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# EMERSON



J. J. LANGHAM, M.A.

TORONTO  
GEORGE N. MORANG & COMPANY, LIMITED  
1900

PRICE, 25 CENTS



AN ENGLISHMAN'S APPRECIATION

OF

RALPH WALDO

# EMERSON

BY

J. J. LANGHAM, M.A.

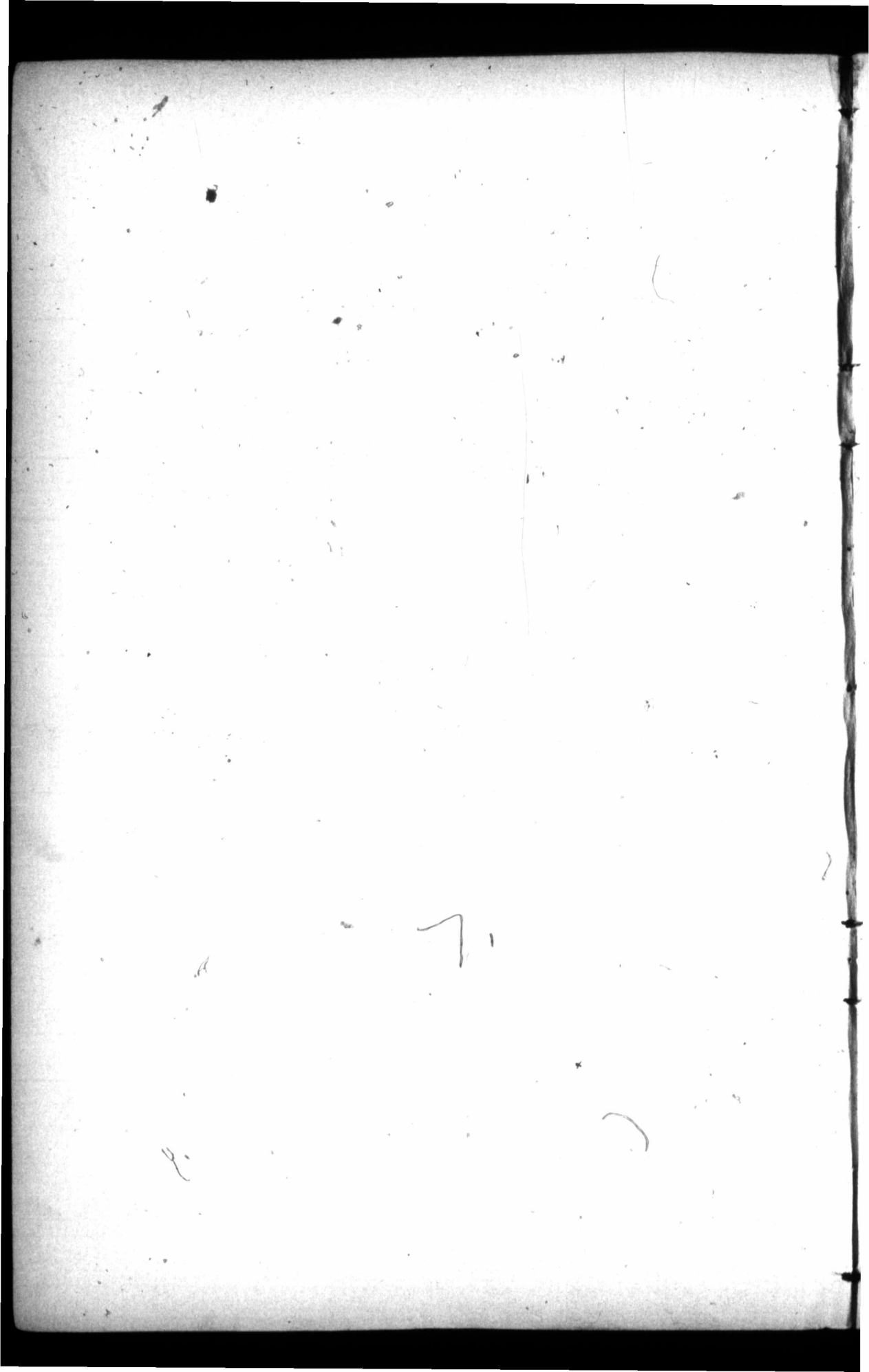
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# RALPH WALDO EMERSON

## AN APPRECIATION

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PROFESSOR MAX MULLER has dedicated one of his books to Ralph Waldo Emerson, "in acknowledgment of constant refreshment of head and heart derived from his writings for a period of 25 years." This is a simple statement. Yet it is a great tribute to Emerson's powers; and it is one which all students of his writings will endorse. Emerson is a "refreshment of head and heart" to all who know him.

