

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

as

A CRITIC OF LITERATURE.

by

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To

MY MOTHER

who has been my greatest inspiration

I dedicate this thesis.

PREFACE

Emerson is the subject of a great many biographies, sketches, and critical essays, and the recognized leader of a certain group of American writers of the nineteenth century. It is therefore profitable to become acquainted with the presentation and application of his artistic principles. Also, his critical writings are individual enough in quality and large enough in extent to demand consideration on their own merits.

The present study is an attempt to show the scope and quality of his literary criticism. The materials for analysis are twelve volumes of his complete works, and ten volumes of his journals. The material selected from these sources is expressed very largely in Emerson's own words, with the idea of presenting, as nearly as possible, his own thoughts and feelings concerning literature.

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August, 1929. D. B. R.

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CHAPTER I.

INFLUENCES UNDERLYING EMERSON'S CRITICISM.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the leading American men of letters, was a lover of literature from early childhood; he dipped into it deeply and read widely. He always favored the book, however, that carried with it an ethical or a spiritual content, and he was lacking in sympathy with a man or a book that did not stimulate his moral or spiritual nature. In all his essays will be found literary and critical doctrine. It is the purpose of this study to set forth this doctrine and his application of it to literature. We shall first consider the nature of the influences that developed him into a literary critic. we shall next attempt to show his literary ideals or the criteria on which he based his judgment. We shall offer an account of how he applied his principles to the interpretation of individual authors, and finally we shall briefly discuss his strength and weakness as a literary critic.

In a study of Emerson as a critic, the character of his formative years is important, since it

discloses the direction of his originality. In this chapter we shall study the influences that formed Emerson's mind and laid the foundation for his criticism.

A very special characteristic of the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson was the view that tradition and outward circumstances had little to do with determining human destiny. Perhaps Emerson is the most conspicuous exponent of the individualism of the nineteenth century in America. Yet we who study his life history and his works feel that his inherited traits, as well as his environment, are influences both powerful and permanent throughout his career. Emerson's mind was of a religious and imaginative cast. He needed no outside influence to make him an idealist. No contemporary, but a long line of spiritual-minded forbears had planted the seed of his inborn independence which his surroundings and external forces caused to sprout and develop. Seven of his ancestors were ministers of New England churches, some of them of sturdy Puritan faith, a faith of which young Emerson wrote much in his early journals.

Of the Puritan faith of his ancestors he writes:

Few bodies or parties have served the world as well as the Puritans. From their irreverent zeal came most of the improvements of the British Constitution. It was they who settled North America. Bradford and Winthrop and Standish, (the) Mathers, Otis, Hawley Hancock, Adams, Franklin and what ever else of vigorous sense or practical genius this country shows are the issue of Puritan stock. ...Our era of exploits and civilization is ripe now and had it not been dissipated by the unfortunate rage of periodical productions, our literature should have been born and grown ere now to a Greek or Roman stature. Franklin is such a fruit as might be expected from such a tree. Edwards, perhaps, more so. The Puritans had done their duty to literature when they bequeathed the paradise Lost and Comus; and to all ~~the~~ great interests of humanity by planting the new world with their thrifty stock.¹

Emerson was reared in a home of hard work and high moral discipline. His father, a minister of the first Unitarian church in Boston, died in 1811 when Ralph was but eight years of age. Though his widowed mother was left with little means, she reared her family of five boys in an atmosphere of simple culture and refinement. Through the sacrifices of Mrs. Emerson, the economy practiced by her sons, and the encouragement of

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¹ Journals, Vol. I, p. 307.

relatives, each of the boys received a college education.

Aside from the immediate strict training of his home,

From first to last appears the value to him of his strange aunt, Miss Mary Moody Emerson, in her constant interest and stimulating influence: poor, remote, only self educated, hungry for knowledge, extraordinarily well-read, exalted in her religious thought, critical but proud of her nephews, especially Ralph, and a tireless correspondent. The boy prized her letters, and they put him on his mettle. His most careful youthful writing is in his answers... He admired her rhetoric, now poetical, now fiery, now sarcastic, - always her own.²

A letter to his elder brother William, just before Ralph entered college, shows Emerson's confidence in his aunt's judgments and the weight he thinks citing her authority will carry with his brother. He writes:

To tell the truth, I do not think it necessary to understand mathematicks and Greek thoroughly to be a good and useful, or even a great man. Aunt Mary would certainly tell you so, and I think you yourself believe it, if you did not think it dangerous doctrine to tell a freshman. But do not be afraid, for I mean to study them through,³ but with equal interest to other studies.³

Miss Emerson's letters to her favorite nephew continued through many years, from remote New England

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2 Introduction to Journals, Vol. I. p. viii; by the editor, E. W. Emerson.

3. Journals, Vol. I, foot-note, p. 67.

towns where she boarded, and formed one of the strongest influences of his early life. "His deep debt to her he always acknowledged."⁴ But they did not always agree in matters of faith. She clung staunchly to the religion of her family, from which he drifted away. Yet, in intellectual, moral, and religious temper there was a remarkable similarity. At the age of seventeen he writes in his journal:

The religion of my aunt (Miss Mary Moody Emerson, his inspiring correspondent, and severe, though loving and secretly proud critic)⁵ is the purest and most sublime of any I can conceive. It appears to be based on broad, and deep and remote principles which few can comprehend and fewer feel. It labors to reconcile the apparent insignificance of the field to the surpassing grandeur of the Operator... It is independent of form and ceremonies, and its ethereal nature gives a glow of soul to her whole life. She is the weird-woman of her religion, and conceives herself always bound to walk in narrow but exalted paths, which lead onward to interminable regions of rapturous and sublime glory.⁶

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4 Journals, Vol. 1, foot-note by Emerson's son. p. 98.

5 Interpolation is by Dr. E. W. Emerson.

6 Journals, Vol. I, pp. 77-78.

The relation between the aunt and the nephew, as revealed in numerous letters and the sketch he writes of her life in a volume of his works called Biographical Sketches, was one of mutual affection, respect, and admiration. She was ever thinking of his welfare as she saw it. She urged him to seek retirement, self-reliance, and friendship with nature, and yet ^{he} was not to neglect human friendships. He once wrote in his journal:

Social occasions also are a part of nature and being, and the delight in others' superiority is, as Aunt Mary said, my best gift from God, for here the moral nature is involved which is higher than the intellectual.

Emerson preserved many of his aunt's letters, and extracts from one of them will throw some light upon the kind of literary advice she gave him and her criticism of his habits of thought and his choice of historical heroes. She writes in answer to one of his letters:

Is the muse become faint and mean?
 Ah well she may, and better leave
 you wholly than weave a garland
 for one whose destiny leads to
 sensation rather spent in collect-
 ing facts than energizing itself
 or unfolding its budding powers
 after the sure, yet far distant
 glories of what Plato, Plotinus,
 and such God-like worthies, who
 in the language of St. Austin,
 showed that none could be a true

philosopher that was not abstracted in spirit from all the effects of the body, etc., etc., more than I dare to impose... O, would the Muse forever leave you till you had prepared for her a celestial abode... You are not inspired in heart, with a gift for immortality, because you are the nurseling of surrounding circumstances. you become a part of the circumstances which make up the ordinary life... you provoke me to prose by eulogizing Caesar and Cicero. True, the speech you quote (I believe you bear Caesar and his fortuna) is sublime, and instanced by christians, but for him, for that tyrant (whose only dream, the love of letters, was not accompanied by enthusiasm) it was mere rant... As to Cicero, one wants to admire him, but accounts forbid - though none are favorable enow ever to place him one moment beyond the imperious conrtoyal of passing events. Dejected in adversity, and without any respite from age to experience - pursuing, begging, other people to let him be praised. Is not this enough to neutralize those effects for the public? His elequence, it is true, is glorious, but himself remains an object of pity... Such are the men you are more excited about than your heroic ancestor.⁷ Merciful Creator! this child, so young, so well born and bred, yet so wedded to sounds and places where human passions triumphed! When he knows the spots, the most famous even, by thine own appearances, are swept out of record!

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7. A footnote by E. W. Emerson explains that Miss Emerson referred here to the Rev. M. William Emerson, the young minister of Concord, who, at the outbreak of the revolution, served as cnaplain in the province camp at Cambridge and later died of fever at Ticonderoga.

Whoever wants power must pay for it.
 The images are within us - born there,
 our native right and sometimes one
 kind of sounding word or syllable
 awakens the instrument of our souls,
 and sometimes another. But we are not
 slaves to sense any more than to politi-
 cal usurpers.

It is not surprising that Mr. Gay, a biographer
 of Emerson, regards Miss Mary Moody Emerson as the boy's
 most influential teacher. He says:

The teachers who influenced him
 most, whether for good or ill,
 were undoubtedly Aunt Mary Moody
 Emerson, who made him read the
 best books, showing no mercy for
 his tender years, and Sarah Bradford,
 who corresponded with him about
 every book and lesson and revised
 his translations. Aunt Mary also
 encouraged him to write verse.⁹

In a letter after he is graduated from college and is
 teaching school he refers to his Aunt as still his prin-
 cipal advisor. He writes to a friend, J. B. Hill, June
 19, 1823:

I am living in the country..., and
 I teach, ay, teach in town, and then
 scamper out as fast as our cosset horse
 will bring us to snuff the winds and
 cross the wild blossoms and branches
 of fields. I am seeking to put myself

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8 Journals, Vol. 1, pp. 330-334 (20 years of age).

9 Emerson, A Study of the Poet as Seer, by R. M. Gay, p. 32.

on a footing of old acquaintance with nature as a poet should. But the fair divinity is somewhat shy of my advances, and I confess I cannot find myself quite so perfectly at home on the rock and in the woods as my ancient, and I might say infant, aspirations led me to expect. My Aunt (of whom I think you have heard before, and who is alone among women) has spent a great part of her life in the country, and is an idolator of Nature... and she was anxious that her nephew might hold high and reverential notions regarding it, as the temple where God and the mind are to be studied and adored and where the fiery soul can begin a premature communication with the other world.

The letter just quoted also serves to mark a stage in the youth's esthetic love of nature.

One other relative who should be mentioned as influencing Emerson is Dr. Ezra Ripley, his step-grandfather, a pastor of the Concord Church and for years an occupant of the Old Manse. An amusing sketch of Doctor Ripley can be found in the same volume as that of Aunt Mary. Doctor Ripley seems always to have appealed to Emerson's sense of the ridiculous, even though he was fully aware of the pastor's virtues and retained a lifelong gratitude for his kindness. Mr. Gay, in his biography of Emerson notes that:

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10 Emerson, A Study of the Poet as Seer, by R. M. Gay, p. 58.

Doctor Ripley's kindness to Mrs. Emerson during the period when she most sorely needed help was tireless, and the boys spent a great deal of time at the old manse and on the adjoining farm, working in the fields or riding with him on his pastoral rounds.¹¹

Perhaps it was the memory of these childhood experiences that influenced Emerson to locate in Concord in 1835.

Little is recorded of Emerson's early education; yet he gives us some idea of his childhood study hours and the kind of reading he did, in his lecture on lecture on Domestic Life:

Who can see unmoved, under a low roof, the eager, blushing boys, discharging as they can their household chores, and hastening into the sitting room to the study of tomorrow's lessons, yet stealing time to read one chapter more of the novel, hardly smuggled into the tolerance of father and mother - atoning for the same by some pages of Plutarch or Goldsmith; the warm sympathy with which they kindle each other in school yard or in the barn or woodshed with scraps of poetry or song, with praises of the last oration, or mimicry of the orator; the youthful criticism, on Sunday, of the sermons; the school declamation faithfully rehearsed at home, ... the first solitary joys of literary vanity, when the translation of the theme has been completed, sitting alone near the top of the house.¹²

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11. Emerson, A Study of the Poet as Seer, by R. M. Gay, p. 38.

12. Society and Solitude, Vol. VII, pp. 119-120.

R. M. Gay writes of Emerson's schooling:

Like most boys, he attended his set scholastic duties... We know that he read books that were contraband, that his recitation of verse was impressive, and that his school compositions were graceful. After early attendance at dame schools, he went first to a tutor, two of his fellow pupils, Samuel Bradford and W. H. Furness, becoming his lifelong friends; and at the age of ten, he entered the Boston Latin School... At Deacon White's store he was sometimes put upon a barrel and invited to deliver passages from Milton and Campbell... He and his brothers were passionate admirers of good oratory, their hero at the time being Edward Everett; and eloquence remained a subject of enthusiasm until after his graduation from college.¹³

From the Boston Latin School, Emerson entered Harvard College in 1817 at the age of fourteen.. *it* was at that time administered in the fatherly spirit of a private academy, under the presidency of Doctor Kirkland. Some of the members of the faculty were Edward Everett, instructor of Greek; George Ticknor, of Modern Languages; Levi Frisbie, of Moral Philosophy; and Edward Channing, of Rhetoric and Oratory. A theological atmosphere was still prevalent, and the boys were protected as far as possible from temptation.

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13. Emerson, A Study of the Poet as Seer, by R. M. Gay, pp. 31-35

During his college career, Emerson was the recipient of occasional scholarships and prizes. We learn from the first volume of his Journals¹⁴ that he competed for both the Bowdoin and Boylston prizes, taking first in one and second in the other. The first prize was won with a dissertation on the character of Socrates; the second, with a dissertation "On the Present State of Ethical Culture." Josiah Quincy took the first Boylston prize. In his diary, which he called Figures of the Past; Quincy recorded the fact that he at the time had no idea that his competitor was a genius, adding that he would have been pleased if the judges who awarded him the first prize had at the same time announced that the recipient of the second was later to be known as the most eminent man in America.

Emerson's recorded life really began in his junior year in college at the age of sixteen, when he began to keep those journals, in which for fifty years he wrote his beliefs, his observations, and speculations. Very little of his outward biography, it is true, can be traced in these memoranda. But in them we do find his thoughts and ideals; his studies, ques-

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14 Journals, Vol. I, p. 4.

tionings and hopes; and a history of his intellectual and spiritual growth. The pages devoted to his college years consist chiefly of notes to be used in themes and dissertations, and minutes of a meeting of a society, the Pythologian, with only a few references to his professors or friends. His son, Edward Waldo Emerson, says that extracts from the journals:

Show the soil out of which Emerson grew, the atmosphere around, his habits and mental food, his steady, earnest purpose, and the things he outgrew... In these years the young Emerson was reading eagerly and widely and learned to find what the author or the college text-book had for him and leave the rest. The growth of his literary taste, his style, independence of thought, and originality in writing verse can be traced... The journal was his confidential friend.¹⁵

During his sophomore year in college, Emerson and several of his classmates formed a book club, the members of which subscribed for magazines and bought books which were not in the college library, and met at irregular intervals in the room of a member to listen to original manuscripts and to read aloud from their new books and periodicals. Emerson was for a time

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15. Introduction to Vol. I of Journals, pp. vii and ix.

secretary of the society.¹⁶ The details of the minutes help us to realize that his faith in the value of solitude did not prevent his indulging, occasionally, in the pleasure of companionship.

His journal for April 4th, 1820, shows faith in inspiration as well as his admiration for Everett. He writes:

Judging from opportunity enjoyed, I ought to have this evening a flow of thought, rich, abundant, and deep; after having heard Mr. Everett deliver his Introductory Lecture, in length one and one-half hours, having read much and profitably in the Quarterly Review, and lastly having heard Doctor Warren's introductory lectures to anatomy, all in the compass of a day, and the mind possessing a temperament well adapted to receive with calm attention what was offered. Shall endeavor to record promiscuously received ideas.¹⁷

He then proceeds to comment upon the Greeks and their dependence upon the Phoenicians for the Alphabet, showing that it was Everett's lectures that made the deepest impression upon his mind. His maturer theories of style were very likely influenced by the eloquence of Everett and Channing and the requirements of the lecture platform. He later wrote

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¹⁶ Journals, Vol. II, 1820, p. 33.

