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# INFLUENCE OF EMERSON.

BY

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THE oldest masterpiece in literature contains the profoundly sad utterances of a mighty soul, upon whom the frailty of man, the mystery of evil, the pangs of conscience, the sorrows and disappointments and failures of life, laid an almost intolerable burden. "My soul is weary of my life," he cried; "I will leave my complaint upon myself: I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say unto God, Do not condemn me; show me wherefore thou contendest with me. Is it good unto thee that thou shouldest oppress, that thou shouldest despise the work of thine hands, and shine upon the counsel of the wicked?" Across the ages that cry of anguish sounds to us distinct, pathetic, human; and it has had numberless echoes in every land which, since Job's Epic of Sorrow was written, has left literary records of itself. Prophets, preachers, and poets, and builders and destroyers of philosophic systems, have wailed forth similar notes of doubt and agony, and have attempted to discover, by Reason or by Faith, the cause of the heaviness of life and a remedy for it.

Who has not felt his heart sink within him as he realized the awful discrepancy between what mankind would be and what they are, between the attainment and the desire! How insignificant the individual appears,—a mere time-bubble floating for a moment between two eternities, a child who must face the inexorable forces by which the stars are balanced! Only by drudgery can he keep himself alive on the planet, only by bitter experience does he come at last to know which habits are wholesome and which harmful; and when, after blind

gropings for superhuman help, he reaches the conviction that there is a moral purpose—and consequently a moral Ruler—in the universe, he is perplexed by a thousand fresh enigmas. Out of the shadows a Voice asks him: "Why does the Source of all virtue and goodness make goodness and virtue so hard for mankind to practise? Why does the God of truth veil truth from his creatures? And what, if God prefers the good to the wicked, becomes of the wicked?

"Looked at from one side, the record of organic life on earth seems but the tale of a perpetual conflict between the strong and the weak,—a conflict in which the strong always win and the weak always perish. Those fittest to survive destroy their inferiors. But what becomes of those that fail? Were they created merely that their stronger enemies might destroy them? And, after all, the fittest themselves are soon superseded: in a few generations they take the place of the weak: they are doomed to destruction, and creatures a little stronger live in their stead. To the tender-hearted, this spectacle of the incessant slaughter of countless millions of individuals is appalling, saddening. Wherefore this extravagant waste of life? To keep each species up to the level of its best members? But in the perspective of geology the existence of a species dwindles to a span of no greater relative breadth than the existence of the individual in the view of history. And what value can a Creator who despises the component members of a race set upon the race as a whole?

"We talk of the forward march of civilization and of the superiority of our time over preceding ages, and assume that a beneficent Power is guiding mankind towards perfection. We persistently look ahead to that ideal millennium which, with the sense of the reality of Sorrow, has lived in the imagination and poetic longings of noble-hearted men. But what of the generations dead, to which no inkling of Utopia was ever whispered? Did they shoot up and wither merely to furnish manure from which our larger growth should spring? May not a similar lot be ours and all men's? Alas! if we are here only to work for a posterity which must in turn perish, how vain, how unutterably hopeless is life!

"And see how slowly, with what infinite pain and patience, a people rises toward what we call civilization! Every improvement in mechanical implement, every increase of knowledge and recognition of a higher moral standard, requires years, perhaps centuries, for dissemination. Each helpful thought or device has been wrested from the invisible Keeper of Knowledge, who grudgingly surrenders it to his mortal antagonist. Life is a cruel combat between frailty and omnipotence, in which the former can gain nothing, and the latter can lose nothing.

"The religions that have dominated mankind have been pervaded with the conviction that life is hard, that happiness is illusory, that by renunciation alone can peace of mind be attained. Do you not hear a piteous Terror sighing through every creed? This conflict between good and evil has been typified as a struggle between a personal God and a personal Devil. The human race, it is preached, is under a blight. Utterly unworthy, it must hasten to perdition, but for the sacrifice of some saviour. Prometheus, Buddha, Christ, by their sublime unselfishness earn for mortals a larger hope of salvation. If the good fail to thrive in this world, they will be rewarded in the next; and though the wicked flourish here, hell awaits them hereafter. The conception of divine vengeance jangles strangely with the assertion that God is love. Yet Christianity offers a great hope, promises that in the end the righteous shall be cared for by God; it holds out to the down-trodden and afflicted a prospect of rest and comfort; it gives strength to bear present ills for the sake of winning divine approval. Nevertheless, what Christian can justify the prevalence of wrongs, of sin, of pain, of failure, in a world ruled by a God whose pretended attributes are right, justice, mercy, love? Among men, the honest do not steal, the truthful do not lie, the loving are not cruel; why should not the works of your divinity correspond to the character you ascribe to him?"

Then will the universe clothe itself in mourning to him who has listened to this Voice. Pain, disease, crime; the pettiness

of daily life; the vast uneducated multitudes stretching like a Slough of Despond over the Past and into the Future: the incubus of poverty; heredity crippling offspring to punish the sins of the fathers; the plaintive cry of the children, the curses of the wicked, the jests of the ribald, — will blot out of his heart the belief in a world governed by a deity which dearly loves it. A crushing sense of the futility of every effort will come over him. Why toil to lift one or two, when millions must inevitably fall? What will become of those millions when they have fallen? Were every American a paragon of virtue and enlightenment, would not Asia, Africa, and the Oceanic hordes remain unsaved? Alas! poor wretches, sinking by myriads in the angry ocean, the little cork I toss you can keep none of you from drowning. And so, with a soul full of anguish and compassion, or of desperate wrath and bitterness, according as his nature leads him to heed chiefly the sufferings of others or his own, he is ready to acknowledge with the pessimist that life is not worth living.

But is this the end? Is life at bottom an abyss of woe spun across with a gossamer film of illusions through which all except children — light-footed in their blissful ignorance — must sink? Are these failures and wrongs, this weariness and despair, not real, — nay, the only realities? Is the "worship of sorrow" not for all hearts? Has not that lamentation of Job resounded through the ages, — an endless, pitiful wail like that heard by Dante in the starless air of Hell, an awful affirmation of the hopelessness of living?

