

RALPH WALDO
EMERSON,

THE EMINENT AMERICAN

PHILOSOPHER AND ESSAYIST.

Description and Estimate of
HIS WRITINGS.

BY

CHARLES C. CATTELL,

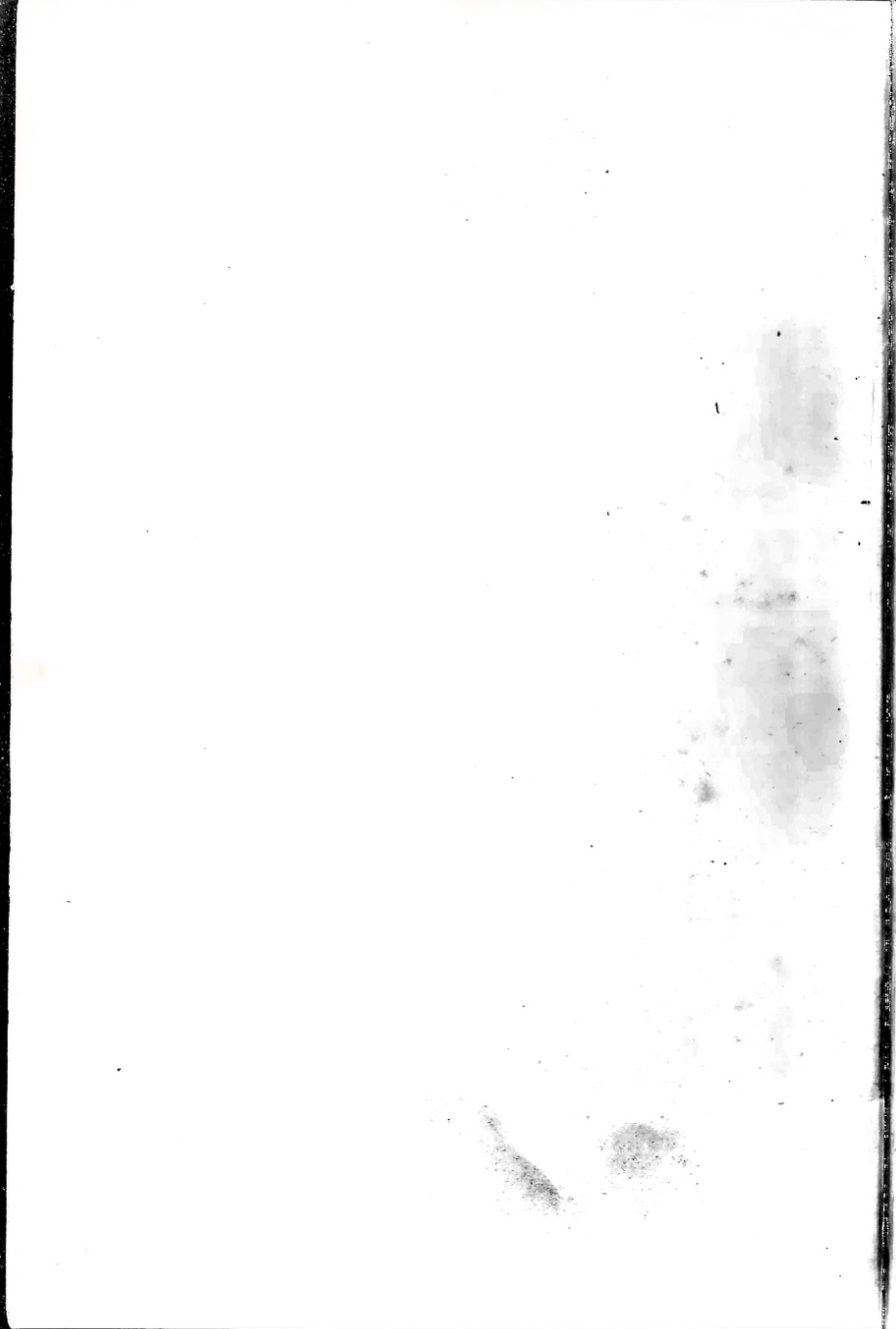
Author of "The Martyrs of Progress," "A String of Pearls,"
&c., &c.

