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# CRITICAL MISCELLANIES

BY

JOHN MORLEY

VOL. I.

**Essay 5: Emerson**

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## EMERSON.

A great interpreter of life ought not himself to need interpretation, least of all can he need it for contemporaries. When time has wrought changes of fashion, mental and social, the critic serves a useful turn in giving to a poet or a teacher his true place, and in recovering ideas and points of view that are worth preserving. Interpretation of this kind Emerson cannot require. His books are no palimpsest, 'the prophet's holograph, defiled, erased, and covered by a monk's.' What he has written is fresh, legible, and in full conformity with the manners and the diction of the day, and those who are unable to understand him without gloss and comment are in fact not prepared to understand what it is that the original has to say. Scarcely any literature is so entirely unprofitable as the so-called criticism that overlays a pithy text with a windy sermon. For our time at least Emerson may best be left to be his own expositor.

Nor is Emerson, either, in the case of those whom the world has failed to recognise, and whom therefore it is the business of the critic to make known and to define. It is too soon to say in what particular niche among the teachers of the race posterity will place him; enough that in our own generation he has already been accepted as one of the wise masters, who, being called to high thinking for generous ends, did not fall below his vocation, but, steadfastly pursuing the pure search for truth, without propounding a system or founding a school or cumbering himself overmuch about applications, lived the life of the spirit, and breathed into other men a strong desire after the right governance of the soul. All this is generally realised and understood, and men may now be left to find their way to the Emersonian doctrine without the critic's prompting. Though it is only the other day that Emerson walked the earth and was alive and among us, he is already one of the privileged few whom the reader approaches in the mood of settled respect, and whose names have surrounded themselves with an atmosphere of religion.

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It is not particularly profitable, again, to seek for Emerson one of the labels out of the philosophic handbooks. Was he the prince of Transcendentalists, or the prince of Idealists? Are we to look for the sources of his thought in Kant or Jacobi, in Fichte or Schelling? How does he stand towards Parmenides and Zeno, the Egotheism of the Sufis, or the position of the Megareans? Shall we put him on the shelf with the Stoics or the Mystics, with Quietist, Pantheist, Determinist? If life were long, it might be worth while to trace Emerson's affinities with the philosophic schools; to collect and infer his answers to the everlasting problems of psychology and metaphysics; to extract a set of coherent and reasoned opinions about knowledge and faculty, experience and consciousness, truth and necessity, the absolute and the relative. But such inquiries would only take us the further away from the essence and vitality of Emerson's mind and teaching. In philosophy proper Emerson made no contribution of his own, but accepted, apparently without much examination of the other side, from Coleridge after Kant, the intuitive, *à priori* and realist theory respecting the sources of human knowledge, and the objects that are within the cognisance of the human faculties. This was his starting-point, and within its own sphere of thought he cannot be said to have carried it any further. What he did was to light up these doctrines with the rays of ethical and poetic imagination. As it has been justly put, though Emersonian transcendentalism is usually spoken of as a philosophy, it is more justly regarded as a gospel.<sup>[1]</sup> But before dwelling more on this, let us look into the record of his life, of which we may say in all truth that no purer, simpler, and more harmonious story can be found in the annals of far-shining men.

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### I.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born at Boston, May 25, 1803. He was of an ancient and honourable English stock, who had transplanted themselves, on one side from Cheshire and Bedfordshire, and on the other from Durham and York, a hundred and seventy years before. For seven or eight

generations in a direct and unbroken line his forefathers had been preachers and divines, not without eminence in the Puritan tradition of New England. His second name came into the family with Rebecca Waldo, with whom at the end of the seventeenth century one Edward Emerson had intermarried, and whose family had fled from the Waldensian valleys and that slaughter of the saints which Milton called on Heaven to avenge. Every tributary, then, that made Emerson what he was, flowed not only from Protestantism, but from 'the Protestantism of the Protestant religion.' When we are told that Puritanism inexorably locked up the intelligence of its votaries in a dark and straitened chamber, it is worthy to be remembered that the genial, open, lucid, and most comprehensive mind of Emerson was the ripened product of a genealogical tree that at every stage of its growth had been vivified by Puritan sap.

Not many years after his birth, Emerson's mother was left a widow with narrow means, and he underwent the wholesome training of frugality in youth. When the time came, he was sent to Harvard. When Clough visited America a generation later, the collegiate training does not appear to have struck him very favourably. 'They learn French and history and German, and a great many more things than in England, but only imperfectly.' This was said from the standard of Rugby and Balliol, and the method that Clough calls imperfect had merits of its own. The pupil lost much in a curriculum that had a certain rawness about it, compared with the traditional culture that was at that moment (1820) just beginning to acquire a fresh hold within the old gray quadrangles of Oxford. On the other hand, the training at Harvard struck fewer of those superfluous roots in the mind, which are only planted that they may be presently cast out again with infinite distraction and waste.

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When his schooling was over, Emerson began to prepare himself for the ministrations of the pulpit, and in 1826 and 1827 he preached in divers places. Two years later he was ordained, and undertook the charge of an important Unitarian Church in Boston. It was not very long before the strain of forms, comparatively moderate as it was in the Unitarian body, became too heavy to be borne. Emerson found that he could no longer accept the usual view of the Communion Service, even in its least sacramental interpretation. To him the rite was purely spiritual in origin and intent, and at the best only to be retained as a commemoration. The whole world, he said, had been full of idols and ordinances and forms, when 'the Almighty God was pleased to qualify and send forth a man to teach men that they must serve him with the heart; that only that life was religious which was thoroughly good; that sacrifice was smoke and forms were shadows. This man lived and died true to that purpose; and now with his blessed word and life before us, Christians must contend that it is a matter of vital importance, really a duty, to commemorate him by a certain form, whether that form be agreeable to their understandings or not. Is not this to make vain the gift of God? Is not this to make men forget that not forms but duties—not names but righteousness and love—are enjoined?'

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He was willing to continue the service with that explanation, and on condition that he should not himself partake of the bread and wine. The congregation would fain have kept one whose transparent purity of soul had attached more than his heresy had alienated. But the innovation was too great, and Emerson resigned his charge (1832). For some five or six years longer he continued occasionally to preach, and more than one congregation would have accepted him. But doubts on the subject of public prayer began to weigh upon his mind. He suspected the practice by which one man offered up prayer vicariously and collectively for the assembled congregation. Was not that too, like the Communion Service, a form that tended to deaden the spirit? Under the influence of this and other scruples he finally ceased to preach (1838), and told his friends that henceforth he must find his pulpit in the platform of the lecturer. 'I see not,' he said, 'why this is not the most flexible of all organs of opinion, from its popularity and from its newness, permitting you to say what you think, without any shackles of proscription. The pulpit in our age certainly gives forth an obstructed and uncertain sound; and the faith of those in it, if men of genius, may differ so much from that of those under it as to embarrass the conscience of the speaker, because so much is attributed to him from the fact of standing there.' The lecture was an important discovery, and it has had many consequences in American culture. Among the more undesirable of them has been (certainly not in Emerson's own case) the importation of the pulpit accent into subjects where one would be happier with out it.