Let us listen to one who sings apart from the dolorous choir, — to Emerson.

Emerson's works, like the Bible or Shakspeare or those collections of proverbs in which in every language are summed up the wit and wisdom of unnumbered nameless poets and philosophers, might furnish texts for sermons of any color. Theist or pantheist or agnostic might bind his arguments with quotations from the many-sided Essays. Nay, at different times Emerson tells a different story to the same person, — as I have experienced in reading his essay on Fate, for instance,

which has seemed to me both an inspiring assertion of the freedom of the will and an unanswerable argument for fatalism. This apparent shifting is the obstacle that prevents many persons from understanding Emerson. We shun uncertainty, and seek amid the unceasing changes of life an immutable standpoint. Those religions which have influenced for the longest time the largest numbers of human beings have accordingly made the boldest pretension of resting on impregnable foundations and asserted an adequate knowledge of heavenly as well as of earthly affairs. To bring order out of the seeming chaos of the natural and spiritual worlds is the incessant effort of Reason. It deduces laws, it weaves theories, — cables which connect it with the shore, no matter how far it drift upon the undiscovered sea. It has rules for everything, a pigeon-hole for everything; and when a fact does not fall directly under the law, Reason complacently argues from the exception the truth of the law itself. But are we really governed by as many rules capable of exact demonstration as we persuade ourselves? Is there not much that is spontaneous and unconscious in our actions? Speaking precisely, is not the tracing of laws an after-process of the Reason, which strives to impose its *ex-post-facto* logic on our lives? For example, we neither love nor hate by logic, nor by any other formula recognized at the moment. Each act, each event is new, and will be tinged by the individuality of each person. The logician who thinks to confound Emerson by demanding syllogistic corroboration, or by confronting him with contradictory opinions bearing on the same subject, will get no satisfaction. "Let me remind you that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, — as if I pretended to settle anything as true or false. I unsettle all things; no facts to me are sacred, none profane. I simply experiment,—an endless Seeker, with no Past at my back."[1] The object of the present essay is therefore to state as briefly and as clearly as possible what may be called Emerson's leading views, often borrowing, for the sake of exactness, his own

[1] Circles.

language, which defies condensation. To attempt to attack them with the usual weapons of philosophical criticism would be ludicrously unprofitable, for only Quixotic philosophers display their prowess by overthrowing systems which do not exist. Emerson's creed, like Shakspeare's, baffles definition; but who on this account is blind to the religion and philosophy in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*? If in one place Emerson makes a half-statement, be sure that somewhere else its complement and corrective have been recorded. He can be understood only by those who seek for the spirit of all his work. To single out a paragraph or chapter as representative, generally misrepresents him. Let us examine, then, the Emersonian scheme, taking care always to remember this warning of his: "I know better than to claim any completeness for my picture. I am a fragment, and this is a fragment of me. I can very confidently announce one or another law, which throws itself into relief and form, but *I am too young yet by some ages to compile a code*."[1]

Emerson divides the Universe into Nature and Soul, comprising under the former all that is *not me* in the natural world and in art. Nature is man's teacher. First of all she discloses herself to him as *Commodity*.[2] She is not only the material, but the result of man's labor. She furnishes everything except the spirit that directs his labor. She is his home, workshop, and playground; his food and raiment. These functions and relations all men, even the dullest, recognize. But the cleverer man does not stop here; he watches her methods and invents devices for lessening his toil and increasing his comforts. "The private poor man hath cities, ships, canals, bridges, built for him. He goes to the post-office, and the human race run on his errands; to the book-shop, and the human race read and write of all that happens, for him; to the court-house, and nations repair his wrongs."

But Nature has a higher purpose than merely to feed and clothe man, — services she renders equally to the meanest

[1] Experience. [2] Nature, chap. ii.

animals; in threefold fashion she satisfies his love of *Beauty*.[1] First, natural forms in and for themselves give pleasure, by resting the weary and by causing purely sensuous delight. The tradesman "comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again." A gorgeous sunrise or sunset, a varied landscape, the succession of plants, and the orderly march of tribes of birds and insects, have a perennial fascination for the sympathetic observer. But a higher element — the spiritual — is essential to its perfection. This pageant of land and sea and sky is more than a mere wonder-stirring yet meaningless show, it is the emblem of the Divine Mind. "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue." Finally, "the beauty of the world may be viewed as it becomes an object of the intellect." Nature has correspondence with thought, as well as with virtue and emotion; and from intellectual admiration is born that desire to re-embody beauty in new forms from which Art springs. "No reason can be asked or given why the soul seeks beauty. Truth and goodness and beauty are but different faces of the same All." Higher than the beauty in Nature, however, is the inward beauty of the soul, which it heralds.

Again, Nature is the vehicle of thought; she furnishes *Language*.[2] Words are primarily signs of natural facts; later, they become symbols of spiritual facts. With metaphors learned from the outside world we clothe our inmost thoughts susceptible of expression: the poet in words, the sculptor in a statue, the musician in sounds. "Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul, he calls Reason: it is not mine or thine or his, but we are its; we are its property and men." But how disproportionate it seems that we should use this "grand cipher," which Reason stamps upon Nature, "to expedite the affairs of our pot and kettle!" "We are like travellers using the cinders of a volcano to roast their eggs." When, therefore, we ask ourselves if these symbols have not

[1] Nature, chap. iii. [2] Ibid., chap. iv.

some inherent significance, we are forced to conclude that "this relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God. . . . There seems to be a necessity in spirit to manifest itself in material forms; and day and night, river and storm, beast and bird, acid and alkali, pre-exist in necessary Ideas in the mind of God, and are what they are by virtue of preceding affections in the world of spirit. A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit."