¹⁷ Ibid., Vol. I, p. 20.

of Everett's influence, saying:

Germany had created criticism in vain for us until 1820, when Edward Everett returned from his five years in Europe and brought his rich results, which no one was so fitted by natural grace and the splendor of rhetoric to introduce and recommend. He made us for the first time acquainted with Wolff's theory of the Homeric writings, with the criticism of Heine. The novelty of the learning lost nothing in the skill and genius of his relation, and the rudest undergraduate found a new morning opened to him in the lecture room of Harvard Hall.¹⁸

Perhaps because of his enthusiastic admiration for Everett and his innate or acquired thirst for the greatest in literature, he wrote further in his journal, the same evening, of his Greek professor's introductory lecture:

I hereby make a resolution to make myself acquainted with the Greek language and antiquities and history with long and serious study; (always with the assistance of circumstances) to which end I hereby dedicate and devote to the down-putting of sentences quoted or original, which regard Greece, historical, poetical, and critical, page 47 of this time honored register. By the way, I devote page 45 to the notation of Inquirenda and of books to be sought.¹⁹

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18 Lectures and Biographical Sketches, Vol. X, p. 312.

19 Journals, Vol. I, pp. 22-23 (age 16).

In a later entry of his journal we find him still pondering over the greatness and the influence of Greece throughout the world:

What imparted that impulse to Greene^c which may be said to have created literature, which has been communicated through Rome to the world? It is a curious spectacle to a contemplative man to observe a little population of twelve thousand men for a couple of generations setting their minds at work more diligently than men were accustomed, and effecting something altogether new and strange; to see them lie quietly down again in darkness, while all the nations of the world rise up to do them a vain reverence; and all the wisest among them exhausting their powers to make a faint imitation of some one excellence of Greece in her age of glory; to see this admiration continued and augmented as the world grows older, and with all the advantages of an experience of 6000 years to find these departed artists never paralleled. It certainly is the manly literature in the world, being composed of histories, orations, poems, and dramatic pieces, in which no sign of accomodation is discovered to the whims of fashion or patronage.²⁰

Aside from his specified college course he read widely in old and in contemporary literature. His early reading has already been noted. To indicate the literary interests that helped to form his tastes in later years, nothing could be more informative than

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the lists of books which he read during his junior and senior years in college. His son, Mr. Edward Waldo Emerson, has carefully compiled from his journals such a list, and it is a remarkable one for a boy of seventeen and eighteen years. We see that an early foundation for a literary life was hereby laid. Of poetry he read Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Theocritus, Lucretius, Virgil, Horace, Shakespeares, Honsont, Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger, Otway, Milton, Dryden, Cowper, Corneille, Racine, Pope, Scott (Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border) Lockhart's Spanish Ballads, The Excursion, Thalaba, Byron, Campbell, Lalla Rookh, and Bryant. Of philosophy and morals: the early Greek philosophers, Zenophon, Plato, and Socrates; Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius; the Zendavesta, the Novum Organum; Hobbes, Descartes, Cudworth, Locke, Shaftesbury, Hume, Priestley, Paley, Dugald Stewart, Reid, Price, Forsyth, and Bishop Hall; and the lectures of Edward Everett. Of history and biography: the Arthurian romances, DeJoinville's Chronicles, Mosheim, Gibbon, Burke, Sismondi, and MacLaurin's Life of Sir Isaac Newton. Of essays and general prose: the

Apocrypha, Montaigne, Chateaubriand, Swift, Sterne, Addison, Johnson (Lives of the Poets) Lamb, and the Reviews: the Edinburgh Review, Quarterly Review, and North American Review. Prose fiction: Guy Mannering, Old Mortality, and The Monastery.²¹

Doctor E. W. Emerson says in his Introduction to the Journals that the names of "Plutarch, Shakespeare, Milton, Montaigne, Jonson, Newton, Burke, Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth are quoted so often that we have in the lists, year by year, set down their recurring names to show his love for them."²²

It is noteworthy that the books mentioned in the several lists do not belong to a single class, nor to one literature. He eagerly read such translations as came his way. (He recommends reading translations throughout his discourse "Quotation and Originality").²³ In his early Journals, aside from the lists of books read, we find comments on specific books and authors;

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21 Journals, Vol. I, pp. 84-91.

22 Introduction to the Journals, Vol. I, pp. xviii-xix.

23 Vol. VIII. Works.

showing his appreciative, interpretative, or critical bent. A few citations will show his early tastes. His admiration for Scott has been referred to. On June 7th, 1820, he writes:

I have of late been reading patches of Barrow and Ben Jonson; and what the object, not curiosity? no, nor expectation of edification, intellectual or moral, but merely because they are authors where vigorous phrases and quaint, peculiar words and expressions may be sought and found.²⁴

And on August the 8th he writes:

I have been reading Novum Organum. Lord Bacon is indeed a wonderful writer; he condenses an unrivaled degree of matter in one paragraph. He never suffers himself to swerve from the direct forthright, or to babble or speak unguardedly on his proper topic, and withal writes with more melody and rich cadence than any writer (I had almost said of England) on a similar subject.²⁵

Here we see him in both cases educating himself in his own way, with a constant eye for style, apparently ignoring the subject matter. In November of the same year we find him admiring Milton not for his style but for the character and spirit of the man:

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24 Journals, Vol. I, pp. 24, 25 (age 17).

25 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 26.

What a grand man was Milton! So marked by nature for the great epic poet that was to bear up the name of these latter times. In 'Reason of Church Government urged against Prelaty', written while young, his spirit is already communing with itself and stretching out in its colössal proportions and yearning for the destiny he was appointed to fulfill.²⁶

Gibbon and Hume he read for the provocation of thought and inspiration:

If you read Gibbon and Hume, you have to think, and Gibbon wakes you up from your slumber to wish yourself a scholar and resolve to be one.²⁷

Emerson seems to have kept no journal for the last half of his senior year in college, 1821, but Dr.

E. W. Emerson, his son, informs us that:

He had graduated in the summer of 1821 number thirty in a class of fifty-nine. His actual scholarship in the required branches must have been much lower, but it must be remembered that any misconduct might remove a greater or less number of marks for recitations. Hence a boy of quiet disposition might stand in the end much higher than a brilliant but disorderly one. But Emerson, none the less, had, night and day been educating himself in his own way. He came just within the number of those to whom 'parts' at commencement were assigned, and in

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26. Journals, Vol. I, p. 71 (age 17) 1820.

27 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 290.

those days they were delivered. His was The Character of John Knox, in a colloquy on Knox, Penn, and Wesley, in which function he is said to have been rather negligent. (Emerson never admired Knox nor his philosophy.) He was class poet, a doubtful honor, as at least six had been asked before him and refused.²⁸

It was necessary for Emerson to begin teaching during his senior year in college to help defray his own and the family expenses. Advanced students of Harvard were permitted at that time to teach or tutor and to appear at the University only for the examinations:

His brother William, who graduated in 1818, was doing his best to maintain the family, and it became Waldo's duty to help, for the case was urgent. William, aged twenty-two, had recently opened a finishing school for young ladies, in Boston, at his mother's house, and now offered his brother, aged eighteen, the place of assistant. It was a trying place for a bashful boy, unused to girls, but he accepted.²⁹

After graduation he continued teaching in his brother William's school for young ladies. In all he taught three years, the first two as assistant and the last year as head master. His brother went to Germany to study divinity and left Waldo

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²⁸ Journals, Vol., I. pp. 96-97.

²⁹ Ibid., Vol. I., pp. 95, 96. (Also see Cabot's Memoirs pp. 69-72 and 86.)

the full responsibility of the finishing school. He was said to have been mild and gentle as a teacher, making an agreeable and lasting impression on the minds of his pupils, though teaching was not at all to his taste. In order to discipline his pupils, he often sent them to his mother's room to pursue their studies.

Emerson spoke years afterward (1865) at a gathering of his former pupils, of his want of skill in teaching and ascribed his deficiencies to his shyness and his lack of system. In this period he was learning and studying, reading and writing - developing. He regretted that he had not made better use of the opportunity the class room offered. To these ladies he expressed his shortcomings thus:

Now I have two regrets in regard to this school. The first is that my teaching was partial and external. I was at that time writing every night, in my chamber, my first thoughts on morals and the beautiful laws of compensation and of individual genius, which to observe and illustrate have given sweetness to many years of my life. I am afraid that no hint of this ever came into the school... Then I should have shown you the poems and works of imagination, I

delighted in; the single passages which have made some men immortal. The sharing of joy of this kind makes teaching a liberal and delicious art. What I wonder is that I did not read to you certain selections of Shakespeare and the poets.

The fact is that he had not liked school-teaching and had turned from it with relief as soon as he could; and yet it was significant that he had an ambition to be a professor of rhetoric. In his later journals he wrote:

Why has never the poorest college offered me a professorship of rhetoric?³⁰

His son writes in the introduction of Volume IX of his journals that:

From childhood he had practiced the art of writing and had been concerned about the means for perfecting himself in it. It was as natural for this boy to write as it was for another to play ball. His journals are sufficient proof of the persistence of this instinct. Always he thought about questions of style; his own and others' aims in expression; his own and their success and failure, and these thoughts he recorded.

In 1823 he began the study of theology, but did not enter the Harvard Theological School, though he attended many lectures there. A great influence at

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³⁰ Journals, Vol. IX, p. 413.

that time was Channing's conversation and preaching.

In 1823 he wrote in his journal:

I heard Doctor Channing deliver a discourse upon Revelation as standing in comparison with Nature. I have heard no sermon approaching in excellence to this; ... the language was a transparent medium, conveying with the utmost distinctness the pictures in his mind to the mind of the hearers. He considered God's word to be the only expounder of his works... Doctor Channing regarded Revelation as much a part of the order of things as any other event.³¹

G. W. Cooke says, "Emerson eagerly embraced the essential spirit of Channing's teaching."³² E. P. Peabody in his Reminiscences of Channing reveals to us the faith and religious theories of Doctor Channing. He tells us that Channing valued Christianity for what it had in common with reason and nature and he thought man received knowledge of the "Absolute" through his reason. In this belief he was largely in sympathy with Wordsworth and Coleridge, to whom Peabody thinks Channing was greatly indebted. Channing believed that we know God only by those moral laws we find in ourselves, because we are of like nature with Him. He saw in the "Cosmic" forces of nature unconscious manifestations of the divine mind.³³

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31 Journals, Vol. I., p. 270 (age 20).

32 Life of Emerson, by G. W. Cooke, p. 23.

33. Reminiscences of William E. Channing, by E. P. Peabody.

Mr. Cooke tells us that because of too close study, Emerson's eyes failed him at this time; and he was unable to take notes on the lectures. He was consequently excused from examination.³⁴ Of this fact Emerson later said, "If they had examined me, they probably would not have let me preach at all." Mr. Cooke thinks that this remark refers to doubts he had even at this time, not doubts as to the substance of religion but concerning the form. In 1826 he was ordained to preach, but on account of poor health he was obliged to spend the following winter in Florida and South Carolina. He preached in Charleston and other places several times during his stay in the South. His health improved, and he returned in the spring of 1827. On the eleventh of January, 1829, he received an invitation from the Second Church of Boston to become an assistant of Rev. Henry Ware. In the summer of this same year he was married to Ellen Tucker, who lived but one and one-half years after their marriage. Because of ill health Reverend Mr. Ware soon resigned and left the full responsibility of the preaching and

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34 Life of Emerson, by G. W. Cooke, p. 24.

the pastoral work to the younger man. Emerson's preaching is said to have been eloquent, simple, and effective. Sanborn gives these incidents of his ministerial experience:

His pulpit eloquence was singularly attractive, though by no means so to all persons. In 1829, before the two friends had met, Bronson Alcott heard him preach in Doctor Channing's Church on 'The Universality of Moral Sentiment', and was struck, he said, with the youth of the preacher, the beauty of his elocution, and the direct and sincere manner in which he addressed his hearers.³⁵

During his ministry he seems to have written nothing on literary themes except a short notice of a new collection of hymns printed in The Christian Examiner of 1831. In this notice he praises the Hebrew Psalms for the greatest perfection to which religious poetry has yet been carried:

Though everything seemed to indicate that Emerson would lead a useful and successful career in the pulpit, yet in the autumn of 1832 he resigned his place and gradually withdrew from his ministerial labors. The cause which led to this action may be found in his adoption of an ideal philosophy and a purely spiritual interpretation of religion. The

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immediate cause was his disinclination to conduct the usual 'communion service.'³⁶

After his resignation his health broke down, and in December he was advised to rest. A desire to see a few men, whose works he had read, namely, Coleridge, Landor, Wordsworth, and chiefly Carlyle, led him across the sea. From Rome he writes to his Aunt Mary:

Did they tell you that I went away from home, a wasted, peevish invalid? Well, I have been mending ever since, and now am in better health than I remember to have enjoyed since I was in college. How should one be sick in Rome?

He also wrote an affectionate letter to his former congregation, which shows that he had abandoned none of the essential ideas of his former faith.³⁷

In Florence, he met Greenough, who secured him an invitation to visit Landor, and he was greatly interested by this unique and independent personality. The impressions made upon the visitor ^{and} published many years later in English Traits did not please Landor. Forster gives Landor's corrections.³⁸ In England Emerson visited Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Carlyle. This visit to Carlyle was the beginning of

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³⁶ Life of R. W. Emerson, by G. W. Cooke, pp. 30-31.

³⁷ This letter and the parting sermon are printed in full in Frothingham's History of New England's Transcendentalism.

³⁸ Walter Savage Landor; by John Forster, Vol. II, pp. 473-4.

a lifetime friendship. Emerson preached a few times in London and elsewhere during his brief stay in England. After an absence of several months, he returned to Boston, fully restored in health. He gave several lectures during the winter. Not long after his return from Europe he began preaching in the Unitarian Church in New Bedford, and remained there for several months. In 1834 he received a call to become the pastor, but he declined. In the summer of 1834 he went to Concord and settled in the "Old Manse", where he founded his home. "I am a poet by nature" he said at this time, "and therefore must live in the country." According to one of his biographers:

In February, 1835 he began a course of biographical lectures in Boston. The first was an introductory one, on the advantages of biography; and it was followed by others on Luther, Milton, Burke, Michael Angelo, and George Fox. In September of this year he married Lydia Jackson. His mother soon became a member of his household, and remained with him until her death in 1853.³⁹

In Concord he wrote his most famous essays, and from there he went out on lecturing tours and

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39 Life, by G. W. Cooke, pp. 37, 38.

gradually substituted the lecture platform for the pulpit. He lectured in New England, the South, and the West. In 1847 he lectured in England and made his second visit to Carlyle. While abroad on this trip he met such literary celebrities as DeQuincey, Macaulay, Thackeray, Tennyson, and Leigh Hunt. Emerson published anonymously in 1836 his first important essay, "Nature", in which he sets forth his idealistic philosophy. In 1842 he became editor of the Dial, a periodical published quarterly, an organ designed to meet the needs of the New England Transcendentalists. He also took part in founding the Atlantic Monthly in 1857, and contributed freely to both magazines. He was also a charter member of the Saturday Club, which included Hawthorne, Motley, Dana, Lowell, Whipple, Agassiz, Holmes, and Longfellow. Stimulated by such companionship, he desired more and more to be a writer of worth, though ever doubtful of his fitness. In a letter to Carlyle, May 10, 1838 he wrote:

Here I sit and read and write, with very little system, and as far as regards composition, with the most

fragmentary result: paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle.

By such means did Emerson climb to his place as a man of letters.

Having thus traced his fortunes to his permanent home in Concord, we shall next inquire concerning the effects of his reading. One's intimate friends and the books he reads are very likely to influence one; these close companions, at least, help to indicate to others his character and personality. Emerson's manner of reading was peculiarly his own. He sought in books the thoughts that he already entertained, or he sought concrete illustrations of such thoughts, or he sought a stimulus for work.

After his return from his first visit to Europe (1833), Emerson complied with the urgent request of his new friend, Carlyle, to make a great effort to read the whole of Goethe in the original German. Fifty-five little volumes of the complete works of Goethe formed a part of Emerson's library at Concord. In 1840 he was able to write Carlyle that he had "contrived to read almost every volume."⁴⁰

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40 Works, Vol. IV, p. 370.

Without doubt, in the German works of Goethe Emerson came upon many illustrations of his own ideas. He wrote in his journal, in 1844:

It is delightful to find our own thoughts in so great a man.⁴¹

Though the two differed in many respects, they were both individualists. The main resemblances between them ceased at this point. Goethe sought universal knowledge as a means to culture. Emerson believed the foundation of culture as of character to be the moral sentiment. Although Emerson recognized Goethe's great literary attainments there was always a qualification in the New Englander's admiration which may be summed up in his own words,

Goethe, the surpassing intellect of modern times, apprehends the spiritual, but is not spiritual.⁴²

On the other hand, Goethe's romantic spirit is foreign to the mature Emerson. His concreteness of illustration differs from Emerson's tendency to abstractions.