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Earlier in the same year in which he retired from his church at Boston, Emerson had lost his young wife. Though we may well believe that he bore these agitations with self-control, his health suffered, and in the spring of 1833 he started for Europe. He came to be accused of saying captious things about travelling. There are three wants, he said, that can never be satisfied: that of the rich who want something more; that of the sick who want something different; and that of the traveller who says, Anywhere but here. Their restlessness, he told his countrymen, argued want of character. They were infatuated with 'the rococo toy of Italy.' As if what was true anywhere were not true everywhere; and as if a man, go where he will, can find more beauty or worth than he carries. All this was said, as we shall see that much else was said by Emerson, by way of reaction and protest against instability of soul in the people around him. 'Here or nowhere,' said Goethe inversely to unstable Europeans yearning vaguely westwards, 'here or nowhere is thine America.' To the use of travel for its own ends, Emerson was of course as much alive as other people. 'There is in every constitution a certain solstice when the stars stand still in our inward firmament, and when there is required some foreign force, some diversion or alteration, to prevent stagnation. And as a medical remedy, travel seems one of the best.' He found it so in 1833. But this and his two other voyages to Europe make no Odyssey. When Voltaire was pressed to visit Rome, he declared that he would be better pleased with some new and free English book than with all the glories of amphitheatre and of arch. Emerson in like

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manner seems to have thought more of the great writers whom he saw in Europe than of buildings or of landscapes. 'Am I,' he said, 'who have hung over their works in my chamber at home, not to see these men in the flesh, and thank them, and interchange some thoughts with them?' The two Englishmen to whom he owed most were Coleridge and Wordsworth; and the younger writer, some eight years older than himself, in whom his liveliest interest had been kindled, was Carlyle. He was fortunate enough to have converse with all three, and he has told the world how these illustrious men in their several fashions and degrees impressed him.<sup>[2]</sup> It was Carlyle who struck him most. 'Many a time upon the sea, in my homeward voyage, I remembered with joy the favoured condition of my lonely philosopher,' cherishing visions more than divine 'in his stern and blessed solitude.' So Carlyle, with no less cordiality, declares that among the figures that he could recollect as visiting his Nithsdale hermitage—'all like Apparitions now, bringing with them airs from Heaven, or the blasts from the other region, there is not one of a more undoubtedly supernal character than yourself; so pure and still, with intents so charitable; and then vanishing too so soon into the azure Inane, as an Apparition should.'

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In external incident Emerson's life was uneventful. Nothing could be simpler, of more perfect unity, or more free from disturbing episodes that leaves scars on men. In 1834 he settled in old Concord, the home of his ancestors, then in its third century. 'Concord is very bare,' wrote Clough, who made some sojourn there in 1852, 'and so is the country in general; it is a small sort of village, almost entirely of wood houses, painted white, with Venetian blinds, green outside, with two white wooden churches. There are some American elms of a weeping kind, and sycamores, i.e. planes; but the wood is mostly pine—white pine and yellow pine—somewhat scrubby, occupying the tops of the low banks, and marshy hay-land between, very brown now. A little brook runs through to the Concord River.'<sup>[3]</sup> The brook flowed across the few acres that were Emerson's first modest homestead. 'The whole external appearance of the place,' says one who visited him, 'suggests old-fashioned comfort and hospitality. Within the house the flavour of antiquity is still more noticeable. Old pictures look down from the walls; quaint blue-and-white china holds the simple dinner; old furniture brings to mind the generations of the past. At the right as you enter is Mr. Emerson's library, a large square room, plainly furnished, but made pleasant by pictures and sunshine. The homely shelves that line the walls are well filled with books. There is a lack of showy covers or rich bindings, and each volume seems to have soberly grown old in constant service. Mr. Emerson's study is a quiet room upstairs.'

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Fate did not spare him the strokes of the common lot. His first wife died after three short years of wedded happiness. He lost a little son, who was the light of his eyes. But others were born to him, and in all the relations and circumstances of domestic life he was one of the best and most beloved of men. He long carried in his mind the picture of Carlyle's life at Craigenputtock as the ideal for the sage, but his own choice was far wiser and happier, 'not wholly in the busy world, nor quite beyond it.'

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'Besides my house,' he told Carlyle in 1838, 'I have, I believe, 22,000 dollars, whose income in ordinary years is six per cent. I have no other tithe or glebe except the income of my winter lectures, which was last winter 800 dollars. Well, with this income, here at home, I am a rich man. I stay at home and go abroad at my own instance, I have food, warmth, leisure, books, friends. Go away from home, I am rich no longer. I never have a dollar to spend on a fancy. As no wise man, I suppose, ever was rich in the sense of *freedom to spend*, because of the inundation of claims, so neither am I, who am not wise. But at home I am rich—rich enough for ten brothers. My wife Lidian is an incarnation of Christianity,—I call her Asia,—and keeps my philosophy from Antinomianism; my mother, whitest, mildest, most conservative of ladies, whose only exception to her universal preference for old things is her son; my boy, a piece of love and sunshine, well worth my watching from morning to night;—these, and three domestic women, who cook and sew and run for us, make all my household. Here I sit and read and write, with very little system, and, as far as regards composition, with the most fragmentary result: paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle.'

'In summer, with the aid of a neighbour, I manage my garden; and a week ago I set out on the west side of my house forty young pine trees to protect me or my son from the wind of January. The ornament of the place is the occasional presence of some ten or twelve persons, good and wise, who visit us in the course of the year.'

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As time went on he was able to buy himself 'a new plaything'—a piece of woodland, of more than forty acres, on the border of a little lake half a mile wide or more, called Walden Pond. 'In these May days,' he told Carlyle, then passionately struggling with his *Cromwell*, with the slums of Chelsea at his back, 'when maples, poplars, oaks, birches, walnut, and pine, are in their spring glory, I go thither every afternoon, and cut with my hatchet an Indian path through the thicket, all along the bold shore, and open the finest pictures' (1845).

He loved to write at 'large leisure in noble mornings, opened by prayer or by readings of Plato, or whatsoever else is dearest to the Morning Muse.' Yet he could not wholly escape the recluse's malady. He confesses that he sometimes craves 'that stimulation which every capricious, languid, and languent study needs.' Carlyle's potent concentration stirs his envy. The work of the garden and the orchard he found very fascinating, eating up days and weeks; 'nay, a brave scholar should shun it like gambling, and take refuge in cities and hotels from these pernicious enchantments.'

In the doings of his neighbourhood he bore his part; he took a manly interest in civil affairs, and was sensible, shrewd, and helpful in matters of practical judgment. Pilgrims, sane and insane, the beardless and the gray-headed, flocked to his door, far beyond the dozen persons good and wise whom he had mentioned to Carlyle. 'Uncertain, troubled, earnest wanderers through the midnight of the moral world beheld his intellectual fire as a beacon burning on a hill-top, and climbing the difficult ascent, looked forth into the surrounding obscurity more hopefully than hitherto' (*Hawthorne*). To the most intractable of Transcendental bores, worst species of the genus, he was never impatient, nor denied himself; nor did he ever refuse counsel where the case was not yet beyond hope. Hawthorne was for a time his neighbour (1842-45). 'It was good,' says Hawthorne, 'to meet him in the wood-paths, or sometimes in our avenue, with that pure intellectual gleam diffused about his presence like the garment of a shining one; and he so quiet, so simple, so without pretension, encountering each man alive as if expecting to receive more than he could impart.'

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The most remarkable of all his neighbours was Thoreau, who for a couple of years lived in a hut which he had built for himself on the shore of Walden Pond. If he had not written some things with a considerable charm of style, Thoreau might have been wisely neglected as one of the crazy. But Emerson was struck by the originality of his life, and thought it well in time to edit the writings of one 'who was bred to no profession; never married; lived alone; never went to Church; never voted; refused to pay a tax to the State; ate no flesh, drank no wine, never knew the use of tobacco; had no temptations to fight against, no appetites, no passions, refused all invitations, preferred a good Indian to highly cultivated people, and said he would rather go to Oregon than to London.' The world has room for every type, so that it be not actively noxious, and this whimsical egotist may well have his place in the catalogue. He was, after all, in his life only a compendium, on a scale large enough to show their absurdity, of all those unsocial notions which Emerson in other manifestations found it needful to rebuke. Yet we may agree that many of his paradoxes strike home with Socratic force to the heart of a civilisation that wise men know to be too purely material, too artificial, and too capriciously diffused.

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Emerson himself was too sane ever to fall into the hermit's trap of banishment to the rocks and echoes. 'Solitude,' he said, 'is impracticable, and society fatal.' He steered his way as best he could between these two irreconcilable necessities. He had, as we have seen, the good sense to make for himself a calling which brought him into healthy contact with bodies of men, and made it essential that he should have his listeners in some degree in his mind, even when they were not actually present to the eye. As a preacher Emerson has been described as making a deep impression on susceptible hearers of a quiet mind, by 'the calm dignity of his bearing, the absence of all oratorical effort, and the singular simplicity and directness of a manner free from the least trace of dogmatic assumption.' 'Not long before,' says this witness, 'I had listened to a wonderful sermon by Chalmers, whose force and energy, and vehement but rather turgid eloquence, carried for the moment all before him—his audience becoming like clay in the hands of the potter. But I must confess that the pregnant thoughts and serene self-possession of the young Boston minister had a greater charm for me than all the rhetorical splendours of Chalmers' (*Ireland*, 141).