And now man discovers that "Nature is a *Discipline*."[1] Every atom, every property of matter brings a lesson. First, the understanding is instructed in intellectual truths; it perceives differences. Each natural object has a peculiar use. Space and Time teach that "things are not huddled and lumped, but sundered and individual." Therefore "the wise man shows his wisdom in separation, in gradation, and *his scale of creatures and of merits is as wide as nature*. The foolish have no range in their scale, but suppose every man is as every other man. What is not good they call the worst, and what is not hateful they call the best." Behold, next, how every event proclaims "the exercise of the Will or the lesson of power." Inch by inch all natural forces are subjugated by the man of character. "His victorious thought comes up with and reduces all things, until the world becomes at last only a realized will, — the double of the man." Moreover, all things are moral: Nature is the ally of religion, for "every natural process is a version of a moral sentence." Borne in upon the mind from all sides is the conviction of a Unity, in which all exists and which permeates all.

Since to the "one end of Discipline all parts of Nature conspire, a noble doubt perpetually suggests itself, — whether this end be not the Final Cause of the Universe, and whether Nature outwardly exists." This doubt can never be settled, because the evidence of the senses can never be tested, and must always be ideal. Let no one argue from this *Idealism*,[2] however, that the stability of the material world is in danger.

[1] Nature, chap. v.

[2] Ibid., chap. vi.

"God never jests with us," but guards inviolably the permanence of Nature. As our culture in Idealism widens, we outgrow our earlier superstition that "man and Nature are indissolubly joined . . . that things are ultimates." We escape from the "despotism of the senses, which binds us to Nature as if we were a part of it, and shows us Nature aloof, and, as it were, afloat. . . . If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them." And Nature herself urges us to our emancipation; the poet helps us; the philosopher, the student of intellectual science, and, finally, ethics and religion, help us to perceive that Nature is an "appendix of the soul."

Nature is the perpetual reminder of God. "It always speaks of *Spirit*,[1] suggests the absolute. . . . And of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most will say least." But he will come to recognize that "it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore that Spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up Nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old." Understanding this, we are "animated to create our own world through the purification of our soul." Emerson closes this essay on Nature — the purest and loftiest spiritual message yet uttered in America — with this promise: "As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions . . . so fast will disagreeable appearances, — swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies, — vanish; they are temporary, and shall be no more seen. . . . The kingdom of man over Nature, which cometh not with observation, — a dominion such as now is beyond his dream of God, — he shall enter without more wonder than the blind man feels who is gradually restored to perfect sight."

Even from this glimpse we see two principles illuminating Emerson's faith, — a high Idealism, bespeaking Unity, immor-

[1] Nature, chap. vii.

tal and infinite, and an unshaken belief in the majesty of the Individual. Intuition apprises us immediately of an ineffable Spirit whose abode is the Universe, whose emblems are Wisdom, Virtue, and Love. It follows that every individual is a part of this Spirit, and that he is not necessarily the fallen, despicable wretch depicted by Moses and still bemoaned in many churches, but a living child of God, — and who can say how much that means?

Emerson is the unwearied champion of Individuals. All his sentences are addressed to them. He reveals to them the possibilities lying within reach of all. Mere bigness and burly multitudes get no praise from him. The glib cant of the demagogue issues not from his lips. "Leave this hypocritical prating about the masses," he says sternly. "Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered, but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drive, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them. The worst of charity is, that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving. Masses! the calamity is the masses."[1] Yet Emerson brings the humblest of his listeners up to the level of the world-heroes. You feel in reading him that no act of heroism, no ordeal of devotion, no supreme renunciation would be hard. "I like that every chair shall be a throne and hold a king."[2] Probably no actual king, except the ever-beautiful Marcus Aurelius, could have filled Emerson's "throne" worthily.

The Individual, being a sharer in the Infinite Spirit, must rise in the world of spirit. Each virtue shall add a plume to his wings. He must be self-reliant. With such a sponsor, what has he to fear? It ill becomes one who knows that he is on a mission for the infinite and eternal to quail before the finite and transitory. "Why should we feel ourselves to be men, unless it be to succeed in everything, everywhere?" exclaims Mirabeau. Emerson adds, "That we are here is proof that we ought to be here."[1] The day dawns when

[1] Considerations by the Way. [2] Manners.

we realize that we must be ourselves, trust ourselves, accepting cheerfully the time and land into which Providence has called us. Little will it avail us to pray the prayers and accept the creeds of others. The authors of those prayers and creeds relied courageously upon themselves; they admonish us to imitate, not their words, but their self-reliance. Why should we ransack England, Italy, and Greece for patterns? We shall find no more in Rome than we take with us thither.

All things conspire to acquaint the Individual with Spirit. Out of dangers and trials he shall extract self-confidence and courage. The strength that lay in each difficulty shall, when overcome, be added to his strength. Art shall make visible for him Beauty, which before lurked dimly in his mind, and Beauty shall delight him as the charm that invariably vivifies perfect work. Books shall introduce him to the assembly of the choice spirits whom the ages have elected to represent humanity. Friendship shall bring him face to face with those who are pursuing a soul's journey similar to his. Love, finally, shall disclose to him most intimately and sweetly the embodiment of the Universal Love.

But the integrity of the Individual must be carefully guarded; he must not be deceived into mistaking any of these for the end of his existence: God alone is that. So he is frequently reminded, if he linger too long over business or art or books or friends, that only the Eternal can permanently satisfy him. These reminders often seem rude, often they cause heartache; but at last he understands their purpose. "The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius; for it commonly operates revolutions in our way of life, terminates an epoch of infancy or youth which was waiting to be closed, breaks up a wonted occupation or a household or style of living, and allows the formation of new ones more friendly to the growth of character. . . . And the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden-flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made

the banian of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men." [1]

One truth of vital importance must, therefore, be learned, — nothing abides except Spirit. Matter and its accidents undergo unintermitted change. Life is fluid, not solid; progressive, not stationary. The soul *is*.