Emerson was more intimate with Carlyle than he was with Goethe. Although they met only three times, their correspondence was abundant, and their regard

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41 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 377.

42 Works, Vol. XII, p. 45.

one for the other never failed. In spite of their strong differences in temperament and rearing both believed firmly in the spiritual side of life and the supreme reality of spiritual things. The journals do not show that Emerson became acquainted with Carlyle's work before 1830. In that year we find a statement concerning Carlyle's translation of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister.⁴³ The next we read of Carlyle is in October, 1832. The reference is to "Corn-Law Rhymes," in which Carlyle expresses his determination to give up all effort to write verse and to devote himself to a development of a style best suited to express his inner nature. It is this determination of Carlyle to stand on his own feet that caught Emerson's attention though he did not know the author of the article at the time. He says,

I am cheered and instructed by this paper on Corn-Law Rhymes in the Edinburgh by my Germanick new-light writer, whoever he is. He gives us confidence in our own principles. He assures the truth-lover everywhere of sympathy. Blessed art that makes books, and so joins me to that stranger by this perfect railroad.⁴⁴

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43 Journals, Vol. II, pp. 329-30.

44 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 515.

In "Corn-Law Rhymes", Emerson caught the spirit of the man he met the following year. Although Emerson read and re-read Sartor Resartus, he did not care for Carlyle's method of presenting the philosophy that formed the background of the German romantic movement. In a letter to his friend, Emerson assails the form of Sartor Resartus, but at the same time he is sensitive to its spiritual value. In May, 1834 he writes to Carlyle:

Some chance wind of Fate blew your name to me, perhaps two years ago, as the author of papers which I had already distinguished (as indeed it was easy to do) from the mass of English periodical criticism as by far the most original or profound essays of the day and the works of a man of faith as well as learned, and who belonging to the despairing and deriding class of philosophers, was not ashamed to hope and to speak sincerely. In Liverpool I wrote to Mr. Fraser to send me his magazine, and I have now received four numbers of the Sartor Resartus, for whose light, thanks evermore. I am glad that one living scholar is self-centered and will be true to himself, who as Montaigne says 'puts his ear close to himself, and holds his breath and listens'... Evermore thanks for the brave stand you have made for spiritualism in these writings... I delight in the contents... the form, which my defective apprehension for a joke makes me not appreciate, I leave

to your merry discretion... Can it be that this humor proceeds from a despair of finding a contemporary audience, and so the prophet feels at liberty to write his message in droll sounds?... At least in some of your prefaces you should give us the theory of your rhetoric. I comprehend not why you should lavish in that spendthrift style of yours, celestial truths. Bacon and Plato have something too solid to say than that they can afford to be humorists. You are dispensing that which is the rarest, namely the simplest truths - truths which lie next to consciousness and which only the Platos and Goethes perceive.⁴⁵

Thus we see that even though he did not admire Carlyle's style in Sartor, he did not lose sight of the worth of the man he had learned to admire and love. Though Carlyle could draw Emerson out and inspire him, there was more than one subject upon which they disagreed - Plato, Democracy, Bacon, Unitarianism. In his journals, however, Emerson leaves no doubt as to his attitude toward Carlyle's work as a whole:

Carlyle's talent, I think, lies more in his beautiful criticism, in seizing the idea of the man or the time than in original speculation.⁴⁶

Emerson was ever looking for a final book from Carlyle that never came. And Carlyle was ever urging Emerson

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45 Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson, Vol. I, p. 14.

46 Journals, Vol. III, p. 573.

to come down to earth and to leave "Transcendental
"Moonshine." In his Introduction to the Journals
Emerson's son says:

Always the friend across the sea
remains a planet in his heaven,
though sometimes with smoky and
lurid light.⁴⁷

Emerson and Carlyle recognized the universe
as full of symbols. Both looked upon history as
principally the personality and deeds of individual
leaders.⁴⁸ Both say that the author in borrowing
may transform his material, and so be in effect crea-
tive. Both trusted the poet to find his own ex-
pression; he need not imitate the rhythmbeats of
conventional versification; if he be inspired, his
subject will find suitable music.

It is sometimes maintained that much of
Emerson's idealism came to him through Coleridge and
Wordsworth. The Journals of 1826 give an extensive
criticism of the effort of Wordsworth and Coleridge
to produce a new type of poetry in the Lyrical Ballads.
Those were the days when Emerson was reading and ad-
miring Plato, Homer, Sophocles, Bacon, Shakespeare,

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47 Journals, Vol. I, p. xiii.

48 Sartor, p. 161; cf. Emerson on History, Works, Vol.
X, p. 323.

Milton, and Pope. Emerson was a Platonist. He says that the only thing that he likes about Wordsworth's poetry is the Platonism of the "Ode".⁴⁹ Emerson never overcame his dislike for Coleridge's poetry, but liked and accepted his criticism. It was after reading The Friend by Coleridge that Emerson was able to appreciate Wordsworth. During the years 1834-35 Emerson accepted Wordsworth as the greatest poet since Milton. In English Traits he writes:

The exceptional fact of the period is the genius of Wordsworth. He had no master but nature and solitude.⁵⁰

Later in the Dial he notes:

It was a brighter day than we have often known in our literary calendar when a London advertisement announced a new volume of poems by Wordsworth... Wordsworth's nature or character has had all the time it needed in order to make its mark and supply the want of talent. We have learned how to read him.⁵¹

Commenting upon Coleridge's treatment of the distinction between the imagination and the fancy, Emerson gave his conception of the distinction thus:

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49 Journals, Vol. II, p. 331.

50 English Traits, "Literature", p. 243.

51 Natural History of Intellect, "The Dial", Vol. III, p. 511.

The distinction of fancy and imagination seems to me a distinction in kind. The Fancy aggregates; the imagination animates. The Fancy takes the world as it stands and selects pleasing groups by apparent relations. The imagination is Vision, regards the world symbolically, and pierces the emblems for the real sense; sees all external objects as types.⁵²

At the age of twenty-one, five years before he read Coleridge's Friend, in which the critic distinguishes between the understanding and the reason, he estimates his fitness for the ministry in a manner which shows he understands the distinction between the terms:

I have or had, a strong imagination, and consequently a keen relish for the beauties of poetry... My reasoning faculty is proportionally weak, nor can I ever hope to write a Butler's Analogy or an essay of Hume. Nor is it strange that with this confession I should choose theology, which is from everlasting to everlasting 'debatable ground.' For, the highest species of reasoning upon divine subjects is rather the fruit of a sort of moral imagination, that of 'Reasoning Machines', such as Locke and Clarke and David Hume. Dr. Channing's Dudleiam Lecture is the model of what I mean, and the faculty which produced this is akin to the higher flights of

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52 Journals: Vol. III, p. 540. Cf. Coleridge's Biographia Literaria.

the fancy. I may add that the preaching most in vogue at the present day depends chiefly on imagination for its success, and asks these accomplishments which I believe are most within my grasp.⁵³

John S. Harrison thinks that Greek thought has been the most important factor in Emerson's development intellectually. In English Traits Emerson said that:

The influence of Plato tinges the British genius. Their minds loved analogy; ... Britain had many disciples of Plato; - More, Bacon, Sidney, Lord Brooke, Herbert, Browne, Donne, Spenser, Chapman, Crashaw, Norris, Cudworth, Berkeley, Jeremy Taylor. Locke is as surely the influx of decomposition and of prose as Bacon and the Platonists of growth. The Platonic is the poetic tendency. The so-called scientific is the negative and poisonous. It is certain that Spenser, Burns, Byron, and Wordsworth will be Platonists and the dull men will be Lockists.⁵⁴

Another great influence that we note throughout his journals is that of Montaigne. Emerson tells us:

In Roxbury, in 1825, I read Cotton's translation of Montaigne. It seems to me as if I had written the book myself in some former life, so sincerely it spoke my thought and experience. No book before or since was ever so much to me as that.⁵⁵

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53 Journals, Vol. I, p. 381.

54 English Traits, pp. 238-239.

55 Journals, Vol. VI, pp. 372-3.

His early hero, Bacon, gave place in a certain measure to Montaigne. Both were independent thinkers, but Montaigne's essays were much more personal. Montaigne is more than an example of style to Emerson. In 1834 he writes in his journal:

Glad to read in my old gossip
Montaigne some robust rules of
rhetoric: I will have a chapter
thereon in my book.⁵⁶

Thus Bacon and later Montaigne, the earliest of modern essayists, each had his share in influencing Emerson.

A contribution to Emerson's conception of the symbol may have come from Jeffrey's review of "Alison on Taste" found in the Edinburgh Review, Volume III, 1811. Emerson noted in 1823 that the review "gives an excellent and condensed view of Allison's theory."⁵⁷ Saintsbury classifies Alison and Jeffrey not as Neo-Classics but as esthetics upholding a philosophical theory of beauty not limited to any kind of art.⁵⁸ They believed that beauty in poetry is produced by associating ideas with the objects of outer nature. That Emerson accepted their philosophy as identical with his own, or appreciated the similarity is shown

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56 Journals, Vol. III, p. 272.

57 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 293.

58. History of English Criticism, by George Saintsbury, p.399.

in a paragraph of the journals in 1832:

A strange poem is Zoroastrism. It is a system and harmonious and sublime as Swedenborgianism - consequently one would be glad to behold the truth which they all shadow forth. For it cannot but be truth that typify and symbolize. ...One sees in this, and in them all, the element of poetry according to Jeffrey's true theory, the effect produced by making everything outward only a sign of something inward: Plato's forms or ideas which seem tantamount to the Ferouers of Zoroaster.⁵⁹

The poetry and philosophy of the Orient were nearly as influential upon Emerson as were the works and philosophy of Plato. He once wrote:

I think the Hindu books the best gymnastics for the mind.⁶⁰

A few pages further in the same volume he writes:

Our best definition of poetry is one of the oldest sentences, and claims to come down to us from the Chaldaean Zoroaster, who wrote it thus: Poets are standing transporters, whose employment consists in speaking to the father and to matter; in producing apparent imitations of unapparent natures.⁶¹

It is not the purpose of this study to investigate minutely the vast field from which Emerson obtained

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59 Journals, Vol. II, pp. 473-4.

60 Letters and Social Aims, "Poetry" Vol. VIII, p. 15.

61 Ibid., p. 19 .

the ideas on which he based his theories of criticism.

In his essay on intellect, he writes:

Every man's progress is through a succession of teachers each of whom seems at the time to have a superlative influence, but at last gives place to a new.⁶²

In another place he gives specific credit to the influence of his European contemporaries:

Like most young men at that time [1833] I was much indebted to the men of Edinburgh and to the Edinburgh Review, to Jeffrey, Mackintosh, Hallam and to Scott, Playfair and DeQuincey; and my desultory reading had inspired the wish to see the faces of three or four writers, - Coleridge, Wordsworth, Landor, DeQuincey and the latest and strongest contributor to the critical journals, Carlyle; - if Goethe had been still living I might have wandered into Germany also.⁶³

His purpose in keeping his literary diary or commonplace book, as he called it, was simply that of gaining practice in writing and of collecting from other writers passages pleasing to him because of the subject matter or the manner of expression. Gradually added to this purpose was the desire of accumulating the wisdom of his times through quotations and original presentations of current ideas. This habit of collecting other men's sayings, proverbs, and maxims gave place to a desire to be self-reliant, and he began in his journals what he called

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62. Works, Vol. II, p.343.

63. English Traits, p.8.

his "Savings Bank",⁶⁴ where he wrote original ideas or inspired thoughts for future use in his lectures, essays, etc. Emerson's withdrawal from the church, and his trip to Europe and accompanying disappointment in the men of whom he had expected much, also brought about in him a more independent spirit. In 1838 he is fully conscious of the definite stylistic qualities he favored. This is evident in his comment on books of that year:

It seems meritorious to read:
but from everything but history
or the works of the old commanding
writers I come back with a con-
viction that the slightest
wood-thought, the least signifi-
cant native emotion of my own
is more to me.⁶⁵

He sought in books the thoughts he already entertained. He preferred poets to prose writers, but he called Swedenborg and Plato poets. We find from the citations made that Emerson came to much of his philosophical idealism chiefly through Coleridge, Goethe, and Carlyle; he drew his symbolism from Swedenborg and his other qualities of style from the Greeks and the writers of the far East. He liked best the books that inspired him to work and to a higher order of living, and these ideals formed the basis for his criticism.

Yet it is hard to say what influence such authors

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64. Journals, vol. III, p. 246.

65. Journals, Oct. 5, 1838; Heart of Emerson's Journals, by Bliss Perry, p. 136.

as the foregoing had upon one who read to discover in an author his own ideas. He read diligently and did not hesitate to use what kindred matter he found. He was discriminating, rejecting as well as accepting, and, despite all the influences that played upon him, he was an independent thinker, an individualist who preserved his own point of view and directed each man to listen to the best part of himself.

Therefore in concluding the chapter on influences underlying Emerson's criticism, embracing his ancestry, environment, education, travel and reading, it is important to look briefly into the character and temperament of the man himself. Every quality which made Emerson a great man contributes to the interest and value of his criticism.

Mr. Gay, in his study of Emerson, the Poet as Seer, affirms that "Emerson's view of the world is the fruit of a special temperament."⁶⁶

A favorite name often given Emerson, is "the seer", and this title suggests the quality of his mind which perceived truth as well as reflected upon it. Insight is perhaps the leading characteristic of his mind. Insight, expressing itself in generalizations, and a determination to see both sides of the case, is a mark of Emerson's intellectual approach to his subject.

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66. Emerson, A Study of the Poet as Seer, by R.M. Gay, Introduction, p.4.

Emerson was an optimist, and his hopeful attitude was carried into his criticism. Stedman tells us that:

As a critic he was ever expectant,
on the lookout for something good
and new, and sometimes found the
one good thing in a man or work
and valued it unduly.⁶⁷

Another instance of his optimism and hopeful anticipation is found in a letter to Sterling revealing his strong desire for the ability to write poetry:

I am naturally keenly susceptible
of the pleasure of rhythm, and
cannot believe but that one day -
I ask not where or when - I shall
attain to the speech of this
splendid dialect, so ardent is my
wish; and these wishes, I suppose,
are ever only the buds of power;
but up to this hour I have never had
a true success in such attempts.
My joy in any other man's success
is unmixed. I wish you may proceed
to the grandest melodies whereof
your heart has dreamed.⁶⁸

Thus we decide that he is not only a product of the external influences exerted upon him, but is inherently a man of intuition and insight.

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67. Poets of America, by E.C. Stedman, p.175.

68. "Letters from Emerson to Sterling", May 29, 1840.

CHAPTER II.

EMERSON'S CRITICISM OF POETS AND POETRY.

In our review of Emerson's life and the many influences brought to bear upon him, especially in regard to his entering the field of literature, we have found that his environment, education, and early struggles against poverty and ill health combined to develop a nature scarcely equalled in nineteenth century America for intellectual strength and moral fervor. We have seen that wide and appreciative reading was one of Emerson's first qualifications for his critical work. And from childhood he had been concerned about making himself perfect in the art of writing. He was, as he often chose to call himself, an idealist, or "a man thinking." Other qualities which had their effect upon his criticism were his independence of spirit, and his enthusiastic delight in literature. In temperament he was cheerful concerning his own day, and hopeful in regard to the literary future, and these traits must be taken into account in considering his critical writings.

The message that he learned from literature and philosophy he communicated in the form of philosophical criticism of literature. There have, perhaps, been few other authors who have had more definite things to say about literary expression. He dealt with the living process of writing in which he was engaged every day. He could write and he knew his subject thoroughly. He always thought about questions of style, of expression, of the success and failure of himself, and of others, and those thoughts he carefully recorded. He has not concealed the secret of his mind. His ideas were mostly abstract, for he was concerned with poetical principles and the philosophy of composition. His theories as has been shown were derived, perhaps, from many sources; yet as has already been said, he read to discover in his authors his own ideas. It is the purpose of this chapter to note the literary doctrine found in his essays and journals, and in two poems on the poet and his art, Merlin and Saadi, (both other names for himself), and their application to his judgments of poets and poetry.

