

CONTEMPORARIES

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

RALPH WALDO EMERSON was born in Boston, Mass., May 25, 1803, being the son of the Rev. William Emerson and Ruth (Haskins) Emerson. The Rev. William Emerson was one of the most eminent of the Boston clergy of his day; and his father, also named William, was the minister of Concord at the time of the "Concord fight," and had on the Sunday previous preached from the text, "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." On the mother's side, as well as on the father's, Ralph Waldo Emerson came not merely of unmixed New England blood, but of an emphatically clerical stock. He had had a minister among his ancestors in every generation for eight generations back, on the one side or the other. Like his friend and teacher, William Ellery Channing, he was reared under the especial and controlling influence of strong women, for his father died when he was but eight years old, so

that his mother and his aunt, Miss Mary Emerson, were the guiding influences of his early life. The Rev. Dr. Frothingham once wrote of Mrs. Emerson, the elder: "Both her mind and character were of a superior order, and they set their stamp upon manners of peculiar softness and natural grace and quiet dignity." Mrs. Ripley wrote of Miss Mary Emerson, "Her power over the minds of her young friends was almost despotic;" and her eminent nephew said of her that her influence upon him was as great as that of Greece or Rome. The household atmosphere was one of "plain living and high thinking," and Mr. Emerson used to relate, according to Mr. Cooke, that he had once gone without the second volume of a book because his aunt had convinced him that his mother could not afford to pay six cents for it at the circulating library. He was fitted for Harvard College at the public schools of Boston, and when he entered, at the age of fourteen, in 1817, he became "President's freshman," as the position was then called, doing official errands for compensation. He was then described as being "a slender, delicate youth, younger than most of his classmates, and of a sensitive, retiring nature."

All his college career showed the conscientiousness which was to control his life, and also

his strong literary tendency. In his junior year he won a "Bowdoin prize" for an essay on "The Character of Socrates," and again in his senior year a second prize for a dissertation on "The Present State of Ethical Philosophy," these two being the only opportunities then afforded by the college for such competition. He also won a "Boylston prize" for declamation, was Class Poet, and had a "part" at Commencement in a conference on the character of John Knox. Josiah Quincy, of Boston, a member of the same class, remarked in his college diary, as quoted by himself in the "New York Independent," that Emerson's dissertation on ethics was "dull and dry." As he himself had won the first prize, his criticism could have afforded, it would seem, to be generous; but as he also regarded Emerson's Class Day poem as "rather poor," it is necessary to remember that there is no known criticism quite so merciless as that of college boys on one another. At any rate it was with these credentials that Emerson went forth to the world in 1821; and as his destiny was to be literature, we must pause for a moment to consider what then was the condition of this nation in that regard.

We must remember that it was only the political life of America which came into being

in 1776: its literary life was not yet born; and though Horace Walpole had written two years earlier that there would one day be a Thucydides in Boston and a Xenophon in New York, nobody on this side of the Atlantic believed it, or even stopped to think about it. The Government was born with such travail, and this was prolonged for so many years, that the thoughts of public men went little farther. Fisher Ames wrote about 1807 an essay on "American Literature" to prove that there would never be any such thing. He said:—

"Except the authors of two able works on our politics we have no authors. Shall we match Joel Barlow against Homer or Hesiod? Can Thomas Paine contend against Plato?"¹ He then shows how in each department of literature America is probably foredoomed to fail, and closes with the hopeful suggestion that, when liberty shall yield to despotism, literature and luxury may arrive together.

It is well known that John Adams, a few years later, took a somewhat similar view of affairs. He wrote in 1819 to a French artist who wished to make a bust of him:—

"The age of sculpture and painting has not yet arrived in this country, and I hope it will not arrive very soon. I would not give six-

¹ Works of Fisher Ames, pp. 460, 461.

pence for a picture of Raphael or a statue of Phidias."

When we wonder at the political ability of that day, we must remember that men concentrated absolutely everything upon it; they could not give even a thought to creating a cultivated nation; the thing that amazes us is that they should have created a nation at all.