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At the lecturer's desk the same attraction made itself still more effectually felt. 'I have heard some great speakers and some accomplished orators,' Mr. Lowell says, 'but never any that so moved and persuaded men as he. There is a kind of undertone in that rich barytone of his that sweeps our minds from their foothold into deep waters with a drift that we cannot and would not resist. Search for his eloquence in his books and you will perchance miss it, but meanwhile you will find that it has kindled all your thoughts.' The same effect was felt in its degree wherever he went, and he took pains not to miss it. He had made a study of his art, and was so skilful in his mastery of it that it seemed as if anybody might do all that he did and do it as well—if only a hundred failures had not proved the mistake.

In 1838 Emerson delivered an address in the Divinity School of Harvard, which produced a gusty shower of articles, sermons, and pamphlets, and raised him without will or further act of his to the high place of the heresiarch. With admirable singleness of mind, he held modestly aloof. 'There is no scholar,' he wrote to a friend, 'less willing or less able to be a polemic. I could not give account of myself if challenged. I delight in telling what I think, but if you ask me how I dare say so, or why it is so, I am the most helpless of men.' The year before, his oration on the American Scholar had filled Carlyle with delight. It was the first clear utterance, after long decades of years, in which he had 'heard nothing but infinite jangling and jabbering, and inarticulate twittering and screeching.' Then Carlyle enjoined on his American friend for rule of life, 'Give no ear to any man's praise or censure; know that that is *not* it; on the one side is as Heaven, if you have strength to keep silent and climb unseen; yet on the other side, yawning always at one's right hand and one's left, is the frightfullest Abyss and Pandemonium' (Dec. 8, 1837). Emerson's temperament and his whole method made the warning needless, and, as before, while 'vociferous platitudes were dinning his ears on all sides,' a whole world of thought was 'silently building itself in these calm depths.' But what would those two divinities of his, Plato and Socrates, have said of a man who 'could not give an account of himself if challenged'? Assuredly not every one who saith Plato, Plato, is admitted to that ideal kingdom.

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It was soon after this that the *Dial* was projected. It had its origin in the Transcendental Club, a little knot of speculative students at Boston, who met four or five times a year at one another's houses to discuss questions mainly theological, from more liberal points of view than was at that time common, 'the air then in America getting a little too close and stagnant.' The Club was first

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formed in 1836. The *Dial* appeared in 1840, and went on for four years at quarterly intervals. Emerson was a constant contributor, and for the last half of its existence he acted as editor. 'I submitted,' he told Carlyle, 'to what seemed a necessity of petty literary patriotism—I know not what else to call it—and took charge of our thankless little *Dial* here, without subscribers enough to pay even a publisher, much less any labourer; it has no penny for editor or contributor, nothing but abuse in the newspapers, or, at best, silence; but it serves as a sort of portfolio, to carry about a few poems or sentences which would otherwise be transcribed or circulated, and we always are waiting until somebody shall come and make it good. But I took it, and it took me and a great deal of good time to a small purpose' (July 1, 1842). On the whole one must agree that it was to small purpose. Emerson's name has reflected lustre on the *Dial*, but when his contributions are taken out, and, say, half a dozen besides, the residuum is in the main very poor stuff, and some of it has a droll resemblance to the talk between Mrs. Hominy and the Literary Ladies and the Honourable Elijah Pogram. Margaret Fuller—the Miranda, Zenobia, Hypatia, Minerva of her time, and a truly remarkable figure in the gallery of wonderful women—edited it for two years, and contributed many a vivid, dashing, exuberant, ebullient page. Her criticism of Goethe, for example, contains no final or valid word, but it is fresh, cordial, and frank, and no other prose contributor, again saving the one great name, has anything to say that is so readable. Nearly all the rest is extinct, and the *Dial* now finds itself far away from the sunshine of human interest.

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In 1841 the first series of Emerson's Essays was published, and three years later the second. The Poems were first collected in 1847, but the final version was not made until 1876. In 1847 Emerson paid his second visit to England, and delivered his lectures on Representative Men, collected and published in 1850. The books are said to have had a very slow sale, but the essays and lectures published in 1860, with the general title of *The Conduct of Life*, started with a sale of 2,500 copies, though that volume has never been considered by the Emersonian adept to contain most of the pure milk of the Word.

Then came that great event in the history of men and institutions, the Civil War. We look with anxiety for the part played by the serene thinker when the hour had struck for violent and heroic action. Emerson had hitherto been a Free Soiler; he had opposed the extension of slavery; and he favoured its compulsory extinction, with compensation on the plan of our own policy in the West Indies. He had never joined the active Abolitionists, nor did he see 'that there was any particular thing for him to do in it then.' 'Though I sometimes accept a popular call, and preach on Temperance or the Abolition of Slavery, I am sure to feel, before I have done with it, what an intrusion it is into another sphere, and so much loss of virtue in my own' (*To Carlyle*, 1844). But he missed no occasion of showing that in conviction and aim he was with good men. The infirmities of fanatics never hid from him either the transcendent purity of their motives or the grandeur of their cause. This is ever the test of the scholar: whether he allows intellectual fastidiousness to stand between him and the great issues of his time. 'Cannot the English,' he cried out to Carlyle, 'leave cavilling at petty failures and bad manners and at the dunce part, and leap to the suggestions and finger-pointings of the gods, which, above the understanding, feed the hopes and guide the wills of men?' These finger-pointings Emerson did not mistake. He spoke up for Garrison. John Brown was several times in Concord, and found a hearty welcome in Emerson's house. When Brown made his raid at Harper's Ferry, and the crisis became gradually sharper, Emerson felt that the time had come, and his voice was raised in clear tones. After the sword is drawn, it is deeds not words that interest and decide; but whenever the word of the student was needed Emerson was ready to give the highest expression to all that was best in his countrymen's mood during that greatest ordeal of our time. The inward regeneration of the individual had ever been the key to his teaching, and this teaching had been one of the forces that, like central fire in men's minds, nourished the heroism of the North in its immortal battle.

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The exaltation of national character produced by the Civil War opened new and wider acceptance for a great moral and spiritual teacher, and from the close of the war until his death in 1882, Emerson's ascendancy within his own sphere of action was complete, and the public recognition of him universal. Of story, there is no more to tell. He pursued his old way of reading, meditating, conversing, and public lecturing, almost to the end. The afternoon of his life was cloudless as the earlier day, and the shades of twilight fell in unbroken serenity. In his last years there was a partial failure of his memory, and more than one pathetic story is told of this tranquil and gradual eclipse. But 'to the last, even when the events of yesterday were occasionally obscured, his memory of the remote past was unclouded; he would tell about the friends of his early and middle life with unbroken vigour.' So, tended in his home by warm filial devotion, and surrounded by the reverent kindness of his village neighbours, this wise and benign man slowly passed away (April 27, 1882).<sup>[4]</sup>

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## II.

It cannot be truly said that Emerson is one of the writers who make their way more easily into our minds by virtue of style. That his writing has quality and flavour none but a pure pedant would deny. His more fervent votaries, however, provoke us with a challenge that goes far beyond this. They declare that the finish, charm, and beauty of the writing are as worthy of remark as the truth and depth of the thought. It is even 'unmatchable and radiant,' says one.



Such exaggerations can have no reference to any accepted standard. It would in truth, have been a marvel if Emerson had excelled in the virtues of the written page, for most of his published work was originally composed and used for the platform. Everybody knows how different are the speaker's devices for gaining possession of his audience, from the writer's means of winning, persuading, and impressing the attention of his reader. The key to the difference may be that in the speech the personality of the orator before our eyes gives of itself that oneness and continuity of communication, which the writer has to seek in the orderly sequence and array of marshalled sentence and well-sustained period. One of the traits that every critic notes in Emerson's writing, is that it is so abrupt, so sudden in its transitions, so discontinuous, so inconsecutive. Dislike of a sentence that drags made him unconscious of the quality, that French critics name *coulant*. Everything is thrown in just as it comes, and sometimes the pell-mell is enough to persuade us that Pope did not exaggerate when he said that no one qualification is so likely to make a good writer, as the power of rejecting his own thoughts.

