“Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldon Emerson (paragraph 1)

I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost,—— and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. **A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.** In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

1. This paragraph comes from the beginning of an essay, entitled “Self-Reliance,” written by a famous American author and philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson. What do you think it means to be “self-reliant”?
2. How does a person become self-reliant and what are some indications that a person is self-reliant?
3. What does Emerson say is “the highest merit” of Moses, Plato, and Milton? That is, what is it that made them great?
4. Re-read the bolded portion from Emerson’s paragraph. What metaphor is Emerson using in these lines? What is he saying about our thoughts in these lines? What hindrance to self-reliance does Emerson bring out in these lines?