

TOPICS OF THE TIME

OUR INHERITANCE IN EMERSON

ONE hundred years ago Ralph Waldo Emerson was born—on the 25th of May, 1803. He died on the 27th of April, 1882. The reaction which seems to be a necessary incident in the progress and establishment of an author's fame may be said to have reached its culmination in the case of Emerson some years ago. John Morley's estimate of him and that put forth by Matthew Arnold in his American lecture were read, at the time of their publication, by those whose intellectual lives were partly fashioned by the literature of the man of Concord, with both protest and sinking of the heart. Those estimates were kindly and regretful dethronements of the god; their very kindliness, and the fact that they were written by sympathizers and admirers, by writers who owed much to Emerson, and who desired to deal as gently with the somewhat outworn divinity as possible,—the evident conviction and unimpeachable honesty of the verdicts,—these things made the Emerson enthusiast all the more anxious, in the midst of his rebellion.

The unflinching admirer, at the time, was so grieved at the destructive parts of these criticisms that he, perhaps, failed to appreciate the constructive praises. He was so pained to witness the removal of his divinity from his exalted pedestal that he was little comforted by the fact that the new shrine, while somewhat different, was scarcely less highly placed than the old. And yet this is the language in which Morley concluded his study: "When all these deductions have been made and amply allowed for, Emerson remains among the most persuasive and inspiring of those who by word and example rebuke our despondency, purify our sight, awaken us from the deadening slumbers of convention and conformity, exorcise the pestering imps of vanity, and lift men up from

low thoughts and sullen moods of helplessness and impiety."

And Arnold, after his negations, it will be remembered, spoke thus: "We have not in Emerson a great poet, a great writer, a great philosophy-maker. His relation to us is not that of one of those personages; yet it is a relation of, I think, even superior importance. His relation to us is more like that of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Marcus Aurelius is not a great writer, a great philosophy-maker; he is the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit. Emerson is the same. He is the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit. All the points in thinking which are necessary for this purpose he takes; but he does not combine them into a system, or present them as a regular philosophy. Combined in a system by a man with the requisite talent for this kind of thing, they would be less useful than as Emerson gives them to us; and the man with the talent so to systematize them would be less impressive than Emerson. . . . As Wordsworth's poetry is, in my judgment, the most important work done in verse, in our language, during the present century, so Emerson's 'Essays' are, I think, the most important work done in prose." And Arnold closed his lecture with this memorable passage: "You cannot prize him too much, nor heed him too diligently. He has lessons for both branches of our race. I figure him to my mind as visible upon earth still, as still standing here by Boston Bay, or at his own Concord, in his habit as he lived, but of heightened stature and shining feature, with one hand stretched out toward the East, to our laden and laboring England; the other toward the ever-growing West, to his own dearly loved America,—'great, intelligent, sensual, avaricious America.' To us he shows for guidance his lucid freedom, his cheerfulness and hope; to you his dignity, delicacy, serenity, elevation."

But the lover of Emerson cannot forget that, following the same lines, both Morley and Arnold deny, with qualification and exception, the greatness often proclaimed for Emerson as a poet, a prose writer, and a philosopher, though still according him a very high place among the inspirers of humanity. With regard to his verse, they point out its lack of certain qualities inherent in the world's greatest poetry; with regard to his prose, they dwell especially upon its lack of continuity and flow; with regard to his philosophy, they easily show that he created no formal system—that in this department he was hardly a “constructor.”

The faults, little and big, of Emerson's prose style are by this time well understood. His poems, too, have not, indeed, the flow of Spenser or Keats—not, as Arnold indicates, even of Longfellow. He built up no formal philosophy.

But those who have gone beyond their periods of first enthusiasm and reactionary doubt concerning Emerson are no longer troubled by any either unfriendly or friendly definition of his artistic, intellectual, or temperamental limitations. They are fully aware of these; but they are as fully aware of a power of intuition and a mastery of expression—indeed, an actual artistic accomplishment—by him, both in verse and in prose, that make his works a possession of such transcendent value that they cannot imagine the literature of the world ever becoming so rich as to be able to dispense with them or to deny them a high and exceptional place. They say to themselves: if it be true, as Arnold declared, that Emerson was not a “born man of letters,” that he was not a “legitimate poet,” then the wonder is accomplished of such a writer adding to the world's literature, to the world's poetry, some of its best treasures of artistic expression; they find that in the third decade after his death his literary influence, and the influence of his thought, is affecting new writers in other tongues and arousing renewed appreciation and adulation among the thoughtful. They may not care to insist upon ranking him arbitrarily above this or that contemporary writer, or author of the past; in their minds his literature may not suggest the immense mountain-ranges or high table-lands of the Shaksperes and Platos, but the peaks of his exquisite genius seem to them to thrust

far up, now and again, to equal height in the same lofty atmosphere.