To say this is to credit him with powers of benediction on the age in which we live. For one of the world's great needs is refreshment. It is said that society is composed of "two mighty hordes, the bored and the bores," and both these classes would be refreshed by assimilating Emerson's works. It is difficult, perhaps, to refer this boredom to any single cause, but one cause of it is undoubtedly the prevalent love of show. This is a very widespread disease, and no class is quite exempt from it. It exhibits itself in

the rush for riches that characterizes our age, in the strenuous efforts made in the upper classes of society to maintain a position beyond the means of a shrinking income, evidenced now by a case in the bankruptcy court, and now by the commission of a fraud; in the constant search for new fields of amusement, and the half-dread of ever owning to be amused; in the pretentious little modern villa, with its seldom-used best sitting-room, and its walls covered with pictures which give no pleasure and speak no truth, the whole an embodiment of sham. Wandering amongst the dales of Yorkshire, Cumberland, or Westmoreland, one may often find in an old farm house a piece of solid oak furniture that has been in the family for some 200 years. But what, one wonders, will be left at the end of two centuries in the interior of the average modern villa, making even the large assumption that the building itself has stood the ravages of time? These may seem trivial matters. But in reality they are not so. They are effects of a cause, an index of character. Did not men love the artificial, did they not wish to appear other than they are, they could not surround themselves as they do with materialized falsehood. It is in reality the same artificial spirit that induces the wearing of sham jewels, the unused best parlour, and the toadyism that in higher circles will move heaven and earth to get "in the swim," and be introduced to a few people in a better social position than they are themselves. And this perpetual striving to appear other than they are induces that feeling of dissatisfaction and unrest that we call boredom. To it Emerson gives the antidote—a return to simplicity and

truth, and hence his power to refresh, not merely for "a period of twenty-five years," but, one would imagine, for all time. With a hatred of all sham he exclaims with Browning—

Oh, this false for real,  
This emptiness which feigns solidity,  
Ever some grey that's white, and dun that's black !  
When shall we rest upon the thing itself,  
Not on its semblance ? Soul, too weak, forsooth,  
To cope with fact, wants fiction everywhere !  
Mine tires of falsehood ; truth at any cost.

The secret of Emerson's power to refresh and inspire then is his intense love of simplicity and truth, his message to the world, "Truth first of all and for ever." It is a message which other great writers have given, but as delivered by Emerson it has a force of its own, for we know that he lived as he wrote. It is a high ideal that he sets before us, when he declares "that no man has a right perception of any truth, who has not been reacted on by it, so as to be ready to be its martyr," but every word is felt and comes from the depths of personal experience. Brought up in poverty, his father having died when he was quite young, and his mother having a large family to maintain, Emerson had from his earliest days to struggle with the stern facts of existence. How poor the family were is evidenced by the story that Ralph, in his school-days, had to share a great-coat with his brother, and to suffer the taunts of his schoolfellows when the coat was passed from one to the other. It was, therefore, a great relief to him and to his family when the expense of education was over, and he at last found himself comfortably settled in the Unitarian ministry. But doubts began to assail him as

to his position. Differences of opinion arose between him and his congregation concerning the Holy Communion, and although they would gladly have kept him, it was impossible for him to remain, and three years after his appointment to a position which had meant independence and a competency he resigned it, a "martyr" to what he deemed the truth.

To one of Emerson's nature the step was inevitable. He could not be bound by any system, however elastic. He thought, and must think, for himself. And yet his independence was not the independence of isolation. It led him to a broad-minded catholicism which recognized the underlying truth in every system. With Tennyson he seemed to hold

Our little systems have their day,  
They have their day and cease to be ;  
They are but broken lights of Thee,  
And Thou, O Lord, art more than they.

