THE LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES

THE LIBRARY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES

EMERSON

R. Waldo Emerson
Born May 25th 1803.

[illegible]

EMERSON

A Lecture

BY
AUGUSTINE BIRRELL

London
PHILIP GREEN, 5, ESSEX STREET, STRAND
1903

PRINTED BY ELSOM AND CO.
MARKET-PLACE, HULL.

B53e

EMERSON.[1]

THE chronological fact that Emerson was born in Boston, Mass., on the 25th of May, 1803, a hundred years ago, does not make my task to-night any the easier. Few men of the modern world have been written about more than he, or by a greater variety of persons. Austere critics, and wild ones; sober-minded folk, mindful of all the traditions, and the veriest outlaws of thought, the Ishmaels of literature, have alike made Emerson the subject of their remarks. But Emerson has not only been written about, he has been read, and read zealously, in a serious spirit, in the study,

---

[1] An Address delivered before the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, London, on the 2nd of June, 1903.

860253

in the pulpit, in college-rooms, in poor men's dwellings and in the open field. He has had those perilous belongings, that often damaging *entourage*—disciples. An American, writing in the Emerson Centenary number of the 'Critic,' with the courage of his race, has hazarded the observation that if all the fools, the 'different kinds of fools, that have been helplessly made by Emerson and by Whitman could be gotten together *en masse*, lined up and opposed to one another, and looked over, Emerson's lot of fools would be more creditable to him than Whitman's.' There is something almost stupendous in this mode of estimating disciplehood. Trembling I pass it by, merely quoting it to help us to realise for one dim moment to-night how vast is the range of Emerson's influence, and how impossible it would be to number his tribe.

Remembering as I do, and as you do, what has been written about Emerson by such men as Lowell and Holmes on his own side of the water; and by Arnold and by John Morley on this side; remembering also that marvellous correspondence between Emerson and Carlyle in which each describes the other in a series of felicitous strokes; and knowing that I am addressing those whose acquaintance with Emerson's way of thinking and modes of expression is at least as great as my own I do not propose to retell a familiar tale or to tease you by any tiresome comments of mine on those slender, much-loved volumes, some of you know better than you do your Bibles.

I invite your attention, first to the nature of the man himself, and his genesis in Boston, and then to his dominant ideas.

One thing must be conceded to me at the outset, and it adds to the interest of the theme. Whatever anyone may now think of Emerson, whether he is to remain for long years to come, as Froude thought Carlyle was to do, a light in the sky, or is destined to fade away as do the colours of the sunset, he was once upon a time, and for a long time, a veritable sign in the heavens—a subtle influence, a something that made all the difference to many a mind. Criticise Emerson as you may, even harshly if it suits your humour (and he lends himself to criticism), predict his decline and fall in a country which is travelling at lightning speed along paths he never trod—yet historically it is certain that from 1837 and onwards Emerson spoke in many an ear as did hardly any other man; that he was what Carlyle in 1841 pronounced him to be, a new era in his country's history, and that thousands of readers in both the Old World and the New never forgot to their dying day, the very place and year when first their souls vibrated to the strange charm, the infinite courage, the inbred composure, the spiritual independence of this New Englander.

'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.'

It is five-and-thirty years since I first read these lines with a shiver of excitement.

Carlyle's famous essay on 'the Signs of the Times' appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1829, the first, and not the least moving sermon preached to a wicked and adulterous generation by the most tempestuous of all its preachers. It is still worth while to take down from a dusty shelf No. 98 of the 'Blue and Buff,' and there to recognise amidst the deadest of all dead things, dead notices of dead books by dead authors, the fiery vocables, still glowing like live embers, of the future author of *Sartor Resartus* and the *French Revolution.*

Two years later in the same organ of respectable Whig opinion, Carlyle's second Sermon to Infidels entitled 'Characteristics' made its appearance, greatly to the annoyance of the regular subscriber, but carrying the strangest sense of impending movement and change of mental posture to many a hitherto solitary thinker. Newman, we know, read it with amazement, wondering, so akin was it to much of his own thought, from whence it proceeded, and wondering also, as well he might, whither it tended. Emerson read both 'Signs of the Times' and 'Characteristics' with that uplifting of the heart that proclaims an epoch.

Between the environments of these two men as yet unknown to one another, — Emerson and Carlyle — how great a difference!

It is always difficult to estimate the force of religion in any community. It may easily be exaggerated. It may easily be overlooked. In Catholic Spain, in Presbyterian Scotland, in Calvinistic New England there could never have been any doubt as to what were the dominant, I will not say domineering, religious views of the community — but Human Nature (of this we may be sure), never failed to assert itself in Madrid, Edinburgh, and Boston; and Human Nature is never Sectarian. Secular characters abound everywhere. Cheerfulness, worldliness, nay even Pagan indifference, break out at all times and in all places. Franklin's Autobiography is a more truly national document than Jonathan Edward's 'Careful and Strict Enquiry' into the Freedom of the Will. In the chapels of the straitest sects are to be discovered elders and deacons of both degrees; death-bed deacons and deacons whose worldliness and good nature were alike incorrigible. Mrs. Stowe, that true humorist, has drawn both kinds to the very life.

