
Ralph Waldo Emerson

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

THE present century in America has been made illustrious by the names and works of men of genius. With the increase of learning, the next generation is to have a more ample and more scholarly literature; but it is not probable that there will soon be another constellation like that now passing the zenith. While we are near to living men we may fail to see them, in their true relations to the age. We have grown up with a life-long reverence for the genius of the past, and it requires some courage to set up an author as a classic before his century has ended.

Prominent among the great men of this generation is the subject of this essay. More than any of our authors he is an exponent of what is native and virile in the thought of this country. Literature is sometimes considered as if it had no concern with politics. If literature consisted of "woful ballads" and society novels, this would be true. But, in any large sense, the constitution and laws of a country, with the attendant social customs, are the life and soul of its letters. Democratic ideas must pervade any truly American work; but, it is proper to add, democracy, as exhibited in the bluster of Buncombe orators in Congress, is quite different from the ideal democracy of a philosopher.

The intellectual life of Emerson for nearly half a century has affected educated men with an influence that is immeasurable; he is "the Columbus of modern thought." Since Lord Bacon, there has not been another writer whose resources were so wholly in himself. He belongs with the three or four philosophic minds of the first order, born of the Anglo-Saxon race.

The relation of Emerson to the philosophy and literature of modern times can not be well understood without some consideration of the state of affairs in New England. The original framework of society was a theocracy, although government was carried

on under democratic forms. The Papacy in its most palmy days never had a more complete ascendancy than the clergy in Boston.

Various circumstances combined to rivet the union of Church and state. The Indian wars consolidated the people, and made it necessary to drive out every person whose loyalty was not fully known. The long struggles to preserve the colonial charters had a similar influence. The strong antipathy to the Episcopal form of worship was blended with a dogged resistance to monarchy. The principles that had overthrown Charles I. and set up Cromwell survived in the colonies, while in England the profligate Charles II. and the gloomy despot James II. were annulling the acts of the Long Parliament, and trampling out nonconformity.

For all practical purposes the town and the parish were one. The town officers collected taxes for the support of the gospel from believers and unbelievers alike. In every place of worship sittings were assigned according to some standard of social rank by the town officers and deacons. This was called "seating the meeting." In the church-steeple under the bell-deck was stored the town's stock of powder and ball for common defense. On the church-door were legally affixed all public proclamations and the warrants for town meetings.

After one hundred and seventy years of clerical rule, which it would be mild to call bigoted, there came a powerful reaction, that was felt in doctrine, discipline, and conduct. On the part of the evilly-inclined there was manifested a defiance of decorum, a willful wickedness, and a general indulgence in strong drink. Graphic pictures may be seen of this period in Judd's "Margaret," a powerful book, written by a native of the town where, long before, that ablest of Calvinists, Jonathan Edwards, wrestled with Fate and Free-Will. The reaction in discipline was seen in the adoption of the "half-way covenant," and in allowing withdrawals from the parish. But the reaction in doctrine was destined to have more important results. More than half the churches in Boston and vicinity, while retaining the Congregational name and the traditional forms of worship, went through a complete change of faith. They rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, of total depravity, of election and reprobation, and of the vicarious atonement; and, while they held mainly to the inspiration of the Scriptures, they claimed that the interpretation must be in accordance with enlightened reason.

Emerson was a son of a Unitarian clergyman, and might almost

be considered a Levite in descent ; since no fewer than seven of his ancestors, during the brief history of the colony, had been ordained preachers. The old faith was now left behind, abandoned by his family and friends, as at variance with nature. The old literature was left behind, as thorny and unfruitful. A new school of letters was to arise, linked with a new philosophy and a new conception of piety. Whether the new or the old would be the better for mankind, it is not necessary to consider. The time for change had come, and with it the predestined leader, William Ellery Channing.

When the boy Emerson was receiving the rudiments of education, the literary nutriment of the time was wholly from British sources. With half a dozen exceptions, most of them unimportant, not a single work of value had appeared in the New World. We can scarcely point to any literature of the last century which would be of service to a budding philosopher or poet, except as a warning. The Revolutionary period was naturally full of stir, and brought forth many pamphlets and speeches, notably those of Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine ; but hardly anything remains that the world continues to read. A vital book is reprinted ; a dead book is delivered over to antiquaries to be embalmed.

Judged by present standards, the Boston of 1800 was a dull and pedantic little town. Its society may have been more stimulating and more attractive than its literature ; but such newspapers as the "Columbian Centinel" are sufficiently self-accusing. To maintain liberty, to split hairs in the discussion of Christian doctrine, and to find profitable markets for fish, had engrossed the energies of the people. Struggles with nature and with savage foes had made the colonists hardy ; resistance to kingly power had made them bold and self-respecting ; and the pursuit of commerce had brought in wealth, that was to serve as a basis for culture in the succeeding generation.