Behind the literary judgments of Emerson lies a definite conception of literature. In art as in life

the moral is inseparable from the beautiful. The critic must judge the work of a writer in terms of universal principles as they are revealed and found written in the heart of man. Emerson evinces insight as applying perception below the surface, into the nature of the thing. The following passage may be taken as suggesting Emerson's mental attitude, and its result:

A man cannot utter two or three sentences without disclosing to intelligent ears precisely where he stands in life and thought, namely, whether in the kingdom of the senses to the understanding, or in that of ideas and imagination, in the realm of intuitions and duty. People seem not to see that their opinion of the world is also a confession of character.¹

Doctor O. W. Holmes says that Mr. Emerson's especial gift is insight:

He saw the germ through its envelop; the particular in the light of the universal; the fact in connection with the principle; the phenomenon as related to the law; all this not by the slow and sure process of science, but by the sudden, and searching flashes of imaginative double vision. He had neither the patience nor the method of the inductive reasoner... Mr. Emerson was eminently

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¹ Works, Vol. VI, p. 224.

sane for an idealist. He carried the same sagacity into the ideal world that Franklin showed in the affairs of common life.²

Naturally enough, the result of insight into the nature of a thing expresses itself in generalization.

In Emerson's words:

Whenever the mind takes a step, it is to put itself at one with a larger class, discerned beyond the lesser class with which it has been conversant.³

Emerson expresses himself largely in terms of higher generalizations, using concrete cases mainly as illustrations of principles.

Thus we see that Emerson trusted the immediate perception, and had as great a distaste for reflection as he had for mathematics or argumentation; nevertheless, his belief in a compensatory fact for every fact, led him to make, when it was possible, a statement on the other side, in compensation for a strong expression of what he at first perceived. From reading his essay entitled "Compensation", we find he was very wary of what might seem any bias of mind, or prejudice. He tried to be as impartial as a pair of scales, that would

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2 Note by E. W. Emerson, Vol. VIII, p. 362.

3 Works, Vol. V, p. 239.

show at once the presence of a weight on either side. The concluding thoughts of the essays on Napoleon and on Shakespeare show this balancing habit of mind.⁴ The tendency to balance is in line with Emerson's dislike for laughter and pathos. He abhorred loud humor, though he was capable of excusing it.⁵ In Emerson in Concord examples are given to show that he had a sense of humor. He was not of those persons of whom he said:

They are past the help of surgeon
or clergy. But even these can under-
stand pitchforks and the cry of Fire!
And I have noticed in some of this
class a marked dislike of earthquakes.⁶

His son tells that he dreaded having a company captured by laughter, so likely to be unbecoming and to pass into the unseemly or uproarious, but that he favored the sort of wit into which human sympathy and kindness enter as a saving sense of humor.⁷ It is never joined with pathos. He also shunned the dismal or mournful in literature.

The faculty of insight, expressing itself in generalizations, with a purpose to see both sides of
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4 Representative Men, Vol. IV.

5 Works Vol. V, "The Comic" pp. 162, 163.

6 Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 140.

7 Ibid., Vol. VIII, notes pp. 375, 376.

the case, and a sympathetic, though real humor, are some of the characteristic marks of Emerson's intellectual approach to the subject of his criticism.

Let us turn now to his more formal ideas of style. He wishes the language of his author to be as simple as the subject will permit. He considers it a proof of high culture to say the greatest matters in the simplest way:

"To clothe the fiery thought
In simple words succeeds,
For still the craft of genius is
To ~~mask~~ a king in weeds."⁸

He believes that as the writer rises in thought, he descends in language:

Every one has felt how superior in force is the language of the street to that^{the} of the academy. ... Ought not the scholar to be able to convey his meaning in terms as short and strong as the porter or truckman uses to convey his? ... The speech of the man in the street is invariably strong, ... and I believe it to be true that when any orator at the bar rises in his thought... he descends in his language.⁹

Perfection of style, according to Emerson, is attained by the writer who knows and employs the relation between the earthly and the spiritual. Emerson says,

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⁸ Works, Vol. VI, p. 294, and note.

⁹ Works, Vol. VIII, pp. 124, 125.

Art expresses the one or the same by the different. Thought seeks to know unity in unity; poetry to show it by variety; that is, always by an object or symbol.¹⁰

The symbol is preeminent in Emerson's theory of expression. It is the idealist's chief means of communication; it is the inevitable constituent of poetry, - the highest product of the Reason, and the Imagination. He believes an author should unite the actual with the ideal. These are general requirements. Specifically he insists on adequacy. He demands the right word and the right symbol in the right place. He believes the writer's principal power is the effective use of figures of speech. Imagination is the power to symbolize. The man of genius makes powerful use of the symbol.

Idealism regards the world as symbolic, and all these symbols or forms as fugitive and convertible expressions. The power of the poet is in controlling these symbols; in using every fact in a fluent symbol, and in measuring his strength by the facility with which he makes the mood of mind give its color to things.

Poetry, by Emerson, is differentiated from prose by the fact that prose may be the expression of the actual, poetry must be the expression of the ideal; and being ideal, it is, according to the foregoing

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¹⁰ Works, Nature, etc.: "The Transcendentalist," p. 330.

quotation, symbolic. How poetry is distinguished from prose and akin with the Reason, the symbol, and idealism in general is sufficiently indicated in these sentences from the Journals:

Poetry preceded prose, as the form of sustained thought, as Reason, whose vehicle poetry is, precedes the Understanding. When you assume the rhythm of verse and the analogy of Nature, it is making proclamation, "I am now freed from the trammels of the Apparent; I speak from the Mind!"¹¹

Thus the sacred character of the symbol, the material expression of divine truth, causes it to pervade all literature. Not only does Nature serve man as a means of embodying abstract truth; it is also God's language. Emerson believes the inspirational effect of the symbol is most powerful by virtue of the fact that it is itself inspired.

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. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world.¹²

By getting close to Nature, Emerson thought, one approached divinity, since Nature is an outer form of the

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11 Journals, Vol. III, p. 492.

12 Nature, etc.: "Language", pp. 34, 35.

spirit. He wrote:

The Poet should walk in the fields, drawn on by new scenes, supplied with vivid pictures and thoughts, until insensibly the recollection of his home was crowded out of his mind, and all memory obliterated, and he was led in triumph by Nature. When he spoke of the stars he should be innocent of what he said; for it seemed that the stars, as they rolled over him, mirrored themselves in his mind as in a deep well, and it was their image and not his thought that you saw.¹³

The close kinship between Nature and style inculcated by country life is impossible for the man whose character has been warped from native simplicity. The writer removed from direct contact with Nature by artificial social conditions must express himself falsely and weakly, for the truest language, the figurative, is for him, borrowed finery, false ornamentation, rather than symbols that tell the truth by being a part of the fact which they describe. Emerson declares:

Hundreds of writers may be found in every long-civilized nation who for a short time believe and make others believe that they see and utter truths, who do not of themselves clothe one thought in its natural garment, but who feed unconsciously on the language created by the primary writers of the country, those, namely, who hold primarily on Nature...¹⁴

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13 Journals, Vol. V, pp. 513-4.

14 Nature, etc.; "Language", p. 30.

Pope and his school wrote poetry
fit to put around frosted cake.¹⁵

In the symbol Emerson found a means of judging
depth of mentality.

An index or mercury of intellectual
proficiency is the perception of
identity.¹⁶

Since the figures of speech dependent on Nature
convince the reader of their high origin and thus of their
truth, the symbol is of great value. Emerson said that
the evidence of one symbol in a work was enough to indi-
cate the author to be a genius. Thus Donne's

'That one would almost say
her body thought.'¹⁷

The writer must express himself concretely and
ideally at the same time, since through objects or facts
is the only method by which the ideal may be revealed.
Though the poet is endowed with the divine spirit, he is
also humanly intelligible.

The poet, like the electric rod,
must reach from a point nearer the sky
than all surrounding objects, down to
the earth, and into the dark, wet
soil, or neither is of use. The poet
must not only converse with pure thought,
but he must demonstrate it almost to
the senses. His words must be pictures,
his verses must be spheres and cubes, to
be seen and smelled and handled. His
fable must be a good story, and its meaning

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15 English Traits: Literature, p. 255.

16 Essays, Vol. I: Intellect, p. 340.

17 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 46.

must hold as pure truth. In the debates on the Copyright Bill, in the English Parliament, Mr. Sargeant Wakley, the Coroner; quoted Wordsworth's poetry in derision, and asked the roaring House of Commons what that meant, and whether a man should have public reward for writing such stuff. Homer, Horace, Milton, and Chaucer would defy the Coroner. Whilst they have wisdom to the wise, he would see that to the external they have external meaning. Coleridge excellently said of poetry, that poetry must first be good sense; as a palace might well be magnificent, but first it must be a house.¹⁸

So close is this relation in the work of the great artists that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate intuition and expression. The word and thought cannot be severed in the supreme poem. But in the inferior poem there is an awkward or conventional note. Emerson demands the right word. He is rigorous enough to say:

No man can write well who thinks there is any choice of words for him. The laws of composition are as strict as those of sculpture and architecture. There is always one line that ought to be drawn, or one proportion that should be kept, and every other line or proportion is wrong, and so far wrong as it deviates from this. So in writing there is always a right word, and every other than that is wrong.¹⁹

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18 Natural History of Intellect, pp. 366-7.

19 Journals, Vol. II, p. 401.

Emerson admires accurate expression wherever he finds it: he calls it "the most precious of beauty."²⁰ He praises Shakespeare for that quality:

One would say Shakespeare must have been a thousand years old when he wrote his first piece, so thoroughly is his thought familiar to him, so solidly worded, as if it were already a proverb, and not only hereafter to become one. Shakespeare is nothing but a large utterance... A wonderful symbolizer and expressor, who has no rival in all ages.²¹

He lauds Milton's fluent precision almost as highly:

Milton's mind seems to have no thought or emotion which refused to be recorded. His mastery of his native tongue was more than to use it as well as any other: he cast it into new forms. He uttered in it things unheard before. Not imitating, but rivalling Shakespeare, he scattered in tones of prolonged and delicate melody, his pastoral and romantic fancies; then soaring into unattempted strains, he made it capable of an unknown majesty, and bent it to express every trait of beauty, every shade of thought; and searched the kennels and jokes as well as the palaces of sound for the harsh discords and his polemic wrath.²²

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20. Journals, Vol. X, p. 229.

21 Natural History of Intellect: Art and Criticism, p. 294.

22 Natural History of Intellect: Milton, pp. 260-1.

This cherishing of the ideal expression, or as he sometimes called it, quantitative beauty, does not in Emerson's theory, exclude qualitative beauty - the love of truth or the actual. It is not enough that the poet should receive impressions and deliver them; he should question the authority of his ideas, whether inferior or superior, as his reader will likewise do. In the criticism of art we are to consider, then, not only exterior excellence, the virtue of development, but also, and even more, interior excellence or the virtue of reality. The beauty of a work of art exists in both, and is supreme when there is a union of perfect quality and quantity. Or, in other words,

The problem of the poet is to
unite freedom with precision;
to give the pleasure of color,
and be not less the most powerful
of sculptors.²³

Here resides the strength of Dante and of Shakespeare.

Dante was free imagination, - all wings, - yet he wrote like Euclid...²⁴
Dante's imagination is the nearest to hands and feet that we have seen. He clasps the thought as if it were

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23 Letters, etc.: Poetry and Imagination, p. 72.

24 Ibid.

a tree or a stone and describes as mathematically. I once found Page, the painter, modelling his figures in clay, Ruth and Naomi, before he painted them on canvas. Dante, one would say, did the same thing before he wrote the verses.²⁵

Art imitates Nature, and by helping her to speak her message, the poet attains his highest triumphs. According to Emerson, Art is real. He desired realism as much as a realist does today, but he did not deny reality to the ideal. His view differed, however, from modern realism in that he held the best to be the most real - men as they ought to be, and as some are. Shakespeare, the ideal dramatist, makes his characters and their speeches lifelike as if they were possible human beings:

The force of representation so plants his figures before him that he treats them as real; talks to them as if they were bodily there; puts words in their mouth such as they would have spoken, and is affected by them as by persons... The humor of Falstaff, the terror of Macbeth, have each their swarm of fit thoughts and images, as if Shakespeare had known and reported the men, instead of inventing them at his desk.²⁶

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25 Natural History of Intellect, p. 49.

26 Natural History of Intellect: Powers and Laws of Thought, p. 49.

Writing which is inspired, is nearer the truth than mere reflections of other men's inspiration. Emerson classifies literature as primary or secondary. Primary literature includes all the sacred books or bibles of the world; all writing in which the spiritual and the symbolic are combined without reference to similar literature in the past.

The old Psalms and Gospels are mighty as ever; showing that what people call religion is literature; that is to say, - here was one who knew how to put his statement, and it stands forever, and people feel its truth, as he did, and say, Thus said the Lord, whilst it is only that he had the true literary genius, which they fancy they despise.²⁷

Primary literature includes also Dante's Vita Nuova, which, Emerson says,

reads like the book of Genesis, as if written before literature, whilst truth yet existed... It is the Bible of Love.²⁸

On the other hand, such a writer as Shelley, though his ideas are idealistic, is not independently and at the present time conscious of these ideas; he writes secondarily. It seems surprising to many, with such

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27 Journals, Vol. IX, p. 345.

28 Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 418.

congeniality of belief there should not have been more sympathy with Shelley on Emerson's part. However, Emerson explains his judgment by saying:

Shelley is never a poet. His mind is uniformly imitative; all his poems composite. A fine English scholar he is, with taste, ear and memory; but imagination, the original, authentic fire of the bard, he had not. He is clearly modern, and shares with Wordsworth, and Coleridge, Byron, and Keats, the feeling of the Infinite, which so labors for expression in their different genius. But all his lines are arbitrary, not necessary, and therefore, though evidently a devout and brave man, I can never read his verses.²⁹

Imitation is to be avoided, but there are some words which we should not wish to do without, though they have been used for ages. Such words are philosophical or sacred in meaning: they are the expressions of the common sense of mankind regarding its knowledge of the Infinite. Emerson is fond of Coleridge's statement, "Language thinks for us."³⁰ He thinks that the most common words may be packed with the philosophical and religious wisdom of the centuries and that these are tools provided by the Genius of Humanity.³¹

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29 Journals, Vol. V, p. 344.

30 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 123.

31 Ibid., Vol. XIII, p. 17.

For the same reason as he respects single words, Emerson holds proverbs in high esteem. He says great passages from such masters of literature as Shakespeare, because of their wise precision and universality are

Pulverized into proverbs, and dispersed into human discourse.³²

Emerson, from early manhood desired to be a teacher of rhetoric in some college. In one of his Journals he writes:

If I were professor of Rhetoric, - teacher of the art of writing well to young men, - I should use Dante for my text-book. Come hither, youth, and learn how the brook that flows at the bottom of your garden, or the farmer who ploughs the adjacent field, your father and mother, your debts and credits, and your web of habits are the very best basis of poetry, and the material which you must work up.³³

Thus we note that he sees universality, not only in old words and proverbs but in the facts of his private experience. The home and business affairs are as good topics as any.

It is the intuitive activity within the artist's mind that is important. Thought is supreme, and nature is its only vehicle. It is the office of the poet to

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32 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 39.

33 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 53.

show unity in variety. He must relate the two worlds, connect his thought with an appropriate symbol or group of symbols. To the great poet there is nothing ugly. The artist, Emerson says,

is very well convinced that the great moments of life are those in which his own house, his own body, the tritest and nearest ways and words and things have been illuminated into prophets and teachers. What else is it to be a poet? What are his garland and singing - roles? What but a sensibility so keen that the scent of an elder-blow, or timber-yard... is event enough for him, - all emblems and personal appeals to him... There is no subject that does not belong to him, - politics, economy, manufactures and stock-brokerage, as much as sunsets and souls; only these things placed in their true order, are poetry; displaced or put in kitchen order, they are un-poetic.³⁴

Herrick's merit lies in his power of glorifying common and base objects in his perfect verse. He pushes this privilege of the poet very far, in the wantonness of his power. He delights to show the muse not nice or squeamish, but treading with firm and elastic step in sordid places, taking no more pollution than the sunbeam, which shines alike on the carrion and the violet.³⁵

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34 Letters, etc.: "Poetry and Imagination, p. 37.