"That which befits us, embosomed in beauty and wonder as we are, is cheerfulness and courage, and the endeavour to realise our aspirations."

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON:

Description and Estimate of his Writings.

EMERSON has been called the Columbus of modern thought, the successor to Lord Bacon, with whom, as also Montaigne, there seems some affinity. He began when American literature was but a name, when writers worked for nothing and paid their printer. To-day Emerson's influence is felt by all speakers and writers. As a philosophic writer, I know none so charming. He is the Plato of modern times. Nature and science in his hand seem vivid: he animates all he sees; his wit and humour playfully enliven fossils and granite rocks. He is master of metaphor and phrases, so that definitions and formulas become a burden and he dispenses with them. He describes the order of nature, points out the distance from the rock to the oyster, and from thence to man, thinking and writing. This he does with as much distinctness as though he had read the experience of explorers, and had had private interviews with Murchison, Lyell, and Darwin before the day of publication. In imagination he equals the writers to whom all men bow, and is one of the chief ornaments of the modern Saxon race. His philosophy is not only for boiling pots, it is to give joy and hope, to make society happy men and women. It is to develop the intellect of the race, and apply it to the promotion of the public good, the good of all. Emerson has, strangely enough, been taken for the ghost of Carlyle, has been set down as a sort of moon to Carlyle's sun. Nothing is more palpably absurd. Readers who cannot distinguish crystals from pine forests make poor critics, and should abandon the profession. The parallel to Emerson is unborn, or at least undeveloped.

In the *Atlantic Monthly* for 1880 there is an account of a party to Wendell Holmes, the founder, it being his 70th birthday. The chairman remarks that Emerson is with us, although silent by preference. I note it is Emerson's 77th year, he having been born at Boston, May 25th, 1803. As arrangements have been made by my friend, Mr. David Kirkwood, to circulate in Boston what I write, a few words on Ralph Waldo Emerson will be well timed. I feel my indebtedness to Emerson, and express it in such unadorned style as my ability permits. He is an inspired man, rich in imagery, in poetry, in arts; I am but the poor beggar subsisting on the crumbs that fall from his table. But it is bad policy to let people know how poor we are. When equals meet there is no apology, no introduction, no preface. I approach Emerson: his ability, age, and influence, demand respect and a certain condescension from me. He is a giant, I a pigmy. A friend who once met him at breakfast in New York tells me he was surprised when the name Emerson was applied to the gentleman near him, who looked no better and no worse than others, and not different from other people. It is as Emerson says, you cannot see the mountain near. I noticed we could not see the Saxon emblems when on the spot; but twenty miles away the horse and the man stood out from the hill in bold relief.

Ralph Waldo Emerson graduated at Harvard College in 1821. He was schoolmaster for five years; was ordained minister of the second Unitarian Church, Boston, 1829, resigning in 1832; and in 1832 and 1847 he visited Europe. He was married in 1830; but his wife died five months after, and he married again in 1835. He speedily gave up his clerical profession, and retired to the village of Concord. Here he studied his favourite theme—the nature of man and his relations to the universe. In 1840 he became associated with Margaret Fuller in editing a magazine of literature, philosophy, and religion, entitled the *Dial*, which continued four years. In 1852, in connection with W. H. Channing, he published "Memoirs of Margaret Fuller, Marchesa d'Ossoli." His "Representative Men" was popular in England in 1850, in which he portrays, in his own inimit-

able manner, types of classes of men under the names of Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. In 1856 another popular work appeared, giving an account of his travels, entitled "English Traits." Between the years 1837 and 1844 he delivered addresses and wrote essays, which were circulated in a cheap form in England; and to these I was indebted for my introduction to this expositor of "the divine laws." Looking in a window full of selected books is one of the delights which fade in the presence of the free public library. I often think what a debt we owe the old collectors of books, who made it the business of their lives to gather a variety for the public choice. The Church library is carefully selected, resembling a flower garden painted on a tea tray: Emerson never enters there. His living thoughts, full of fire, would dissolve any school collection of innocent Sunday serials.