It was in this rather sterile and unlovely field that one of the most subtle of philosophers and one of the rarest of imaginative poets was to be developed. Genius is always a surprise, because no one can see in the bearding boy the hidden strands of ancestral traits. Nothing, however, is surer than heredity, for heredity is practically fate ; and in this descendant of a line of clergymen were to be blended, along with their gravity, patience, and self-control, their clear sight, their high moral sense, their love of truth and beauty, their skill in dialectics, and their before undreamed-of power of imagination.

As before said, there was no impetus from behind ; but there were a "promise and potency" in existing elements. The poet Dana, with Greenwood, Channing, and others, were establishing our now venerable "Review"—writing for nothing, and paying the printer besides. In the day of small things this was an event of no ordinary character. For almost the first time men saw an American periodical in which living topics were adequately discussed by scholars in a tone that was free from cant and pedantry. The intellectual movement might not have been the consequence of the metamorphosis of faith, but it followed closely after—*post hoc*, if not *propter hoc*—and it is a striking fact that nearly every noted poet, historian, scholar, and statesman in New England and in the North has been indebted to the influence of Channing and his associates. Many of them sat at his feet as disciples ; all were touched by the power of his free spirit.

Consciously or unconsciously, every living man in the Northern States has been made more liberal in thought, and has been led to broader views of life and duty, by the teachings of Channing. This widespread influence has created the audience for the philosophic teacher, the circle of readers for the historian and poet, and the constituency for the philanthropic statesman. Before the Revolution neither Channing nor Emerson could have had a hearing. It may be added here that every living American who reads books, or listens to sermons or lectures, is swayed by the influence of Emerson. No writer of any elevation of sentiment, certainly no Protestant writer, has escaped his influence. He stands in the pulpits of those who attack or deplore his doctrines. His brilliant points are transferred to shine in the sentences of his critics. His philosophy and his phrases are in the air ; men can not escape them. Every essayist and peripatetic reformer is translating into more obvious, but also into more awkward phrase, such of the Emersonian apothegms as he has mastered. To know how universally the thought and the portable epigrams of Emerson have been diffused, it is only necessary for the reader, familiar with recent literature, to open some of the earlier essays, such as "Nature," or "English Traits," and to renew the acquaintance begun twenty-five years ago. On every page there will be seen scintillating lines that have since become the common property of mankind, quoted by everybody, like Hamlet and Lycidas, and generally without a thought of the source whence they came.

Mr. Emerson's life has been singularly uneventful ; the facts are

few and in simple order. What his future biographer may have to relate of his inner experience may be much fuller and more fascinating. He was born in Boston in 1803, May 25th, was fitted for college at the Latin School, and was graduated at Harvard in 1821. He taught school for five years, and then studied divinity. In 1829 he was ordained as colleague to the Rev. Henry Ware, pastor of the Second Church in Boston; but in 1832 he resigned his place, and practically left the ministry. He twice visited Europe—in 1832 and again in 1847. He was married in September, 1830, to Miss Ellen Louisa Tucker, who died in February following. In 1835 he was married to Miss Jackson, a sister of the late eminent *savant*, Charles T. Jackson. In the same year he removed to Concord, Massachusetts, where his residence has attracted the society of congenial people—the Hawthornes, Alcotts, Channings, and others—until the historic village has become a rustic Weimar, the resort of literary pilgrims every summer.

His literary work, almost without exception, took the form of lectures. A considerable number of them, after having been kept for the Horatian nine years and more, have been collected and published; but many still remain in manuscript, which, it is to be hoped, will some time be given to the world. The only departure from this even tenor of his literary life was his share in the conduct of "The Dial," a quarterly periodical edited at first by Miss Margaret Fuller (Marchioness d'Ossoli) and afterward by himself. The best-known contributors were A. Bronson Alcott (father of the world-famous Louisa), William H. Channing, George Ripley, now literary editor of the "Tribune," and Theodore Parker. This was known as the organ of the "Transcendentalists," disciples of an ideal philosophy, which has been since merged in larger statements, and has ceased to exist as a distinct school.

Authors are easily classified, if we do not attempt nice discriminations. But, when Emerson is called philosopher and poet, both terms need definition. In his first essay on "Nature," in the chapter entitled "Idealism," is a passage that helps us to a correct perception of the man: "While thus the poet animates Nature with his thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. . . . The true philosopher and the true poet are one; and a beauty which is truth, and a truth which is beauty, is the aim of both."

This is the distinction of Emerson, to have unified poetry and philosophy as no one else has done, with the single exception of

Goethe. Indeed, with the same exception, no other philosopher has taken any rank as a poet, and has been eminent both in prose and verse. Excepting Pascal, no philosopher is so entertaining a companion. We may go further, and say that few philosophers in all the ages have enlivened their discussions as Emerson has with the surprises of wit, the charm of a grave humor, and the unfailing analogies of the natural world.