Emerson's attitude towards all creeds is perhaps best explained in his own words. "God offers," he writes, "to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please—you can never have both. Between these, as a pendulum, man oscillates. He in whom the love of repose predominates will accept the first creed, the first philosophy, the first political party he meets—most likely his father's. He gets rest, commodity, and reputation ; but he shuts the door of truth. He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations, between which, as walls, his being is swung. He submits to the inconvenience of suspense and imperfect opinion, but he is a candidate for truth as the other



is not, and respects the highest law of his being." Here again Emerson certainly carries out his own maxims. None can study his essays without feeling how completely he does "keep himself aloof from all moorings." To those who read him with the object of bolstering up their own particular views the result is necessarily disappointing. But those who wish to see both sides of a question will always find Emerson invigorating. He is like a breath of the fresh air of Truth blowing away our sophistries and clearing our mental vision. Bound as he feels to "recognize all the opposite negations," he never hesitates to put down what tells against his argument as well as what is in its favour. As evidence of this tendency, one cannot do better than quote the following from his essay on "Fate" in "The Conduct of Life": "If we must accept fate we are not less compelled to affirm liberty, the significance of the individual, the grandeur of duty, the power of character. This is true and that other is true. But our geometry cannot span these extreme points and reconcile them. What to do? By obeying each thought frankly, by harping, or if you will pounding on each string we learn at last its power. By the same obedience to other thoughts, we learn theirs, and then comes some reasonable hope of harmonizing them. We are sure that, though we know not how, necessity does comport with liberty, the individual with the world, my polarity with the spirit of the times. The riddle of the age has for each a private solution. If one would study his own time it must be by this method of taking up in turn each of the leading topics which belong to our scheme of human life, and by firmly stating all that is agreeable to experience on

one, and doing the same justice to opposing facts in the others, the true limitations will appear. Any excess of emphasis on one part would be corrected and a just balance would be made. Emerson's message is therefore thoroughly scientific, the law of polarity pervading the whole of nature. Thus also in his desire for "truth at any cost," optimist though he is, Emerson cannot refrain from putting down the facts concerning the cruelty observable in nature. He never consents to play the role of a mere advocate. "The way of Providence," he writes, "is a little rude. The habit of snake and spider, the snap of the tiger, and other leapers and bloody jumpers, the crackle of the bones of his prey in the coil of the anaconda—these are in the system and our habits are like theirs. . . . Let us not deny it up and down. Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try and whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in the clean shirt and white neck-cloth of a student in divinity."

The same characteristic love of truth which led Emerson to write all that he really felt, regardless of its effect on his ultimate conclusions, filled him with a wonderful tolerance to all who differed from him. Indeed tolerance is far too mild a word to use. He not merely tolerated, he loved all sincere men, and he loved them none the less because their views were opposed to his own. He held strongly that it was every man's duty to speak out his own thought straight from the heart. No man worthy of the name could be content to be merely a purveyor of the second-hand opinions of others. He must respect himself and dare to give utterance to

himself as Nature herself does. "Man is timid and apologetic," he writes; "he is no longer upright; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage. He is ashamed before the blade of grass or the blowing rose. These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day." And again, "Let a man know his worth and keep things under his feet. Let him not peep or steal, or skulk up and down with the air of a charity boy, a bastard, or an interloper in the world which exists for him." And yet again, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato and Milton is that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men, but what they, thought." And once again in one of his letters he bursts out with the remark "that the soul of a man should speak out and not the soul-general of the town or town-pump is essential to all eloquence."

This it is that explains Emerson's wonderful affection for Thomas Carlyle. Viewing the universe from completely different standpoints, each was intensely attracted by the perfect sincerity of the other. It was in the summer of 1833 that the two first met. Emerson was on a visit to England at the time, and took the opportunity of paying a visit to Carlyle at Craigenputtock. The impression he made upon his host is best

told in Carlyle's own words. "That man," he said, "came to see me; I don't know what brought him, and we kept him one night, and then he left us. I saw him go up the hill. I didn't go with him to see him descend. I preferred to watch him mount and vanish like an angel." Emerson, on his side, was most deeply impressed by Carlyle's "commanding sense of justice, and incessant demand for sincerity," and henceforth became his devoted admirer. Long before he had gained the ear of the British public, thanks to Emerson, Carlyle was read and admired in America. Emerson was the first American to recognize his merit, and his own slender means were freely risked to make his friend known on the other side of the Atlantic. It was he who first edited the "Sartor Resartus" in America in 1836, and the cheques which came across the Atlantic were of no little assistance to Carlyle in the early days of struggle. A common love of truth bound together characters so dissimilar.