When once this truth has been grasped we wonder no longer why laws, religions, and social customs cannot be permanent. They are dams made to fit one time; the river of Humanity flows through all times. See, for example, how significant this is when applied to ethics. The ethical codes, one after another, grow too small, and must be cast off, or repaired and enlarged. As men's faith in a personal God diminishes, their need of a personal symbol of him diminishes; Christ the Man has more significance than Christ the God. Likewise, many enlightened persons no longer believe in everlasting damnation, — a scheme of compensation evidently contrary to all the testimony of life, because it assumes that the universal flux will cease and that the guilty soul will remain in a fixed shape in hell, in spite of the fact that all souls are moving. Moreover, it attaches an absolute value to a human, relative act. Which of us would dare to assert that a single act or a single thought is the summary and completion of his career, or that it is even conceivable that any momentary experience should become solid, unchanged forevermore? Look where we will, development, or unfolding, is going on; no end is reached, or thinkable. The human imagination has drawn a finite, temporal hell to do what it intends shall be an infinite and eternal work. Let us beware of using our foot-rule and hour-glass to measure immeasurable Space and Time. All human theories of retribution must be false if they are false to this law of life; namely, Growth, or Being, or Becoming.

Emerson overthrows the fetich Consistency because under the pretence of being consistent men too often remain dwarfed. They are tethered to a dogma, they have eaten all the food within their reach; and yet, instead of going forth

[1] Compensation.

[2] See Self-Reliance.

to feed in the inexhaustible pastures of the universe, their consistency makes them revolve hungrily in their little disk of stubble. Life is larger than a theory, — does it not include all theories? The soul is larger than a dogma. But Consistency, which cannot grow, denies the right of growth to his victim. The clinging to the Past indicates an ignoble suspicion that the Present and Future must fall short, and that the infinite has limitations. The healthy soul welcomes change as the creator of newer, grander conditions. "In proportion to the vigor of the individual, these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant, and all worldly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming, as it were, a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen, and not, as in most men, an indurated heterogeneous fabric of many dates and of no settled character, in which the man is imprisoned." [1]

There are two questions which every earnest man has asked himself, oftenest in trembling or grim desperation: "Am I the puppet of Fate?" "What means this crushing mystery of Sin?" Upon the answers to these questions depend his views of morals, his happiness in this world, his hope of immortality, his belief in God. If he ask himself in vain; if, in spite of diligent self-questioning and entreaty, the reply never come, — he will turn to the great wise men who stand at the entrance to the temple as spokesmen of the gods invisible within. Lucky will it be if from any lips issue words to put his perplexity at rest! It is only too likely that their responses will be his old riddles in new garb. Then will he depart in sorrow, crying out with Omar Khayyám, —

"O thou who didst with pitfall and with gin
Beset the Road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with Predestined Evil round
Enmesh, and then impute my Fall to Sin!

"O thou who Man of baser Earth didst make,
And even with Paradise devise the Snake,
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blackened, Man's Forgiveness give — and take." [2]

[1] Compensation.

[2] Rubaíyát, lxxx. lxxxi.

It seems that the Keeper of these secrets has never yet revealed them to mortal coaxing or compulsion. They are impregnable to the assaults of dialecticians. Philosophical and scientific system-makers have hurled ingeniously contrived engines against the adamantine stronghold. After the din and dust of the concussion vanish, the rock rises there, grim, silent, awful; and the splinters of the puny battering-ram strew its base. Nevertheless, though dialectics fail and vision be dim, we live, and, in living, by hints and inklings we begin to infer something concerning those secrets which we could not take by storm. Emerson's inestimable worth appears in this; he furnishes you with no weapon of attack, but by pregnant hints and by discovering hidden relations he will assist you towards a reasonable certainty. In 1853 he wrote to Carlyle in regard to the essay on Fate, then recently written: "You will survive the reading, and will be a sure proof that the nut is not cracked. For when we find out what fate is, I suppose the Sphinx and we are done for, and Sphinx, Œdipus, and the world ought by good rights to roll down the steep into the sea."[1]

Of what nature, then, is the assistance Emerson gives us towards accepting that bitter mystery, the apparent conflict of Fate and Free-will? Certainly no single phrase sums up his views. We need not hope to win him for an ally for either camp. He states with unflinching candor that Fate is omnipresent. "Great men, great nations, have not been boasters and buffoons, but *perceivers of the terror of life*, and have manned themselves to face it."[2] He shows how heredity, sex, temperament, circumstances inevitably shape, limit, bind the individual. He describes the perpetual struggle between brute matter and thought, "the spirit which composes and decomposes Nature," — a struggle, fierce and necessary, between God and Devil. But even from the darkest aspect of the enigma Emerson plucks radiant counsel. "If you believe in Fate to your harm," he says, "believe in it at least for your good. For if Fate is so prevailing, *man also is part of it, and can confront fate with fate.*"[2]

[1] Carlyle-Emerson Correspondence, ii. 217.

[2] Fate.

Admit the scope of Fate, you must equally admit the freedom of the Will. Should this contradiction clash with your logic, it will nevertheless tally with your experience. Intellect, in that which pertains to itself, testifies to a Necessity; Will, in that which pertains to Will, testifies to Freedom: you must believe both, since each has no authority either to prove or disprove matters outside of its sphere. The intuition which makes you aware of moral responsibility is as indubitable as any other fact which enters your consciousness. Yet it necessarily transcends mathematical demonstration. Will you on this account scornfully toss it away as chimerical or worthless? Then for the same reason you must deny the commonest, yet inscrutably secret, facts of experience, such as the union of mind and matter, or variety proceeding from unity, or motion from rest. So Emerson maintains that the moral sentiment demands the freedom of the Will. Every fact is moral, and manifests the moral nature of Spirit. Fate, therefore, dissipates the immoral delusion that trusts in luck or chance or a law-breaking "special Providence." Fate presupposes and asserts the permanence and sacredness of Law and of that "Blessed Unity which holds natures and souls in perfect solution and compels every atom to serve a universal end." Believing absolutely in the beneficence of the Great Spirit, from whom all things ebb and to whom all things flow back, Emerson could not help believing that the end served by every atom is not only universal, but ultimately good. With our relative knowledge we cannot possibly prove that what seems transiently bad will remain eternally bad, or that even from what is bad at the moment good may not be derived; yet even measuring by our every-day standard of good and bad, we detect numerous instances, either in our own lives or in history, of great blessings originating in apparent calamities. This being true of phenomena whose purport we presume to determine, why should not the same be true of all phenomena? Our shortsightedness extends to our view of morals. We do not behold crime immediately punished according to our code, and we exclaim, therefore, that the guilty escape, or that there is no moral law. But every account is settled, though we be