"I am owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Cæsar's hand and Plato's brain,
Of Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's strain."

Thus Emerson places every individual man on a common level, giving him a share in the whole estate of the intellect of the race; he thinks as Plato did, and there is no saint like whom he may not feel. Persecutors and slanderers, to such a well-endowed man, appear as dwarfs acting under the hallucination that they are giants. The Bible to him is only a portion of the scriptures of mankind. Jesus is one of the many young men hanged or gibbeted at Tyburn. Socrates is no longer a poor benighted heathen, but a noble, heroic man, and Jesus only a brother. After reading Emerson our idea is that the world is fair and beautiful, although there are sorrow and death. Before, it was on its last legs—creation a blunder—men and women had neither beauty nor dignity. It seemed a pity so much sin and ugliness were born, and only the long-suffering patience of their creator prevented their extinction. Everything pointed to an eternal collapse; but Emerson gives confidence in the stability, the self-sustaining power of nature. We are consoled with the assurance that the sun and moon will last our time, and we leave the good

will to posterity, and transfer our anxiety to their holy keeping. It is, then, no longer a misfortune to be born, a misery to live, or a terror to die. We become cheerful, and revive our courage. We return to the battle of life—up again, old heart, and at them: we are yet neither foam nor wreck.

In reading Emerson the mind acquires new habits of thought. The ideas generated are new and startling, and still founded on observation a thousand years old. The chatter of the theologians is as chaff and chips; Emerson is as sweet and refreshing as a summer's breeze. The words of the theologian are like a flickering candle in a widow's window on a dark and stormy night; Emerson's words are as the brilliant sun shining through the forest. Compared with Emerson, the doctrines, the parson, and even the Church itself, appear fossils, mere wrecks of a former world of beauty and of truth.

Emerson speaks from the heart; he has seen nature, and he interprets what he has seen; everything appears living and full of purpose. The theologian sees nothing to-day; he only reports that God and nature were seen ages back, when the world was young and innocent. He is a talking machine, he is a canal, not a river. Emerson is the waterfall, dashing and sparkling; the theologian a stagnant pool, fed by little brooks that flowed from the hills after the last flood. The theologian speaks of a God who died long centuries ago, who left his will, and appointed him executor to his children. One cannot help pitying the poor orphans! Emerson says God is alive to-day; through me, through you, through all pure souls, God speaks to-day. But the God of Emerson cannot be measured, cannot be put into a box, nor be eaten. He does not reside in Judea, nor in Christendom. "There is a soul in the centre of nature, and over the will of every man, so that none of us can wrong the universe." "There is a power over and behind us, and we are the channels of its communications." Again: "When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence." Elsewhere he says: "The baffled intellect must still kneel before his cause, which refuses to be named."

Our quaint names, fortune, muse, holy ghost, are too narrow to cover the unbounded substance. Every fine genius has tried to represent it by some symbol. Anaximenes, by air; Thales, by water; Anaxagoras, by thought; Zoroaster, by fire; Jesus and the moderns, by love.

Emerson says that in "our more correct writing we give to these generalisations the name of Being, and thereby confess we have arrived as far as we can go." I do not believe that there is a soul in the centre of all things, or that a soul in man presides over and directs all the organs of his brain; still, I fondly cherish the remembrance of being lifted into the universal being, which had its centre everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. The bewilderments of metaphysics and the cobwebs of theology make the confused brain so hot that these words act like a gentle shower in sultry weather:—

"The rounded world is fair to see,
 Nine times folded in mystery;
 Though baffled seer cannot impart
 The secret of its labouring heart,
 Throb thine with Nature's throbbing breast,
 And all is clear from east to west.
 Spirit, that lurks each form within,
 Beckons to spirit of its kin;
 Self-kindled every atom glows,
 And hints the future that it owes."

