

THE SENSES AND THE SOUL.

"WHAT we know is a point to what we do not know." The first questions are still to be asked. Let any man bestow a thought on himself, how he came hither, and whither he tends, and he will find that all the literature, all the philosophy that is on record, have done little to dull the edge of inquiry. The globe that swims so silently with us through the sea of space, has never a port, but with its little convoy of friendly orbs pursues its voyage through the signs of heaven, to renew its navigation again forever. The wonderful tidings our glasses and calendars give us concerning the hospitable lights that hang around us in the deep, do not appease but inflame our curiosity; and in like manner, our culture does not lead to any goal, but its richest results of thought and action are only new preparation.

Here on the surface of our swimming earth we come out of silence into society already formed, into language, customs, and traditions, ready made, and the multitude of our associates discountenance us from expressing any surprise at the somewhat agreeable novelty of Being, and frown down any intimation on our part of a disposition to assume our own vows, to preserve our independence, and to institute any inquiry into the sweet and sublime vision which surrounds us.

And yet there seems no need that any should fear we should grow too wise. The path of truth has obstacles enough of its own. We dwell on the surface of nature. We dwell amidst surfaces; and surface laps so closely on surface, that we cannot easily pierce to see the interior organism. Then the subtlety of things! Under every cause, another cause. Truth soars too high or dives too deep, for the most resolute inquirer. See of how much we know nothing. See the strange position of man. Our science neither comprehends him as a whole, nor any one of its particulars. See the action and reaction of Will and Necessity. See his passions, and their origin in the depths of nature and circumstance. See the Fear that rides even the brave. See the omnipresent Hope, whose fountains in our consciousness no metaphysician can find. Consider

the phenomenon of Laughter, and explore the elements of the Comic. What do we know of the mystery of Music? and what of Form? why this stroke, this outline should express beauty, and that other not? See the occult region of Demonology, with coincidence, foresight, dreams, and omens. Consider the appearance of Death, the formidable secret of our destiny, looming up as the barrier of nature.

Our ignorance is great enough, and yet the fact most surprising is not our ignorance, but the aversion of men from knowledge. That which, one would say, would unite all minds and join all hands, the ambition to push as far as fate would permit, the planted garden of man on every hand into the kingdom of Night, really fires the heart of few and solitary men. Tell men to study themselves, and for the most part, they find nothing less interesting. Whilst we walk environed before and behind with Will, Fate, Hope, Fear, Love, and Death, these phantoms or angels, whom we catch at but cannot embrace, it is droll to see the contentment and incuriosity of man. All take for granted, — the learned as well as the unlearned, — that a great deal, nay, almost all, is known and forever settled. But in truth all is now to be begun, and every new mind ought to take the attitude of Columbus, launch out from the gaping loiterers on the shore, and sail west for a new world.

This profound ignorance, this deep sleep of the higher faculties of man, coexists with a great abundance of what are called the means of learning, great activity of book-making, and of formal teaching. Go into one of our public libraries, when a new box of books and journals has arrived with the usual importation of the periodical literature of England. The best names of Britain are on the covers. What a mass of literary production for a single week or month! We speculate upon it before we read. We say, what an invention is the press and the journal, by which a hundred pale students, each a hive of distilled flowers of learning, of thought, — each a poet, — each an accomplished man whom the selectest influences have joined to breed and enrich, are made to unite their manifold streams for the information and delight of everybody who can read! How lame is speech, how imperfect the communication of

the ancient Harper, wandering from castle to hamlet, to sing to a vagrant audience his melodious thoughts! These unopened books contain the chosen verses of a hundred minstrels, born, living, and singing in distant countries and different languages; for, the intellectual wealth of the world, like its commercial, rolls to London, and through that great heart is hurled again to the extremities. And here, too, is the result, not poetic, of how much thought, how much experience, and how much suffering of wise and cultivated men! How can we in America expect books of our own, whilst this bale of wisdom arrives once or twice in a month at our ports?

In this mind we open the books, and begin to read. We find they are books about books; and then perhaps the book criticized was itself a compilation or digest of others; so that the page we read is at third or fourth hand from the event or sentiment which it describes. Then we find that much the largest proportion of the pages relates exclusively to matter of fact—to the superficial fact, and, as if systematically, shuns any reference to a thought or law which the fact indicated. A large part again, both of the prose and verse, is gleanings from old compositions, and the oft repeated praise of such is repeated in the phrase of the present day. We have even the mortification to find one more deduction still from our anticipated prize, namely, that a large portion of ostentatious criticism is merely a hired advertisement of the great booksellers. In the course of our turning of leaves, we fall at last on an extraordinary passage—a record of thought and virtue, or a clarion strain of poetry, or perchance a traveller makes us acquainted with strange modes of life and some relic of primeval religion, or, rarer yet, a profound sentence is here printed—shines here new but eternal on these linen pages,—we wonder whence it came,—or perhaps trace it instantly home—*aut Erasmus aut Diabolus*—to the only head it could come from.

A few thoughts are all we glean from the best inspection of the paper pile; all the rest is combination and confectinary. A little part abides in our memory, and goes to exalt the sense of duty, and make us happier. For the rest, our heated expectation is chilled and disappointed.