35 Memoir, Vol. II, p. 721.

He found his subject where he stood, between his feet, in his house, pantry, barn, poultry-yard, in his village, neighbors' gossip and scandal.³⁶

Hence travel is unnecessary, for the writer

given the insight he will find as many beauties and heroes and strokes of genius close by him as Dante, or Shakespeare behold. It was in a cold moor farm, in a dingy country inn, that Burns found his fancy so sprightly.³⁷

If then, nearness in time and place are to be sought, or in Emerson's words,

the test or measure of poetic genius is the power to read the affairs; - to fuse the circumstances of to-day, convert the vivid energies acting at this hour in New York and Chicago and San Francisco into universal symbols,³⁸

it is plain that the American writer should choose the contemporary and the native subject. Emerson had great faith in this country as a literary field, but did not believe it had been worked deeply. He wrote in a letter to Carlyle:

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36 Natural History of Intellect, Art and Criticism, p. 296.

37 Miscellanies, p. 632.

38 Natural History of Intellect, p. 390.

Here are rich materials for the ... poet, ... we have in these parts... no poet to put a sickle to the prairie wheat.³⁹

And in The Poet he says:

We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods he so much admires in Homer; then in the Middle Age; then in Calvinism. Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple at Delphi, and are as swiftly passing away. Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats..., the Northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.⁴⁰

Though typically American and hopeful of his country's literary future, he was not provincial nor biased in his judgments of her poets. His praise of Lowell is slight. In the last volume of his Journals he wrote of Lowell's improvement but also of his want of the necessary interior impulse:

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39 Carlyle and Emerson's Correspondence, Vol. 1, p. 120.

40 Essays, Vol. II: "The Poet," pp. 37-38.

I have been reading some of Lowell's new poems, in which he shows unexpected advance on himself, but perhaps most in technical skill and courage. It is in talent rather than in poetic tone, and rather expresses his ambition, than the uncontrollable interior impulse which is the authentic mark of a new poem.⁴¹

Though Emerson did not regard Alcott as a writer he had an extraordinary admiration of him as a noble idealist, and at one point in his Journals he praises him highly as a critic of his contemporary poets and country-men:

Alcott complained to me of want of simplicity in Lowell, Ward, and Longfellow; and Alcott is the right touchstone to test them; true litmus to detect the acid.⁴²

Thoreau, he admired almost without reserve, as a man of genius and marked character as well as a prospective poet; but on his friend's delicate literary scales, Thoreau was weighed and found wanting:

Last night Henry Thoreau read me verses which pleased, if not by beauty of particular lines, yet by the honest truth, and by the

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⁴¹ Journals, Vol. X, p. 252.

⁴² Complete Works, Vol. IV, p. 304.

length of flight and strength of wing; for most of our poets are only writers of lines or of epigrams. These of Henry's at least have rude strength and we do not come to the bottom of the mine. Their fault is that the gold does not yet flow pure, but is grossy and crude. The thyme and marjoram are not yet made into honey; the assimilation is imperfect.⁴²

Emerson credits Ellery Channing as being sincere but lacking in completeness and metrical form. He wrote in his Journals that

Ellery Channing's poetry has the merit of being genuine, and not the metrical common places of the magazine, but it is painfully incomplete. He has not kept faith with the reader; 'tis shamefully indolent and slovenly. He should have lain awake all night to find the true rhyme, for a verse, and he has availed himself of the first one that came; so that it is all a babyish incompleteness. Walter Scott is the best example of this mastery of metrical commonplaces.⁴³

Of Bryant he speaks well in his Journals, but a few pages later classes him with the single speech poets. He said,

Bryant has learned where to hang his titles, namely, by tying his mind to autumn woods, winter mornings, rain, brooks, mountains, evening winds and wood-birds. Who speaks of these is forced to remember Bryant. He

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42 Complete Works, Vol. IV, p. 304.

43 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 541.

is American. Never despaired of
the Republic. Dared name a fay
and a gentian, crows also. His
poetry is sincere.⁴⁴

Then later he said some authors are single speech poets:

Hogg only wrote "Kilmenny"...
Halleck, "Marco Bozzaris,"
and W. C. Bryant, "Water Fowl."⁴⁵

He classed Whitman as our greatest poet when he said,

Whitman is our American master, but
has not got out of the Fire-Club
and gained the entree of the sitting-
rooms.⁴⁶

The writer who gathers his material and chooses
his topics from the life around him must have in himself
and in his writing the quality of humanity: the ability
to sympathize with and interpret the actions, thoughts,
and feelings of the members of all classes of society.

Emerson cites Burns as a poet who is able to
do this thing. He calls him:

the poet of the poor, anxious, cheerful,
working humanity, or the gray hoddie and
the guernsey coat and the blouse. He
has given voice to all the experiences
of common life; he has endeared the

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44 Journals, Vol. V, p. 76.

45. Ibid., p. 147.

46 Natural History of Intellect; Art and Criticism, pp. 286-7.

farm house and cottage patches and poverty, beans and barley; ale, the poor man's wine; hardship; the fear of debt; ... of brothers and sisters, proud of each other, knowing so few and finding amends for want and obscurity in books and thoughts. What a love of Nature, and shall I say it? of middle-class nature. Not like Goethe in the stars, or like Byron, in the ocean, or Moore, in the luxurious East, but in the homely landscape which the poor see around them, - bleak leagues of pasture and stubble, ice and sleet and rain and snow - choked brooks; birds, hares, field-mice, thistles and heather which he daily knew.⁴⁷

Hence, the ideal poet, sees, delights in, and shows the beauty and the poetry in the ordinary events of his own life and his neighbor's. This union brings his writings into relation with the world movement toward democracy in literature and life. Emerson was as fond of the idiomatic as he was of the simple expression. He considered it equally fit for expressing either the actual or the ideal or both in combination. Its closeness to Nature gives it, through its symbolic quality, great spiritual value. The idiomatic is accurate in expressing the actual because it is a part of Nature. Emerson notes with gladness that the English

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47 Miscellanies: "Robert Burns," pp. 441-2.

delight in strong earthly expression, not mistakable, coarsely true to the human body... This homeliness, veracity and plain style... imparts into songs and ballads the smell of the earth, the breath of cattle, and like a Dutch painter, seeks a household charm, though by pails and pans.⁴⁸

Such a style, because of the vitality of its origin, has force. He said

Many of Goethe's poems are so idiomatic, so strongly rooted in the German soil, that they are the terror of translators, who say they cannot be rendered into any other language without loss of vigor, as we say of any darting passage of our own masters.⁴⁹

He thinks the subject matter may need elevating before the idiomatic is fit for use, and that Burns is also an artist at this kind of refining.

He had that secret of genius to draw from the bottom of society the strength of its speech, and astonish the ears of the polite with these artless words, better than art, and filtered of all offense through his beauty... Burns knew how to take from fairs and gypsies, blacksmiths and drovers, the speech of the market and street, and clothe it with melody.⁵⁰

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48 English Traits: "Literature", p. 232.

49 Natural History of Intellect: "Art and Criticism," pp. 294-5.

50. Ibid., pp. 236-7.

To be associated with Emerson's liking for the idiomatic, is his fondness for the terse, compressed style. He reckons the weight of a book, and guided by this criterion arrives at an estimate of its value. "I judge a book by number and weight, counting the things that are in it."⁵¹ He wrote in a later entry in his Journals that we are to select from the best books our sentences or words: "'Tis really by a sentence or a phrase or two that many great men are remembered. Zoroaster has three or four."⁵² In literature of the ideal, he said, condensation is even more necessary than in that of the actual

'Tis inexcusable in a man who has messages to men, who has truths to impart, to scribble flourishes. He shall write that which cannot be omitted.⁵³

Thus in poetry, compression is more to be desired than in prose. For though prose may be ideal in subject matter, poetry must be. Emerson said,

In reading prose, I am sensible as soon as a sentence drags, but in reading poetry, as soon as a word drags.⁵⁴

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51 Journals, Vol. IV, pp. 23-24.

52 Ibid., Vol. X, p. 262.

53. Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 423.

54. Ibid., p. 214.

The poet to a far greater extent than the prose-writer, must omit all but the important passages:

the inexorable rule in the muses' court, either inspiration or silence, compels the bard to report only his supreme moments. It teaches the enormous force of a few words, and in proportion to the inspiration checks loquacity.⁵⁵

Furthermore, compression is characteristic of ideal style because such expression must be symbolic or suggestive rather than direct. Such is the case with everything pertaining to the nature of the divine.

God himself does not speak prose, but communicates with us by hints, omens, inference and dark resemblances in objects lying all around us.⁵⁶

Since not what is said but what is hinted is important, the poet should leave to the reader the pleasure of supplying "the unsaid part - the best of every discourse."⁵⁷

Let us now see what Emerson had to say concerning the structure of poetry, for he was able to recognize lack of artistic organization, even though he was deficient in it himself. And though a poem may be composed of scattered facts, the results of momentary inspiration,

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55 Letters, etc. "Transcendancy," pp. 72-3.

56 Ibid., Poetry, p. 12.

57 Journals, Vol. 3, p. 492.

it must be made into a perfect whole through the art of the poet:

A poem should be a blade of Damascus steel, made up (of) a mass of knife-blades and nails, and parts every one of which has had its whole surface hammered and wrought before it was welded into the sword, to be wrought over new.⁵⁸

Not only perfect welding, but unity of design, thought, and tone are necessary in poetry. Of his friend Ellery Channing's verse, Emerson says:

His poetry is like the artless warbling of a vireo, which whistles prettily all day and all summer in the elm, but never rounds a tune, nor can increase the value of melody by the power of composition and cuneiform determination.⁵⁹ He must have construction also.

According to Emerson, unity of tone and thought are almost the same.

The authentic mark of a new poem is the uncontrollable interior impulse ...which is unanalysable, and makes the merit of an ode of Collins, or Gray, or Wordsworth, or Herbert, or Byron, - and which is felt in the pervading tone rather than in brilliant parts or lines; as if the sound of a bell or a certain cadence

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58 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 278.

59 Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 54.

expressed in a low whistle or booming, or humming, to which the poet first timed his step, as he looked at the sunset, or thought, was the incipient form of the piece, and was regnant through the whole.⁶⁰

One genial thought is the source of every true poem. I have heard that a unity of this kind pervades Beethoven's great pieces in music. And why, but because tone gives unity.⁶¹

Emerson acknowledged his own weakness in regard to poetic form. He says,

It is much to write sentences; it is more to add method and write out the spirit of your life symmetrically. But to arrange general reflections in their natural order, so that I shall have one homogeneous piece, - a Lycidas, an Allegro, a Hamlet, a Midsummer Night's Dream, - this continuity is for the great. The wonderful men are wonderful hereby. Such concentration of experiences is in very good work, which though successive in the mind of the master, were primarily combined in his piece. But what we want is consecutive-ness. 'Tis with us a flash of light, then a long darkness, then a flash again. Ah! Could we turn these fugitive sparkles into an astronomy of Copernician worlds.⁶²

Being conscious of his failure in larger units, and of his brilliant, though fragmentary success in a smaller way, he again writes in his Journals:

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60 Journals, Vol. X, p. 267.

61 Ibid., p. 278.

62 Natural History of Intellect: "Powers and Laws of Thought," pp. 52-3.

I am a bard least of bards. I cannot like them, make lofty arguments in stately, continuous verse, constraining the rocks, trees, animals, and the periodic stars to say my thoughts, - for that is the gift of great poets; but I am a bard because I stand near them, and apprehend all they utter, and with pure joy hear that which I also would say, and, moreover, I speak interruptedly words and half stanzas which have the like scope and aim: - what I cannot declare, yet cannot all withhold.⁶³

Thus we see that, even as Emerson recognized his weakness as a poet, he realized his ability to interpret the utterance of the bard, and heard with pleasure the message. He demanded structure as the necessary qualification of supreme verse, and he tested poetry in this way. He tells us of a conversation with Tennyson regarding the epic, Festus.

When Festus was spoken of, I said that a poem must be made up of little poems, but that in Festus were no single good lines; you could not quote one line. Tennyson quoted - 'There came a hand between the sun and us, And its five fingers made five nights in air.' Tennyson had picked out for him the most Tennysonian lines in Festus.⁶⁴

To show how Emerson applied his theories of style and structure to individual poets, we shall briefly

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63 Journals, Vol. IX, p. 472.

64 Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 445.

cite a few of his judgments. In most of Emerson's critical comments on individual poets, we note the balancing of his judgments, often a measuring with the ideal. He sees defects in those whom he admires most. He longs for the master mind who shall by deeper principles unite existing contradictions. He uses an absolute criticism, a comparison of the particular work of art with the inferior, with the superior and with the supreme art, - or art that excels the best that has ever been produced. Beyond the ideal poem is the ideal poet. He sets a high standard for the poet.

The poet is the person in whom powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart.⁶⁵

He then says in the same volume,

The signs and credentials of the poet are that he announces that which no man foretold.⁶⁶

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem, - a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.

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65 The Poet, Vol. III, p. 6.

66 Ibid., p. 8.

...The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet.⁶⁷

Emerson realizes his standard is high for he says,

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not with sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor dare we chant our own times and social circumstances. If we filled the day with bravery we should not shrink from celebrating it. Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man... whom all things await... If I have not found that excellent combination of gifts in my countrymen which I seek, neither could I aid myself to fix the idea of poet by reading, now and then in Chalmers's collection of five centuries of English poets. These are wits more than poets, though there have been poets among them. But when we adhere to the ideal of the poet we have difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer, too literal and historical.⁶⁸

At the close of his discussion on Shakespeare, one of his representative men, whom he typifies as "The Poet" he says,

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67 The Poet, Vol. III, pp. 9, 10.

68 Ibid., p. 37.

The world still wants its poet-priest, a reconciler, who shall not trifle with Shakespeare, the player, nor shall grope in graves with -- ... the mourner; but who shall see, speak and act, with equal inspiration.⁶⁹

In early manhood, Emerson did not care for Wordsworth. In the second volume of his Journals he said, -

Mr. Wordsworth is trying to distill the essence of poetry from poetic things, instead of being satisfied to adorn common scenes with such lights from these sources of poetry as nature will always furnish to her true lovers. We feel the same sort of regret when Aristotle forsakes the law of the intellect and the Principles of Ethics for researches into the nature of the mind.⁷⁰

Later in volume III of his Journals he records a higher opinion of Wordsworth, but still finds him dull reading. He says,

It is a comfort I have in taking up those new poems of Wordsworth, that I am sure here to find thoughts in harmony with the great frame of nature, the placid aspect of the Universe. I may find dullness and flatness, but I shall not find meanness and error.⁷¹

While very fond of The Bride of Lammermoor by Scott, Emerson does not care much for Scott's poetry

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69 Representative Men, Vol, IV, p. 219.

70 Journals, Vol. II, p. 233.

71 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 560.

because it deals with society rather than man. At a celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of Scott's birth, he said,

He made no pretension to the lofty style of Spenser, or Milton, or Wordsworth. But he had the skill to fit his verse to his topic, and not to write solemn pentameters alike on a hero or a spaniel. His good sense elected the ballad to make his audience larger.⁷²

Emerson has little to say in favor of Moore or the greater romantic poets. Of Tennyson he said,

Tennyson is endowed precisely in points where Wordsworth wanted. There is no finer ear, nor more command of the keys of language. Color like the dawn, flows over the horizon from his pencil, in waves so rich that we do not miss the central form. Through all his refinements, too he has reached the public, - a certificate of good sense and general power since he who aspires to be the English poet must be as large as London, but in his own kind. But he wants a subject, and climbs no mount of vision to bring its secrets to the people. ...There are all degrees in poetry and we must be content and thankful for every beautiful talent.⁷³

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72 "Walter Scott," Vol. IX, p. 464.

73 English Traits, Vol. V, p. 244.

When "In Memoriam" appeared, Emerson was not impressed. He said,

Tennyson's "In Memoriam" is the common places of condolence among good Unitarians in the first week of mourning. The consummate skill of versification is the sole merit.⁷⁴

Later, when "The Idylls of the Kings" appear, he changes his views and says,

His inventions are adequate to the dignity of the fable. The gift of adequate expression is his; the priest is astonished to find a holiness in this knight-errant... The fine invention of Tennyson is in crowding into an hour the slow creations and destructions of centuries.⁷⁵

Then Emerson writes into the Journals three years later under the date, 1871, the following sentence:

The only limits to the praise of Tennyson as a lyric poet is that he is alive. If he were an ancient there would be none.⁷⁶

As has been said, Emerson never cared for Shelley, but admits that since others are attracted to him it would be wrong to overlook him. In the Journals for 1841, Emerson states that

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74 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 163.