Let us observe at the start that metaphysics is but a minor branch of philosophy, and one that is daily declining in importance. It is a science of definitions without known bases. It contains a vast amount of laborious logic that leaves us no wiser than we were. To read Kant, Hegel, and Hamilton may be intellectually stimulating; but, when so much practical work remains to be done, it is like a Western settler's practicing with Indian clubs to develop his muscles, when he might be felling trees and building a cabin. Doubtless every successive theorist supposed he had solved the universe, and each one probably did contribute something to the world's stock of ideas; but the general view of the systems of philosophy as seen in Lewes's bulky history is like that of a lumber-room in the Patent-Office, filled with abortive and superseded inventions. Among the philosophers who appear to have most strongly impressed Emerson may be named Plato, who shines like a star across the ages; Kant, the modern idealist; Goethe, in his capacity of naturalist; and Comte, the formulator of the development of the sciences. He has also a half-confessed fondness for Berkeley, who pushed idealism to the farthest verge until it touched immateriality. And by sheer audacity of imagination he anticipated Darwin in announcing the theory of evolution.

That we are spirits in prison, eager for enlargement, and undyingly curious as to our status in the universe, does not matter. We shall always speculate, but it is equally certain that we shall not penetrate the mystery of being—a mystery just as profound in a head of lettuce as in the processes of Shakespeare's brain.

Emerson is fitly placed among philosophers; but it is not because he has attempted to arrange universal knowledge in eternal formulas. He is a philosopher because he perceives the relations of man with nature, and because he shows universal wisdom in human affairs. He admires mostly those philosophers who are of the intellectual lineage of Plato. The sense of beauty is his supreme faculty. In this respect only one modern author, Ruskin, bears a comparison with him; but, with that particular, the resem-

blance ends ; for Emerson elaborates no formal landscapes, line by line, as are shown in the "Modern Painters" ; instead of this, he flashes scenes upon the mind with a mere phrase.

Parallels are useful to give us clear ideas ; but, in truth, no perfect parallel is possible for Emerson, or for any man of transcendent original genius. He is in one aspect a unit, a blazing point of intelligence ; in another, he is a complex entity, to form which strong and various ancestral traits have combined—which Puritan tradition tinged—which the revival of free thought under Channing nurtured—which German philosophy developed—which the spirit of New World democracy inspired—and which the influences of nature have softened into love. What distinguishes him from most philosophical writers, as has been before intimated, is the force of imagination. A page of Hume is full of the germs of thought, but Hume sets down principles and theories like arithmetical tables. There is no warmth in the man ; he is no more enthusiastic than a clockmaker. Still colder and more arid is Herbert Spencer. His horizon is broad, and his thought is tenacious, but the element of poetry is wanting. If men were only thinking-machines, destitute of emotion and of the sense of beauty, Spencer would be for them a perfect writer. This is not to disparage that great man, whose services in favor of practical philosophy all reasoning minds acknowledge. We are only casting a side-light upon the writings of Emerson.

The profound emotion which we occasionally observe in our philosopher must appear to colder minds like the baseless hyperbole of Eastern poetry. The truth is, to understand this wonderful, complex mind, there must be a kindred feeling and a kindred development in the reader. All the world worships Shakespeare, yet the attributes that make him the first poet of all the ages are perceived by scarcely a thousand men in a generation. Only a poet can do justice to Emerson's philosophy ; only a philosopher will see what is deepest and grandest in his verse. The poetic sentiment in view of the beautiful or the sublime is easily assumed ; and many persuade themselves that they share the feelings of the poet they read. But nature as seen in a library, before a comfortable fire, or as contemplated from the seclusion of a hammock, swung under an apple-tree, is one thing ; but nature, met face to face, without aid from books or from remembered poetical fervors, is quite another thing. How many persons actually climb a hill-top, unless it is the fashion ? How many feed their souls by communion with the sea ?

How many find the haunts of wild flowers, or know the floral almanac? How many recognize the various songs of birds, and can predict the migrations of these winged poets? How many feel anything but wrath at the physical discomfort of a snow-storm?

When a man has a sincere admiration and awe in presence of the works of the Creator, he will be in a mood to estimate Emerson at his true value. But fancy an ignoble man, a philistine, reading this: "I see the spectacle of morning from the hill-top over against my house, from daybreak to sunrise, with emotions which an angel might share. The long, slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea, I seem to partake its rapid transformations: the active enchantments reach my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind. How does nature deify us with a few and cheap elements! Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sunset and moonrise my Paphos and unimaginable realms of faerie; broad noon shall be my England of the senses and the understanding; the night shall be my Germany of mystic philosophy and dreams."