Some indirect benefit will no doubt accrue. If we read with braced and active mind, we learn this negative fact, itself a piece of human life. We contrast this mountain of dross with the grains of gold,—we oversee the writer, and learn somewhat of the laws of writing. But a lesson as good we might be learning elsewhere.

Now what is true of a month's or a year's issue of new books, seems to me with a little qualification true of the age. The *stock-writers*, (for the honesty of the literary class has given this population a name,) vastly outnumber the thinking men. One man, two men,—possibly, three or four,—have cast behind them the long-descended costume of the academy, and the expectations of fashion, and have said, This world is too fair, this world comes home too near to me than that I should walk a stranger in it, and live at second-hand, fed by other men's doctrines, or treading only in their steps; I feel a higher right herein, and will hearken to the Oracle myself. Such have perceived the extreme poverty of literature, have seen that there was not and could not be help for the fervent soul, except through its own energy. But the great number of those who have voluminously ministered to the popular tastes were men of talents, who had some feat which each could do with words, but who have not added to wisdom or to virtue. Talent amuses; Wisdom instructs. Talent shows me what another man can do; Genius acquaints me with the spacious circuits of the common nature. One is carpentry; the other is growth. To make a step into the world of thought is now given to but few men; to make a second step beyond the first, only one in a country can do; but to carry the thought on to three steps, marks a great teacher. Aladdin's palace with its one unfinished window, which all the gems in the royal treasury cannot finish in the style of the meanest of the profusion of jewelled windows that were built by the Genie in a night, is but too true an image of the efforts of talent to add one verse to the copious text which inspiration writes by one or another scribe from age to age.

It is not that the literary class or those for whom they write, are not lovers of truth, and amenable to principles. All are so. The hunger of men for truth is immense; but they are not erect on their feet; the senses are too strong

for the soul. Our senses barbarize us. When the ideal world recedes before the senses, we are on a retrograde march. The savage surrenders to his senses; he is subject to paroxysms of joy and fear; he is lewd, and a drunkard. The Esquimaux in the exhilaration of the morning sun, when he is invigorated by sleep, will sell his bed. He is the fool of the moment's sensations to the degree of losing sight of the whole amount of his sensations in so many years. And there is an Esquimaux in every man which makes us believe in the permanence of this moment's state of our game more than our own experience will warrant. In the fine day we despise the house. At sea, the passengers always judge from the weather of the present moment of the probable length of the voyage. In a fresh breeze, they are sure of a good run; becalmed, they are equally sure of a long passage. In trade, the momentary state of the markets betrays continually the experienced and long-sighted. In politics, and in our opinion of the prospects of society, we are in like manner the slaves of the hour. Meet one or two malignant declaimers, and we are weary of life, and distrust the permanence of good institutions. A single man in a ragged coat at an election looks revolutionary. But ride in a stage-coach with one or two benevolent persons in good spirits, and the Republic seems to us safe.

It is but an extension of the despotism of sense, — shall I say, only a calculated sensuality, — a little more comprehensive devotion which subjugates the eminent and the reputed wise, and hinders an ideal culture. In the great stakes which the leaders of society esteem not at all fanciful but solid, in the best reputed professions and operations, what is there which will bear the scrutiny of reason? The most active lives have so much routine as to preclude progress almost equally with the most inactive. We defer to the noted merchants whose influence is felt not only in their native cities, but in most parts of the globe; but our respect does them and ourselves great injustice, for their trade is without system, their affairs unfold themselves after no law of the mind; but are bubble built on bubble without end; a work of arithmetic, not of commerce, much less of considerate humanity. They add voyage to voyage, and buy stocks that they may buy stocks, and no ulterior

purpose is thought of. When you see their dexterity in particulars, you cannot overestimate the resources of good sense, and when you find how empty they are of all remote aims, you cannot underestimate their philosophy.

The men of letters and the professions we have charged with the like surrender to routine. It is no otherwise with the men of office. Statesmen are solitary. At no time do they form a class. Governments, for the most part, are carried on by political merchants quite without principle, and according to the maxims of trade and huckster; so that what is true of merchants is true of public officers. Why should we suffer ourselves to be cheated by sounding names and fair shows? The titles, the property, the notoriety, the brief consequence of our fellows are only the decoration of the sacrifice, and add to the melancholy of the observer.

“The earth goes on the earth glittering with gold,
The earth goes to the earth sooner than it should,
The earth builds on the earth castles and towers,
The earth says to the earth, all this is ours.”

All this is covered up by the speedy succession of the particulars, which tread so close on each other's heel, as to allow no space for the man to question the whole thing. There is somewhat terrific in this mask of routine. Captain Franklin, after six weeks travelling on the ice to the North Pole, found himself two hundred miles south of the spot he had set out from. The ice had floated; and we sometimes start to think we are spelling out the same sentences, saying the same words, repeating the same acts as in former years. Our ice may float also.

This preponderance of the senses can we balance and redress? Can we give permanence to the lightnings of thought which lick up in a moment these combustible mountains of sensation and custom, and reveal the moral order after which the earth is to be rebuilt anew? Grave questions truly, but such as to leave us no option. To know the facts is already a choosing of sides, ranges us on the party of Light and Reason, sounds the signal for the strife, and prophesies an end to the insanity and a restoration of the balance and rectitude of man.