One thing is clear, that, if a man fails to find consolation and peace in nature, he will find it nowhere. If he sees no beauty in a landscape, receives no pleasure from looking at a rose, a tree, or a simple weed; if he sees no grandeur in a storm; if the rolling, tempestuous sea excites no feeling of admiration or of awe, of wonder or fear, he may rely upon it, either his mind or his body is out of health. Emerson says he knew a physician who believed that the religion a man accepted depended very much on the state of his liver. If diseased, he would be a Calvinist; if that organ was sound, a Unitarian. No doubt the kind of religion adopted depends a great deal on the climate and the state of the blood.

The great idea that Emerson teaches is self-reliance; every heart vibrates to that iron string. Individualism

is encouraged by him in every chapter he writes. He delights in the man who sets up the strong present tense, does broad justice now, and makes progress a fact ; to fill the hour, that is happiness, and leaves no room for repentance or approval.

“ Work of his hand
He nor commends nor grieves ;
Pleads for itself the fact ;
As unrepenting Nature leaves
Her every act.”

Thus men of character become the conscience of society, and unite with all that is just and true. Emerson teaches that the world exists for a noble purpose, the transformation of genius into practical power. The popular idea is that the world is in a state of liquidation, that the Grand Master of the Ceremonies is about to appear to wind up the whole concern, and only believers will share what may be realised from the estate. Emerson, on the contrary, encourages men to work on and hope on, believing that right and justice will ultimately triumph.

There is one special feature in Emerson that is worthy the serious attention of students, and readers of who are not students. In his writings he shows an acquaintance with the literature of the Old and the New Worlds. He places within the reach of ordinary readers a mine of literary wealth. I have read a great variety of books during the past quarter of a century, but confess that, with few exceptions, Emerson knew all I have since learnt. I know of no more economic method of gaining an insight into the literature of the Old World and the New than by reading the writings of this remarkable man. However practical a man may be, he needs some poetry to make life tolerable, and in Emerson the poetic side of life has sufficient attention, although mixed with science and philosophy.

Emerson is called a visionary dreamer ; but do not his words show that he sees life as it is, and has felt the dark side of life, been under the shadow of existence ? While he teaches Individualism, he is not mad, for he writes of love and friendship, and says :—

“All are needed by each one,
Nothing is fair and good alone.”

In his fable of the quarrel between the mountain and the squirrel, the squirrel says:—

“Talents differ ; all is well and wisely put ;
If I cannot carry forests on my back,
Neither can you crack a nut.”

In his “Compensation” he teaches that “the world is dual, so is every one of its parts.” This chapter is unlike anything written in modern times. He desired, when a boy, to write this essay, for it seemed to him life was ahead of theology, and that the people knew more than the preachers taught.

In politics he says nature is neither democratic nor Limited-Monarchical, but despotic. Persons having reason have equal rights—demand a democracy—but besides persons, the State undertakes to protect property; and here is inequality—one man owns his clothes, another a county. He does not urge that the Republic is “better,” but that it is “fitter.” It suits them. He holds that the limitation of government, all governments, is the wisdom of men; all men being wise, the State would disappear. The tendency of the time favours self-government. The less government we have, the better. We think we get value for our money everywhere, except what we pay for taxes.

In “The Conduct of Life,” among the many questions discussed is wealth. He says: “As soon as a stranger is introduced the question is, How does he get his living? He should be able to answer. Every man is a consumer, and should be a producer. He fails to make his place good in the world who does not add something to the commonwealth.”

In a chapter on Worship he mentions that some of the Indians and Pacific Islanders flog their gods when things take an unfavourable turn. Laomedon threatened to cut the ears off Apollo and Neptune in his anger. King Olaf put a pan of glowing coals on the belly of Eyvind, which burst asunder, saying, “Wilt thou *now* believe in Christ?” In the romantic ages of Christianity, to marry a Pagan husband or wife was to

take a step backwards towards the baboon. To-day he says, religion is weak and childish; we have the rat-and-mouse revelation, thumps in table drawers. To-day, he says men talk of "mere morality," which is as if one should say, "Poor God, with nobody to help him!" He prophesies that there will be a new Church, founded on moral science, that will gather science, music, beauty, picture, and poetry around it.

"Society and Solitude," which contains a valuable chapter on Books, is written in language less angular and studied than his previous books—more like his "English Traits," which I suppose everybody has read.