not present at the settlement; and "every ultimate fact is the first of a new series."[1] Evidently, were Emerson a professed fatalist and nothing more, he would meet Fate as a friendly, and not as a malignant, power.

A recent critic[2] has brought the charge against Emerson "that he has little to say of that horrid burden and impediment on the soul which the churches call Sin, and which, by whatever name we call it, is a very real catastrophe in the moral nature of man. He had no eye, like Dante's, for the vileness, the cruelty, the utter despicableness to which humanity may be moulded. The courses of Nature and the prodigious injustice of man in society affect him with neither horror nor awe." If this charge were true, Emerson's name would already be forgotten, — nay, it would never have emerged from obscurity. Not by "mere playing with words" did he rise to be one of the great moral forces of this century. Not by shutting his eyes, not by betaking himself to the clouds, when his questioners put to him this bitter puzzle or pointed at the hideous spectres of evil, did he soothe their terrible doubts and revive their courage. If he had not known their need, how could he have ministered to them? How could his spirit still speak the right word to a new generation of inquirers? The truth is, that to bring such a charge against Emerson is to proclaim an imperfect understanding of his teaching and a crippled appreciation of his character. Emerson does not shut his eyes upon the nightmare of Sin. Less than any other modern moralist does he blink the truth, because he has no theory or sect to serve by half-statements or by suppression. On the contrary, it is because he has dared to scrutinize all that he dares to tell all. We call his tone optimistic from its habitual healthy ring; but let nobody suppose it lacks other notes, or that he wished himself to be thought of as singing pretty little ditties, jocund madrigals, and ballads of fair weather.

In the chapters on Fate and Power, in those on Compensation and Considerations by the Way and Behavior, — not to mention others, — Emerson's deep realization of the

[1] Circles.

[2] Mr. John Morley.

existence and mystery of Evil is recorded. Listen to a few of his stern facts: —

"We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman, but swallows your ship like a grain of dust. The diseases, the elements, fortune, gravity, lightning, respect no persons."[1] "Let us not deny it up and down, Providence has a wild, rough, incalculable road to its end, and it is of no use to try to whitewash its huge, mixed instrumentalities, or to dress up that terrific benefactor in a clean shirt and white neckcloth of a student of divinity."[1] "Nature works very hard, and only hits the white once in a million throws. In mankind she is contented if she yield one master in a century."[2]

Let these, from among a hundred quotable passages of identical import, bear witness that Emerson, "unshaken, unseduced, unterrified," dared to look at the monster. The quotations that follow help to corroborate and to explain why the hideous spectacle overcame neither his courage nor his hope: —

"Fate keeps everything alive so long as the smallest thread of public necessity holds it on to the tree. The coxcomb and bully and thief class are allowed as proletaries, every one of their vices being the excess or acridity of a virtue. The mass are animal, in pupilage, and near chimpanzee."[2] "In front of these sinister facts, the first lesson of history is the good of evil."[1] "Nothing, Falsehood, may indeed stand as the great night, or shade, on which, as a background, the living universe paints itself forth: but no fact is begotten by it; it cannot work, for it is not. It cannot work any good; it cannot work any harm. It is harm, inasmuch as it is worse not to be than to be."[3] "Our philosophy is affirmative, and readily accepts the testimony of negative facts, as every shadow points to the sun."[4] "The Medical College piles up in its museum its grim monsters of morbid anatomy, and there are melancholy sceptics with a taste for carrion who batten on the hideous facts in history, — persecutions, inquisitions, St. Bartholomew massacres, devilish lives, Nero, Cæsar Borgia, Marat, Lopez, men in whom every ray of humanity was extinguished, parricides, matricides, and whatever moral monsters. These are not cheerful facts, but they do not disturb a healthy mind; they require of us a patience as robust as the energy that attacks us, and an unresting exploration of final causes. Wolf, snake, and crocodile are not inharmonious in nature, but are made useful as checks, scavengers, and pioneers; but we must have a scope as large as Nature's to deal with beast-like men, detect what scullion function is assigned them, and foresee in the secular melioration of the planet how these will become unnecessary and will die out."[5]

[1] Fate. [2] Considerations by the Way. [3] Compensation. [4] Spiritual Laws. [5] Courage.

Emerson looks upon Sin as relative. He sees, with eyes as keen as Darwin's, the everlasting reciprocity between the individual and his environment. He understands that in order to lift the individual you must take him from his lower up to a higher plane. *Why* this is true, Emerson pretends not to explain, fully aware that it is as inexplicable as that anything *is;* but he insists that the realization of this truth suffices to direct our conduct. "I have learned," he says, "that I cannot dispose of other people's facts. . . . They wish to be saved from the *mischiefs of their vices, but not from their vices.*"[1] Emerson stands on a high cliff, beneath which a crowd of unfortunates call to him to extricate them from a bog. From his eminence he sees, beyond the slough, firm land, pleasant meadows, and wooded hills, and he replies to the strugglers: "You can never be comfortable while you remain where you are; a few brave steps will bring your feet upon solid ground." He does not tell them to try to fill up the bog, or to spend their lives in wondering why it is there and why they are involved in it, but he tells them to go out of it. Once let them reach a stable footing, and all thought of their plight will vanish. This may illustrate, however rudely, the manner in which life answers most of our questions: not by a direct *Yes*, or *No*, not by a glib phrase, but by a roundabout experience in which we live the answer.