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His manner as a lecturer, says Dr. Holmes, was an illustration of his way of thinking. 'He would lose his place just as his mind would drop its thought and pick up another, twentieth cousin or no relation at all to it.' The same manner, whether we liken it to mosaic or to kaleidoscope, marks his writing. It makes him hard to follow, oracular, and enigmatical. 'Can you tell me,' asked one of his neighbour, while Emerson was lecturing, 'what connection there is between that last sentence and the one that went before, and what connection it all has with Plato?' 'None, my friend, save in God!' This is excellent in a seer, but less so in the writer.

Apart from his difficult staccato, Emerson is not free from secondary faults. He uses words that are not only odd, but vicious in construction; he is not always grammatically correct; he is sometimes oblique, and he is often clumsy; and there is a visible feeling after epigrams that do not always come. When people say that Emerson's style must be good and admirable because it fits his thought, they forget that though it is well that a robe should fit, there is still something to be said about its cut and fashion.

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No doubt, to borrow Carlyle's expression, 'the talent is not the chief question here: the idea—that is the chief question.' We do not profess to be of those to whom mere style is as dear as it was to Plutarch; of him it was said that he would have made Pompey win the battle of Pharsalia, if it could have given a better turn to a phrase. It would not be worth while to speak of form in a thinker to whom our debt is so large for his matter, if there were not so much bad literary imitation of Emerson. Dr. Holmes mournfully admits that 'one who talks like Emerson or like Carlyle soon finds himself surrounded by a crowd of walking phonographs, who mechanically reproduce his mental and oral accents. Emerson was before long talking in the midst of a babbling Simonetta of echoes.' Inferior writers have copied the tones of the oracle without first making sure of the inspiration. They forget that a platitude is not turned into a profundity by being dressed up as a conundrum. Pithiness in him dwindles into tenuity in them; honest discontinuity in the master is made an excuse for finical incoherencies in the disciples; the quaint, ingenious, and unexpected collocations of the original degenerate in the imitators into a trick of unmeaning surprise and vapid antithesis; and his pregnant sententiousness set the fashion of a sententiousness that is not fertility but only hydropsy. This curious infection, which has spread into divers forms of American literature that are far removed from philosophy, would have been impossible if the teacher had been as perfect in expression as he was pure, diligent, and harmonious in his thinking.

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Yet, as happens to all fine minds, there came to Emerson ways of expression deeply marked with character. On every page there is set the strong stamp of sincerity, and the attraction of a certain artlessness; the most awkward sentence rings true; and there is often a pure and simple note that touches us more than if it were the perfection of elaborated melody. The uncouth procession of the periods discloses the travail of the thought, and that too is a kind of eloquence. An honest reader easily forgives the rude jolt or unexpected start, when it shows a thinker faithfully working his way along arduous and unworn tracks. Even at the roughest, Emerson often interjects a delightful cadence. As he says of Landor, his sentences are cubes which will stand firm, place them how or where you will. He criticised Swedenborg for being superfluously explanatory, and having an exaggerated feeling of the ignorance of men. 'Men take truths of this nature,' said Emerson, 'very fast;' and his own style does no doubt very boldly take this capacity for granted in us. In 'choice and pith of diction,' again, of which Mr. Lowell speaks, he hits the mark with a felicity that is almost his own in this generation. He is terse, concentrated, and free from the important blunder of mistaking intellectual dawdling for meditation. Nor in fine does his abruptness ever impede a true urbanity. The accent is homely and the apparel plain, but his bearing has a friendliness, a courtesy, a hospitable humanity, which goes nearer to our hearts than either literary decoration or rhetorical unction. That modest and lenient fellow-feeling which gave such charm to his companionship breathes in his gravest writing, and prevents us from finding any page of it cold or hard or dry.

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Though Emerson was always urgent for 'the soul of the world, clean from all vestige of tradition,' yet his work is full of literature. He at least lends no support to the comforting fallacy of the indolent, that originating power does not go with assimilating power. Few thinkers on his level display such breadth of literary reference. Unlike Wordsworth, who was content with a few tattered volumes on a kitchen shelf, Emerson worked among books. When he was a boy he found a volume of Montaigne, and he never forgot the delight and wonder in which he lived with it. His library is described as filled with well-selected authors, with curious works from the eastern world, with many editions in both Greek and English of his favourite Plato; while portraits of



Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, Dante, looked down upon him from the walls. Produce a volume of Plato or of Shakespeare, he says somewhere, or '*only remind us of their names,*' and instantly we come into a feeling of longevity. That is the scholar's speech. Opening a single essay at random, we find in it citations from Montesquieu, Schiller, Milton, Herodotus, Shelley, Plutarch, Franklin, Bacon, Van Helmont, Goethe. So little does Emerson lend himself to the idle vanity of seeking all the treasures of wisdom in his own head, or neglecting the hoarded authority of the ages. It is true that he held the unholy opinion that a translation is as good as the original, or better. Nor need we suppose that he knew that pious sensation of the book-lover, the feel of a library; that he had any of the collector's amiable foolishness about rare editions; or that he nourished festive thoughts of 'that company of honest old fellows in their leathern jackets in his study,' as comrades in a sober old-world conviviality. His books were for spiritual use, like maps and charts of the mind of man, and not much for 'excellence of divertisement.' He had the gift of bringing his reading to bear easily upon the tenor of his musings, and knew how to use books as an aid to thinking, instead of letting them take the edge off thought. There was assuredly nothing of the compiler or the erudite collegian in him. It is a graver defect that he introduces the great names of literature without regard for true historical perspective in their place, either in relation to one another, or to the special phases of social change and shifting time. Still let his admirers not forget that Emerson was in his own way Scholar no less than Sage.

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A word or two must be said of Emerson's verses. He disclaimed, for his own part, any belief that they were poems. Enthusiasts, however, have been found to declare that Emerson 'moves more constantly than any recent poet in the atmosphere of poesy. Since Milton and Spenser no man—not even Goethe—has equalled Emerson in this trait.' *The Problem*, according to another, 'is wholly unique, and transcends all contemporary verse in grandeur of style.' Such poetry, they say, is like Westminster Abbey, 'though the Abbey is inferior in boldness.' Yet, strangely enough, while Emerson's poetic form is symbolised by the flowing lines of Gothic architecture, it is also 'akin to Doric severity.' With all the good will in the world, I do not find myself able to rise to these heights; in fact, they rather seem to deserve Wordsworth's description, as mere obliquities of admiration.

Taken as a whole, Emerson's poetry is of that kind which springs, not from excitement of passion or feeling, but from an intellectual demand for intense and sublimated expression. We see the step that lifts him straight from prose to verse, and that step is the shortest possible. The flight is awkward and even uncouth, as if nature had intended feet rather than wings. It is hard to feel of Emerson, any more than Wordsworth could feel of Goethe, that his poetry is inevitable. The measure, the colour, the imaginative figures, are the product of search, not of spontaneous movements of sensation and reflection combining in a harmony that is delightful to the ear. They are the outcome of a discontent with prose, not of that high-strung sensibility which compels the true poet into verse. This must not be said without exception. *The Threnody*, written after the death of a deeply loved child, is a beautiful and impressive lament. Pieces like *Musquetaquid*, the *Adirondacs*, the *Snowstorm*, *The Humble-Bee*, are pretty and pleasant bits of pastoral. In all we feel the pure breath of nature, and

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The primal mind,  
That flows in streams, that breathes in wind.