The lack of constructive continuity in Emerson's writing is compensated for by the cosmic character of the separate sections. He himself spoke of his “paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle.” A lecturer the other night, in daring hyperbole, described molecules as little solar systems, showing that science had abolished all idea of insignificant smallness. So one might speak of Emerson's prose sentences. As to his verse, the occasional roughness is a probably unintentional enhancement of the clear, melodious cadences that so often recur, charming the mind and ear with an unearthly music. Good verse is thought packed tight for a long journey; but only here and there in all literature is there such tight packing as in the verse of Emerson, and no limit can be safely named to the length of its journey down the tide of time.

Emerson's highest artistic quality has in it always a suggestion of miracle. One “cannot see how it was done,” and imitation is disaster. The sentence, the phrase, creates in the mind a sense of luminousness, so keen is the vibration. This may be said of all works of high artistic genius, but in the case of Emerson the miraculously luminous effect is peculiarly felt. On a building at the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, the visitor who read the following words, even if he could not remember having read them before, might not long doubt as to their origin: “O rich and various Man! thou palace of sight and sound, carrying in thy senses the morning and the night and the unfathomable galaxy; in thy brain, the geometry of the City of God; in thy heart, the bower of love and the realms of right and wrong.”

And as to that slender and precious volume of Emerson's poems: open anywhere, and everywhere the miracle. We, at the moment, came, by accident, upon “Two Rivers.” Consider it for subtlety and for sweep of imagination, or for the liquid beauty of the line, the crisp of its consonants and the rich pour of its vowels; how often in any language has it been equaled?

Thy summer voice, Musketaquit,
Repeats the music of the rain;
But sweeter rivers pulsing fit
Through thee, as thou through Concord
Plain.

Thou in thy narrow banks art pent :
 The stream I love unbounded goes
 Through flood and sea and firmament ;
 Through light, through life, it forward
 flows.

I see the inundation sweet,
 I hear the spending of the stream
 Through years, through men, through nature
 fleet,
 Through love and thought, through power
 and dream.

Musketaquit, a goblin strong,
 Of shard and flint makes jewels gay ;
 They lose their grief who hear his song,
 And where he winds is the day of day.

So forth and brighter fares my stream,—
 Who drink it shall not thirst again ;
 No darkness stains its equal gleam,
 And ages drop in it like rain.

The midmost stanza of the five happens to be a part of the "familiar quotation" of our day; it gleams here like a lucent jewel on a golden ring, a jewel wide as nature and deep as time.

The beauty of Emerson's prose at its best cannot be analyzed, nor of his verse. His phrase, in prose or verse, is in a very intense sense the natural product of an individual, and that individual a soul apart. Our inheritance in Emerson is not only an inheritance of a literature, but of a life, of a nature well-nigh unique among world-authors. Surely few lives have ever been lived on such moral and intellectual heights. Somewhat as Washington stands among the world's statesmen,—a public and private life one in purity and sentiment,—so stands Emerson among the greatest of those who have expressed themselves in language: no pettiness to deplore, no derelictions to explain or forget. Others have been good; others have been pure; but in him there is a crystalline intensity of purity, a never abandoned altitude. Life, thought, expression are one, and all are altogether noble.

In Emerson as an American, as a patriot, we of the New World have an inheritance peculiarly our own, which will grow richer with the spending—for the spending of such an inheritance means that we ourselves be spent for the Republic. Far as we may go beyond our present failures,—beyond what Morley calls this

our corrupt period,—far as we may go on the line of our nobler national accomplishments (and amidst all our discouragements we must not forget these nobler accomplishments!), far as we may travel up the pathway of our true ideals—still before us, and ever higher on that pathway, will be seen the beckoning figure, will be heard the urging and inspiring voice, of Emerson.