Emerson's toleration was, however, more seriously tested in an interview he had with Coleridge on the same visit. "It was near noon," he says. "Mr. Coleridge sent a verbal message that he was in bed, but if I would call after one o'clock he would see me. I returned at one, and he appeared, a short, thick old man with bright blue eyes and fine, clear complexion, leaning on his cane. He took snuff freely, which presently soiled his cravat and neat black suit. . . . He spoke of Dr. Channing. It was an unspeakable misfortune that he should have turned out a Unitarian after all. On this, he burst into a declamation on the folly and ignorance of Unitarianism—its high unreasonableness; and

taking up Bishop Waterland's book, which lay on the table, he read with vehemence two or three pages written by himself in the fly-leaves—passages, too, which I believe are printed in 'Aids to Reflection.' When he stopped to take breath, I interposed that 'whilst I highly valued all his explanations, I was bound to tell him that I was born and bred a Unitarian.' 'Yes,' he said, 'I suppose so,' and continued as before. 'It was a wonder, that after so many ages of unquestioning acquiescence in the doctrine of St. Paul—the doctrine of the Trinity, which was also, according to Philo Judæus, the doctrine of the Jews before Christ—this handful of Priestleians should take on themselves to deny it; &c., &c. He was very sorry that Dr. Channing—a man to whom he looked up—no, to say that he looked up to him would be to speak falsely; but a man whom he looked at with so much interest—should embrace such views.'” Even this outburst could not diminish Emerson's respect for an honest opponent, and the only comment he makes on his not too civil reception is that Coleridge “was old and pre-occupied, and could not bend to a new companion and think with him.”

One more story may be told in illustration of Emerson's regard for sincerity in those who differed from him. In 1841 he wrote “The Method of Nature,” and a certain Baptist minister presided on the occasion of its first delivery. At the close the worthy minister offered up a fervent prayer that the audience might be preserved from ever hearing such transcendental nonsense again. Emerson asked his name, and observed “He seems a very conscientious, plain-spoken man.”

The same love of truth made Emerson utterly regard-

less of a reputation for consistency. He realized to the full, as he had reason to do, the possibility of an earnest thinker changing his opinions. He could never have tolerated the modern newspaper treatment of the politician who dares to grow wiser as he grows older, with which we are all so familiar, in which extracts from the foolish speeches of youth are placed side by side with the maturer statements of later life, that the public may ridicule the weak mortal who has had the audacity to change his views. Emerson on the contrary would say, "If by chance you should learn that you are not infallible and that you have made a mistake, be honest and own it like a man." "A foolish consistency," he urges, "is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict everything you said to-day."

The missile that is generally hurled at Emerson by those who have made little or no effort to understand him is that of transcendentalist. Those who apply the epithet to him use the word as a rule somewhat loosely and without reference to its philosophical signification. By it they would imply that he is a mere idealist living in the clouds, altogether beyond the ken of ordinary mortals. That he is a deep thinker none will deny. But that he is a mere idealist dwelling in a cloudy atmosphere of his own is quite false. On the contrary, the message that he has given to the world is intensely practical. It is thoroughly modern. It is pertinent. It

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is scientific. It is calculated to influence for good to-day people of every rank and class. And its power to do this lies in its unceasing demand for truth.

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II.

EMERSON'S VIEWS.

From Emerson's steadfast determination to "keep himself aloof from all moorings" and to "recognize all the opposite negations" it might possibly be inferred that he had no very definite views of his own, for certainly the habit of seeing both sides of a question does not conduce to the rapid attainment of conclusions. But it would be a great mistake to imagine this of Emerson. He has a most distinct philosophy of his own. And he reiterates these distinctive views in all his writings with a persistency which shows that he himself is well able to distinguish between true consistency and that "foolish consistency" which he declares to be "the hobgoblin of little minds."

Emerson's theory of the universe is pantheistic. To him external nature is simply the incarnation of the Divine mind. All that is, has the Divine spark in it. The material is only the garment of the spiritual. God is in man and all the world. Thus, to quote from the essay that evoked the prayer of the good Baptist minister, he writes—"In the woods we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes) which nature cannot repair. 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." Emerson thus felt in the presence of nature what has been so grandly expressed by Mrs. Browning—

Earth's crammed with heaven  
And every common bush afire with God.