There is a certain charm of *naïveté*, that recalls the unvarnished simplicity of the Italian painters before Raphael. But who shall say that he discovers that 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling,' which a great poet has made the fundamental element of poetry? There are too few melodious progressions; the melting of the thought with natural images and with human feeling is incomplete; we miss the charm of perfect assimilation, fusion, and incorporation; and in the midst of all the vigour and courage of his work, Emerson has almost forgotten that it is part of the poet's business to give pleasure. It is true that pleasure is sometimes undoubtedly to be had from verse that is not above mediocrity, and Wordsworth once designed to write an essay examining why bad poetry pleases. Poetry that pleases may be bad, but it is equally true that no poetry which fails to please can be really good. Some one says that gems of expression make Emerson's essays oracular and his verse prophetic. But, to borrow Horace's well-known phrase, 'tis not enough that poems should be sublime; *dulcia sunt*,—they must be touching and sympathetic. Only a bold critic will say that this is a mark of Emerson's poems. They are too naked, unrelated, and cosmic; too little clad with the vesture of human associations. Light and shade do not alternate in winning and rich relief, and as Carlyle found it, the radiance is 'thin piercing,' leaving none of the sweet and dim recesses so dear to the lover of nature. We may, however, well be content to leave a man of Emerson's calibre to choose his own exercises. It is best to suppose that he knew what he was about when he wandered into the fairyland of verse, and that in such moments he found nothing better to his hand. Yet if we are bidden to place him among the poets, it is enough to open Keats at the *Ode to a Nightingale*, or Shelley at *The Cloud*, the *Skylark*, or the *Sensitive Plant*, or Wordsworth at *Tintern Abbey*, or Goethe at *Das Göttliche*, or Victor Hugo in the *Contemplations*. Then in spite of occasional formality of rhythm and artifice in ornament, we cannot choose but perceive how tuneful is their music, how opulent the resources of their imagination, how various, subtle, and penetrating their affinity for the fortunes and sympathies of men, and next how modest a portion of all these rare and exquisite qualifications reveals itself in the verse of Emerson.

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### III.

Few minds of the first order that have busied themselves in contemplating the march of human fortunes, have marched forward in a straight line of philosophic speculation unbroken to the end. Like Burke, like Coleridge, like Wordsworth, at a given point they have a return upon themselves. Having mastered the truths of one side, their eyes open to what is true on the other; the work of revolution finished or begun, they experience fatigue and reaction. In Hawthorne's romance, after Miles Coverdale had passed his spring and summer among the Utopians of Blithedale, he felt that the time had come when he must for sheer sanity's sake go and hold a little talk with the Conservatives, the merchants, the politicians, 'and all those respectable old blockheads, who still in this intangibility and mistiness of affairs kept a death-grip on one or two ideas which had not come into vogue since yesterday morning.' 'No sagacious man,' says Hawthorne, 'will long retain his sagacity if he lives exclusively among reformers and progressive people, without periodically returning into the settled system of things, to correct himself by a new observation from that old stand-point.' Yet good men rightly hoped that 'out of the very thoughts that were wildest and most destructive might grow a wisdom, holy, calm, and pure, and that should incarnate itself with the substance of a noble and happy life.' Now that we are able to look back on the crisis of the times that Hawthorne describes, we perceive that it was as he expected, and that in the person of Emerson the ferment and dissolvency of thought worked itself out in a strain of wisdom of the highest and purest.

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In 1842 Emerson told Carlyle, in vindication of the *Dial* and its transcendentalisms, that if the direction of their speculations was as deplorable as Carlyle declared, it was yet a remarkable fact for history that all the bright young men and young women in New England, 'quite ignorant of each other, take the world so, and come and make confession to fathers and mothers—the boys, that they do not wish to go into trade; the girls, that they do not like morning calls and evening parties. They are all religious, but hate the churches; they reject all the ways of living of other men, but have none to offer in their stead.'

It is worth while to transcribe from the *Dial* itself the scene at one of the many Bostonian Conventions of that date—the Friends of Universal Progress, in 1840:—'The composition of the Assembly was rich and various. The singularity and latitude of the summons drew together, from all parts of New England, and also from the Middle States, men of every shade of opinion, from the straightest orthodoxy to the wildest heresy, and many persons whose church was a church of one member only. A great variety of dialect and of costume was noticed; a great deal of confusion, eccentricity, and freak appeared, as well as of zeal and enthusiasm. If the Assembly was disorderly, it was picturesque. Madmen, madwomen, men with beards, Dunkers, Muggletonians, Come-outers, Groaners, Agrarians, Seventh-day Baptists, Quakers, Abolitionists, Calvinists, Unitarians, and philosophers, all came successively to the top, and seized their moment, if not their *hour*, wherein to chide or pray or preach or protest. The faces were a study. The most daring innovators, and the champions-until-death of the old cause, sat side by side. The still living merit of the oldest New England families, glowing yet after several generations, encountered the founders of families, fresh merit emerging and expanding the brows to a new breadth, and lighting a clownish face with sacred fire. The Assembly was characterised by the predominance of a certain plain sylvan strength and earnestness' (*Dial*, iii. 101).

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If the shade of Bossuet could have looked down upon the scene, he would have found fresh material for the sarcasms which a hundred and fifty years before he had lavished on the Variations of the Protestant Churches. Yet this curious movement, bleak and squalid as it may seem to men nurtured in the venerable decorum of ecclesiastical tradition, was at bottom identical with the yearning for stronger spiritual emotions, and the cravings of religious zeal, that had in older times filled monasteries, manned the great orders, and sent wave upon wave of pilgrims and crusaders to holy places. 'It is really amazing,' as was said by Franklin or somebody else of his fashion of utilitarianism, 'that one of the passions which it is hardest to develop in man is the passion for his own material comfort and temporal well-being.'

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Emerson has put on record this mental intoxication of the progressive people around him, with a pungency that might satisfy the Philistines themselves.<sup>[5]</sup> From 1820 to 1844, he said, New England witnessed a general criticism and attack on institutions, and in all practical activities a gradual withdrawal of tender consciences from the social organisations. Calvinists and Quakers began to split into old school and new school. Goethe and the Germans became known. Swedenborg, in spite of his taint of craziness, by the mere prodigy of his speculations, began 'to spread himself into the minds of thousands'—including in no unimportant degree the mind of Emerson himself.<sup>[6]</sup> Literary criticism counted for something in the universal thaw, and even the genial humanity of Dickens helped to break up the indurations of old theology. Most powerful of all was the indirect influence of science. Geology disclosed law in an unsuspected region, and astronomy caused men to apprehend that 'as the earth is not the centre of the Universe, so it is not the special scene or stage on which the drama of divine justice is played before the assembled angels of heaven.'

A temper of scrutiny and dissent broke out in every direction. In almost every relation men and women asked themselves by what right Conformity levied its tax, and whether they were not false to their own consciences in paying it. 'What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world! One apostle thought that all men should go to farming; and another thought that no man should buy or sell—that use of money was the cardinal evil; another thought the mischief was in

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our diet—that we eat and drink damnation. These made unleavened bread, and were foes to the death to fermentation. Others attacked the system of agriculture, the use of animal manures in farming, and the tyranny of man over brute instinct. These abuses polluted his food. The ox must be taken from the plough, and the horse from the cart; the hundred acres of the farm must be spaded, and the man must walk wherever boats and locomotives will not carry him.... Others assailed particular vocations.... Others attacked the institution of marriage as the fountain of social evils.... Who gave me the money with which I bought my coat? Why should professional labour and that of the counting-house be paid so disproportionately to the labour of the porter and the woodsawyer? Am I not too protected a person? Is there not a wide disparity between the lot of me and the lot of thee, my poor brother, my poor sister?'

One of Emerson's glories is, that while wise enough to discern the peril and folly of these excesses, he was under no temptation to fall back. It was giddy work, but he kept his eye on the fixed stars. Certainly Emerson was not assailed by the stress of mighty and violent events, as Burke and Wordsworth were in some sense turned into reactionaries by the calamities of revolution in France. The 'distemper of enthusiasm,' as Shaftesbury would have called it, took a mild and harmless form in New England: there the work in hand was not the break-up of a social system, but only the mental evolution of new ideals, the struggle of an ethical revival, and the satisfaction of a livelier spirit of scruple. In face of all delirations, Emerson kept on his way of radiant sanity and perfect poise. Do not, he warned his enthusiasts, expend all energy on some accidental evil, and so lose sanity and power of benefit. '*It is of little moment that one or two or twenty errors of our social system be corrected, but of much that the man be in his senses.* Society gains nothing whilst a man, not himself renovated, attempts to renovate things around him; he has become tediously good in some particular, but negligent or narrow in the rest, and hypocrisy and vanity are often the disgusting result. It is handsomer to remain in the establishment, better than the establishment, and conduct that in the best manner, than to make a sally against evil by some single improvement, without supporting it by a total regeneration.'