Two years after John Adams had made the above remark about painting, and only fourteen years after Fisher Ames had written thus hopelessly of American literature, Emerson was graduated at Harvard. It is to be noted of him that he was the very first of that long line of well-known authors who received their first literary criticism from Professor Edward Tyrrel Channing. Up to that time there had been no such thing as a professional author in America, except Brockden Brown, who died in 1810. Channing was a clergyman; Bryant was a lawyer; Cooper was not yet known, his novel of "Precaution" having been published anonymously; Bancroft was still in Germany, and Irving in England. The "North American Review" had been six years established, but still reached only a small circle. Sydney Smith had lately written (in 1818): "There does not seem to be in America, at this moment, one man of any considerable talents." Such was

the condition of affairs when Emerson took his diploma and went forth as Bachelor of Arts.

For five years after leaving college he was an assistant teacher in a school for girls, taught by his elder brother, William. In 1823 he began to study for the ministry, the accumulated traditions of his ancestry being quite too strong for him. He did not join the Harvard Divinity School, then newly established, but he was duly "appointed to preach" in 1826. His health was delicate, and he took a trip southward for small parishes under temporary engagements. He evidently felt at this time a premonition of that longing for studious retirement to which he afterward yielded; for the graceful verses,

"Good-by, proud world, I'm going home,"

belong to this period of his life and not to the later time. On March 11, 1829, he was ordained as colleague to the Rev. Henry Ware, Jr., of the Second Unitarian Society in Boston. Here he remained for three years, faithfully discharging his professional duties, and indeed construing them with a liberality beyond most of his profession, inasmuch as he twice opened his pulpit for anti-slavery addresses. The Rev. Mr. Ware was absent in Europe during a large part of Mr. Emerson's term of service, and returned only to resign his post from ill-health,

saying to the people in regard to his young colleague: "Providence presented to you at once a man on whom your hearts could rest."

Emerson's preaching seems to have prefigured his later lecturing in earnestness and sincerity, and it had the same ideal aspect; he spoke of himself once as "killing the utility swine" in a sermon on ethics. He had some duties outside his own pulpit, was Chaplain of the State Senate, and member of the City School Committee. He seems to have liked his work, but was compelled by his conscience to preach a sermon (September 9, 1832) against the further observance of the so-called "Lord's Supper." This sermon was not printed at the time, but may be found in Frothingham's "History of Transcendentalism." It does not seem very aggressive when tried beside the more trenchant heresies of to-day, but it sufficed to separate him from his parish. Yet it is evident that the separation was without bitterness, inasmuch as he furnished for the ordination of his successor, the Rev. Chandler Robbins, during the next year, the fine hymn beginning —

"We love the venerable house
Our fathers built to God."

During this pastorate he was married (in September, 1829) to Ellen Louise Tucker, to whom he addressed the lines entitled "To

Ellen at the South." She died of consumption in February, 1832, and at the end of that year he sailed for Europe, being gone nearly a year. It was during this visit that he made the acquaintance of Landor and Wordsworth, as described in "English Traits," and he also went to Craigenputtock to see Carlyle, who long afterward described his visit (in conversation with Longfellow), as being "like the visit of an angel." Then began that friendship which lasted for a lifetime, and which had such a hold upon the high-minded Carlyle, that he scarcely seemed a cynic when the name of Emerson was uttered.

After his return to Boston Mr. Emerson preached a few times — once in his old pulpit — and declined a call from the large Unitarian Society in New Bedford. He gave public lectures on "Italy," on "Water," and on "The Relation of Man to the Globe." In 1834 he gave in Boston a series of biographical lectures on Michael Angelo, Milton, Luther, George Fox, and Edmund Burke, — a different pantheon, it will be observed, from his later "Representative Men." It is well remembered that there was even at that time a charm in his manner which arrested the attention of very young people; and from that time forward, for half a century, he was one of the leading lecturers of

America. He lectured in forty successive seasons before a single "lyceum" — that of Salem, Mass. His fine delivery unquestionably did a great deal for the dissemination of his thought. After once hearing him, that sonorous oratory seemed to roll through every sentence that the student read; and his very peculiarities, — the occasional pause accompanied with a deep gaze of the eyes, or the apparent hesitation in the selection of a word, always preparing the way, like Charles Lamb's stammer, for some stroke of mother-wit, — these identified themselves with his personality, and secured his hold. He always shrank from extemporaneous speech, though sometimes most effective in its use; he wrote of himself once as "the worst known public speaker, and growing continually worse;" but his most studied remarks had the effect of off-hand conviction from the weight and beauty of his elocution.