Emerson's teaching concerning man is the unity of the race. "There is one mind," he says, "common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought he may think; what a saint has felt he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent." He seems to regard humanity as leading one life, and that in a special sense the embodiment of the Divine. "The heart in thee is the heart of all: not a valve, not an intersection is there anywhere in nature, but one blood rolls uninterruptedly an endless circulation through all men, as the water of the globe is all one sea, and truly seen its tide is one." As to the diversities in the one life, while fully recognizing the power of circumstance in moulding human destiny, he yet holds no less strongly the power of the will to modify circumstance. "Trust thyself," he says; "every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the Divine Providence has found for you, the society of your contemporaries, the connection of events.



And then as to success or failure these things are governed by fixed laws. The right merchant is one who has the just average of faculties we call *commonsense*; a man of strong affinity for facts, who makes up his decision on what he has seen. He is thoroughly persuaded of the truths of arithmetic. There is always a reason in the man for his good or bad fortune, and so in making money. Men talk as if there were some magic about this, and believe in magic in all parts of life. He knows that all goes on the old road, pound for pound, cent for cent—for every effect a perfect cause—and that good luck is another name for tenacity of purpose." There is, according to Emerson, a law of compensation that holds good all through life. Man gets what he chooses to buy, but he must buy it, for nothing is given. It is, he says, "a point of economy to look for seed of the same kind as you sow, and not to hope to buy one kind with another kind. Friendship buys friendship; justice, justice; military merit, military success. Good husbandry finds wife, children and household. The good merchant large gains, ships, stocks and money. The good poet fame and literary credit; but not either the other. Yet there is commonly a confusion of expectation on these points." And since Emerson advocates self-reliance and thoroughness in action, he of course, insists on self-reliance in thought which governs action. Men must not be led away by others' truths. They must gain their own. They must think for themselves, and not be mere echoes of the opinions of others. "Books," he once wrote, "are apt to turn reason out of doors. You find men talking everywhere from their memories instead of from their understanding." And this freedom

of thought he pushed strongly, as he was bound to do, into the region of religion and ethics. "He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

It is perhaps, hardly necessary to remark that Emerson, "pounding" as usual "on both strings," does not disparage reading. A perusal of his essay on "Books" will convince anyone, not only of the value that he places upon them, but of the extent of his own reading as well. Indeed all through his essays he constantly surprises us with his intimate acquaintance with out-of-the-way authors. All he protests against is a parrot-like repetition of other men's opinions which have never been assimilated.

No account of Emerson's views could profess to be complete that ignored the transcendentalism which is usually associated with his name. And yet there is no doubt that when the title transcendentalist was first bestowed upon him Emerson had no acquaintance whatever with Kant's philosophy. He was only a transcendentalist in so far that he believed in the existence of necessary ideas independent of experience. In was easy, he said, "to show the materialist that he also is a phantom walking and working amid phantoms, and that he need only ask a question or two beyond his daily questions to find his solid universe proving dim and palpable before his sense!" But if anyone should read Emerson hoping to find in his writings an exposition of Kant's transcendental philosophy, he will be doomed to disappointment. He could bind himself to no system.

What he saw, he said. Not one word more, though it should be backed by the authority of an angel of light.

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III.

EMERSON'S STYLE.

Augustus Hare, in his charming "Reminiscences," tells how in his earliest drawing lessons his aunt would often ask him why he had inserted a certain line. He would childishly reply, "Because he thought it looked nice," whereupon it was ruthlessly deleted, and thus he was taught from the first to leave out all that was unnecessary. Emerson had evidently learnt the same lesson as regards the art of writing, and, as usual, consistently carries out his own maxims. "Beauty," he had written, "rests on necessities. The line of beauty is the result of perfect economy. The cell of the bee is built at that angle which gives the most strength with the least wax; the bone or the quill of the bird gives the most alar strength with the least weight. 'It is the purgation of superfluities,' said Michael Angelo. There is not a particle to spare in natural structure." And this principle is reflected in Emerson's style, the main characteristic of which is terseness and directness. No unnecessary word is added for the mere sake of effect. He expresses in plain, straight English exactly what he wishes to say. Each word adds something to the sense, and is there because it has a service to render. And it is this quality that makes his sentences so telling, his English so vigorous. Merely as a writer of pure English,

Emerson might justly claim to be widely read, and possibly the writers of not a few newspaper articles or even sermons might imitate him with advantage in the excision of padding.