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Emerson, then, is one of the few moral reformers whose mission lay in calming men rather than in rousing them, and in the inculcation of serenity rather than in the spread of excitement. Though he had been ardent in protest against the life conventional, as soon as the protest ran off into extravagance, instead of either following or withstanding it with rueful petulancies, he delicately and successfully turned a passing agitation into an enduring revival. The last password given by the dying Antonine to the officer of the watch was *Æquanimitas*. In a brighter, wider, and more living sense than was possible even to the noblest in the middle of the second century, this, too, was the watchword of the Emersonian teaching. Instead of cultivating the tormenting and enfeebling spirit of scruple, instead of multiplying precepts, he bade men not to crush their souls out under the burden of Duty; they are to remember that a wise life is not wholly filled up by commandments to do and to abstain from doing. Hence, we have in Emerson the teaching of a vigorous morality without the formality of dogma and the deadly tedium of didactics. If not laughter, of which only Shakespeare among the immortals has a copious and unfailing spring, there is at least gaiety in every piece, and a cordial injunction to men to find joy in their existence to the full. Happiness is with him an aim that we are at liberty to seek directly and without periphrasis. Provided men do not lose their balance by immersing themselves in their pleasures, they are right, according to Emerson, in pursuing them. But joy is no neighbour to artificial ecstasy. What Emerson counsels the poet, he intended in its own way and degree for all men. The poet's habit of living, he says beautifully, should be set on a key so low that the commonest influences should delight him. 'That spirit which suffices quiet hearts, which seems to come forth to such from every dry knoll of sere grass, from every pine-stump and half-embedded stone on which the dull March sun shines, comes forth to the poor and hungry, and such as are of simple taste. If thou fill thy brain with Boston and New York, with fashion and covetousness, and wilt stimulate thy jaded senses with wine and French coffee, thou shalt find no radiance of wisdom in the lonely waste of the pinewoods' (ii. 328).

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It was perhaps the same necessity of having to guide men away from the danger of transcendental aberrations, while yet holding up lofty ideals of conduct, that made Emerson say something about many traits of conduct to which the ordinary high-flying moralist of the treatise or the pulpit seldom deigns to stoop. The essays on Domestic Life, on Behaviour, on Manners, are examples of the attention that Emerson paid to the right handling of the outer conditions of a wise and brave life. With him small circumstances are the occasions of great qualities. The parlour and the counting-house are as fit scenes for fortitude, self-control, considerateness, and vision, as the senate or the battlefield. He re-classifies the virtues. No modern, for example, has given so remarkable a place to Friendship among the sacred necessities of well-endowed character. Neither Plato nor Cicero, least of all Bacon, has risen to so noble and profound a conception of this most strangely commingled of all human affections. There is no modern thinker, again, who makes Beauty—all that is gracious, seemly, and becoming—so conspicuous and essential a part of life. It would be inexact to say that Emerson blended the beautiful with the precepts of duty or of prudence into one complex sentiment, as the Greeks did, but his theory of excellence might be better described than any other of modern times by the *καλοκαγαθία*, the virtue of the true gentleman, as set down in Plato and Aristotle.

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So untrue is it that in his quality of Sage Emerson always haunted the perilous altitudes of Transcendentalism, 'seeing nothing under him but the everlasting snows of Himalaya, the Earth shrinking to a Planet, and the indigo Firmament sowing itself with daylight stars.' He never thinks it beneath his dignity to touch a point of minor morals, or to say a good word for what he somewhere calls subterranean prudence. Emerson values mundane circumspection as highly as

Franklin, and gives to manners and rules of daily behaviour an importance that might have satisfied Chesterfield. In fact, the worldly and the selfish are mistaken when they assume that Common Sense is their special and exclusive portion. The small Transcendentalist goes in search of truth with the meshes of his net so large that he takes no fish. His landscapes are all horizon. It is only the great idealists, like Emerson, who take care not to miss the real.

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The remedy for the break-down of the old churches would, in the mind of the egotist, have been to found a new one. But Emerson knew well before Carlyle told him, that 'no truly great man, from Jesus Christ downwards, ever founded a sect—I mean wilfully intended founding one.' Not only did he establish no sect, but he preached a doctrine that was positively incompatible with the erection of any sect upon its base. His whole hope for the world lies in the internal and independent resources of the individual. If mankind is to be raised to a higher plane of happiness and worth, it can only be by the resolution of each to live his own life with fidelity and courage. The spectacle of one liberated from the malign obstructions to free human character, is a stronger incentive to others than exhortation, admonition, or any sum of philanthropical association. If I, in my own person and daily walk, quietly resist heaviness of custom, coldness of hope, timidity of faith, then without wishing, contriving, or even knowing it, I am a light silently drawing as many as have vision and are fit to walk in the same path. Whether I do that or not, I am at least obeying the highest law of my own being.

In the appeal to the individual to be true to himself, Emerson does not stand apart from other great moral reformers. His distinction lies in the peculiar direction that he gives to his appeal. All those regenerators of the individual, from Rousseau down to J.S. Mill, who derived their first principles, whether directly or indirectly, from Locke and the philosophy of sensation, experience, and acquisition, began operations with the will. They laid all their stress on the shaping of motives by education, institutions, and action, and placed virtue in deliberateness and in exercise. Emerson, on the contrary, coming from the intuitional camp, holds that our moral nature is vitiated by any interference of our will. Translated into the language of theology, his doctrine makes regeneration to be a result of grace, and the guide of conscience to be the indwelling light; though, unlike the theologians, he does not trace either of these mysterious gifts to the special choice and intervention of a personal Deity. Impulsive and spontaneous innocence is higher than the strength to conquer temptation. The natural motions of the soul are so much better than the voluntary ones. 'There is no such thing as manufacturing a strong will,' for all great force is real and elemental. In all this Emerson suffers from the limitations that are inseparable from pure spiritualism in all its forms. As if the spiritual constitution were ever independent of the material organisation bestowed upon the individual at the moment when he is conceived, or of the social conditions that close about him from the instant of his birth. The reaction, however, against what was superficial in the school of the eighteenth century went to its extreme length in Emerson, and blinded his eyes to the wisdom, the profundity, and the fruitfulness of their leading speculations. It is enough for us to note the fact in passing, without plunging into contention on the merits. All thoughts are always ready, potentially if not actually. Each age selects and assimilates the philosophy that is most apt for its wants. Institutions needed regeneration in France, and so those thinkers came into vogue and power who laid most stress on the efficacy of good institutions. In Emerson's America, the fortunes of the country made external circumstances safe for a man, and his chance was assured; so a philosophy was welcomed which turned the individual inwards upon himself, and taught him to consider his own character and spiritual faculty as something higher than anything external could ever be.

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Again to make a use which is not unproductive of the old tongue, Emerson is for faith before works. Nature, he says, will not have us fret and fume. She does not like our benevolences, our churches, our pauper-societies, much better than she likes our frauds and wars. They are but so many yokes to the neck. Our painful labours are unnecessary and fruitless. A higher law than that of our will regulates events. If we look wider, things are all alike: laws and creeds and modes of living are a travesty of truth. Only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience we become strong. Our real action is in our silent moments. Why should we be awed by the name of Action? 'Tis a trick of the senses.<sup>[7]</sup>

Justification by faith has had a savour of antinomianism and indifferency ever since the day when Saint Paul so emphatically denied that he made void the law through faith, and said of certain calumniators that their damnation was just. Emerson was open to the same charge, and he knew it. In a passage already quoted, Emerson says good-humouredly that his wife keeps his philosophy from running to antinomianism. He could not mistake the tendency of saying that, if you look wider, things are all alike, and that we are in the grasp of a higher law than our own will. On that side he only paints over in rainbow colours the grim doctrine which the High Calvinist and the Materialistic Necessarian hold in common.