In our ordinary transactions we look for a definite, tangible payment for work. By the introduction of a neutral symbol of exchange we are apt to lose sight of the intrinsic conditions of compensation. In early times if a man wanted a cow he did a specified piece of work and received a cow as wages; now we work ostensibly for money,—of no value in itself unless it be the equivalent of a considerable number of articles. Hence vagueness arises concerning the true relations between work and wages. Moreover, we are inclined to imagine that rewards in the moral world come in the same fashion as in the labor-market.

It need hardly be pointed out that this view has dominated

[1] Experience.

every organized system of religion. The good Mohammedan is to be rewarded in heaven by unrestricted license to gratify his sensual appetites, without risk of satiety. The North American Indian, through whose robust veins and wiry muscles vibrates the desire of activity, hopes to awaken in a "happy hunting-ground," — a region where game never grows scarce, and where every arrow hits the mark. The more libidinous Asiatic, finding his chief solace in the flesh, commands that his women be buried alive with him, so that they may be ready for his pleasure upon his arrival in the other world. The Turk has faith that Allah will people heaven with houris; the more sceptical and careful Asiatic deems it prudent to provide for his own comfort. What Arab ever left his darling horse out of his dream of heaven? The Christian ideal of paradise has varied in accordance with the large variety of peoples who have called themselves Christians. Doubtless, no two ideals agree; but the underlying characteristic of all has been that heaven is a *place* where all wrongs will be righted and all longings satisfied. The Almighty sits there as a judge who rewards or punishes mortals according to their good or evil deeds on earth. The virtuous will receive a crown, the symbol — is it not? — of their dearest desire; while the wicked will be doomed to everlasting torment. So completely, at times, has this fiction of what we may call the "reward-of-merit" scheme of compensation contaminated branches of the Christian Church that its members did not even wait for the sentence of the Almighty Judge, but assumed to know before doomsday what He would decree. The Catholics, for instance, had a tariff, in which was set down the cost of any transgression. If a nobleman wished to kill an enemy, or to rob the poor, or to outrage defenceless women, he could do so with impunity, provided he bought an "indulgence" of the Pope, — the indulgence being a certificate for notifying the recording angel in heaven that the sinner had settled his score on earth. Even to-day, millions of Catholics are taught that the felicity of the souls of their loved ones in the other world can be enhanced by the burning of candles in this! — a superstition which, like that of those persons who by means of table-rappings and

slate-scratchings think to communicate with the spirits of departed friends, begets pity, and not contempt.

These examples are cited solely to illustrate the pathetic extreme to which the notion that heaven is a *place* for the distribution of prizes has carried professing Christians. Other illustrations might have been chosen which would have shown less forcibly the same fact; for the characteristic alluded to is traceable even in such noble visions as the "divine rose of Love" of Dante's Paradise. As religion becomes more spiritual, men cherish purer views of heaven; so that if nothing remained of a race except the picture it had drawn, in hope and in fear, of heaven, we could determine accurately its civilization.

But is it not possible that here on earth are the conditions supposed to obtain in the imaginary heaven? that to-day, that every day, is a "day of judgment"? What if it turn out that a man may not wait until the end of time to be punished for his evil deed, but that he is punished on the spot, — that the commission of the wrong and the punishment are simultaneous? What if it be true that "virtue is its own reward"?

If we follow the standards of the stock-exchange and the political platform, or even those of many theologies, we shall hear that "the wicked prosper; the good are unhappy; Wrong very often tramples upon Right." Not until we agree as to what makes true prosperity can we establish wherein true compensation lies. Let us define prosperity, therefore, as "that state in which the Spirit can most fully exercise its relations with God." Neither wealth, nor social position, nor business success, nor public honor, nor any other external profit is essential to this communion. "Be cheerful also, and seek not external help, nor the tranquillity which others give: a man then must stand erect, not be kept erect by others," says Marcus Aurelius; and he adds in another passage: "Things do not touch the soul, for they are external and remain immovable; but our perturbations come only from the opinion which is within. . . . Does any one do wrong? It is to himself that he does the wrong." Is not this the meaning of Goethe's saying: "Every debt is paid in this life"? Is not this the clue to Emerson's doctrine of Compensation?

The soul's health abides in God, in Goodness. Every good act increases our store of goodness and strengthens our relations with God. Every bad act, on the other hand, removes us by just so much from him; in this removal, this deprivation, consists our punishment. Since the greatest imaginable bliss is to be pervaded by spirit, the greatest calamity is to be cut off therefrom; and each act, to the extent of its moral value, immediately takes us nearer to or farther from the Over-Soul. The compensation coincides with the work. The attempt to separate the good from the price which must be paid for it would never be tried, says Emerson, were it not that "when the disease began in the will, of rebellion and separation, the intellect is at once infected, so that man ceases to see God whole in each object, but is able to see the sensual allurement of an object, but not see the sensual hurt, and thinks he can cut off that which he would have from that which he would not have."[1] Is this not a more reasonable and spiritual view than that other in which the avenging deity is represented as pursuing culprits but never overtaking them until they stumble over the precipice of death into the bottomless pit of hell?