In another respect the character of Emerson's prose is simply a reflection of the man himself. He has been truly described as a seer rather than a philosopher. His weapon is intuition rather than logic. What he sees he gives to the world, never troubling himself or them with the process by which he arrives at his conclusions. He sees the truth, recognizes it, and straightway utters it. Consequently, his essays are in no sense elaborate arguments, and are the despair of philosophers who would classify him as belonging to a particular school of thought. But it is perhaps this very circumstance which gives to his writings their unique charm. Wherever you open him you find, instead of a single jewel in an elaborate setting, masses of gems literally heaped together. Not a page of him but sparkles with thought; and better still, not a page of him but will make the reader think.

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#### IV.

##### EMERSON'S POETRY.

As a poet Emerson will never take a high place. Not that he lacked poetic feeling. On the contrary, his very prose is poetry. But the rules of versification seem to hamper him. He does not write poetry, like Byron for instance, because he cannot help himself. It is some-

what of an effort to him to coax his thoughts to wear the Muse's dress. Nor perhaps is it to be wondered at. The man who so persistently refuses to bind his thought in any way, who will "keep himself aloof from all moorings and afloat," whose whole habit of life is to speak out straight from the heart in plain terse English, is not unlikely to feel himself circumscribed when bound by the laws of metre. And in fact, he often refuses to be so bound. Not a few of his lines are in absolute disregard of such laws, the matter in such cases triumphing over the form. Now and again, however, the two happen to fit, and the result is admirable. As an instance of his love of and intimate acquaintance with Nature we may quote the following:—

As I spoke, beneath my feet  
The ground pine curled its pretty wreath,  
Running over the club moss burrs ;  
I inhaled the violet's breath ;  
Around me stood the oaks and firs ;  
Pine cones and acorns lay on the ground :  
Over me soared the eternal sky,  
Full of light and of deity ;  
Again I saw, again I heard  
The rolling river, the mocking bird—  
Beauty through my senses stole ;  
I yielded myself to the perfect whole.

Beautiful lines no doubt, but one cannot help feeling how much more vigorously Emerson would have expressed the same thoughts in prose, as for instance, when he bursts out, "The man who has seen the rising moon break out of the clouds at midnight has been present like an archangel at the creation of light and of the

world." As other examples of his poetry one may quote the lines.—

As the wave breaks to foam on shelves,  
Then runs into a wave again,  
So lovers melt their sundered selves,  
Yet melted would be twain :

and the striking thought enshrined in the line—

There is no god dare wrong a worm.

Before passing from his poetry one feels bound to add a few lines of the little poem, "Terminus," not on account of their literary merit, but by reason of the pathetic interest attaching to them and as an instance of the greatness of the man. Emerson was growing old, and though still eagerly sought after as a lecturer, he felt his powers were waning and his work was no longer, what it had been. His recognition of this fact and the resolution based upon it shall be given in his own words—

It is time to be old,  
To take in sail ;  
The god of bounds,  
Who sets to seas a shore,  
Came to me in his fatal rounds,  
And said : " No more !  
No further shoot  
Thy broad ambitious branches and thy root,  
Fancy depart ; no more invent,  
Contract thy firmament  
To compass of a tent."

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As a bird trims her to the gale  
I trim myself to the storm of time,  
I man the rudder, reef the sail,  
Obey the voice at eve obeyed at prime :  
Lowly faithful, banish fear,  
Right onward drive unharmed ;  
The port, well worth the cruise, is near,  
And every wave is charmed.

V.

CONCLUSION.

Such then was Ralph Waldo Emerson, the intense lover of truth, and one who not only loved truth but lived it, the seer of the Divine in all things, the teacher of the unity of Nature and the brotherhood of mankind; the prophet who taught men to be brave and true, trusting themselves, thinking for themselves, telling their own thoughts instead of being mere echoes of other men; the exponent of a world-wide charity which can love all who hold opposing views if only they be straight and true. The world is indeed richer for his life, and Englishmen may well feel proud that their kinsmen across the Atlantic have found so pure and noble a tongue wherewith to re-echo the teaching of their own great master—

To thine own self be true,  
And it must follow as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

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