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All great minds perceive all things; the only difference lies in the order in which they shall choose to place them. Emerson, for good reason of his own, dwelt most on fate, character, and the unconscious and hidden sources, but he writes many a page of vigorous corrective. It is wholesome, he says, to man to look not at Fate, but the other way; the practical view is the other. As Mill says of his wish to disbelieve the doctrine of the formation of character by circumstances —'Remembering the wish of Fox respecting the doctrine of resistance to governments, that it might never be forgotten by Kings nor remembered by subjects, I said that it would be a blessing if the doctrine of necessity could be believed by all *quoad* the characters of others, and disbelieved in regard to their own.' So Emerson knew well enough that man's consciousness of freedom, action, and power over outer circumstances might be left to take care of itself, as the

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practical view generally can. The world did not need him to tell it that a man's fortunes are a part of his character. His task was the more far-reaching one of drawing them to recognise that love is the important thing, not benevolent works; that only impure men consider life as it is reflected in events, opinions, and persons; that they fail to see the action until it is done, whereas what is far better worth considering is that its moral element præ-existed in the actor.

It would be easy to show that Emerson has not worked out his answers to these eternal enigmas, for ever reproducing themselves in all ages, in such a form as to defy the logician's challenge. He never shrinks from inconsistent propositions. He was unsystematic on principle. 'He thought that truth has so many facets that the best we can do is to notice each in turn, without troubling ourselves whether they agree.' When we remember the inadequateness of human language, the infirmities of our vision, and all the imperfections of mental apparatus, the wise men will not disdain even partial glimpses of a scene too vast and intricate to be comprehended in a single map. To complain that Emerson is no systematic reasoner is to miss the secret of most of those who have given powerful impulses to the spiritual ethics of an age. It is not a syllogism that turns the heart towards purification of life and aim; it is not the logically enchained propositions of a *sorites*, but the flash of illumination, the indefinable accent, that attracts masses of men to a new teacher and a high doctrine. The teasing *ergoteur* is always right, but he never leads nor improves nor inspires.

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Any one can see how this side of the Emersonian gospel harmonised with the prepossessions of a new democracy. Trust, he said, to leading instincts, not to traditional institutions, nor social ordering, nor the formulæ of books and schools for the formation of character; the great force is real and elemental. In art, Mr. Ruskin has explained the palpable truth that semi-civilised nations can colour better than we do, and that an Indian shawl and China vase are inimitable by us. 'It is their glorious ignorance of all rules that does it; the pure and true instincts have play, and do their work; and the moment we begin teaching people any rules about colour, and make them do this or that, we crush the instinct, generally for ever' (*Modern Painters*, iii. 91). Emerson said what comes to the same thing about morals. The philosophy of democracy, or the government of a great mixed community by itself, rests on a similar assumption in politics. The foundations of a self-governed society on a great scale are laid in leading instincts. Emerson was never tired of saying that we are wiser than we know. The path of science and of letters is not the way to nature. What was done in a remote age by men whose names have resounded far, has no deeper sense than what you and I do to-day. What food, or experience, or succour have Olympiads and Consulates for the Esquimaux seal-hunter, for the Kanáka in his canoe, for the fisherman, the stevedore, the porter? When he is in this vein Emerson often approaches curiously near to Rousseau's memorable and most potent paradox of 1750, that the sciences corrupt manners.<sup>[8]</sup>

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Most men will now agree that when the great fiery trial came, the Emersonian faith and the democratic assumption abundantly justified themselves. Even Carlyle wrote to Emerson at last (June 4, 1871): 'In my occasional explosions against Anarchy, and my inextinguishable hatred of it, I privately whisper to myself, "Could any Friedrich Wilhelm now, or Friedrich, or most perfect Governor you could hope to realise, guide forward what is America's essential task at present, faster or more completely than 'Anarchic America' is now doing?" Such "Anarchy" has a great deal to say for itself.'

The traits of comparison between Carlyle and Emerson may be regarded as having been pretty nearly exhausted for the present, until time has changed the point of view. In wit, humour, pathos, penetration, poetic grandeur, and fervid sublimity of imagination, Carlyle is the superior beyond measure. But Emerson is as much his superior in that high and transparent sanity, which is not further removed from midsummer madness than it is from a terrene and grovelling mediocrity. This sanity, among other things, kept Emerson in line with the ruling tendencies of his age, and his teaching brings all the aid that abstract teaching can, towards the solution of the moral problems of modern societies. Carlyle chose to fling himself headlong and blindfold athwart the great currents of things, against all the forces and elements that are pushing modern societies forward. Beginning in his earlier work with the same faith as Emerson in leading instincts, he came to dream that the only leading instinct worth thinking about is that of self-will, mastery, force, and violent strength. Emerson was for basing the health of a modern commonwealth on the only real strength, and the only kind of force that can be relied upon, namely, the honest, manly, simple, and emancipated character of the citizen. This gives to his doctrine a hold and a prize on the work of the day, and makes him our helper. Carlyle's perverse reaction had wrecked and stranded him when the world came to ask him for direction. In spite of his resplendent genius, he had no direction to give, and was only able in vague and turbid torrents of words to hide a shallow and obsolete lesson. His confession to Emerson, quoted above, looks as if at last he had found this out for himself.

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If Emerson stood thus well towards the social and political drift of events, his teaching was no less harmoniously related to the new and most memorable drift of science which set in by his side. It is a misconception to pretend that he was a precursor of the Darwinian theory. Evolution, as a possible explanation of the ordering of the universe, is a great deal older than either Emerson or Darwin. What Darwin did was to work out in detail and with masses of minute evidence a definite hypothesis of the specific conditions under which new forms are evolved. Emerson, of course, had no definite hypothesis of this sort, nor did he possess any of the knowledge necessary to give it value. But it was his good fortune that some of his strongest propositions harmonise with the scientific theory of the survival of the fittest in the struggle for material existence. He connects his exhortation to self-reliance with the law working in nature for

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conservation and growth,—to wit, that 'Power is in nature the essential measure of right,' and that 'Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdom which cannot help itself.' The same strain is constantly audible. Nature on every side, within us and without, is for ever throwing out new forms and fresh varieties of living and thinking. To her experiments in every region there is no end. Those succeed which prove to have the best adaptation to the conditions. Let, therefore, neither society nor the individual check experiment, originality, and infinite variation. Such language, we may see, fits in equally well with democracy in politics and with evolution in science. If, moreover, modern science gives more prominence to one conception than another, it is to that of the natural universe of force and energy, as One and a Whole. This too is the great central idea with Emerson, repeated a thousand times in prose and in verse, and lying at the very heart of his philosophy. Newton's saying that 'the world was made at one cast' delights him. 'The secret of the world is that its energies are *solidaires*.' Nature 'publishes itself in creatures, reaching from particles and spicula, through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries. A little heat, that is, a little motion, is all that differences the bald dazzling white and deadly cold poles of the earth from the prolific tropical climates.' Not only, as Professor Tyndall says, is Emerson's religious sense entirely undaunted by the discoveries of science; all such discoveries he comprehends and assimilates. 'By Emerson scientific conceptions are continually transmuted into the finer forms and warmer lines of an ideal world.'

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That these transmutations are often carried by Emerson to the extent of vain and empty self-mystifications is hard to deny, even for those who have most sympathy with the general scope of his teaching. There are pages that to the present writer, at least, after reasonably diligent meditation, remain mere abracadabra, incomprehensible and worthless. For much of this in Emerson, the influence of Plato is mainly responsible, and it may be noted in passing that his account of Plato (*Representative Men*) is one of his most unsatisfactory performances. 'The title of Platonist,' says Mill, 'belongs by far better right to those who have been nourished in, and have endeavoured to practise Plato's mode of investigation, than to those who are distinguished only by the adoption of certain dogmatical conclusions, drawn mostly from the least intelligible of his works.' Nothing is gained by concealing that not every part of Emerson's work will stand the test of the Elenchus, nor bear reduction into honest and intelligible English.

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One remarkable result of Emerson's idealism ought not to be passed over. 'The visible becomes the Bestial,' said Carlyle, 'when it rests not on the invisible.' To Emerson all rested on the invisible, and was summed up in terms of the invisible, and hence the Bestial was almost unknown in his philosophic scheme. Nay, we may say that some mighty phenomena in our universe were kept studiously absent from his mind. Here is one of the profoundest differences between Emerson and most of those who, on as high an altitude, have pondered the same great themes. A small trait will serve for illustration. It was well known in his household that he could not bear to hear of ailments. 'There is one topic,' he writes, 'peremptorily forbidden to all well-bred, to all rational mortals, namely, their distempers. If you have not slept, or if you have slept, or if you have headache, sciatica, or leprosy, or thunder-stroke, I beseech you by all angels to hold your peace, and not pollute the morning, to which all the housemates bring serene and pleasant thoughts, by corruption and groans. Come out of the azure. Love the day'—(*Conduct of Life*, 159).