From the time, however, when he retired to his father's birthplace, Concord (in 1834), and published his first thin volume, entitled "Nature," it became plain that it was through the press that his chief work was to be done. It is sometimes doubtful how far one who initiates a fresh impulse, whether in literature or life, does it with full and conscious purpose. There can be no such doubt in the case of Emerson.

From the beginning to the end of this first volume, the fact is clear that it was consciously and deliberately a new departure. Those ninety brief pages were an undisguised challenge to the world. On the very first page the author complains that our age is retrospective, — that others have “beheld God and nature face to face; we only through their eyes. Why should not we,” he says, “also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition?” Thus the book begins, and on the very last page it ends, “Build, therefore, your own world!”

At any time, and under any conditions, the first reading of such words by any young person would be a great event in life, but in the comparative conventionalism of the literature of that period it had the effect of a revelation. It was soon followed by other similar appeals. On the very first page of the first number of the “Dial” (July, 1840) the editors speak of “the strong current of thought and feeling which for a few years past has led many sincere persons in New England to make new demands on literature, and to repudiate that rigor of our conventions of religion and education which is turning us to stone.”

Emerson’s “Thoughts on Modern Litera-

ture,” contained in the second number of the “Dial” (October, 1840), struck the keynote of a wholly new demand. In this he has a frank criticism of Goethe, whom he boldly arraigns for not rising above the sphere of the conventional, and for not giving us a new heaven and a new earth. Goethe, he says, tamely takes life as it is, “accepts the base doctrine of Fate, and gleans what straggling joys may yet remain out of its ban.”

“He was content to fall into the track of vulgar poets, and spend on common aims his splendid endowments, and has declined the office proffered now and then to a man in many centuries, in the power of his genius — of a Redeemer of the human mind. . . . Let him pass. Humanity must wait for its physician still, at the side of the road, and confess as this man goes out that they have served it better who assured it out of the innocent hope in their hearts that a Physician will come, than this majestic Artist, with all the treasures of wit, of science, and of power at his command.”

Again, Emerson says in the same paper: —

“He who doubts whether this age or this country can yield any contribution to the literature of the world only betrays his blindness to the necessities of the human soul. . . . What shall hinder the Genius of the Time

from speaking its thought? It cannot be silent if it would. It will write in a higher spirit, and a wider knowledge, and with a grander practical aim, than ever yet guided the pen of poet; . . . and that which was ecstasy shall become daily bread."

It was the direct result of words like these to arouse what is the first great need in a new literature—self-reliance. The impulse in this direction, given during the so-called Transcendental period was responsible for many of the excesses of that time, but it was the only way to make strong men and women. The "Dial" itself revealed liberally some of the follies of the movement it represented, but nothing can ever deprive it of its significance as offering the first distinctly American movement in literature. And while it is difficult, in this period of perhaps temporary reaction against the ideal school of thought, to fix Emerson's permanent standing among thinkers, his influence as a stimulus was quite unequalled during the era when our original literature was taking form.

In 1835 Mr. Emerson was married for the second time, his wife being Miss Lidian Jackson, daughter of Charles Jackson, of Plymouth, and sister of Dr. Charles T. Jackson, well known in connection with the discovery of anæsthetics. He then went to reside in the

house which was thenceforth his home, and was for many years, as Lord Clarendon said of the house of Lord Falkland, "a college situated in purer air" and "a university in less volume" to the many strangers who came thither. In this house his children were born, and here his devoted mother resided with him until she died. From this time forth, too, he identified himself with all the local affairs of Concord, writing a hymn for the dedication of the Revolutionary Monument, giving an historical address, and recognized by all as the chief pride and ornament of that little town—as sturdy and courageous in its individuality as any free city of the later Middle Ages.

His books appeared in steady succession, the material having been often, though not always, used previously in lectures. The two volumes of "Essays" appeared in 1841 and 1844, the "Poems" in 1846, "Representative Men" in 1850, the "Life of Margaret Fuller Ossoli" (of which he was part editor) in 1852, "English Traits" in 1856, "The Conduct of Life" in 1860, "May-Day and Other Poems," with "Society and Solitude," in 1869. This list does not include the various addresses and orations which were published in separate pamphlets, and remained uncollected in America until 1849, though reprinted in a cheap form in