Colder people will think this an outburst of the riotous blood of youth; yet it is only in Shakespeare and in kindred geniuses that the blood riots so.

Observe this also: "Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."

"Pantheism!" shouts the ecclesiastic. Not so, but rather the losing of mortal sense in contemplation of the infinite. While we are quoting, it may be well to look at a passage already referred to, which, though in the phrases of to-day, was written nearly forty years ago: "Now we learn what patient periods must round themselves before the rock is formed, then before the rock is broken, and the first lichen race has disintegrated the thinnest external plate into soil, and opened the door for the remote Flora, Fauna, Ceres, and Pomona, to come in. How far off yet is the trilobite! how far the quadruped! how inconceivably remote is man! All duly arrive, and then race after race of men. It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato, and the preaching of the immortality of the soul. Yet all must come, as surely as the first atom has two sides."

Notice also this prophetic stanza, prefixed to the same essay :

“ A subtle chain of countless rings
 The next unto the farthest brings ;
 The eye reads omens where it goes,
 And speaks all languages the rose ;
 And, striving to be man, the worm
 Mounts through all the spires of form.”

To state the religious doctrines of Emerson is a matter of delicacy. If religion were merely the equivalent of piety, it would be an easier task. But we observe a cautious phraseology, born not of unbelief, but of a high and rare sense of the value of words. He avoids the bald and positive terms in which unreflecting minds speak of the Infinite. He sees only God in his works and in the operation of his laws, and therefore can not picture his personal attributes, as Phidias might have thought of Jove. This sensitive conscience in terms has led some persons to accuse him of leaving God out of his theories. But Emerson is no atheist nor pantheist. He is full of natural piety, filial toward the Creator, and brotherly toward mankind. Both his poetry and his prose abound with lively descriptions of nature, and show the utmost delight in every sight and sound of the material world ; and yet in every hymn the undertone of harmony which is heard is the joy of the soul in these manifestations of the Divine Author of beauty. He tells us : “ The aspect of Nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from Nature the lesson of worship.” And again : “ Is not prayer also a study of truth—a sally of the soul into the unfound Infinite ? No man ever prayed heartily without learning something.”

It is desirable, perhaps, to look a little more closely at what our author has proposed to himself to do. The object of modern philosophy, as Macaulay expressed it, is fruit ; to accomplish something beneficial to mankind. The arts and sciences are studied to increase knowledge and practical power ; ethics and religions are cultivated to develop truth, justice, and piety ; letters and the fine arts are used to make clear the perception of beauty and symmetry, and to furnish the mind with agreeable images and objects of thought. Philosophy should unite all these forces for the well-being of the race. “ Fruit ” is not simply what is good in the material sense. It includes sound thinking, good laws, humane institutions, wise

marriages, and a high tone of morality, public and private ; and its ultimate result should be 'in peopling the whole earth with well-descended, well-trained, pure-minded, generous, and prosperous societies of men and women. Now, although Emerson has pointedly avoided a system, it is not the less true that all the elements we have mentioned are steadily held up before the reader. This being the grand aim of philosophy, Emerson has a rightful place among the benefactors as well as among the lights of the age. His first work (as it stands in his volumes) is entitled "Nature"; and it contains, besides its grand and pregnant introduction, "Commodity" (material advantage), "Beauty," "Language," "Discipline," "Idealism," "Spirit," and "Prospects." It came before men unheralded, and, one might almost say, at first, unheeded. But what a challenge it was to the old world of thought and of men ! He had turned his back on the past, and struck out a new course, across an untraveled ocean. The terms he used were his own. The curious, lucid, compact style was his own. Extreme parsimony was evident : never a word too much ; always the word chosen was the one inevitable word. In this small treatise are the germs, or rather the prophecies, of his future volumes. It seems like an original essence with a power and a flavor unknown before. Nothing that concerns man seems to have been omitted ; but the chief stress is laid upon the need of high ideals in life. Nature is shown not merely as a background or a theatre for man's activities, but as a source of beauty and strength, working with and for us, and always leading us to worship.

As Emerson makes use of philosophy only to benefit men, and passes it by when it leads to doubtful disputations, so, it must be admitted, he disregards the formal statement of dogmas and the prescriptive observances which constitute the popular notion of religion. We should not presume to supply his reasons except as far as they are apparent. But he seems to believe that the whole aim of religion should be to make men devout and moral ; and, as he regards the end only, he is indifferent toward the doctrines and ceremonies which have been associated with the simplicity of piety and good conduct.