75 Ibid., Vol. X, p. 240-214; 1868.

76 Ibid., (1871)

Shelley is wholly unaffecting to me. I was born a little too soon: but his power is so manifest over a large class of the best persons that he is not to be overlooked.⁷⁷

Emerson praises Byron for his unmatched expressiveness, and his extraordinary ability to write verse, but sees his defects and rejects him because he is a poet of vice and disease, and lacks thought. In the third volume of his Journal he writes,

Italy is Byron's debtor, and I think no one knows how fine a poet he is who has not seen the subjects of his verse, and so learned to appreciate the justness of his thoughts and at the same time their great superiority to other men's. I know well the defects of Childe Harold.⁷⁸

Later in the same volume, he classes Byron with Moore and compares them with Chaucer and Wordsworth,

Poetry, to be sterling, must be more than a show; must have, or must be, an earnest meaning. Chaucer, Wordsworth; per contra Moore and Byron.⁷⁹

Goethe, classed by Emerson as another of the seven representative men of the world, under the title

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77 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 114.

78 Ibid., Vol. III, p. 99.

79 Ibid., p. 501.

of The Writer, is admired for his great learning and individuality, but because of worldliness is found wanting as an artist. Emerson says,

The poet of the nineteenth century is Goethe, - impossible at an earlier time. He appears at a time when a general culture has spread itself and has smoothed down all sharp individual traits; ... there is no trace of provincial limitations in his muse. "The Helena" or the second part of "Faust" is a philosophy of literature set in poetry.⁸⁰

Later in the same volume, he says

Goethe, this law giver of art, is not an artist. He is fragmentary; a writer of occasional poems and of an encyclopaedia of sentences.⁸¹

He tells the readers of "The Dial" that

The poem of the present age for which we predict the longest term, is "Abou ben Adhem" of Leigh Hunt. It is strange that one of the best poems should be written by a man who has hardly written any other.⁸²

From the foregoing citations we see that Emerson, actually pronounced his critical judgments from a mountain height. His criterion was so high and absolute that we notice he sometimes became discontented with many favo-

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⁸⁰ Representative Men, vol. IV, p. 257.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 273.

⁸² The Dial, Vol. III, p. 511.

rites of the past as well as those of his own day. And though, as is shown in the following quotation, he recognized the frailty of man, he was hopeful and ever looking forward for the ideal poet. He said in a lecture in April, 1872,

Many men are ill-born or ill-bred, - the brains are so marred, so imperfectly formed, unheroically, brains of fallen men, - that the doctrine is imperfectly received. One man sees a spark or shimmer of the truth and reports it, and his saying becomes a legend or garden proverb for ages, and other men report as much, but none wholly and well. Poems! - we have no poem. Whenever that angel shall be organized and appear on earth, the Iliad will be reckoned a poor ballad - grinding. I doubt never the gifts of Nature, the immense wealth of the mind.⁸³

George E. Woodberry, in his Life of Emerson, said that Emerson

Had formed an ideal poet, who stood for this poet in him, another and higher self, and named him Osman, and quoted from him in his prose; but in his verse he was the poet, and gave him other names there; and this self, secret and private and most dear to him, whose life was that of the roamer of nature, is the bard who uses the wind, the pine tree, the snowstorm and

.....

and seashore, the chemic heat and
the solar blaze, as the strings of
his lyre.⁸⁴

Though Emerson held, we might say, too high
a standard for his poet, he was sympathetic with him,
cheerful in regard to his own day, and hopeful for the
future.

.....

84 Life, by George E. Woodberry, p. 160.

Chap. III.

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CHAPTER III.

EMERSON'S CRITICISM OF PROSE AND PROSE-WRITERS.

Most of Emerson's comments on style and the art of writing connect themselves with his philosophy, as has been shown in the foregoing chapter. He has a faith, as has been cited, that there is a realm of sense and a realm of spiritual vision, that two views of things are possible, the material and the ideal, and the ideal is superior.

His theories in regard to the style and the organization of prose are exactly parallel to his theories in regard to the style and the organization of poetry. In prose, too, he admired a simple, idiomatic, compressed, and above all, a living style. Prose is also composed of particles, the result of momentary inspiration. The function of the author is to receive, organize, and report the message.

The more fully the inspired idea is revealed to the reader, the more surely is it poetic. Though prose may be the expression of the actual and poetry of the ideal, the nearer prose comes to the expression

of the ideal the better Emerson considers it to be. Usually he fails to distinguish between the two forms of discourse. Poetry and prose are the same, and the great writer, regardless of meter, is a poet. The man of letters is a revealer of inner truth.

The material fact is the peculiar means by which the ideal may be expressed; only nature and human experience are provided as instruments by which the divine may be interpreted. According to Emerson,

Man stands on the point betwixt spirit and matter, and the native of both elements; the true thinker sees that one represents the other, that the world is the mirror of the soul, and that it is his office to show this beautiful relation. And this is literature!¹

Exhaltation of the spiritual does not exclude fondness for a satisfactory expression of the actual. Sometimes he seems to crave relief from idealism. He is a man of this world and also artist enough to delight in the solid footing which he finds in Montaigne. Emerson writes thus of too much reading of imaginative or idealistic literature:

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1 Memoir, Vol. II, p. 716.

We have too many fine books, and
 as those who have too much cake
 and candy long for a brown crust,
 so we like the Albany Cultivator.²

Thus we see one reason for his liking Montaigne.

The essay devoted to him in Representative Men includes several paragraphs in a sympathetic understanding of a desire of Montaigne to assure his reader that

whatever you get here shall smack
 of the earth, and of real life,
 sweet, or smart, or stinging.³

Emerson finds English literature deficient in idealism; but at the same time he is appreciative of its success in realistic expression. He says of Swift that he

describes his fictitious persons as
 if for the police. Defoe has no
 insecurity or choice.⁴

In Emerson's opinion, Carlyle is superior as an expressor of fact to any other English author. In regard to him he said,

A better painter in the Dutch style
 than we have had in literature before.
 It is terrible - his closeness and
 fidelity; he copies that which never
 was seen before. It is like seeing
 your figure in a glass. It is an
 improvement in writing as strange as

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2 Journals, Vol. VI, p. 224.

3 Representative Men, Vol. IV, p. 172.

4 English Traits, Literature, Vol. V, p. 234.

Daguerre's in picture, and rightly
fell in the same age with that.⁵

Emerson uses many expressions or phrases to suggest the
variety and at the same time the precision of Carlyle's
style: He writes in regard to Frederick the Great,

I see the eyes of the writer looking into
my eyes; all the way, chuckling with under-
tones and puns and winks and shrugs and
long commanding glances, and stereoscopic
every figure that passes, and every hill,
river, wood, hummock, and pebble in the
long perspective.⁶

To the same effect he writes elsewhere that in Carlyle's
book

You have no board interposed between
you and the writer's mind, but he
talks flexibly, now high, now low,
in loud emphasis, in undertones, then
laughs till the walls ring, then
calmly moderates, then hints, or raises
an eye-brow. He has gone nigher to the
wind than any other craft.⁷

As Emerson regards expression, then, it is
adequate if it is an accurate record of thought; or of
the substance of the thought, Nature and experience; or
in case the two are properly combined through the art
and sifting of the individual intellect. Whichever
it may be, it is of more worth if it is spiritual in

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6 Journals, Vol. IX, pp. 195-6.

7 Natural History of Intellect: "Art and Criticism," p. 299.

character. He craves adequacy and yet he recognizes that for several reasons words are ineffectiv, and also that difficulties may develop from the writer's own weakness. He may be unable to unite the individual mind with the Divine. He thinks language is defective. It describes but does not definitely picture the thing; for that reason, it is most successful when it merely suggests. He wrote in one of his Journals:

It seems true that nothing can be described as it is. The most accurate picture is only symbols and suggestions of the thing, but from the nature of language all remote.⁸

When Emerson wrote to Carlyle concerning the feebleness of language, Carlyle, in his reply agreed:

What you say about the vast imperfection of all modes of utterance is most true, indeed. Let a man speak and sing, and do, and sputter, and gesticulate as he may, - the meaning of him is most ineffectually shown forth, poor fellow; rather indicated as if by straggling symbols, than spoken or visually expressed! Poor fellow!⁹

Emerson makes a strenuous demand on the writer. Yet he recognizes the partial success of his own works and is conscious of the difficulties, according to his

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8 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 266.

9 Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle, Vol. II, p. 96.

standard, of expression for all writers. He does not, on that account, lose hope. He writes to Carlyle that so far as he, himself is concerned, he is

Certain and content that the truth can very well spare me, and have itself spoken by another without leaving it or me the worse... My faith in the Writers, as an organic class, increases daily, and in the possibility to a faithful man of arriving at statements for which he shall not feel responsible, but which shall be parallel with nature.¹⁰

As was noted in the discussion of poetry, Emerson believes that the connection between the divine and the simple is shown in the language the writer uses when he is most deeply moved, when he is raised above the world of sense to the world of realities. And for Emerson, nearness to the natural is nearness to the spiritual. He did not believe in using language that only a select few could understand. He says,

Gauss, I believe, it is, who writes books that nobody can understand but himself, and himself only in his best hours. And Pierce and Gould and others in Cambridge are piqued with the like ambition. But I fancy more the wit of Defoe, and Cervantes, and Montaigne, who make deep and abstruse things popular.¹¹

.....

10 Correspondence of Emerson and Carlyle, Vol. II, pp. 58-9.

11 Journals, Vol. IX, p. 117.

He once said to his friend, Henry Thoreau,

I am ambitious to write something which all can read, like Robinson Crusoe. And when I have written a paper or a book, I see with regret that it is not solid, with a right materialistic treatment, which delights everybody.¹²

we have seen that in Emerson's view, the simple style, clearly a fitting vehicle for the actual, is also faithful to Nature and Spirit and hence the form of the intensest expression. The language of experience is plainly the language of the hard, material fact; but it becomes an equally desirable means of representing the ideal. The idiomatic, accurate to fact, is at the same time nearest to Nature and hence emblematic. It is also appropriate because it is fresh, genuine, and lifelike.

Just as any kind of experience may furnish examples and symbols for the details of writing, so the whole composition may be written on any topic. The utilization of the small, the common, the domestic, the commercial, the near in time and place is a great influence toward simplicity of style. Size has nothing to do with the importance of a subject.

.....

¹² Journals, Vol. VIII, pp. 424-5.

I say to Lidian that in composition
 the What is of no importance compared
 with the How...¹³

You need not write the History of the
 World, nor the Fall of Man, nor King
 Arthur, nor Iliad nor Christianity;
 but write of hay, or of cattle shows,
 or of a ship, or of Ellen, or Alcott,
 or of a couple of schoolboys, if only
 you can be the fanatic of your subject,
 and find a fiber reaching from it
 to the core of your heart, so that
 all your affection, and all your
 thought can freely play.¹⁴

Remoteness in time and in place are unnecessary
 and really undesirable in a subject. Emerson objects to
 modern antiques like Landor's Pericles,... They are
 paste jewels.¹⁵ They are likely to be unnatural and to
 that extent insincere. Even, as Emerson calls it, when
 speaking of Dickens' work,

The poor Pickwick stuff teaches this,
 that prose and parlors and shops and
 city windows, the tradesman's dinner,
 and such matters are as good materials
 in a skilful hand for interest and art
 as palaces and revolutions.¹⁶

And Carlyle is commendable for a like reason, having given
 in his books,

.....

13 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 211.

14 Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 207.

15 Ibid., Vol. VI, p. 400.

16 English Traits, pp. 383-4.

The first domestication of the modern system, with its infinity of details, into style.¹⁷

To the writer nothing is foreign. It is good to report whatever things are homely and near at hand, whatever things are personal, or whatever are common to mankind. In other words, anything can be written of that can be expressed simply. But the writer who gathers his materials and chooses his topics from the everyday life around him must have in himself and in his writing the quality of humanity, that is, the ability to sympathize with and interpret the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the members of all classes of society. Scott, for example,

by nature, by his reading and taste an aristocrat, in a time and country which easily gave him that bias... had the virtues and graces of that class, (but) not less his eminent humanity delighted in the sense and virtue and wit of the common people. In his own household and neighbors he found characters and pets of humble class, with whom he established the best relation, - small farmers and tradesmen, shepherds, fishermen, gypsies, peasant-girls, crones, - and came with these into real ties of mutual help and goodwill. From these originals he drew so genially

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17 Natural History of Intellect: "Past and Present," p. 390.

his Jeanie Deans, his Dinmonts and Edie Ochiltrees, Caleb Balderstones and Fairservices, Cuddie Headriggs, Dominies, Meg Merrilies, and Jenny Rintherouts, full of life and reality; making these, too the pivots on which the plots of his stories turn; and meanwhile with not one word of brag of this discernment, - nay this extreme sympathy reaching down to every beggar and beggar's dog and horse and cow.¹⁸

Plutarch has the same quality.

Nothing touches man but he feels to be his... A man of society; of affairs; upright, practical; a good son, husband, father and friend, - he has a taste for common life, and knows the court, the camp and the judgment hall, but also the forge, farm, kitchen and cellar, and every utensil and use.¹⁹

For the use of every kind of human element in writing, the author

must have a sensuous eye, but an intellectual co-perception.²⁰

He must go behind the dress to the character of the man, and find there the universal. He must regard every human action as related to the spirit which animated it.

.....

18 Miscellanies: "Walter Scott," pp. 465-6.

19 Lectures, etc.: "Plutarch," p. 299.

20 Ibid., pp. 298-9.

In mankind, as in Nature, he must see outer likenesses as symbolic of inner truths. The idiomatic is suitable for expressing either the actual or the ideal or both in combination. The closeness to nature of the idiomatic gives it, through its symbolic quality, remarkable spiritual values. According to Emerson, it is a part of human nature, of life and experience - and for this reason is also accurate on the material side. It deals with essentials; it is unspoiled by literary affectation. Of Montaigne's writing Emerson says,

The sincerity and marrow of the man reaches to his sentences. I know not where the book that seems less written. It is the language of conversation transferred to a book. Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive.²¹

Emerson deplotes the affected, unidiomatic style of review articles and other literary productions in which too much learning has caused a general lifelessness. He speaks thus of the unidiomatic writers of his day:

Our conventional style of writing is now so trite and poor, so little idiomatic, that we have several foreigners who write in our Journals in a style not to be distinguished from their native colleagues.²²

.....

21 Representative Men: "Montaigne," p. 168.

22 Journals, Vol. V, p. 215.

He who would be powerful must have the terrible gift of familiarity...., -²³ writers as Swift, Defoe, and Carlyle.

Emerson's advice is:

Speak with the vulgar, think with the wise. See how Plato managed it, with an imagination so gorgeous and a taste so patrician, that Jove, if he descended, was to speak in his style. Into the exquisite refinement of his Academy, he introduces the low-born Socrates, relieving the purple diction by his perverse talk, his gallipots, and cart-wheels - and steadily kept this coarseness to flavor a dish, else too luscious.²⁴

The qualities of style capable of expressing the material or the ideal or the two in combination must be communicated simply, in a style which has for its substance ordinary human events and circumstances - thus idiomatic, and it must be free from excess. Emerson advocated compression, and since he believed the whole truth is embodied in any part of the truth, he favored proverbs. He likes such statements for their independent value apart from their context. He says,

Of many of Landor's sentences, we are fain to remember what was said of those of Socrates; that they are cubes, which will stand firm, place them how or where you will.²⁵

.....

23 Natural History of Intellect: "Art and Criticism," p. 285-6.

24 Ibid., pp. 286-7.

25 Natural History of Intellect: Papers from Dial, "Landor", p.349.

Carlyle, he notes approvingly,

Crowds meaning into all the nooks
and corners of his sentences. Once
read, he is but half read.²⁶

There is still another reason for Emerson's belief in
compression. This is its artistic quality. He says,

This art of omission is a chief
secret of power, and, in general,
it is proof of high culture to
say the greatest matters in the
simplest way.²⁷

This is a Greek ideal and Emerson recognized it as such;
he says,

Access to the Greek mind lifts the
Englishman's standard of taste...
The great silent crowd of thorough-
bred Grecians always known to be
around him, the English writer cannot
ignore. They pruned his orations...
and point his pen.²⁸

Emerson recognizes exceptions to this exacting
requirement of omission. The man whose range of thought
and expression is wide has a right to fluency of style.
Such a man was Rabelais:

The style at once decides the high
quality of the man. It flows like
the river Amazon, so rich, so plenti-
ful, so transparent, and with such

.....