The great variety of Emerson's writings prevents the notice of any special chapter at any considerable length. A few allusions sufficiently indicate his wide departure from the popular theology. The belief in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul is, with him, as natural to the soul of man as apples are to apple trees. Revelation, with him, is the disclosure of the soul—the popular idea is, that it is telling of fortunes. He would not believe any man who said the Holy Ghost told him the last day of Judgment occurred in the eighteenth century. His teaching seems to indicate that all opinions, beliefs, conjectures, and anticipations, to be of use to the individual, must come to him. He cannot learn from other men; there is nothing second-hand in his divinity. Omniscience flows behind and through every man; he is simply a medium. Holding these transcendental views, still he paints the Sceptic in his essay on Montaigne with marvellous fidelity. His description of the position of the believer, the unbeliever, and the disbeliever is so accurate that one often regrets the clergy and ministers of the Gospel do not devote one hour of their long and busy lives to the reading of this one chapter of Emerson; whatever they might have to say after might be understood by the persons holding the opinions they attempt to refute. Emerson shows that the Sceptic is not a fool; he is the considerer, the man who weighs evidence, and limits his statement by the assurance of facts. He does not allow that any Church or society of men have all the truth. He knows all knowledge is relative; all conclusions not

based on ascertained facts are open to doubt. Perhaps as much can be said against as for any speculative opinion. Who then shall forbid a wise Scepticism ?

In confirmation of my representation of Emerson's views, I quote his approval of Spenser. He says :—

“ The soul makes the body, as the wise Spenser teaches;
For of the soul the body form doth take ;
For soul is form, and doth the body make.”

His description of man entering the world among the lords of life is—

“ Little man, least of all,
Among the legs of his guardians tall,
Walked about with puzzled look.”

He is born in a series of which the extremes are unknown—there are stairs above and below, both beyond our vision ; no man knows how far they extend in either direction. “ Life is a string of beads, and as we pass through them, they prove to be many-coloured lenses, which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its own focus.”

All martyrdoms look mean when they are suffered ; every ship is a romantic object, except the one we sail in ; our little life looks trivial, and we often wonder how anything of use or beauty was produced by us ; the landscape of our neighbour's farm is beautiful to look upon, but as to our field it only holds the world together.

In 1876 he published “ Letters and Social Aims,” in which we find the last chapter is on Immortality. Emerson was then in his 73rd year, and might be expected to tell us something of the life beyond life. But he knows nothing to impart to another ; yet in our weakness we ask, does Emerson believe it? The members of the church ask their pastor, is there any resurrection? Did Dr. Channing believe we should know each other? “ Let any master simply recite to you the substantial laws of the intellect, and in the presence of the laws themselves you will never ask such primary-school questions.” He says the Sceptic affirms the universe to be a nest of boxes with nothing in the last box.

Montesquieu delighted in believing himself as im-

mortal as God himself. Young children have a feeling of terror of a life without end. "What, will it never stop? Never, never die? It makes me feel so tired."

Penal servitude "for life" fills men with terror, but "for ever" makes them sing and rejoice. The thought that this poor frail being is never to end is overwhelming. Herodotus, in his second book, says: "The Egyptians were the first among mankind who have affirmed the immortality of the soul."

As the savage could not detach in his mind the life of the soul from the body, he took great care of his body. The great and chief end of man being to be buried well, the priesthood became a senate of sextons; and masonry and embalming the most popular of the arts.

Sixty years ago we were all taught that we were born to die, and theology added all the terrors of savage nations to increase the gloom. A wise man in our generation caused "Think on Living" to be inscribed on his tomb. Emerson says this shows a great change and describes a progress in opinion. He describes the soul as master. "A man of thought is willing to die, willing to live; I suppose because he has seen the thread on which the beads are strung, and perceived that it reaches up and down, existing quite independently of the present illusions." Matter-of-fact people will pronounce these sentences nonsense, while they pretend to believe greater miracles on Sundays and holy days. "And what are these delights in the vast, permanent, and strong, but approximations and resemblances of what is entire and sufficing, creative and self-sustaining life? For the creator keeps his word with us."