In all that concerns the sterling worth of character, right living, and wise thinking, this first treatise is of the utmost value, wholly apart from its rare beauty and imaginative power. Succeeding essays and larger works have developed and illustrated these primal ideas. Their whole force is given to raising man to higher levels—

to enlarging the scope of ideas—to the quickening of conscience—to the practice of the best wisdom in daily life—and to the fostering of the finer spiritual intuitions. Surely this is fruit. And it is not the less actual and tangible because its serene philosophy is wreathed with flowers and enlivened with song.

There is a kind of fascination that is renewed and vivified when we turn over the volumes of early essays, merely from seeing the titles and head-lines. Each subject once had its season of profound interest, and has left its indelible record in the soul. The very indexes are finger-posts along the track of memory. History, self-reliance, compensation, spiritual laws, love, friendship, prudence, heroism, manners, gifts, character, poetry—these and many more are like the formulas of the chemist, and stand as symbols of remembered delights. All of them contain the familiar, clear sentences, interspersed with the density of proverbs and the apt illustrations from history; and all are pervaded by the subtle aroma of poetry. If such weighty and practical thoughts do not make the world better, it is because they are not read. For, if a man should be imbued with this wisdom and guided by these lofty aims, he would be as nearly perfect as is permitted to mortals.

Probably the most popular of Emerson's works is "Representative Men," a series of studies of character, finely contrasted and profoundly suggestive. Perhaps some of them are not wholly just. Something must be always allowed for the personal bias of a writer. There are some evident qualifications necessary to his estimate of Napoleon; and, with regard to the place he claims for Swedenborg, we must modestly but strongly dissent. For mystics, as such, there is a surely waning respect. Swedenborg may have given a sublime system to the world, but for him in his supernatural aspect, and for Jakob Boehme, for Fox in his dreaming days, and for the hysterical convulsionists who afflict themselves under certain ministrations of religion, there can not be a sentiment that rises much above pity. It is true, we are not all intellect. We have emotions, but it is the part of reason to control them; they are not to control us: otherwise a wayward child, a savage, or a Southern negro at a camp-meeting, would be a better model for imitation than the mystic himself.

One of these representative men is Montaigne. If there is any man whose manner has influenced our author, it is this first of personal essayists. Centuries have passed without dimming his fame, and without diminishing his hold upon readers. Every scholar,

every well-read gentleman, knows that he must go through Montaigne at some time. But the great Frenchman was wholly different in nature and in purpose from our great New-Englander. He occupied himself with more mundane affairs, with stories of camps and courts, with ransacking the stores of the ancient classics, and with pleasant disquisitions on every-day affairs, including his school-days, his amours, and his morbid liver. The difference in the plane of thought is enormous, but *the tone*, it must be confessed, is often the same in the Yankee as in the Gascon.

The article upon Goethe is one of the author's most finished works. The style is marvelously perfect; the opening sentences are clear and bright as mountain-brooks. To any one of mature age and reasonable cultivation, who should be in doubt as to the merits and as to the charm of Emerson, this would afford a happy solution.

"English Traits" is the title of one of the *best* of Emerson's works. We say the best, because it concerns the island which is the center of thought and affection for all English-speaking people, and because it has a delightful mixture of shrewd observation and pungent comment. Many eyes have looked upon the men and manners, the works and institutions, of the British Isles, but none with such a fatal certainty of vision. Under the heads of "Race," "Ability," "Manners," "Character," "Wealth," "Aristocracy," "Universities," "Religion," "Literature," and a few others, he has made almost a chemical analysis of the constituents of the body politic. The book *is* England dissolved in ink. In most books of travel the writer is disagreeably in the foreground; he will not get himself out of the way, that we may see the landscape or the people. There is nothing of this in the "English Traits." There are only observations and results. Without wasting time in superlatives, we may say that this is such a summary of the origin, development, institutions, and social traits of England, as was never made before of that country, or of any country. We have sketches of Wordsworth and Coleridge that are as strong and literal as the pictures of Holbein; also delightful interviews with Carlyle and Landor. Coleridge makes a rather poor figure—"a short and stout old man, leaning on a cane," and with not much to say except with regard to his detestation of Unitarians. Wordsworth appears in a desperately prosy vein. He shows narrowness, pique, envy, and other belittling traits. Emerson's estimate of his poetry is high; his view of the man is not ennobling. Readers who have seen Maclise's

outline portrait of the great man, as he sits pensively and mild-eyed, with an unsubstantial body, thin legs, shrunken cheeks, and a noble dome of head, will never forget the impression. Maclise's sketch is called a caricature; it seems rather a likeness of a poet in a humdrum mood, showing the soul in a kind of limp undress. The intellectual crown seems top-heavy for want of fleshly support. There is evidently something behind the dreamy eyes; but a feeble irresolution in the lines of the mouth seems to render the spiritual power abortive. This masterly portrait and our author's unconsciously satirical description precisely complement each other.