England in 1844. Some of these special addresses attracted quite as much attention as any of his books — this being especially true of those entitled "The Method of Nature," "Man Thinking," "Literary Ethics," and above all, the "Address before the Senior Class at Divinity College, Cambridge," delivered July 15, 1838. It would be difficult to exaggerate the hold taken by these addresses upon the young people who read them, or the extent to which their pithy and heroic maxims became a part of the very fibre of manhood to the generation then entering upon the stage of life. The perfect personal dignity of the leader, his elevation of thought, his freedom from all petty antagonisms, his courage in all practical tests enhanced this noble influence. Pure idealist as he was, he went through the difficult ordeal of the anti-slavery excitement without a stain, and more than once endured the novel experience of hisses and interruptions with his philosophic bearing undisturbed, and seeming, indeed, to find only new material for thought in this unwonted aspect of life. He also identified himself with certain other reforms: signed the call for the first National Woman's Suffrage Convention, in 1850, and was one of the speakers at the first meeting of the Free Religious Association, of which he was ever after a Vice-

President. It is needless to say that he was in warm sympathy with the national cause during the war for the Union; and he was a Republican in politics.

Mr. Emerson's fame extended far beyond his native land; and it is probable that no writer of the English tongue had more influence in England, thirty years ago, before the all-absorbing interest of the new theories of evolution threw all the so-called transcendental philosophy into temporary shade. When we consider, for instance, his marked influence on three men so utterly unlike one another as Carlyle, Tyndall, and Matthew Arnold, the truth of this remark can hardly be disputed. On the continent his most ardent admirers and commentators were Edgar Quinet in France, and Herman Grimm in Germany.

It will be remembered by many that during Kossuth's very remarkable tour in this country — when he adapted himself to the local traditions and records of every village as if he had just been editing for publication its local annals — he had the tact to identify Emerson, in his fine way, with Concord, and said in his speech there, turning to him, "You, sir, are a philosopher. Lend me, I pray you, the aid of your philosophical analysis," etc., etc. He addressed him, in short, as if he had been Kant or Hegel.

But in reality nothing could be remoter from Emerson than such a philosophic type as this. He was only a philosopher in the vaguer ancient sense; his mission was to sit, like Socrates, beneath the plane-trees, and offer profound and beautiful aphorisms, without even the vague thread of the Socratic method to tie them together. Once, and once only, in his life, he seemed to be approaching the attitude of systematic statement — this being in his course of lectures on "The Natural Method of Intellectual Philosophy," given in 1868 or thereabouts; the fundamental proposition of these lectures being that "every law of nature is a law of mind," and all material laws are symbolical statements. These few lectures certainly inspired his admirers with the belief that their great poetic seer might commend himself to the systematizers also. But for some reason, even these lectures were not published till after Emerson's death, and his latest books had the same detached and fragmentary character as his earliest. He remained still among the poets, not among the philosophic doctors, and must be permanently classified in that manner.

Yet it may be fearlessly said that, within the limits of a single sentence, no man who ever wrote the English tongue has put more meaning into words than Emerson. In his hands, to

adopt Ben Jonson's phrase, words "are rammed with thought." No one has revered the divine art of speech more than Emerson, or practiced it more nobly. "The Greeks," he once said in an unpublished lecture, "anticipated by their very language what the best orator could say;" and neither Greek precision nor Roman vigor could produce a phrase that Emerson could not match. Who stands in all literature as the master of condensation if not Tacitus? Yet Emerson, in his speech at the anti-Kansas meeting in Cambridge, quoted that celebrated remark by Tacitus where he mentions that the effigies of Brutus and Cassius were not carried at a certain state funeral; and in translating it, bettered the original. The indignant phrase of Tacitus is, "Præfulgebant . . . eo ipso quod . . . non visebantur," thus giving a grand moral lesson in six words; but Emerson gives it in five, and translates it, even more powerfully: "They glared through their absences." Look through all Emerson's writings, and then consider whether in all literature you can find a man who has better fulfilled that aspiration stated in such condensed words by Joubert, "to put a whole book into a page, a whole page into a phrase, and that phrase into a word." After all, it is phrases and words won like this which give immortality. And if you

say that, nevertheless, this is nothing, so long as an author has not given us a system of the universe, it can only be said that Emerson never desired to do this, but left on record the opinion that "it is too young by some ages yet to form a creed." The system-makers have their place, no doubt; but when we consider how many of them have risen and fallen since Emerson began to write, — Coleridge, Schelling, Cousin, Comte, Mill, down to the Hegel of yesterday and the Spencer of to-day, — it is really evident that the absence of a system cannot prove much more short-lived than the possession of that commodity.