He says, after making our children adepts in arts, we do not send for the soldiers to shoot them down. Nature does not, like the Empress Anne of Russia, employ all the genius of the empire to build a palace of snow. Emerson thinks the eternal, the vast, the powerful in nature indicates the permanence of living thought—the perpetual promise of the creator. Goethe said: "It is to a thinking being impossible to think himself non-existent; so far every one carries proof of immortality." Van Helmont wishes Atheists "might taste, if only for a moment, what it is to intellectually under-

stand ; whereby they may feel the immortality of the mind, as it were, by touching."

"The healthy state of mind is the love of life. What is so good? Let it endure." This is the language of the inspired on the mount ; but those who live in the valley inquire, *Will it endure?*

"I think all sound minds rest on a certain preliminary conviction—namely, that if it be best that conscious personal life shall continue, it will continue ; if not best, then it will not." Whatever it is, "the future must be up to the style of our faculties—of memory, hope, and reason." There is this drawback to all statements—hungry eyes close disappointed ; listeners do not hear what they want. At last Emerson confesses that you cannot prove your faith by syllogisms : the reasons all vanish ; it is all flying ideal ; conclusions are always hovering ; no written theory or demonstration is possible : Jesus explained nothing. Emerson remarks that it is strange that Jesus is esteemed by mankind the bringer of the doctrine of immortality. "He is never once weak or sentimental ; he is *very abstemious of explanation* ; he never preaches the personal immortality ; while Plato and Cicero had both allowed themselves to overstep the stern limits of the spirit, and gratify the people with that picture." Emerson compares the grandeur of the doctrine with frivolous populations : Will you build magnificently for mice ? Offer empires to such as cannot keep house ? Here are people on whose hands an hour hangs heavily—a day ! Will you offer them rolling ages without end ? At last all drop into the universal soul ; each is as a bottle broken into the sea. Emerson quotes, "The soul is not born ; it does not die." This is the Hindoo faith.

Another chapter in the 1876 volume is on "Quotation and Originality." Emerson has been reading and quoting and thinking and writing all his long life ; hence, what high value must we set on this chapter ! To the literary student it is simply invaluable. He is like the old mountain guide, who never misled a tourist, and never missed his way. Only those who wander extensively in new paths can appreciate one to whom all roads are known. Read Tasso, and you think of Virgil ; read Virgil, and you think of Homer ; read Plato, and you

find Christian dogma and Evangelical phrases. Rabelais is the source of many a proverb, story, and jest.

"Reynard the Fox," a German poem of the thirteenth century, yielded to Grimm, who found fragments of another original a century older.

M. le Grand showed the original tales of Molière, La Fontaine, Boccaccio, and Voltaire in the old Fabliaux.

Mythology is no man's work. Religious literature psalms, liturgies, the Bible itself, is the growth of ages. Divines assumed revelations of Christianity, the exact parallelisms of which are found in the stoics and poets of Greece and Rome. After the modern researches, Confucius, the Indian Scriptures, and the history of Egypt show that "no monopoly of ethical wisdom could be thought of."

Sayings reported of modern statesmen and literary men can be traced to Greek and Roman sources

Baron Munchausen's bugle, hung up by the kitchen fire till the frozen tune thawed out, is found in the time of Plato.

Only recently England and America have discovered their nursery tales were old German and Scandinavian stories; and now it appears that they came from India, and were warbled and babbled by nurses and children of all nations for unknown thousands of years. "Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it. Many will read a book before one thinks of quoting a passage." When Shakespeare is charged with debts, Landor replies: "Yet he is more original than his originals. He breathed upon dead bodies, and brought them into life." If De Quincey said to Wordsworth, "That is what I told you," he replied, as his habit was to reproduce all the good things: "No, that is mine—mine, and not yours." Marmontel's principle was: "I pounce on what is mine, *wherever I find it.*" Poets, like bees, take from every flower that suits them, not concerned where it originally grew. "It is a familiar expedient of brilliant writers and witty talkers, the device of ascribing their own sentence to some imaginary person in order to give it weight."

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