Still, the dominant religious views of a community must always count for a great deal; and in New England, Calvinism, seemingly firmly built on the depravity of Human Nature, the corruption of man's heart, and with its great central doctrine, going deep down into Hell, of Original Sin, remained until after the Revolution the creed of the community, mitigated by Human Nature, with its undying delight in its own reproductiveness.

But a change took place—a great change, and very quickly. To turn Calvinism into Unitarianism, to substitute William Ellery Channing for Jonathan Edwards, to see Emerson gracefully climbing the pulpit of Cotton Mather, was a rapidly-effected change, only possible, perhaps, in a new country. How did Boston come to lose its faith in the Corruption of Man's Heart?

Recent American writers have dwelt a good deal upon what they have called their 'national inexperience.' They are supplying the want, if it be one, very quickly. The Calvinists got rid of the Indians and the Witches with that vigorous robustness of action that admits of no doubt as to God being on your side; and the ground thus cleared of God's enemies, it became possible to lead a life in New England homesteads of great simplicity and detachment, free from the pressure of the past, quit of the weight of tradition, ignorant of and therefore untroubled by authority, unfettered by any obligation to admire masterpieces, or by any school of criticism. The creed of Calvinism was no doubt there—in the background, supported by public opinion, so far as public opinion was vocal, and always well defended in Church committees when new ministers were to be appointed, but not bolstered up, and buttressed and battlemented by Thrones, Cathedrals, Bishoprics, and Universities. As yet no crowded cities full of slums and gin-shops yawned hell upon all beholders. Horrible, unnameable offences were not, as in the old country, part of the criminal calendar of every gaol-delivery. A belief in human goodness became quite practicable. The present professor of English at Harvard, Mr. Barrett Wendell, in his Literary History of America, happily compares the New England of the period before the Revolution to an only child gravely playing alone in a quiet nursery. It is indeed a happy comparison. An only child has no one to arouse angry passions by gouging out her doll's eyes or kicking over her tower of bricks. Such a lonely mortal easily begins to believe that it is all nonsense about the corruption of man's heart. Dr. Watts' Hymns and Moral Songs were written for a crowded nursery. New England was a quiet place, where the population bred up in quiet puritan habits lived quiet lives, separate and apart from great currents of thought and untrammelled speculation, pursuing its own line of development, and by the end of the eighteenth century, somehow or another, it came about that Calvinism as a system died out in the hearts of the people, and in the University itself in the very year of Emerson's birth the chief chair in Theology was bestowed upon an avowed and pronounced Unitarian.

Nowhere else has Unitarianism as a professed belief become dominant. In Boston it ruled the roost for many a day. We may here see illustrated the difference between an old country with an Established Church and a new country free to swing as it chooses. In England there are hundreds of thousands of Unitarians who have never entered a Unitarian Chapel and never mean to do so. It would be difficult to name a more emphatic Unitarian than Carlyle, yet he does not disguise from Emerson, but half released from that body, his dislike—almost contempt—for Unitarians. He writes in 1835: 'To speak with perhaps ill-bred candour, I like as well to fancy you *not* preaching to Unitarians a gospel after their heart. I will say, farther, that you are the only man I ever met with of that persuasion whom I could unobstructedly like.' Schism seems a dreadful thing even to a Schismatic. It has always been very hard in England to be a Nonconformist. It has demanded an effort, and was felt to be a cutting yourself off, not from the fountains of holiness, but from the main currents of secular, national life. Hence it happens that the Church of England can still rejoice in the membership of such men as Lord Avebury and others who could be named. There was never any difficulty about being a Nonconformist in the States. Indeed, Emerson somewhere declares that who so would be a man must be a Nonconformist.

It was therefore in the Unitarian creed that Emerson was nurtured from the beginning. He took things easily from the first. He came however of a race of preachers and religious professors on both the spear and the spindle side. His ancestors were grave men, accustomed to be saluted in the Market-place and listened to in the Meeting-house. In 1838 Emerson said :—

> 'Two inestimable advantages Christianity has given us : first, the Sabbath, the jubilee of the whole world, everywhere suggesting even to the vile the dignity of spiritual being. And secondly, the institution of preaching—the speech of man to men—essentially the most flexible of all organs. What hinders that now everywhere, in pulpits, in

> lecture-rooms, in houses, in fields, wherever the invitations of men or your own occasions lead you, you speak the very truth, as your life and conscience teach it, and cheer the waiting, fainting hearts of men with new hope, new revelation?'

Sundays and Sermons! This is indeed to view Christianity from a Manse-window.