Listen to the words of Emerson the American, of Emerson the patriot: "America should affirm and establish that in no instance shall the guns go in advance of the present right. We shall not make *coups d'état* and afterward explain and pay, but shall proceed like William Penn, or whatever other Christian or humane person who treats with the Indian or the foreigner, on principles of honest trade and mutual advantage. We can see that the Constitution and the law in America must be written on ethical principles, so that the entire power of the spiritual world shall hold the citizen loyal, and repel the enemy as by force of nature. It should be mankind's bill of rights, or Royal Proclamation of the Intellect ascending the throne, announcing its good pleasure that now, once for all, the world shall be governed by common sense and law of morals." "It is not a question whether we shall be a multitude of people. No, that has been conspicuously decided already; but whether we shall be the new nation, the guide and lawgiver of all nations, as having clearly chosen and firmly held the simplest and best rule of political society."

The above from "The Fortune of the Republic," spoken in the Old South Church, Boston, in 1878; and this last quotation from "The Young American," uttered in 1844, and still new, fresh, and sublimely monitory, like the recorded words from the lips anointed of some Hebrew prophet-poet: "Here stars, here woods, here hills, here animals, here men abound, and the vast tendencies concur of a new order. If only the men are employed in conspiring with the designs of the Spirit who led us hither, and is leading us still, we shall quickly enough advance out of all hearing of others' censures, out of all regrets of our own, into a new and more excellent social state than history has recorded."

¹ See also editorial in THE CENTURY for July, 1882.

PARTY NECESSITY A PARTY SNARE

THE excuse for supporting an unscrupulous senator is made in one State on the ground of party necessity, in this case party necessity generally meaning business necessity. The "honest" manufacturer, while privately denouncing in one breath the State's notorious boss senator,—with satisfactory moral fervor and profane persiflage,—in the next breath will explain the impossibility of letting his own views be known outside of the charmed circle of intimacy, because, as you know, his business is such as to be endangered by any change in party domination. "Of course," he will say, "So-and-so is an intolerable rascal and possibly ought to be in the State prison, but I am convinced that the prosperity of the country depends upon the ascendancy of our party; and because I can't afford, on account of my business, to take any chances, I confess that, in the circumstances, I 'd support the senator if he were the devil himself."

In another State the "honest" member of the opposite party will say: "Of course I agree with you, as between gentlemen, that the senator is an intolerable rascal; but he controls the State machine and is a part of the national machine, and I 'm so tired of the abominations of the other party in national affairs that I 'm just nat-

urally bound to support the senator in this campaign. As I am a mightily convinced partizan, I 'm free to confess that I should support him if the senator were the personal devil himself, and I sometimes think he is."

So each party sends to represent it, from each of these two States, not two honest and capable partizans, but one conscienceless boss senator and a servile tool of the boss senator. And when it comes to some great and pressing issue, in which, in the broadest sense, the good of one party or the other is involved, each of these boss senators and his tool,—having no real principles themselves, either of party or otherwise,—will be found conspiring with the most conscienceless men under the opposite flag to defeat the honest policies of the conscientious leaders of their respective parties.

Those familiar with modern political history will not find it difficult to make fairly close application of the above remarks to particular instances, perhaps in various directions. The conclusion is irresistible that it would be infinitely better, in the interest of mere partizanship,—to say nothing of the interest of good government,—for these States to send representatives to the Senate who would stand honestly by anything, including the principles of the party that sent them.


 IN LIGHTER VEIN
Half-Truths

FRIENDSHIP is a reciprocal endurance of mutual egotisms.

THE desire for sympathy is like morphine; it forms a habit.

THE linguist is enabled, by education, to make a fool of himself in a variety of tongues.

EVERY man has his religion—with some it is witch-hazel.

IMAGINATION is the gift of God and the instrument of the devil.

Louise Herrick Wall.

To a Beginner at Golf

From an Observer of the Game

WOULDST play the game, O youth?

Forget the lore of ages:

Golf scorns each adage of
Philosophers and sages.

"Look up, not down," my friend,
Is *not* the way to view it;
Reverse it straightway, man,
Or thou shalt surely rue it.

No "wagon hitched to stars"
Will aid thee in thy driving;