It must be left for future generations to determine Emerson's precise position even as a poet. There is seen in him the tantalizing combination of the profoundest thoughts with the greatest possible variation in artistic work, — sometimes mere boldness and almost waywardness, while at other times he achieves the most exquisite melody touched with a certain wild grace. He has been likened to an æolian harp, which now gives and then perversely withholds its music. Nothing can exceed the perfection of the lines —

"Thou canst not wave thy staff in air,
Nor dip thy paddle in the lake,
But it carves the bow of beauty there,
And the ripples in rhyme the oar forsake."

Yet within the compass of this same fine poem ("Wood - Notes") there are passages which elicited from Theodore Parker, one of the poet's most ardent admirers, the opinion that a pine-tree which should talk as Mr. Emerson's tree talks would deserve to be plucked up and cast into the sea. His poetic reputation was distinctly later in time than his fame as an essayist and lecturer; and Horace Greeley was one of the first, if not the first, to claim for him a rank at the very head of our American bards. Like Wordsworth and Tennyson, he educated the public mind to himself. The same verses which were received with shouts of laughter when they first appeared in the "Dial" were treated with respectful attention when collected into a volume, and it was ultimately discovered that they were among the classic poems of all literature. In part this was due to the fact that Emerson actually did what Margaret Fuller had reproached Longfellow for not doing, — he took his allusions and his poetic material from the woods and waters around him, and wrote fearlessly even of the humble-bee. This was called by some critics "a foolish affectation of the familiar," but it was recognized by degrees as true art. There was thus a gradual change in the public mind, and it turned out that in the poems of Emerson, not less than in his prose, the birth of a literature was in progress.

It must, on the other hand, be remembered, in justice to the public mind, that Emerson disarmed his critics by some revision of his poems, so that they appeared, and actually were, less crude and whimsical when transplanted into the volume. In the very case just mentioned, the original opening,

"Fine humble-bee! fine humble-bee!"

had a flavor of affectation, whereas the substituted line,

"Burly, dozing humble-bee,"

added two very effective adjectives to the original description. Again, in the pretty verses about the maiden and the acorn, the lines as originally published stood thus:—

"Pluck it now! In vain — thou canst not!

It has shot its rootlets down'rd.

Toy no longer, it has duties;

It is anchored in the ground."

There probably is not a rougher rhyme in English verse than that between "down'rd" and "ground;" but, after revision, this softer line was substituted,

"Its roots have pierced yon shady mound,"

which, if less vigorous, at least propitiates the ear. It is evident from Emerson's criticisms in the "Dial"—as that on Ellery Channing's poems—that he had a horror of what he calls

"French correctness," and could more easily pardon what was rough than what was tame. When it came to passing judgment on the details of poetry, he was sometimes a whimsical critic; his personal favorites were apt to be swans. He undoubtedly felt some recoil from his first ardent praise of Whitman, for instance, and at any rate was wont to protest against his "priapism," as he tersely called it. On the other hand, there were whole classes of writers whom he scarcely recognized at all. This was true of Shelley, for example, about whom he wrote: "Though uniformly a poetic mind, he is never a poet." His estimate of prose authors seemed more definite and trustworthy than in the case of verse, yet he probably never quite appreciated Hawthorne, and certainly discouraged young people from reading his books.

"Of all writers," says Sir Philip Sidney, "the poet is the least liar;" and we might almost say that of all poets Emerson is the most direct and unfaltering in his search for truth. To this must be added, as his highest gift, a nature so noble and so calm that he was never misled for one instant by temper, by antagonism, by controversy. The spirit in which he received and disarmed the criticisms of his colleague, Henry Ware, on the publication of his Divinity Hall address, was the spirit of his whole life; it was

"first pure, then peaceable." The final verdict of posterity upon him must be essentially that epitaph which he himself placed upon the grave of the friend and brother-poet who but just preceded him. On his return from Mr. Longfellow's funeral he said to a friend, — with that vague oblivion of names which alone beclouded his closing years, — "That gentleman whose funeral we have been attending was a sweet and beautiful soul, but I forget his name." These high words of praise might fitly be applied to the speaker himself; but his name shows no signs of being forgotten. He died at Concord, Mass., April 27, 1882.