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If he could not endure these minor perturbations of the fair and smiling face of daily life, far less did he willingly think of Death. Of nothing in all the wide range of universal topics does Emerson say so little as of that which has lain in sombre mystery at the very core of most meditations on life, from Job and Solon down to Bacon and Montaigne. Except in two beautiful poems, already mentioned, Death is almost banished from his page. It is not the title or the subject of one of his essays, only secondarily even of that on Immortality. Love, Friendship, Prudence, Heroism, Experience, Manners, Nature, Greatness, and a score of other matters—but none to show that he ever sat down to gather into separate and concentrated shape his reflections on the terrifying phantom that has haunted the mind of man from the very birth of time.

Pascal bade us imagine a number of men in chains and doomed to death; some of them each day butchered in sight of the others; those who remained watching their own lot in that of their fellows, and awaiting their turn in anguish and helplessness. Such, he cried, is the pitiful and desperate condition of man. But nature has other cruelties more stinging than death. Mill, himself an optimist, yet declares the course of natural phenomena to be replete with everything which, when committed by human beings is most worthy of abhorrence, so that 'one who endeavoured in his actions to imitate the natural course of things would be universally seen and acknowledged to be the wickedest of men.' To man himself, moreover, 'the most criminal actions are not more unnatural than most of the virtues.' We need not multiply from poets and divines, from moralists and sages, these grim pictures. The sombre melancholy, the savage moral indignation, the passionate intellectual scorn, with which life and the universe have filled strong souls, some with one emotion and some with another, were all to Emerson in his habitual thinking unintelligible and remote. He admits, indeed, that 'the disease and deformity around us certify that infraction of natural, intellectual, and moral laws, and often violation on violation to breed such compound misery.' The way of Providence, he says in another place, is a little rude, through earthquakes, fever, the sword of climate, and a thousand other hints of ferocity in the interiors of nature. Providence has a wild rough incalculable road to its end, and 'it is of no use to try to white-wash its huge mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student of divinity.' But he only drew from the thought of these cruelties of the universe the practical moral that 'our culture must not omit the arming of the man.' He is born into the state of war, and will therefore do well to acquire a military attitude

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of soul. There is perhaps no better moral than this of the Stoic, but greater impressiveness might have marked the lesson, if our teacher had been more indulgent to the man's sense of tragedy in that vast drama in which he plays his piteous part.

In like manner, Emerson has little to say of that horrid burden and impediment on the soul, which the churches call Sin, and which, by whatever name we call it, is a very real catastrophe in the moral nature of man. He had no eye, like Dante's, for the vileness, the cruelty, the utter despicableness to which humanity may be moulded. If he saw them at all, it was through the softening and illusive medium of generalised phrases. Nor was he ever shocked and driven into himself by 'the immoral thoughtlessness' of men. The courses of nature, and the prodigious injustices of man in society, affect him with neither horror nor awe. He will see no monster if he can help it. For the fatal Nemesis or terrible Erinnyes, daughters of Erebus and Night, Emerson substitutes a fair-weather abstraction named Compensation. One radical tragedy in nature he admits—'the distinction of More and Less.' If I am poor in faculty, dim in vision, shut out from opportunity, in every sense an outcast from the inheritance of the earth, that seems indeed to be a tragedy. 'But see the facts clearly and these mountainous inequalities vanish. Love reduces them, as the sun melts the iceberg in the sea. The heart and soul of all men being one, this bitterness of His and Mine ceases. His is mine.' Surely words, words, words! What can be more idle, when one of the world's bitter puzzles is pressed on the teacher, than that he should betake himself to an altitude whence it is not visible, and then assure us that it is not only invisible, but non-existent? This is not to see the facts clearly, but to pour the fumes of obscuratation round them. When he comforts us by saying 'Love, and you shall be loved,' who does not recall cases which make the Jean Valjean of Victor Hugo's noble romance not a figment of the theatre, but an all too actual type? The believer who looks to another world to redress the wrongs and horrors of this; the sage who warns us that the law of life is resignation, renunciation, and doing-without (*entbehren sollst du*)—each of these has a foothold in common language. But to say that all infractions of love and equity are speedily punished—punished by fear—and then to talk of the perfect compensation of the universe, is mere playing with words, for it does not solve the problem in the terms in which men propound it. Emerson, as we have said, held the spirit of System in aversion as fettering the liberal play of thought, just as in morals, with greater boldness, he rebelled against a minute and cramping interpretation of Duty. We are not sure that his own optimistic doctrine did not play him the same tyrannical trick, by sealing his eyes to at least one half of the actualities of nature and the gruesome possibilities of things. It had no unimportant effect on Emerson's thought that he was born in a new world that had cut itself loose from old history. The black and devious ways through which the race has marched are not real in North America, as they are to us in old Europe, who live on the very site of secular iniquities, are surrounded by monuments of historic crime, and find present and future entangled, embittered, inextricably loaded both in blood and in institutions with desperate inheritances from the past.

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There are many topics, and those no mean topics, on which the best authority is not the moralist by profession, as Emerson was, but the man of the world. The world hardens, narrows, desiccates common natures, but nothing so enriches generous ones. For knowledge of the heart of man, we must go to those who were closer to the passions and interests of actual and varied life than Emerson ever could have been—to Horace, Montaigne, La Bruyère, Swift, Molière, even to Pope. If a hostile critic were to say that Emerson looked at life too much from the outside, as the clergyman is apt to do, we should condemn such a remark as a disparagement, but we should understand what it is in Emerson that the critic means. He has not the temperament of the great humorists, under whatever planet they may have been born, jovial, mercurial, or saturnine. Even his revolt against formalism is only a new fashion of composure, and sometimes comes dangerously near to moral dilettantism. The persistent identification of everything in nature with everything else sometimes bewilders, fatigues, and almost afflicts us. Though he warns us that our civilisation is not near its meridian, but as yet only in the cock-crowing and the morning star, still all ages are much alike with him: man is always man, 'society never advances,' and he does almost as little as Carlyle himself to fire men with faith in social progress as the crown of wise endeavour. But when all these deductions have been made and amply allowed for, Emerson remains among the most persuasive and inspiring of those who by word and example rebuke our despondency, purify our sight, awaken us from the deadening slumbers of convention and conformity, exorcise the pestering imps of vanity, and lift men up from low thoughts and sullen moods of helplessness and impiety.

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#### FOOTNOTES

- [1] Frothingham's *Transcendentalism in New England: a History*—a judicious, acute, and highly interesting piece of criticism.
- [2] *English Traits*, 7-18. *Ireland*, 143-152. Froude's *Carlyle*, ii. 355-359.
- [3] Clough's *Life and Letters*, i. 185.
- [4] The reader who seeks full information about Emerson's life will find it scattered in various volumes: among them are—

*Ralph Waldo Emerson*; by George Willis Cooke (Sampson Low & Co., 1882)—a very



diligent and instructive work.

*R.W.E.*; by Alexander Ireland (Simpkin, Marshall, & Co. 1882), described by Carlyle, and known by others, as 'full of energy and broad sagacity and practicality; infinitely well affected to the man Emerson too,'—and full moreover of that intellectual enthusiasm which in his Scotch countrymen goes so often with their practicalities.

*Emerson, at Home and Abroad*; by Moncure D. Conway (Trübner & Co., 1883): the work of a faithful disciple, who knew Emerson well, and has here recorded many interesting anecdotes and traits.

- [5] *New England Reformers: Essays*, ii. 511-519.
- [6] The Swedenborgians—'a sect which, I think, must contribute more than all other sects to the new faith, which must come out of all.'—*To Carlyle*, 1834.
- [7] *Essays: Spiritual Laws*, etc.
- [8] What so good, asks Rousseau, 'as a sweet and precious ignorance, the treasure of a pure soul at peace with itself, which finds all its blessedness in inward retreat, in testifying to itself its own innocence, and which feels no need of seeking a warped and hollow happiness in the opinion of other people as to its enlightenment?'

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## END OF VOL. I.

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