26 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 196.

27 Conduct of Life: "Beauty," p. 294.

28 English Traits: "Universities," p. 207.

long reaches, that longanimity or
longsightedness which belongs to the
Platos.²⁹

Usually, however, in the presentation of the
everyday fact, it is clear that accuracy demands the
avoidance of exaggeration. At the same time in express-
ing the ideal, mildness and reticence have a stimulating
and suggestive effect, are therefore more powerful than
the use of superlatives. Plato is thus superior to many
writers; he

needs no barbaric paint, or tattoo,
or whooping; for he can define. He
leaves with Asia the vast superlative;
he is the arrival of accuracy and
intelligence.³⁰

Though Emerson is willing to give some praise
to those writers, such as Milton or Bacon, whose intellect
is so broad it gives them a right to use the adorned,
exuberant style; he was never quite satisfied with the
extravagant, vehement style of Carlyle. He makes the
excuse for Carlyle that

In all his fun of castanets of play-
ing of tunes with a whip-lash like
some renowned charioteers - in all
his glad and needful venting of
his redundant spirits, he does yet,

.....

29 Journals, Vol. VI, p. 279.

30 Representative Men: "Plato", pp. 45-47.

ever and anon, as if catching the glance of one wise man in the crowd, quit his tempestuous key, and lance at him in clear, level tone the very word, and then with new glee return to his game. He is like a lover or an outlaw who wraps his message in a serenade, which is nonsense to the sentinel, but a salvation to the ear for which it is meant.³¹

But more often, as we have discovered, he prefers simplicity in all expression, whether of the material or the spiritual. In a letter to Carlyle he said,

I comprehend not why you should lavish in that spendthrift style of yours lavish truths. I look for the hour with impatience when the vehicle will be worthy of the spirit, - then the word will be simple, and so as resistless, as the thought, - and, in short when your words will be one with things.³²

There are, perhaps, occasions, Emerson thinks, when precision may give way to an ecstasy, when the enthusiastic emotion may overleap caution; when the writer may be generous or even extravagant in his expressions. But the adequate comes more often through the simple, positive speech.

As well as in adequacy and precision of expression, there is no doubt that Emerson believed, in theory at least,

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31 Natural History of Intellect: "Past and Present", p. 289.

32 Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson, Vol. I, pp. 14-15.

in the most artistic kind of coherence, unity, and proportion. He could recognize lack of artistic organization when he met with it. He found deficient in this respect, Goethe, Landor, Bacon, and Milton. In the chapter on poetry we noted that he spoke of Goethe as a lawgiver of art, but no artist because he was fragmentary. Landor, he says

has not the high overpowering method by which the master gives unity and integrity to a work of many parts.³³

Bacon's work

is fragmentary, wants unity. It lies along the ground like the materials of an unfinished city.³⁴

On Milton's prose writings, with the exception of Areopagitica, he makes the following comment:

Their rhetorical excellence must also suffer some deduction. They have no perfectness. These writings are wonderful for truth, the learning, the subtlety and pomp of the language; but the whole is sacrificed to the particular. Eager to do fit justice to each thought, he does not subordinate it so as to project the main argument. He writes while he is heated: the piece shows all the rambles and resources of indignation, but he never integrated the parts of the argument in his mind. The reader is fatigued with admira-

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33 Natural History of Intellect: "Landor," p. 348.

34 Memoirs, Vol. II, p. 720.

tion, but is not yet master of the subject.³⁵

Perhaps the surest test of Emerson's critical ability in regard to method is his attitude toward his own weaknesses. He is his own severest critic. He charges himself with writing

paragraphs incompressible, each sentence an infinitely repellent particle.³⁶

Again, in writing to Carlyle of his own disconnected style, he says,

I build my house of boulders: somebody asked me if I built of medals.³⁷

The ideal system must be genuine, and it is Emerson's advice to

Shun manufacture, or the introducing and artificial arrangement in your thoughts - it will surely crack and come to nothing.³⁸

Emerson's notion of artistic creation is carefully formed. The writer's problem and his right course of action he outlines thus:

There is a process in the mind very analogous to crystalization in the mineral kingdom. I think of a particular fact or singular beauty and interest; in thinking of it I am led

.....

35 Natural History of Intellect: "Milton", p. 249.

36 Correspondence, Emerson and Carlyle, Vol. I, p. 161.

37 Ibid., Vol. I, p. 345.

38 Journals, Vol. III, p. 550.

to many more thoughts which show themselves, first partially, and afterwards more fully. But in the multitude of them I see no order. When I would present them to others they have no beginning. There is no method. Leave them now, and return to them again. Domesticate them in your mind, do not force them into arrangement too hastily, and presently you shall find they will take their own order. And the order they assume is divine. It is God's architecture.³⁹

Writing so organized; 'in the natural'; as Emerson calls it, will prove the most satisfactory to writer and reader.

If a natural order is obediently followed, the composition will have an abiding charm to yourself as well as to others; you will see that you were a scribe of a higher wisdom than your own, and it will remain to you, like one of Nature's works, pleasant and wholesome, and not, as our books so often are, a disagreeable remembrance to the author.⁴⁰

Not only must the system have a divine origin, but its means of connection must also be spiritual, clearly representative of high thinking. Of Landor, Emerson says that

what skill or transition he may possess is superficial, not spiritual.⁴¹

.....

39 Journals, Vol. II, p. 446.

40 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 336.

41 Natural History of Intellect: Landor, p. 348.

And in general he declares that

A continuous effect cannot be produced by discontinuous thought, and when the eye cannot detect the juncture of the skillful mosaic, the spirit is apprised of disunion, simply by the failure to affect the spirit.⁴²

One more doctrine of Emerson is noticed in his evaluation of writers. It is the law of compensation. According to it, every fact in nature or human life has some fact which balances it, or holds it in check. In the chapter on Literature in English Traits,⁴³ Emerson first praises English writers for their common sense and for their accurate revelation of the apparent, and then alternately blames and praises English literature because of its modern deficiency in Platonists and its former glory. In the essays in Representative Men,⁴⁴ he follows the same scheme. Napoleon is portrayed as a man, possessing common sense and executive power and then his immorality is vividly deplored. Montaigne's scepticism and actuality are admirable, but scepticism can never take the place of faith, and thus Emerson's theory of compensation is carried out through the volume.

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42 Natural History of Intellect: Instinct and Inspiration, p. 67.

43 Works, Vol. V. Chap. XIV, pp. 233-260.

44 Works, Vol. IV.

Emerson favors a style which tries to come close to the writer's own mind, and aims at an exact reproduction of its ecstasy, its violence, its calmness, its humor, its seriousness, its holiness, or whatever its mood may be. He recognizes the value of the symbol in prose as in poetry as a means of heightening style and of making it concrete, and believes it has a spiritual value. He admires a live, strong, yet ideally suggestive style.

He considers the figure as having a spiritual life and reality of its own and does not regard it as merely an imaginative likeness of one thing with another for purely literary purposes. He believes that nature and experience, or all material things, are the language of the spirit. As a result of this conception, he desires in the symbol a close blending of the ideal, of spiritual truth with material accuracy. To his view-point, external nature is the source of all that is holy. In his opinion, every object in nature, no matter how small, deserves attention. It is the duty of imagination to enter into it and to explore its

hidden treasures. The writer is at liberty to use any object in nature, no matter how small or common and to find in it spiritual significance. And it is in this way that Emerson's theory justifies the use of the ordinary objects of life, experience, and nature and makes desirable a style which is both simple and alive. Thus his theory agrees admirably with the style which is idiomatic, compact and suggestively moderate. But it is not to style alone that Emerson's theories apply; it includes structure and the relation of structure to content. It is necessary that prose as well as poetry be perfectly blended in unity of design, thought, and tone. But if the writer is a genius, the appropriate form will follow.

As was pointed out in the chapter on poetry, Emerson expressed his judgments in terms of higher generalizations, using concrete cases mainly to illustrate his principles. And his belief in compensation led him to weigh the object of his criticism fairly according to his criterion.

We shall now try to show the application of the foregoing principles to his judgment of prose and prose-

writers. To Emerson, a true book is an organic expression of ideal Nature, produced through the instrumentality of a human mind from the Universal Mind. He praised the literature that seemed to him truthful, faithful to fact and reality. He always laid greatest stress upon the message or the truth expressed. He says in Representative Men,

Art expresses the one or the same
by the different. Thought seeks
to know unity in unity.⁴⁵

Let us now turn to Emerson's criticism of individual prose writers or types of prose, where we shall notice that some one or more of the foregoing principles are applied to every author or his work, or both.

Emerson read very few novels. He says in one of his early Journals,

The love of novels is the preference
of sentiment to the senses.⁴⁶

Of all the novelists, he cared most for Scott. He liked Scott better as a novelist than he did as a poet. He said in one of his lectures,

.....

45 Representative Men: "Plato", p. 56.

46 Journals, Vol. II, p. 373.

If the success of his poems, however large, was partial, that of his novels was complete. The tone of *Waverly* at once announced the master, and was more than justified by the superior genius of the following romances up to the Bride of Lammermoor, which almost goes back to Aeschylus as a painting of Fate, leaving on every reader the impression of the highest and purest tragedy.⁴⁷

In another comment on Scott and his works we see that Emerson looks back of the book to the author and admires in his early contemporary, good sense, human sympathy, and uprightness of character:

His extreme sympathy reached down to every beggar and beggar's dog, and horse and cow. In the number and variety of his characters he approached Shakespeare. He had no insanity or vice or blemish. He was a thoroughly upright, wise and great hearted man, equal to whatever event or fortune should try him.⁴⁸

But much as Emerson appreciates Scott, the man, the Bride of Lammermoor and parts of other of his novels, he finds weakness in the dialogues of Scott when compared with Shakespeare's.

Scott's dialogue will bear criticism; his lords brave each other in smart epigrammatic speeches, but the dialogue is in costume and does not please on

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47 Works, Vol. XI, p. 465.

48 Miscellanies: Walter Scott, Vol. XI, p. 466-7.

the second reading; it is not warm with life. In Shakespeare alone the speakers do not strut and bridle; the dialogue is easily great.⁴⁹

Emerson cared little for Dickens. He gives him credit for an acute eye for surfaces, with a language of manners, but thinks him deficient in style and lasting qualities. In English Traits, he says,

Dickens, with preternatural apprehension of the language of manners; and the varieties of street life; with pathos, and laughter, with patriotic and still enlarging generosity, writes London tracts. He is a painter of English details, like Hogarth; local and temporary in his tints and style, and local in his aims.⁵⁰

It is not only in the novel that Emerson finds Dickens insufficient. In the American Notes, there is nothing to praise. He says,

Yesterday I read Dickens's American Notes; it answers its end very well, which plainly was to make a readable book, nothing more. Truth is not his object for a single instant, but merely to make good points in a lively sequence, and he proceeds very well. As an account of America it is not to be considered for a moment; it is too short, and too narrow, too superficial, and too ignorant, too slight, and too fabulous, and the man totally unequal to the work... As a picture of American manners, nothing can be

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49 Works, Vol. III, p. 148.

50 English Traits: "Literature," p. 234.

falsers. No such conversations ever occur in this country in real life, as he relates. He has picked up and noted with eagerness each odd local phrase that he met with, and, when he had a story to relate, has joined them together so that the result is the broadest caricature; and the scene might as truly have been laid in Wales, or in England as in the States... Exaggeration is an easy secret of romance. The book makes but a poor apology for its author, who certainly appears in no dignified or enviable position.⁵¹

Thackeray's novels, he found wanting, missing any merits but observant of their defects. He thinks

Thackeray's Vanity Fair is pathetic in its name, and in the use of the name; an admission it is from a man of fashion in the London of 1850. The poor old Puritan Bunyan was right in his conception of the London of 1650 and yet now in Thackeray is the added wisdom or scepticism that, - though this is really so, he must yet live in tolerance of and practically in homage and obedience to these illusions.⁵²

Again in English Traits, he says,

Thackeray finds that God has made no allowance for the poor thing in his universe, - more's the pity, he thinks, - but 'tis not for us to be wiser; we must renounce ideals and accept London.⁵³

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51 Works, Vol. IV, p. 312.

52 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 113.

53 English Traits: Literature, p. 234.

In Bulwer, Emerson finds some creditable traits. He is strong where Thackeray is weak. Bulwer does not ignore the lower class of people, neither does he caricature them as does Dickens. On the same page with the discussion of Thackeray, Emerson says,

Bulwer, an industrious writer, with occasional ability, is distinguished for his reverence of intellect as a temporality, and appeals to the worldly ambition of the student. His romances tend to fan these low flames.⁵⁴

Later, he writes in the Dial,

Bulwer's romances have proved a main stimulus to mental culture in thousands of young men in England and America. We are not very versed in these books, yet we have read Mr. Bulwer enough to see that the story is rapid and interesting; he has really seen London society, and does not draw ignorant caricatures. He is not a genius, but his novels are marked with great energy and with a courage of experiment which in each instance had its degree of success. The story of Zanoni was one of those world fables which is so agreeable to the human imagination that it is found in some form in the language of every country and is always reappearing in literature. Many of the details of this novel preserve a poetic truth. We read Zanoni with pleasure, because magic is natural... But Zanoni pains us and the author

.....

loses our respect, because he speedily betrays that he does not see the true limitations of the charm; because the power with which his hero is armed is a toy, in as much as the power does not flow from its legitimate fountains in the mind.

Mr. Bulwer's recent stories have given us who do not read novels, occasion to think of this department of literature, supposed to be the natural fruit and expression of the age.⁵⁵

Emerson liked his Concord neighbor Hawthorne, but could say nothing in approval of his writings. After Hawthorne's death in 1864, Emerson wrote in his Journal,

I thought him a greater man than any of his works betray, that there was still a great deal of work in him, and that he might one day show a purer power.⁵⁶

Emerson gives D'Israeli some praise for his cleverness.

D'Israeli is well worth reading; quite a good student of his English world, and a very clever expounder of its wisdom and craft; never quite a master.⁵⁷

In another place Emerson classes E'Israeli's work with the novels of fashion and becomes satirical in the discussion of them:

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55 Vol. III, The Dial: Europe and European Books, pp. 511-512.

56 Journals, Vol. X, p. 40.

57 Complete Works, Vol. VI, "Culture", p. 561.

The novels of fashion of D'Ibraeli, Mrs. Gore, Mr. Ward, belong to the class of novels of costume, because the aim is purely external success. Of the tales of fashionable life, by far the most agreeable and most efficient was Vivian Grey. Young men were and still are the victims. Byron ruled for a time, but Vivian, with no tithe of Byron's genius, rules longer. One can distinguish the Vivians in all companies. They would quiz their father and mother and lover and friend. They discuss sun and planets, liberty and fate, love and death, over the soup. They never sleep, go no where, stay no where, eat nothing, and know nobody, but are up to anything...., Festus-like, Faust-like, Jove-like, and could write an Iliad any rainy day, if fame were not such a bore.⁵⁸

In contrast to the novels of fashion, Emerson places Wilhelm Meister with the novels of character and praises it highly in comparison with those of costume. He says in the same volume,

But the other novel, of which Wilhelm Meister is the best specimen, the novel of character, treats the reader with more respect; the development of character, being the problem, the reader is made a partaker of the whole prosperity. Every thing good in such a story remains with the reader when the book is closed. A noble book was Wilhelm Meister. It gave the hint of a cultivated society

.....

which we found no place else. It was founded on power to do what was necessary, each person finding it an indispensable qualification of membership that he could do something useful.⁵⁹

Emerson tried to like the German novelist, because of Carlyle's fondness for him, but Goethe was worldly. A few examples will make plain that Emerson praised Goethe's prose, as he did his poetry, with moderation:

In reading Meister, I am charmed with the insight; ... I find there actual men and women even too faithfully painted. I am not over instructed in the possibility of a highly accomplished society, and taught to look for great talent and culture under a gray coat. But this is all. The limits of artificial society are never quite out of sight... We are never lifted above ourselves; we are not transported out of the dominion of the senses, or cheered with an infinite tenderness, or armed with a grand trust.⁶⁰

Again, in another volume, he says,

All great men have written proudly, nor cared to explain. They know that the intelligent reader would come at last, and would thank them... Goethe has done this in Meister. We can fancy his saying to himself:-
"There are poets enough of the ideal; let me paint the actual, as, after years of dreams, it will still appear and reappear to wise men."
Yes, O Goethe! but the ideal is truer than the actual.⁶¹

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59 Vol. III, The Dial: Europe and European Books, p. 512.