Though Emerson did not long remain a Unitarian Minister, and soon ceased to be 'the Rev. R. W. Emerson' he was ever a preacher and remained a sabbatical man to the end of the chapter. He inherited the quiet assumptions of the pastor. He was not a Scholar, or an Historian, or a Critic, or a Publicist, but a grave teacher in prose and tuneless verse of men and women who were willing to listen to him in the quiet reflective hours of life.

I need not dwell upon Emerson's reasons for quitting the ministry in 1832. They are known to you all and easily understood. His hold upon any possible form of organised Christianity was ever of the slightest. No ecclesiastical tradition, however liberal its hue, save the quiet Sunday and the written discourse, appealed to him in the very least. Authority had neither charm nor terror for him. History played a very small part in Emerson's religion. He grazed his soul on all pastures and found one as good as another.

> ' From air and ocean bring me foods
> From all Zones and altitudes.'

And again, he exclaims with obvious sincerity

> ' One accent of the Holy Ghost
> The heedless world hath never lost.
> I know what say the Fathers wise
> The Book itself before me lies,
> Old Chrysostom, best Augustine
> And he who blent both in his line
> The younger Golden Lips or mines,
> Taylor, the Shakespeare of divines.
> His words are music in my ear
> I see his cowled portrait dear—
> And yet, for all his faith could see,
> I would not the good bishop be.'

What a bewildering planet to live on is

this world, where two such men as Emerson and Newman were alive at the same moment of time, one in Boston, Mass., the other in Oxford, slowly qualifying themselves to become leaders of the thoughts of the luckless, vagrant, race of man. Shepherds they were both, out on the hillside penning their flocks in very different folds.

In 1833 Emerson came to Europe for the first time and paid his famous call upon Carlyle, then an unknown man, at Craigenputtock. Just before Emerson's arrival, unannounced and a perfect stranger, Carlyle had made the following entry in his diary 'In all times, there is a word which spoken to men, to the actual generation of men would thrill their inmost soul. But the way to find that word? The way to speak it when found? *Opus est consulto* with a vengeance.'

Both Carlyle and his visitor were to find the word and to speak it to actual generations of men.

In 1834 Emerson settled himself in Concord, the home of his forefathers and there he lived, suffering the ordinary fate of mortals, until the end came in 1882.

In the 'Thirties,' Boston was at least as agitated as Oxford and better fitted to give a hearing to Tracts *for* and not *against* the Times. In Oxford, the objective of attack was a barren, faithless, Churchmanship, and what was to be made alive was the Idea of the Church as a Living Witness to the Truth, an authoritative Voice which if appealed to, would answer as surely as of old on Sinai or at Pentecost. In Boston what was attacked was a barren, stagnant Socinianism, and what was to be restored was the Temple of the living God in the soul of man. Oxford looked regretfully back upon the Fourth Century, and Boston enthusiastically forward to the unfolding of future mysteries.

'The rounded world is fair to see,
Nine times folded in mystery :
Though baffled seers 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 which it owes.'

It is idle to laugh and ridiculous to sneer at thought-movements. They are the only things that matter—the dynamic force that constitutes the fascination of history. What heavy fun the *Edinburgh Review* and the London wits and diners-out poked at the Tractarians—but there is not to-day a parish church in England which does not bear witness to the strength and reality of that movement. So too the Transcendentalism of Boston was a living force, a second Spring. 'For the Winter is now past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers have appeared in our land.'

Emerson's famous oration delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge on the 31st August, 1837, though not by any means the beginning of the movement, was, says Mr. Lowell, 'an event without any former parallel in our literary annals, a scene to be always treasured in the memory for its picturesqueness and its inspiration. What crowded and breathless aisles, what windows clustering with eager heads, what enthusiasm of approval, what grim silence of foregone dissent! It was our Yankee version of a lecture by Abelard, our Harvard parallel to the last public appearance of Schelling.'[1]

And in another place Mr. Lowell wrote: 'We used to walk in from the country to the Masonic Temple (I think it was) through the crisp winter night and listen to that thrilling voice of his so charged with subtle meaning and subtle music as shipwrecked men on a raft to the hail of a ship that came with unhoped-for food and rescue. Cynics might say what they liked. Did our own imaginations transfigure dry remainder-biscuit into ambrosia? At any rate he brought us *life* which on the whole is no bad thing. Was it all transcendentalism? magic lantern pictures on mist? As you will. Those, then, were just what we wanted. But it was not so. The delight and the benefit were that he put us in communication with a larger style of thought, sharpened our wits with a more pungent phrase, gave us ravishing glimpses of an ideal under the dry husk of our New England, made us conscious of the supreme and everlasting originality of whatever bit of soul might be in any of us, freed us in short from the stocks of prose in which we had sat so long that we had grown wellnigh contented in our cramps. And who that saw the audience will ever forget it, where everyone still capable of fire or longing to renew in them the half-forgotten sense of it, was gathered? Those faces, young and old, agleam with pale intellectual light, eager with pleased attention, flash upon me once more from the deep recesses of the years with an exquisite pathos. Ah, beautiful young eyes, brimming with love and hope, wholly vanished now in that other world we call the Past, or peering doubtfully through the pensive gloaming of memory, your light impoverishes these cheaper days. I hear again that rustle of sensation as they turned to exchange glances over some pithier thought, some keener flash of that humour which always played about the horizon of his mind like heat-lightning, and it seems now like the sad whisper of the autumn leaves that are whirling around me.'