The chapter upon "Literature" in the "English Traits" is brief, but full of thought and of the materials for thought. His aspiring Platonism dictates the choice of his favorites, yet he has a word also for the sturdy and manly realistic writers. He is perhaps a little too positive to do justice to natures and faculties alien to his own, and we read with some regret his sweeping condemnation of authors of known ability and worth. Pope was as far as possible from an ideal or imaginative poet, but Emerson's gibe seems quite unworthy. The author of the "Essay on Man" and of "The Universal Prayer" is not simply the poet to make couplets "fit to put round frosted cake." Chaucer, too, is something more than "a hard painter" of contemporary manners. And Southey, who was a scholar, and a man of sentiment and sensibility, deserves, so we must think, a different recognition. "He pestered me with Southey," says our author of Landor; "but who is Southey?" These are drawbacks, to be sure, but they are characteristic, and one would not spare even a single damnatory phrase.

Literature still remains greater than any one man; no critic has mastered even a section of it. Witness the brilliant and all-accomplished Taine and his scant estimates of English genius. Witness the compendiums and handbooks.

That the "English Traits" was not popular in England is not remarkable. The time for a just appreciation by Englishmen of monarchy, aristocracy, and throned bishops has not come. The noble of thirty descents does not relish the name of "filthy thieves" as applied to the followers of William the Norman. The churchman, who is dumb when the Thirty-nine Articles are called in question, does not like being compared to a box-turtle.

Among Emerson's essays written in his prime are those grouped under the general title of "The Conduct of Life." The last of these, "Illusions," appeared in the first number of "The Atlantic

Monthly," November, 1857. Another brilliant volume appeared in 1870, entitled "Society and Solitude." The last of the series, if we mistake not, "Letters and Social Aims," was published in 1875. If these three volumes have less spirit and a lighter tone, they are upon topics of more general interest, and are filled with apposite reminiscences from history and biography. The early essays have perhaps more weight of thought and more imagination, and show more lively impressions of natural objects. The later ones are full of practical wisdom and the best results of wide reading, and are more in the current of modern ideas. Each series has its own indescribable charm. Under every head is gathered a succession of profound or suggestive observations, apparently disconnected, yet in a line with the controlling thought. Nothing is more difficult than to give an account of such compositions; they have no counterparts. The chief thing that remains in mind is the brilliancy that illuminates each field of thought by turns. When the electric light at Nantasket was directed across the harbor to the opposite Hingham shore, the silver track brightened every wave, made a ghost of every passing vessel, rimmed the cedar-tufted hills, and was reflected back from the far-off clusters of seaside villas. In reading Emerson, the images, thoughts, and feelings rise into view; the light of his genius falls upon them, and there is a track of radiance to the verge of the horizon.

There is no short way to an understanding of this. The reader must learn the secret for himself. One can not give the substance of a proverb, being all substance; nor a lamina of diamond, the gem being inseparable without destruction. These thoughts are primal types. Of the odor of rose we simply say it is rose.

We had intended to make a brief collection of striking sentences. Two came to mind. The first was this: "It makes a great difference in the force of any sentence whether there be a man behind it or no." This was the other: "The democrat is a young conservative; the conservative is an old democrat. The aristocrat is the democrat ripe and gone to seed." Then the selection became as bewildering as the choice of sticks in a thicket; all was proverb, and the collection had to be abandoned.

One of the early and vulgar notions about Emerson has well-nigh disappeared: we refer to the alleged obscurity of style and the enigmatic character of his sentences. It is true that Emerson does not write so that "he who runs may read"; neither did Bacon, nor Hume, nor Pascal. There is no difficulty in Emerson's *style*, for

that is crystal clear in meaning ; the obstacle to rapid or careless reading is the weight of thought. Coleridge tells a story of a little girl in Germany who was in the habit of assisting him in reading the language. Looking over his shoulder one day, and finding him occupied with the "Critique of Pure Reason," she exclaimed with charming *naïveté*: "Why, Mr. Coleridge, do you read Kant? I can't understand Kant!"

Emerson, like Carlyle, was at first strongly affected by the intellect of modern Germany, chiefly by Goethe and Richter. In his perverse fashion of utterance, in his whims, his grim humor, and especially in his crabbed diction, Richter is the descendant of Rabelais, though a fairer and cleaner soul. The "Sartor Resartus" is purely Rabelaisian and Jean-Paulesque ; as its sentences—given to "yawing, not minding the helm, and going stern-foremost"—and its grotesque and malodorous names, such as *Smelfungus* and *Teufelsdröckh*, fully attest. Carlyle delved in this German field long enough to be strongly influenced in his own style ; and his early sentences were as unmistakable as the whimsicalities of Sterne (another of Rabelais's offspring). But "the crooked" has been "made straight, and the rough places plain." The stream of English flows through Carlyle's maturer works with an equable, broad, and magnificent current. In his articles on Burns and Voltaire the old strength is visible ; but the saturnine humor and the droll epithets are left out, and the sentences no longer startle us with acrobatic poses.

