heads into self-imposed exile.

But how self-focused is self-knowledge? Paradoxically, self-knowledge cannot be gained but through others. Thus in Plato, one's beloved supplies a window into the self, the self one sees mirrored in the adoring looks of one's beloved. But that only underscores the paradox of self-knowledge, which is never simply knowledge of the self, but of the self *in relation to others*.

See also: <http://classics.binghamton.edu/greek.htm>

¹ "That fellow thinks he knows something, though he doesn't know it. Whereas I, just as I *don't* in fact know, neither do I *think* I do. At any rate, it seems that I'm wiser than he at least by just this tiny little bit: in that I do not think I know what I in fact do not," Socrates in Plato *Apology* 21d.