In this view each sinful act draws a film between the individual and the Great Spirit, until, in the end, no light could pierce for the guidance of the sinner. His spiritual life becomes warped. One by one the qualities that ennoble are quenched, for want of nourishment. Should the degradation continue to the lowest conceivable limit, should every channel of communication with God be closed, the soul must go out from, or, more precisely, could not enter into, the individual. It is as if we should descend the scale of organic life: at each descent some organ or faculty would be extinguished, until we reached those shapeless creatures whose single attribute is life; beyond them is Nothingness, the real perdition. In this departure from perfection, in this loss of those characteristics which we associate with the noblest ideal, in this imbruting, lives the real curse of guilt, the real punishment; and not in the confinement of the wretch in a prison during this life and

[1] Compensation.

in a hell during the next. "Crime and punishment grow out of one stem." Be it again noted that in the ordinary conception of heaven and hell, Time enters as an impossible element: tortures and rewards are referred to temporal standards; but Spirit is eternal.

Over the world of possessions the same balance is held. Despite apparent disparity, justice is done. The peasant, seeing only the splendor, power, ease, and luxury of the king, dreams that if he were king all his desires could be easily gratified; he does not see the cares and responsibilities of kingship, which make a sovereign often less free than his subjects. We daily hear persons who would "give anything" (that is, nothing) to own So-and-so's millions; but they forget that the millionnaire has paid cent for cent for all his fortune, and that he has acquired with it its very real limitations and burdens. These persons "see the mermaid's head," but overlook "the dragon's tail." So, too, with genius. Everybody would gladly write the great poem or symphony, or paint the great picture; but how many would pay the artist's price for the privilege? How many would learn with Dante, during twenty years of exile, how hard it is to mount and descend a stranger's stairs, and how salt is a stranger's bread? How many would bear Beethoven's burden of melancholy and deafness? How many would share Michael Angelo's ninety years of titanic but unspeakably sad loneliness? We arrange to receive everything and to give nothing, and our hearts convict the plan as ignoble. "He is base — and that is the one base thing in the universe — to receive favors and render none."[1]

Thus the "radical tragedy of Nature, the seeming distinction of More or Less," assumes a different aspect. Inequalities, injustice, deprivations, the lifting up of the dishonest and the beating down of the virtuous, affect the external world, and not the Soul. The wise man knows that equality is everywhere preserved. The immemorial experience of mankind emphasizes the fact that upon no race, time of life, rank, or possessions is conferred the right to a monopoly in happiness. The

[1] Compensation.

spiritual sustenance necessary for the soul's welfare, like light and air, is free to all. Does any one think of Socrates or Christ as poor? or of Spinoza, patiently grinding lenses in Amsterdam, as lacking in aught that the worldly rich Dutch merchants could have given him? Which of us would prefer to be Vanderbilt, with all his millions, rather than Emerson?

You cannot bribe him who places virtue above all other things, unless you offer him virtue. Shall you persuade him to lead a virtuous life by promising him a heaven filled with rewards that he despises? Does the lover ask for any higher recompense than the bliss of loving? Verily, we insult man's divinest attributes when we treat them like mercenaries hired to fight the battle of life with him!

I fear that to those unacquainted with Emerson a controversial temper may seem at times to intrude itself into this review of the problems of Fate, Sin, and Compensation; but Emerson never descends to controversy. He never argues,—he affirms. He tells what *he* sees; if *you* do not see it likewise, he does not present credentials testifying to his veracity. He addresses the soul rather than the intellect. He knows that spiritual experience is not less but more real because it eludes verbal expression. The misunderstandings and wranglings which we call "theology" arise from the vain attempt to explain spiritual experience in terms of material experience, to fortify Faith (which is *not* Reason) by Reason (which is *not* Faith). Should we smile at, or pity, a father who should try to demonstrate to us, by means of the binomial theorem, that he loved his children? Emerson excels as a spiritual guide and mental stimulator because he never falls into this confusion. He does not try to overthrow by Faith the evidence that Reason has authority to judge; neither does he, like so many theologians, lead Faith away from her coign of vantage to be attacked and grievously wounded by Reason. Both bring him priceless messages, but of different quality.

Health needs no advocate. Emerson takes this truth for granted, and he also takes it for granted that you will know intuitively when you are in health. Pain in the physical world

and evil in the moral world are the symptoms of ill-health. Be sure that whatever lifts, broadens, cheers, is good for you, and that whatever lowers, warps, depresses, is bad for you. Do not waste time philosophizing why the latter should be, but get rid of it in all haste. Emerson calls the theological problems of predestination, original sin, and evil "the soul's mumps, measles, and whooping-coughs," and he declares that "a simple mind will not know these enemies." His object is not to tell you why the poisonous air stifles you, but to call you away from the miasma into a salubrious neighborhood. Of all men he has the largest faculty of discovering spiritual good. He finds it everywhere and in everybody. Carlyle took him through the slums of London, and asked: "Don't you believe in a hell now?" Emerson said firmly, "No." For him, at the bottom of the deepest well the stars are shining. Underneath the evil on the surface he sees the permanent substance, Good. We marvel at the keenness of his insight. He takes pagans or Christians, ancients or moderns, to illustrate his convictions, and the very wealth and variety of his illustrations suggest to us that Virtue has belonged to no single age or people, neither has it been the honor of any particular creed; the godlike in man hallows all ages and places.

Emerson extols to-day; he never disturbs himself about the future. If you are doing your best now, he says, you are fitting yourself for any career that may come to you five years or five hundred years hence. Herein his teaching differs from that of Buddha and the Stoics and from the interpretation his followers have assigned to Christ's teaching. The Hindoo saviour exhorts his disciples to destroy all desire, because thus alone can they be absorbed into that dreamless rest which is Nirvana. The Stoics aspired to attain to tranquillity by smothering the passions and by keeping austerely in view the axiom that it mattered not whether one lived or died; and Christ's words have been so read that "other-worldliness" — or the regulating of conduct with an eye upon the rewards and demands of the next life, to the maiming of the highest development in this life — has been a prominent and depressing characteristic among almost all classes of Christians.