---

[1] 'My Study Windows.'—*Thoreau.*

. . . .

'To some of us that long-past experience remains as the most marvellous and fruitful we have ever had. Emerson awakened us, saved us from the body of this death. It is the sound of the trumpet that the young soul longs for, careless what breath may fill it. Sidney heard it in the ballad of 'Chevy Chase,' and we in Emerson. Nor did it blow retreat, but called to us with assurance of victory. Did they say he was disconnected? So were the stars that seemed larger to our eyes still keen with that excitement as we walked homeward with prouder stride over the creaking snow. And were *they* not knit together by a higher logic than our mere sense could master? Were we enthusiasts? I hope and believe we were, and am thankful to the man who made us worth something for once in our lives. If asked what was left? what we carried home? we should not have been careful for an answer. It would have been enough if we had said that something beautiful had passed that way. Or we might have asked in return what one brought away from a Symphony of Beethoven? Enough that he had set that ferment of wholesome discontent at work in us.

. . . .

'I can never help applying to him what Ben Jonson said of Bacon "There happened in my time one noble speaker who was full of gravity in his speaking. His language was nobly censorious—No man ever spake more neatly, more pressly, more weightily, or suffered less emptiness, less idleness in what he uttered. No member of his speech but consisted of his own graces. His hearers could not cough or look aside from him without loss. He commanded where he spoke." Those who heard him while their natures were yet plastic and their mental nerves trembled under the slightest breath of divine air will never cease to feel and say:—

'Was never eye did see that face,
  Was never ear did hear that tongue,
Was never mind did mind his grace,
  That ever thought the travail long,
But eyes and ears and every thought,
Were with his sweet perfections caught.' [1]

That there were some queer folk, odd fishes among these Transcendentalists we know from Emerson himself, for in his lecture on 'New England Reformers' read on Sunday the 3rd of March, 1844, he has been good enough to give us a highly humourous account of some of them.

---

[1] 'My Study Windows.'—*Emerson the Lecturer.*

'Whoever has had opportunity of acquaintance with society in New England during the last twenty-five years with those middle and with those leading sections that may constitute any just representation of the character and aim of the community will have been struck with the great activity of thought and experimenting. His attention must be commanded by the signs that the church or religious party is falling from the church nominal and is appearing in temperance and non-resistance societies in movements of abolitionists and of socialists, and in very significant assemblies called Sabbath and Bible Conventions, composed of ultraists, of seekers of all the soul of the soldiery of dissent and meeting to call in question the authority of the Sabbath, of the priesthood and of church. In these movements nothing was more remarkable than the discontent they begot in the movers. The spirit of protest and of detachment drove the members of these conventions to bear testimony against the church and immediately afterward to declare their discontent with these conventions, their independence of their colleagues and their impatience of the methods whereby they were working. They defied each other like a congress of kings each of whom had a realm to rule and a way of his own that made concert unprofitable. What a fertility of projects for the salvation of the world! One apostle thought all men should go to farming, and another that no man should buy or sell, that the use of money was the cardinal evil; another that the mischief was in our diet, that we eat and drink damnation. These made unleavened bread and were foes to the death to fermentation. It was in vain urged by the housewife that God made yeast as well as dough and loves fermentation just as dearly as he loves vegetation; that fermentation developes the saccharine element in the grain and makes it more palatable and more digestible. No; they wish the pure wheat and will die but it shall not ferment. Stop, dear nature, these incessant advances of thine: let us scotch these ever-rolling wheels! Others attacked the system of agriculture, the use of animal manures in farming, and the tyranny of man over brute nature: these abuses polluted his food. The ox must be taken from the plough, and the horse from the cart, the hundred acres of the farm must be spaded, and the man must walk wherever boats and locomotives

> will not carry him. Even the insect world was to be defended, that had been too long neglected, and a society for the protection of ground-worms, slugs and musquitos was to be incorporated without delay. With these appeared the adepts of homœopathy, of hydropathy, of mesmerism, of phrenology, and their wonderful theories of the Christian miracles. Others assailed particular vocations, as that of the lawyer, that of the merchant, of the manufacturer, of the clergyman, of the scholar. Others attacked the institution of marriage, as the fountain of social evils. Others devoted themselves to the worrying of churches and meetings for public worship; and the fertile forms of antinomianism among the elder puritans seemed to have their match in the plenty of the new harvest of reform.’