There was a mild Teutonic flavor in Emerson's early style ; and, as the traits of German thought were then more noticeable than now, the unreflecting public at once accused our philosopher of being an imitator of Carlyle. The statement was absurd, because the native qualities of the two men have always been diverse. There was never any similarity between Carlyle and Emerson except in regard to acuteness, honesty, and fearlessness. If there was at one time observable in their writing the influence of the same German masters, there has since been a growing divergence. They have been occupied with widely different themes, and have gone on, each in his own way. The one has produced essays and poems, dealing mostly with abstract ideas ; the other has written voluminous histories, biographies, and reviews. The one crystallizes thought into proverbs ; the other can be downright when he will, but often indulges in long periods, connected, oratorical, and rising to climaxes. Carlyle has more energy, Emerson more insight. Carlyle is planted

upon the actual, in the domain of the understanding ; Emerson soars on the wings of imagination. Carlyle portrays kings, soldiers, and statesmen, with hard outlines and abundant detail ; Emerson shows us the souls of poets, prophets, and philosophers, and conveys their wisdom and love. The history of a German prince, half robber and all tyrant, may not interest future ages ; but the "Essays on Nature" are a part of the permanent treasures of thinking men, like the "Phædo" of Plato, and the "Essays" of Lord Bacon.

The poetry of Emerson is separated from his prose by a narrow and sometimes imperceptible line. Quoting once more his own sentence, we see that the pursuit of "a truth which is beauty" and of "a beauty which is truth" are often two modes of describing the same process. As his philosophy is often conveyed in highly figurative language and illumined by flashes from the imagination, so his verse, though full of the vital characteristics of poetry, has always a philosophic tone and aim.

The elements that would have made Emerson a poet, skilled in more varied strains, and able to touch the hearts of all men, are comparatively few, and are often shared by natures greatly inferior to his. The sense of comedy and the feeling of jollity seem wanting ; his pleasure is of a high, placid quality. Though there is no gloom, yet there is not a laugh, nor scarcely a smile, in all that he has written—so much, perhaps, for having had seven ancestors in black cloth. There are no hymns to Bacchus or Venus. With this calm-eyed man one would think there had never been a hurried heart-beat. There is no trace of love's volcanic fires, not even the ashes or cinders of an extinct passion. He almost comes within Luther's malediction—

"Who loves not woman, wine, and song," etc.

All the great poets have been furious lovers, and the world is unwilling to call him poet who has not at some time put his soul into a love-story like Coleridge's "Genevieve." And, truly, it sets one thinking how it is that he whom love has never inspired, nor wine warmed, nor passion tempted—who neither laughs at men nor with them—who makes an abstraction of religion, and to whom all creatures are as pawns upon the world's chessboard—how such a man, with the residue of nature and of human nature, can be a great poet, as Emerson undoubtedly is. Three or four elements are clearly his : a soul sensitive to beauty, an instinctive perception of human nature, the power of comparison and analogy, and the force

of imagination. The term imagination is so belittled and misapplied in superficial criticism that one hesitates to use it without some phrase to indicate its quality. For instance, people speak of the pretty conceits of "The Culprit Fay" as displaying "imagination," as if that were some finery put on, and not the very soul of the thought. In this great quality Emerson is probably first of living men; certainly no one but Tennyson can dispute the claim. "Each and All" is a series of pictures that display imaginative power, placing the poet and the reader *in the scene* as sketched. The lines are too familiar to be quoted anew:

"Little thinks in the field, yon red-cloaked clown,
Of thee from the hill-top looking down," etc., etc.

It was imagination that added to the flight of the Humble-Bee over beds of wild flowers—

"All was picture as he passed."

It was imagination that inspired the thought—

"Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world."

"The Chartist's Complaint" is pure imagination, and a sure test of the power of appreciation in a reader.

On a much higher key is "The Problem," an imaginative poem, wholly grand, and at times sublime. The lines seem fated—done by a stroke of creation; not wrought in detail, but spoken into being. Emerson himself has said that Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality" is the high-water mark of poetry in this century; and the judgment is just, unless "The Problem" be the greater. And it is our judgment that this poem, as a whole, has more depth of thought, imaginative insight, and power of expression, than any since the time of Milton. The volume of Emerson's poems seems to open at this place of its own accord, and the thrilling lines have been so often read that they seem to have always existed. We must quote a few, no matter how familiar:

"The hand that rounded Peter's dome,
And groined the aisles of Christian Rome,
Wrought in a sad sincerity;
Himself from God he could not free;
He builded better than he knew—
The conscious stone to beauty grew.