With Emerson, however, the "eternal Now" is all important. Hair-shirts, sackcloth and ashes, monasticism, and other pious methods of stunting the growth of the soul he would abolish as being as harmful as the British practice of dwarfing physical growth by dosing prospective jockeys with gin. He disapproves as much of the remorse which wastes the Present by brooding over the Past, as of the discontent which wastes the Present by brooding over the Future. Repentence manifests itself in the turning to good works, not in the consumption of precious hours by weeping over the irrevocable. To reach your Heaven you must journey through To-day; therefore let To-day's journey bring you on as bravely and as far as possible. Your welfare can be found wherever you are; do not imagine that it awaits you in Paris or Athens. God fills all zones with his presence. Cultivate, then, a noble contentment and a high reverence for your surroundings, — parents, friends, business, and native land. Cheerfulness and courage are the supreme virtues after Emerson's heart; they shine through his writings and lived in his conduct. He exacts a deep patriotism and a love of one's time.

The practicalness of his teaching stimulates every one who has tasted it: and what teaching is more than miserable humbug unless it be practical? We have in him a unique combination of common sense and spiritual insight. Mr. Lowell's couplet says, with truth, —

> "A Greek head on right Yankee shoulders, whose range
> Has Olympus for one pole, for t' other the Exchange."

Other philosophers bewilder you with their abstractions, — their "subjectives" and "objectives," their "ologies" and "isms," — until they convert your search for truth into a search of meanings in the dictionary. Emerson discourses to you of the everlasting verities, and uses for examples the common facts and events of your daily life. In his hand the vulgarest object sparkles with a divine lustre. Has it not been remarked that his sentences have the homeliness as well as the pith of proverbs? He beckons mankind from hopeless speculation over the mysteries of the universe, and points out that improvement

and happiness lie only in or through present realities. "The only path of escape known in all the worlds of God is performance."[1] He alone is consistent who obeys the voice of the Spirit, and that voice calls him ever upward. It has no fixed cry, no password whose significance has been worn away by repetition. To each it speaks new words, suited to his new conditions; what it whispered to the child it no longer whispers to the man. But though the message change, the voice changes not; in the evening of life we recognize that it emanates from the same eternal source whence it came to gladden our infancy and our prime.

The complaint is heard that Emerson does not lift the curtain of Death and allow us to peer into the mystery beyond, and that he has little to tell us about the immortality of the soul. Persons who make this complaint have failed lamentably to apprehend the unvarying theme of his belief, which is the imperishability of Spirit. They have been blind, too, to his written word. "Men ask," he says, "concerning the immortality of the soul, the employments of heaven, the state of the sinner, and so forth. They even dream that Jesus has left replies to precisely these interrogatories. Never a moment did that sublime spirit speak in their *patois*. To truth, justice, love, the attributes of the soul, the idea of immutableness is essentially associated. Jesus, living in these moral sentiments, heedless of sensual fortunes, heeding only the manifestations of these, never made the separation of the idea of duration from the essence of these attributes, nor uttered a syllable concerning the duration of the soul. It was left to his disciples to sever duration from the moral elements and to teach the immortality of the soul as a doctrine and maintain it by evidences. The moment the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is separately taught, man is already fallen."[2] Seek where you will through Emerson's prose or poetry, and you will find that conviction re-affirmed, —

> "What is excellent,
> As God lives, is permanent:
> Hearts are dust, hearts' loves remain;
> Heart's love will meet thee again."[3]

[1] Worship. [2] The Over-Soul. [3] Threnody.

Those who had personal acquaintance with Emerson state that one thing particularly impressed them, — "the sense that he seemed to have of a certain great amplitude of time and leisure: it was the behavior of one who really *believed* in an immortal life, and had adjusted his conduct accordingly." [1] Happy the man whose soul has been brimmed with a sense of that great amplitude in his converse with Emerson's thoughts!

But let us not blink the fact that many persons do not understand Emerson; that some pronounce his Essays "commonplace," while others lift their eyebrows and with a superior air say, "moonshine;" that others again with exemplary modesty — if genuine — declare that "he is too deep for them." There is another class of Emersonian fanatics who take it amiss that everybody will not worship at the little altar they have dedicated to him. By argument or sarcasm or browbeating they would capture that homage which is worthless unless it come by love. But those who have imbibed even the humblest drop of Emerson's meaning will be annoyed by none of these, for they have learned from him that only the Infinite can satisfy all needs and appease all yearnings. To no book, or music, or landscape, or friend is it granted to say the right word at every moment; but it is Emerson's high distinction to appeal to us in those moments the soul recognizes as the best. Seek him in lower moods, and his words kindle no response.

These are some of the keys of the instrument upon which Emerson plays his mighty Hymn of Life. To those persons who require an explanation of the universe by reference to fixed dogmas, Emerson must seem vague, and obscure to those who are not accustomed to contemplate earnestly matters pertaining to the Spirit; but to those who, in reverence and sympathy, seek his wisdom he unfolds precious revelations. He strips things and persons of their material wrap, and shows, beneath, the Spirit, which is their substance, imperishable and infinite, the soul of the world.

[1] A Western Journey with Mr. Emerson, by Prof. J. B. Thayer.

One hesitates to hand to a stranger a mere cupful from so broad and pure a lake; but to all of us — both to those who have listened gratefully to his words, and to those who have not — the supreme fact of Emerson's life endures as an encouragement and a blessing. *That* we all understand; and we can never forget that there was recently among us a pure and beautiful spirit who looked out upon the world we see, who lived in conditions similar to those which surround us, who shirked no duty as son, husband, father, friend, or citizen, who was familiar with the wisdom of the ages, who knew the frailty and the strength, the disappointments and the aspirations, of humanity, and who gave to us and to posterity out of the sincerity of his soul a message of joy. "Fair is the prize and the hope is great," Plato, antiquity's sentinel, calls from his watch in Athens. *Wir heissen Euch hoffen*, — "We bid you to hope," — Goethe echoes, mounting guard at Weimar. And Emerson from Concord responds serenely:

> "Lowly faithful, banish fear,
> Right onward drive unharmed;
> The port, well worth the cruise, is near,
> And every wave is charmed."