Four years earlier he had written to Carlyle in the same strain. ‘We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket. I am gently mad myself and am resolved to live cleanly. George Ripley is talking up a colony of agriculturists and scholars with whom he threatens to take the field and the book. One man renounces the use of animal food, and another of coin, and another of domestic hired service, and another of the State ; and on the whole we have a commendable share of reason and hope.'

The dogmatism of Idealists is often as intense as that of Agnostics. Mr. Wendell, in his History already referred to, tells a story of a Bostonian educated fifty years ago under Transcendental influences, but now (so Mr. Wendell assures us) an earnest Christian, who only the other day remarked with perfect gravity and in tones of deep settled conviction that of course no one doubted that Human Nature was quadruple, consisting of Mind, Body, Soul and Spirit. He had heard of the existence of this *partie carrée* in his early enthusiastic days and had never thought of questioning it or even of asking what it meant. All of us I expect have had experience of the immovable dogmatism of the unorthodox.

This kind of thing made Carlyle very uneasy, characteristically uneasy. He wrote in 1842: 'I love your *Dial*, and yet it is with a kind of shudder. You seem to me to be in danger of dividing yourself from the Fact of this present Universe in which alone, ugly as it is, can I find any anchorage, and soaring away after Ideas, Beliefs, Revelations, and such like, into perilous altitudes as I think. . . . . Surely I could wish to see you *returned* into your own poor nineteenth century, its follies and maladies, its blind or half-blind but gigantic toilings, its laughter and its tears, and trying to evolve in some measure the hidden Godlike that lies in *it*—that seems to me the kind of feat for literary men.'

Emerson replies in an easy vein. 'For the *Dial* and its sins I have no defence to set up. We write as we can and we know very little about it. If the direction of these speculations is to be deplored, it is yet a fact for literary history that all the bright boys and girls in New England, quite ignorant of each other, take the world so and come and make confessions to fathers and mothers—the boys that they do not wish to go into trade, the girls that they do not like morning calls and evening parties. They are all religious, but hate the Churches; they reject all the ways of living of other men, but have none to offer in their stead. Perhaps one of these days a great Yankee shall come who will easily do the unknown deed.'

Carlyle remained uncomfortable. He dreaded a sect. He writes: 'Sect founders withal are a class I do not like. No truly great man from Jesus Christ downwards ever founded a sect—I mean wilfully intended founding one.'

There was no real need for Carlyle's anxiety. Emerson was not a Yankee for naught. No saner man, not even the author of the 'Blithedale Romance,' ever drew breath in New England. Indeed, Emerson sometimes handles the mysteries of our Birth and State, the very Infinite itself, with a coolness of temper and stiffness of an unbendable knee that one of his countrymen has characterised as 'serene insolence,' and to many readers has seemed irreverent. I do not think either insolence or irreverence is an applicable word, always supposing that you concede to Emerson his position. We should all respect, or appear to respect, each other's convictions, or lack of convictions; but why should a man who never goes to Court wear a Court suit in his own dining-room, or walk out backwards in front of an empty chair?

I turn now from the man and his environment to the things he said—for it must not be forgotten that to those who have to live the best part of their lives in the twentieth century, it is what Emerson said that matters most. We can no more hear his rich baritone, deliberate utterance, and 'closely filed' speech than we can watch the spare form of

Newman glide into the pulpit of St. Mary's. This is a Centenary Celebration of Emerson's birth. A hundred years of recorded time in certain aspects of things is nothing; in others it is a great deal. To our children, Carlyle, Newman, Emerson, Browning can never be what they have been to us. To them they are books in a row—in uniform editions; the dates of original publication, once so full of spiritual significance, for ever obliterated. What are the 1827's, the '33's, the '41's, the '45's, the '59's to careless youngsters born in the '70's and '80's?

'Nothing can be, as it has been before—
Better—so call it—only not the same.'

Our children want to know the upshot of it all—what it comes to. I have sometimes felt a sneaking sympathy with the pert Cantab who, being urged to read 'Paradise Lost,' inquired as a preliminary what it proved? Great poets are perhaps entitled to exemption from such interrogatories, but dead preachers, orators, and the whole tribe of deceased ethical gentlemen must not grumble in their graves if succeeding generations, pressed and harried by their own environments, with the glowing spell of the imperious present upon their cheeks, do not make a very patient congregation.

What then, we must ask, are Emerson's dominant Ideas? What does he say, not to the Boston of 1837, but to-day, to the great restless world of readers, both here and in America?

The mention of America at once emphasises a difference. In America this Centenary of Emerson's birth is a National Event. Was Emerson not the author of the hymn sung at the completion of the Concord Monument on April 19, 1836?

> 'By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
> Their flag to April's breeze unfurl'd,
> Here once the embattled farmers stood,
> And fired the shot heard round the world.'