Earth proudly wears the Parthenon
 As the best gem upon her zone;
 And Morning opes with haste her lids
 To gaze upon the Pyramids;
 O'er England's abbeys bends the sky,
 As on its friends, with kindred eye;
 For, out of Thought's interior sphere,
 These wonders rose to upper air;
 And Nature gladly gave them place,
 Adopted them into her race,
 And granted them an equal date
 With Andes and with Ararat."

In this poem we see Emerson's belief that the divine influences neither began with Moses nor ended with Jesus; that all sincere prayer and praise are inspired; and that—

"One accent of the Holy Ghost
 The heedless world hath never lost."

By far the greater number of his poems are upon the sights and sounds of the world of nature. The poem called "May-Day" is full of the fluttering of sparrows, the raucous cry of wild geese, the piping of robins and blackbirds. We see the tide of heat rolling northward, and the flushing of maples and oaks. Pines and birches breathe their fragrance, flowers peep out from among dead leaves, and life returns to every nook of field and forest. The charm of this poem is like that of nature itself. It is sweet and fresh, but mobile and restless, full of surprises, and with unexpected changes of key. The measure is short and fitful, not to be scanned by pedagogues. Impulse rules, as in the soul of a bird while he sings, tilting on the tip of a bough. As the poem stands, it is a type of a lovely wild country, unspoiled by man, with lonely lakes and plashing brooks, with majestic growths and the luxuriance of ferns, mosses, and flowers, the air vocal with birds, and every leafy fastness peopled with the bright-eyed and shy favorites of nature. If it were made methodical in rhyme and rhythm, it might perhaps be turned into a dull pleasure-ground, as bare of nature and of romance as a city square.

But Emerson knows also the hollowness of society, and has touched the vices of pride and insincerity with a wand like Shakespeare's. In his "Good-by" there is a solid energy of reprobation which the poor and unfashionable will always admire:

“ Good-by to Flattery’s fawning face ;
 To Grandeur with his wise grimace ;
 To upstart Wealth’s averted eye ;
 To supple office, low and high ;
 To crowded halls, to court and street ;
 To frozen hearts and hasting feet ;
 To those who go, and those who come ;
 Good-by, proud world ! I’m going home.”

Our poet is also so terse in expression that his thoughts might be selected out and printed as epigrams. Multitudes of these are floating in the memories of man. In his sad “Terminus” we have a line that Milton might have written :

“ Obey the voice at eve obeyed at prime.”

Notice the power of this quatrain :

“ Though love repine, and reason chafe,
 There came a voice without reply—
 ‘Tis man’s perdition to be safe,
 When for the truth he ought to die.’”

The poem entitled “Brahma,” too hastily ridiculed at first, is only a compact rendering of the leading ideas of the Hindoo mythology ; but it is a rendering that no other living man could have made. Another striking poem is the “Boston Hymn,” written for the Day of Emancipation. The overthrow of slavery was a gigantic fact—an event of greater importance than any in our history ; and the poet has celebrated it in stanzas rough and impressive as Stonehenge. Here are a few :

“ God said, I am tired of Kings,
 I suffer them no more ;
 Up to my ear the morning brings
 The outrage of the poor.

“ I will have never a noble,
 No lineage counted great ;
 Fishers and choppers and plowmen
 Shall constitute a state.

“ Pay ransom to the owner,
 And fill the bag to the brim.
 Who is the owner ? The slave is owner,
 And ever was. Pay him.

“O North! give him beauty for rags,
 And honor, O South! for his shame;
 Nevada! coin thy golden crags
 With Freedom’s image and name.”

In “Monadnock,” a bold and irregular but most forcible rhapsody, occur many nervous lines. We have room only for these (the mountain speaks) :

“ . . . I await the bard and sage
 Who in large thoughts, like fair pearl-seed,
 Shall string Monadnock like a bead.
 Comes that cheerful troubadour,
 This mound shall throb his face before,
 As when, with inward fires and pain,
 It rose a bubble from the plain.”

But it is time to stop quotation. If there were space a volume could be filled. The poems are full of texts and mottoes for discourse ; they form a treasury which future generations will pore over. Posterity will envy those who had the fortune to live in daily sight of his gracious features, and within the sound of his noble voice.

Every original genius presents a new phase to the world ; and the verse-maker who never attempted an epic, nor a song, nor an idyl of human passion, and who used no variety of meters, and no prettiness of phrase, will come to be regarded as one of the great poets of the century. Both as poet and as philosopher the fame of Emerson is secure ; and, if the theory of human progression does not prove a delusion, his fame must continue to grow as the years roll on. His character will add to his fame, or rather will become a part of it ; for a purer and nobler nature has seldom existed. He has had the reverence and love of all who have known him, and his “Terminus” will be read with mourning in all nations of men.

FRANCIS H. UNDERWOOD.