In May of 1834, in a lecture before the Boston Natural History Society, the fourth in a series on scientific subjects, Emerson publicly asserted in miniature the theme that would underlie his life’s work: ‘We are possessed with a conviction that Nature means something, that the flower, the animals, the sea, the rock have some relation to us which is not understood which if known would make them more significant’ (EL1, 78). Though to be ‘possessed with a conviction’ hardly connoted an open scientific mindset, it was to science that Emerson first turned in the wake of his resignation from Boston’s Second Church, in the summer of 1832, in order to rethink his relationship with nature. Indeed, it was nature’s ‘relation to us’ that had become essential to Emerson’s interpretation of its significance and which needed to be ‘understood’. When in early November of 1833 he was preparing the first lecture in the series, he developed the point with reference to his favourite scientist: ‘Bacon said that man is the minister & interpreter of nature: he is so in more respects than one. He is not only to explain the sense of each passage but the scope & argument of the whole book’ (JMN4, 95). Emerson had already decided that he could not be a good minister of the church when within the church, thus to continue to be a minister and interpreter he had to find a new public role and in 1833 he moved from the ministry to the lecture platform. His metaphors, though, make it clear that even if the position from which he speaks has changed his task remains essentially the same: to interpret a book, its passages, scope and argument; that is to be a minister of the book of nature. The metaphor is extended further and the connection between jobs old and new is reinforced by a suppressed phrase in the same journal entry:

Nature is a language & every new fact that we learn is a new word; but rightly seen, taken all together it is not merely a language but...
a scripture which contains the whole truth but the language put together into a most significant & universal book. I wish to learn the language not that I may know a new set of nouns & verbs but that I may read the great book which is written in that tongue.

(\textit{JMN4}, 95)

The revision in the passage marks an important change in Emerson’s thinking about his role. A ‘scripture which contains the whole truth’ is a Bible; it is attached to a particular system of belief and records a unique revelation. A ‘most significant & universal book’, however, is deracinated from any particular tradition and almost secularized. We can see these thoughts advance when the passage is further revised for use at the end of Emerson’s first public lecture, ‘The Uses of Natural History’, given only three days later on 5 November 1833:

I look to the progress of Natural Science as to that which is to develop new and great lessons of which good men shall understand the moral. Nature is a language and every new fact we learn 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.

(\textit{EL1}, 26)

Here the movement from religion to science appears complete. Now ‘Natural Science’ will provide the moral for ‘good men’ to understand. Nature will supply the text and its grammar will be physics, biology, astronomy; the methods of interpretation which allow it to relate to man. The individual sciences, or grammars, are merely means to an end: it is the book that matters. But, what is more important and more telling for his own career, unlike the Bible, unlike scripture, which have been exhausted by theological analysis, the language of nature is not ‘dead in the dictionary’ but still open in ‘a most significant and universal sense’. The natural historian has access to a place wherein ‘is writ by the Creator his own history’; the implication being that the Bible was not written by God, but by men. What is also clear is that reading this new text has the same function as reading the Bible once had—to bring man to God. Emerson, though, takes this further in the same lecture: ‘it may be, all this outward universe shall one day disappear, when its whole sense hath been comprehended and engraved forever in the