We are assured by those who ought to know, that Emerson is now recognised as a leader of American thought. The 25th of May, 1903, was a red-letter day in the States. This is what happened :—

'Harvard University does homage to its most illustrious graduate by a unique commemoration service. The corner-stone of the Emerson Memorial Hall for the Department of Philosophy, for which a sum of £30,000 was subscribed, will be laid. The Society of Authors give a dinner of five hundred in New York, to which guests and speakers come from all parts. There will be a memorial observance to-night at Concord, organized by a citizens' committee, with an address by the President-Elect of Harvard, followed to-morrow by ceremonies at the same town and speeches by Senator Hoar, Charles Eliot Norton, and others. In Boston the free religious association of which Emerson was one of the founders devotes a session of its annual convention to the consideration of his religious influence. Its Emerson Memorial Conference will occupy three weeks of July with morning sessions at Concord and evening sessions at Boston. Thirty lectures are to be given and special Sunday services held. In all these all living friends of Emerson and all his most eminent disciples take part.'—*The 'Times' Correspondent.*

The Press—that is what men write in newspapers, has acclaimed Emerson a great thinker, a great author, and a great citizen.

This is all as it should be. Let us not enquire too curiously how much it really means. It is in any case a tribute paid to the things of the Spirit by the things of the Flesh.

In America Emerson stands for much. He was an Emancipator, not of black bodies but of the minds of white men. He spoke right out with fearless indifference. He was never afraid of what is called 'public opinion.' His fine old Calvinistic aunt, Miss Mary Moody Emerson, used to tell him when he was a little boy, 'Do what you are afraid to do.' What words are these in the Essay on *Character*?

> 'We boast our emancipation from many superstitions; but if we have broken any idols, it is through a transfer of the idolatry. What have I gained that I no longer immolate a bull to Jove, or Neptune, or a mouse to Hecate; that I do not

tremble before the Eumenides, or the Catholic Purgatory or the Calvinistic Judgment-day,—if I quake at opinion, the public opinion as we call it; or the threat of assault, or contumely, or bad neighbours, or poverty, or at the rumour of revolution or of murder? If I quake,—what matters it, what I quake at?'

Emerson was indeed what Carlyle declared him to be, an era in his great country, and it is only right and noble that he should take his place among the names and memories that help to make and keep a nation great by making it self-respecting.

I think, I notice, a supersensitive spirit abroad just now in the States which is apt to resent foreign criticism of native products. Even praise is a little resented. Hawthorne, I have been told, has suffered in popularity in America because he is so beloved in England. After all, Englishmen cannot help understanding the language in which Americans write their books. Anything more alien to the serene cosmopolitanism of Emerson, the least parochial of Anglo-Saxons, than this distortion of patriotism, could hardly be discovered. Criticism, seldom easy, becomes in these circumstances almost dangerous.

In England and to Englishmen Emerson cannot be what he is in America and to Americans. His Centenary is not a national event, but his notes, his dominant ideas, the things he said, still arrest attention

His fearlessness, his speaking his mind right out, his careless indifference to what people would say, is a quality far from characteristic of our own writers of to-day. Let us do obeisance to it here—let us admire it, envy it, imitate it, if we dare.

Of Emerson's optimism, his far-famed optimism—what is to be said? Here was a man who did not believe in Hell. It is most irritating; it made Carlyle furious. Emerson argues it out with you bravely and tenaciously. You cannot shake him off. You must listen to him.

'Nothing shall warp me from the belief that every man is a lover of truth. There is no pure lie, no pure malignity in nature. The entertainment of the proposition of depravity is the last profligacy and profanation. There is no scepticism, no atheism but that. Could it be received into common belief suicide would unpeople the planet. It has had a name to live in some dogmatic theology, but each man's innocence and his real liking of his neighbour have kept it a dead letter. I remember standing at the polls one day when the anger of the political contest gave a certain grimness to the faces of the independent electors, and a good man at my side looking on the people remarked, "I am satisfied that the largest part of these men on either side mean to vote right." I suppose considerate observers looking at the masses of men in their blameless and in their equivocal actions will assent that in spite of selfishness and frivolity the general purpose in the great number of persons is fidelity. The reason why anyone refuses his assent to your opinion or his aid to your benevolent design is in you. He refuses to accept you as a bringer of truth because though you think you have it he feels that you have it not. You have not given him the authentic sign.'—*New England Reformers.*

In an even bolder strain, in his Essay

on Montaigne, perhaps Emerson's favourite author, he says: 'The Divine effort is never relaxed; the carrion in the sun will convert itself to grass and flowers, and man, though in brothels, or jails, or on gibbets, is on his way to all that is good and true.'

This may not be convincing, but it is very Emersonian.

On what basis does this invincible optimism rest? On Emerson's theory of *compensation* which is now often dismissed as a whim, a fad, a fancy—but is nothing of the kind; it is the pulse of the machine. Wipe it out, and Emerson is wiped out save as a mere phrase-monger. Listen to him for yourselves:

> 'Ever since I was a boy I have wished to write a discourse on Compensation, for it seemed to me, when very young, that on this subject Life was ahead of Theology and the people knew more than the preachers taught.'

But what is Compensation?

> 'Every excess causes a defect; every defect, an

excess. Every sweet has its sour; every evil, its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse. It is to answer for its moderation with its life. For everything you have missed, you have gained something else; and for everything you gain, you lose something. If riches increase, they are increased that use them. If the gatherer gathers too much, nature takes out of the man what she puts into his chest; swells the estate, but kills the owner. There is always some levelling circumstance that puts down the overbearing, the strong, the rich, the fortunate, substantially on the same ground with all others. . .

. . . .

'The farmer imagines power and place are fine things. But the President has paid dear for his White House. It has commonly cost him all his peace, and the best of his manly attributes. . . . ·

'Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Though no checks to a new evil appear, the checks exist and will appear. If the government is cruel, the governor's life is not safe. If you tax too high, the revenue will yield nothing. If you make the criminal code sanguinary, juries will not convict. Under all governments the influence of character remains the same—in Turkey and in New England about alike.'

These latter remarks might be bits of Johnson's conversation reported by Boswell. But the next extract is in another mould—

> 'Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul, which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law. It is almighty. All nature feels its grasp. It is eternal, but enacts itself in time and space. Justice is not postponed. The world, like a multiplication-table, turn it how you will, balances itself. Take what figure you will, its exact value still returns to you. Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed. . . . . Always pay; for, first or last, you must pay your entire debt. Persons and events may stand for a time between you and justice, but it is only a postponement. You must pay at last your own debt. . . . The thief steals from himself; the swindler swindles himself.

This is the Emersonian doctrine of Compensation.

Before everything else Emerson was a fearless, convinced optimist whose optimism rested on his belief in the inviolable, the unconquerable spirit of Man, independent of time, place and circumstance.

> ‘Christian and Pagan—king and slave,
> Soldier and Anchorite,
> Distinctions we esteem so grave
> Were nothing in his sight.’

Man’s true spirit, according to Emerson, can never be dishonoured by the most unhallowed events. In the end it will emerge clean and holy. ‘Herein,’ says he, ‘I rejoice with a serene eternal peace.’ Serenity, Eternity, Peace. This is Emerson and from it follows inevitably his Individualism. In every fibre of his mind Emerson was an Individualist. This may not be the popular creed to-day—but it was Emerson’s. He lived in an age of associations—of groups, of schemes and plans to be worked out in consort. Given a host of miserable units—add them all together and the total is happiness. Emerson’s hardy optimism rejected this as scornfully as did Leopardi’s black pessimism. The Italian wrote in his biting way :—

> ‘The lofty spirits of my century have discovered a new counsel, for not being able to make happy

on earth any one person, they ignored the individual and gave themselves to seek universal felicity, and of a multitude, singly sad and wretched, they make a joyous and happy people.'

What does Emerson say?

'Friendship and association are very fine things, and a grand phalanx of the best of the human race, banded for some catholic object. Yes, excellent—but remember that no society can ever be so large as one man.'

And again in the same essay, on 'New England Reformers':—

'I do not wonder at the interest these projects inspire. The world is awakening to the idea of union and these experiments show what it is thinking of. It is, and will be magic. Men will live and communicate, and plough, and reap, and govern, as by added ethereal power when once they are united. . . . . But this union must be inward and not one of covenants, and is to be reached by a reverse of the methods they use. The union is only perfect when all the uniters are isolated. It is the union of friends who live in different streets or towns. Each man, if he attempts to join himself to others, is on all sides cramped and diminished of his proportion; and the stricter the union the smaller and the more pitiful he is.'

Again in the same essay:—

'Many a reformer perishes in his removal of rubbish—and that makes the offensiveness of the class. They are partial—they are not equal to the work they pretend, and they lose their way—in the assault on the kingdom of darkness, they expend all their energy on some accidental evil, and lose their sanity and power of benefit. It is of little moment that one or two or twenty errors of our social system be corrected, but of much that the man be in his senses.'

Here is plainly revealed Emerson the Emancipator—the man who would have men be free. It is an old cry this for freedom:

> 'There is no man free in all this world,
> Slaves of possession, slaves of fortune, hurl'd
> This way and that—or else the multitude
> Hath hold on him, or love, and stone and wood
> Constrain, and will not let him see the soul
> Within him. So, thou dur'st not, and thine whole
> Thought hangs on what the herd will say.'

It is Euripides who speaks, through the

mouth of Hecuba. The English is Mr. Gilbert Murray's.

Of Theology, strictly so called, Emerson had none. This may as well be admitted at once. In this respect he shared the plight of Carlyle and Matthew Arnold.

> 'It makes no difference whether the appeal is to numbers or to one. The faith that stands on authority is not faith. The reliance on authority measures the decline of religion, the withdrawal of the soul. The position men have given to Jesus, now for many centuries of history, is a position of authority. It characterises themselves. It cannot alter the eternal facts. Before the immense possibilities of man, all mere experience, all past biography, however spotless and sainted, shrinks away.' (*The Over-Soul.*)

In another place Emerson says :—

> 'If a man claims to know and speak of God, and carries you backward to the phraseology of some old mouldered nation in another country in another world, believe him not. Whence this worship of the past? The centuries are conspirators against the sanity and authority of the soul . . . . History is an impertinence and an injury if it be anything

more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming . . . . As men's prayers are a disease of the will so are their creeds a disease of the intellect. (*On Self-Reliance*).

You cannot, I repeat, however dogmatically inclined, construct a theology out of Emerson.

How really Emerson stands in America to-day I do not know. Unitarianism, so at least Dr. Holmes says, is no longer dominant in Boston. A mild Episcopalianism reigns in its stead. Anything less like Emerson than a mild Episcopalianism it would be hard to fancy. But it may well be there has been another change since Dr. Holmes wrote his life of Emerson.

The America of to-day is certainly not the America of Emerson's Boston hymns and songs.

'Old Europe groans with palaces,
Has lords enough and more—
We plant and build by foaming seas
A city of the poor.

. . . .

'God said "I'm tired of kings,
I suffer them no more;
Up to my ear the morning brings
The outrage of the poor."

. . . .

'I will divide my goods;
Call in the wretch and slave:
None shall rule but the humble,
And none but Toil shall have.'

It would be cruel to quote any more of what I am sure the Press, its new-born admiration for Emerson notwithstanding, would call 'rant' or 'fustian.'

Social unrest haunts both worlds. Fear sits at the bottom of men's hearts. 'Society,' said Emerson, 'is devoured by a secret melancholy which breaks through all its smiles and all its gaiety and games.' Society is still devoured by this same melancholy. The nations dwell behind barricades forging fresh weapons of offence. Great guns and hostile tariffs have lost none of their vogue. If ever Freedom shrieked aloud she might be expected to do so to-day. It is hard to be an optimist on the 2nd of June, 1903.

At no time did the luckless race of man stand more in need of Emerson's spirit than to-day. His splendid courage, his undying hope, his cheerfulness, his fixed determination to quake at nothing, his spiritual independence, his serenity, his peace, are all possessions we would were ours.

> ' O air-born voice, long since, serenely clear,
> A cry like thine in mine own heart I hear—
> Resolve to be thyself, and know that he
> Who finds himself, loses his misery.'

THE END.

The Essex Hall Lectures.

Price One Shilling each net. Postage Twopence.

The Development of Theology, as illustrated in English Poetry from 1780 to 1830. The Essex Hall Lecture, 1894. By STOPFORD A. BROOKE, M.A., LL.D.

'The lecture is a valuable study in the English poetry of this century as well as a vigorous theological pronouncement.'—*Christian World.*

Unitarians and the Future. The Essex Hall Lecture, 1895. By Mrs. HUMPHRY WARD.

'It is needless to say that it is marked by the literary grace and deftness we expect from the author of "Robert Elsmere."'—*Glasgow Herald.*

'A brilliant sketch of the development of Unitarianism, and of its prospects in the Future.'—*Christian World.*

The Relation of Jesus to his Age and our own. The Essex Hall Lecture, 1896. By J. ESTLIN CARPENTER, M.A.

'In a short compass are indicated with great skill the results of deep and varied study.'—*The Star.*

The Significance of the Teaching of Jesus. The Essex Hall Lecture for 1897. By R. A. ARMSTRONG, B.A.

'It has all the qualities we might expect—deep religious feeling, adequate knowledge, grave measured eloquence.'—*Liverpool Post.*

The Religion of Time and the Religion of Eternity. A Study of certain Relations between Mediæval and Modern Thought. The Essex Hall Lecture, 1899. By PHILIP H. WICKSTEED, M.A.

'The book bears all the marks of an accomplished and cultivated scholarship, and the tone and temper with which the author deals with deep and burning topics are worthy of imitation by theological disputants of all schools of thought.'—*New Age.*

Some Thoughts on Christology. The Essex Hall Lecture, 1902. By JAMES DRUMMOND, M.A., LL.D.

'No open-minded reader can turn from its pages without feeling that he is brought into contact with the thoughts of a devout and reverent thinker, who has experienced much of the spiritual verities of our common Christianity.'—*The British Friend.*

Emerson. The Essex Hall Lecture, 1903. By AUGUSTINE BIRRELL, K.C.

PHILIP GREEN, 5, ESSEX ST., STRAND, LONDON, W.C.

GN450 1510

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY
Los Angeles
This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

REC'D LD-URL
ORION
LD/URL NOV 26 '89

NOV 1 8 [illegible]

University of California, Los Angeles
L 005 490 479 2