60 The Dial Vol. I, "Thoughts on Modern Literature," p. 195.

61 Natural History of Intellect: Dial: "Thoughts on Modern Literature," p. 195.

Emerson's admiration of Goethe, then, was qualified by a number of considerations, the leading objection being ethical. In comparing Goethe's novel, Meister, with George Sand's Consuelo, Emerson says,

George Sand, in Consuelo and its continuation has sketched a truer and a more dignified picture.⁶²

Doctor E. W. Emerson, says in the notes of this same volume:

Among the few novels that Mr. Emerson read, he always praised Consuelo.⁶³

Thus we see that novels had little attraction for Emerson. He was fond of mythology, epics, heroic tradition, and biography and they took the place of the novel for him. We have seen that he found no pleasure in Dickens, Thackeray, or Hawthorne. The Waverly novels delighted him as a youth. He read D'Israeli's novels with some interest, but with little real liking. George Sand's Consuelo gave him much pleasure and he alludes to it several times in his writings. His son said concerning his father's reading of novels:

.....

62 Works, Vol. IV, p. 277.

63 Ibid., p. 376.

He read little of Balzac, of Dumas. Charles Reade's Christie Johnstone and Peg Woffington, he read and praised. The Jane Eyre of Miss Bronte he read with some interest.⁶⁴

Though Emerson was not pleased with the novel, he acknowledged that it was the leading type of literary work of his age and predicted a greater future for it.

In his lecture on books he said:

How far off from life and manners and motives the novel still is! Life lies about us dumb; the day, as we know it, has not yet found a tongue. These stories are to be the plots of real life... But the novel will find to our interiors one day, and will not always be the novel of costume merely.⁶⁵

Having discovered Emerson's opinion of novels and novelists, we shall next study his attitude toward other types of prose and prose-writers. Emerson loved the concrete and specific terms; and in his friend, Carlyle, he found superiority in expressing the fact. In the following passage, he reviews, interprets, and gives the aims and philosophy of Carlyle's new book, for the Dial:

Here is Carlyle's new poem, his Iliad to follow his poem on the French Revolution. In its first aspect it is a political

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64 Works, Vol. VIII, Notes by Dr. E. W. Emerson.

65 Ibid., "Books" p. 214.

tract, and since Burke, since Milton, we have had nothing to compare with it. It grapples honestly with the facts lying before all men, groups and disposes them with a master's mind, and, with a heart full of manly tenderness, offers his best counsels to his brothers. Obviously it is the book of a powerful and accomplished thinker, who has looked with naked eyes at the dreadful political signs in England for the last few years, has conversed much on these topics with such wise men of all ranks and parties as are drawn to a scholar's house until such daily and nightly meditations has grown into a great connection, if not a system of thoughts; and the topic of English politics becomes the best vehicle for the expression of his recent thinking recommended to him by the desire to give some timely counsels, and to strip the worst mischiefs of their plausibility. It is a brave and just book, and not a semblance.⁶⁶

Even though he loved the man much and was in sympathy with most of Carlyle's ideals of life as well as his ideals of literature, he felt his friend's limitations. For to him Carlyle was worldly and thus lacking in subject matter. He says in volume II of his Journals:

In Carlyle as in Byron, one is more struck with the rhetoric than with the matter. He has manly superiority

.....

rather than intellectuality, and so makes good, hard hits all the time. There is more character than intellect in every sentence, herein strongly resembling Samuel Johnson.⁶⁷

He adds in a later Journal:

In reading Carlyle's Life of Sterling, I still feel, as of old that the best service Carlyle has rendered is to Rhetoric or the art of writing.⁶⁸

In discussing another contemporary, Emerson is more satirical and lacking in sympathy than with Carlyle, for he found little to admire in Macaulay. In English Traits, he writes:

The brilliant Macaulay, the critic, hides his skepticism under the English cant of practical. To convince the reason, to touch the conscience, is romantic pretension. The fine arts fall to the ground. Beauty except as luxurious commodity does not exist. It is very certain that if Lord Bacon had been only the sensualist his critic pretends, he would never have acquired the fame which now entitles him to his patronage.⁶⁹

Again in his Journals he wrote:

What a notable green-grocer was spoiled to make Macaulay.⁷⁰

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67 Journals, Vol. II, p. 179.

68 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 261.

69 English Traits: "Literature", pp. 234-5.

70 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 402.

Macaulay was provincial:

Great men are universal men,
men of common sense, not provincial.⁷¹

But in his judgment of contemporaries, Emerson realizes difficulties for he says in his lectures on books,

In contemporaries it is not easy to distinguish between notoriety and fame.⁷²

Emerson finds his friend and countryman, Alcott, strong, where the Englishman, Macaulay, was weak, and weak, where Macaulay was strong. He says,

I told Alcott, that I should describe him as a man with a divination or good instinct for the quality and character of wholes: as a man who looked at things in a little larger angle than most other persons, ... but he has the least shop value of any man... He has no wares; he has not wrought his fine clay into vases, nor his gold dust into ingots. All the great masters finish their work to the eye and hand, as well as to Divine Reason; to the shop as well as to the Gods.⁷³

Emerson found much to love and admire in Alcott, the man and teacher, but he could not praise his books. In a letter to Margaret Fuller he writes,

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71 Journals, Vol. X, p. 49.

72 Works, Vol. VIII, "Books", p. 187.

73 "Letter to Margaret Fuller," May 19, 1833.

Mr. Alcott is the great man. His book, "Conversations on the Gospels" does him no justice and I do not like to see it. He is a teacher.⁷⁴

In a letter to Sterling in 1844, Emerson writes of his friend Margaret Fuller's work,

A copy of No. XV of the Dial contains a critique, written by Margaret Fuller, on Strafford, and other children of genius, both yours and other men's. I heartily hope you will find something right and wise in my friend's judgments, if with something inadequate, and if her pen ramble a little.⁷⁵

Of his friend, Henry Thoreau, he said,

Henry Thoreau we all remember as a man of genius and of marked character... but more widely known as the writer of some of the best books which have been written in this country, and which, I am persuaded, have not yet gathered half their fame. He too was an excellent reader.⁷⁶

In almost direct contrast to Henry Thoreau is a great hero of Emerson's youth - Napoleon, the "Man of the World" as Emerson describes him in Representative Men. Napoleon is to be admired for his great courage as a man, and for his simple, clear-cut narrative style of writing, but he was too worldly to be a genius.

.....

74 "Letter to Margaret Fuller," May 19, 1833.

75 Correspondance of Emerson and Sterling: "Letter to Sterling," Jan. 31, 1844.

76 Works, Vol. XI, "Concord Public Library," p. 500.

His memoirs dictated to Count Mantholon and General Gourgand at St. Helena, have great value, after all the deduction that it seems is to be made from them on account of his known disingenuousness. He has the good-nature of strength and conscious superiority. I admire his clear, simple narrative of his battles; good as Caesar's.⁷⁷

Another favorite writer of the nineteenth century is Charles Lamb. Of him he says,

What a figure is Charles Lamb! so much wit lodged in such a saccharine temperament... How grateful we are to the man of the world who obeys the morale, as in humility, and in the obligation to serve mankind. True⁷⁸ genius always has these inspirations.

A greater even than Charles Lamb, though of another century, who "obeys the morale," is John Milton. For an example of the highest form of goodness, Emerson turns to Milton, whose object, according to Emerson, was to teach, but who poured into his work a sublime sense of beauty, and a lofty sense of truth. He says that "Milton is the most literary man in literature."⁷⁹ Emerson thinks that,

The spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine. The sublime vision comes

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77 Representative Men, Vol. IV, p. 251.

78 Journals, Vol. X, p. 154.

79 Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 369.

to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body.⁸⁰

What a grand man was Milton, so marked by nature for the great Epic Poet that was to bear up the name of these latter times. In "Reason of Church Government urged against Prelaty," written while young, in spirit is already communing with itself and stretching out in its colossal proportions and yearning for the destiny he was appointed to fill.⁸¹

His "Areopagitica"; the discourse addressed to Parliament, in favor of removing the censorship of the press is the most splendid of his prose works... The weight of the thought is equaled by the vivacity of the expression, and it cheers as well as teaches.⁸²

The aspect of Milton, to this generation, will be part of the history of the nineteenth century. There is no name in English literature between his age and ours that rises into any approach to his own... His poems fell unregarded among his country-men in his life time. His prose writings, especially the "Defense of the English People," seem to have been read with avidity. These tracts are remarkable compositions. They are earnest, spiritual, rich with allusion, sparkling with innumerable ornaments; but as writings designed to gain a practical point they fail. They are not effective, like similar productions of Swift and Burke.⁸³

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80 Works, Vol. III, pp. 28-9.

81 Journals, Vol. I, p. 26.

82 Natural History of Intellect: "Milton," p. 148.

83 Ibid., p. 146.

The attraction Emerson found in Montaigne was that he dared to be frank and dared to please himself. Montaigne also had a style which Emerson admired. In one of his early Journals he writes,

Yesterday I delighted myself with Michel de Montaigne. With all my heart I embrace the grand old sloven. He pricks and stings the sense of virtue in me - the wild Gentile stock, I mean, for he has no Grace.⁸⁶

Later Emerson seems to have reacted from his early admiration of Montaigne and even listed him among a class of books not to be read. In an essay on "Inspiration" he said,

You shall not read newspapers, nor politics, nor novels, not Montaigne, nor the newest French book. ...You may read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Milton, O- and Milton's prose or his verse.⁸⁷

Montaigne lacks that which is most vital in Emerson's make-up, spiritual insight. Francis Bacon, the first modern English essayist was also an early favorite of Emerson. During his college life he wrote,

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86 Journals, Vol. III, p. 538.

87 Vol. VIII, Letters and Social Aims, p. 295.

I have been reading the Novum Organum. Lord Bacon is indeed a wonderful writer; he condenses an unrivaled degree of matter into one paragraph; he never suffers himself to swerve from the direct forthright; or to babble or speak unguardedly on his proper topic, and withal writes with more melody and rich cadence than any writer on a similar subject.⁸⁸

It is not only for his style and organization that Emerson liked Bacon, but for his idealism and for his instrumentality in spreading it in England. He says of Bacon,

he drinks of a diviner stream, and marks the influx of idealism into England. Where that goes, is poetry, health and progress.⁸⁹

Emerson also believes with Bacon, that universal principles serve as major premises which have been realized intuitively and not through experiment. Again in English Traits, Emerson says that Bacon

required in his map of the mind, first of all universality, or Prima Philosophia.

But with all this richness, it is to no purpose; he does nothing with it. It leads him nowhere. In one of Emerson's later Journals he says,

.....

88 Journals, Vol. I, p. 26.

89 English Traits: "Literature," Vol. V, pp. 238-9.

This pivotal Lord Bacon, his rules or reform or influence is nothing. He is a bubble of a certain stream of thought, which is of great importance. All his importance is the influx of idealism into England... Bacon had genius and talent... genius looks one way, always is ideal... But he had talents and the common ambition to sell them. ...His treachery to his genius begins as soon as he left the employments he loved, and which enobled him, for the lucrative jobs which the queen or the favorite imposed.⁹⁰

Though Emerson was not satisfied with Bacon, as a man, yet he places him with the great essayists:

Read a poor essayist and one feels humiliated at the poverty of human wit. Read Burton, or Montaigne or Sir Thomas Browne or Bacon and you are in wonder at the profusion of wise observations, which they seem to have barrelled up from the vast common places of mankind.⁹¹

Again Emerson compares Bacon, other English essayists and prose writers with Milton:

Bacon's essays are the portrait of an ambitious and profound calculator, a great man of the vulgar sort... The man Locke is virtuous without enthusiasm and intelligent without poetry. Addison, Pope, Hume, and Johnson, students with very unlike temper and success of the same subject, cannot

.....

90 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 492.

91 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 381.

taken together, make any pretension to the amount or the quality of Milton's inspiration... Lord Chesterfield is unworthy to touch his garment's hem. Franklin is a frugal, inoffensive thrifty citizen, but savors of nothing heroic.⁹²

There is apparently no form of essay or prose composition that Emerson enjoyed reading more than he did criticism, and he especially delighted in the citation of a quotation or in the praise of a piece of literature or of an author that he had already approved. He liked to find his own opinions and criticisms anticipated.

Godd criticism is very rare and always precious. I am always happy to meet persons who perceive the transcendent superiority of Shakespeare over all other writers. I like people who like Plato.⁹³

In his comments on Shakspeare in Representative Men, he says,

Coleridge and Goethe are the only critics who have expressed our convictions with any adequate fidelity.⁹⁴

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92 Natural History of Intellect: "Milton" p. 105.

93 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 142.

94 Representative Men, p. 204.

And he thinks they have praised Shakespeare so highly that the great dramatist is indebted to them for much of the fame he has received.

Even Shakspeare of whom we can believe everything, we think, indebted to Goethe and Coleridge for the wisdom they detect in his Hamlet and Anthony.⁹⁵

Emerson did not care for Coleridge as a poet, but conceded him to be a suprame critic:

Coleridge, a catholic mind with a hunger for ideas; with eyes looking before and after to the highest bards and sages, and who wrote and spoke the only high criticism in his time, is one of those who save England from reproach of no longer possessing the capacity to appreciate what rarest with the island has yielded. Yet the misfortune of his life, his vast attempts but most inadequate performings, failing to accomplish any one masterpiece, - seems to mark the closing of an era.⁹⁶

Emerson measures critics as he does other writers, and as he does books, by comparison:

No book has worth by itself; but by relation to what you have from many other books, it weighs.⁹⁷

He compares Coleridge with Landor and finds in Coleridge adequate expression, precision, and order, a possession in which Landor is lacking:

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95 Works, Vol. VII, p. 47.

96 English Traits; "Literature", p. 248-249.

97 Journals, Vol. III, p. 490.

Landor is a man full of thoughts, but not like Coleridge, a man of ideas. Only from a mind conversant with the first philosophy can definitions be expected. Coleridge has contributed many valuable ones to modern literature. Mr. Landor's definitions are only enumerations of particulars; the generic law is not seized.⁹⁸

Again weighing Coleridge in the same scales with Landor he says,

By recognizing the cardinal principles of unity and variety, a complete insight which brings order out of the previous crudities of conception regarding nature and morals... Coleridge is superior to Landor.⁹⁹

The following quotation, however, shows Emerson's love of reading Landor's dialogues:

After twenty years I still read (Landor's) strange dialogues with pleasure, not only sentences but page after page.¹⁰⁰

Emerson and Landor did not always agree in their evaluation of writers, especially in regard to Southey, Burke, and Socrates. Emerson says in English Traits:

On the fifteenth of May, I dined with Mr. Landor. ...He pestered me with Southey; but who is Southey? ...He undervalued Burke and he undervalued Socrates.

.....

98 Natural History of Intellect: "Landor", p. 346.

99 Ibid., p. 346.

100 Journals, Vol. VI, p. 32.

Landor is strangely undervalued in England; usually ignored and sometimes savagely attacked in the reviews the criticism may be right or wrong, and is quickly forgotten; but year after year the scholar must go back to Landor for a multitude of sentences; for wisdom and wit.¹⁰¹

Landor is admirable for his broad knowledge, for his independence, and for his strong sentences, and according to Emerson, it is to Landor's credit that

He was one of the first to pronounce wordsworth the great poet of the age, yet he discriminates his faults, with the greater freedom. He loves Pindar, Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Demosthenes, Virgil, yet with open eyes. His position is by no means the highest in literature; he is not a poet or philosopher. ... (Yet) Mr. Landor is the most useful of critics. He has commented on a wide variety of writers, with a closeness and extent of view which has enhanced the value of those authors to his readers.¹⁰²

As has been said, in reading reviews and criticism, Emerson had an eye for support and illustrations of his own opinions, and when he found them he rejoiced and recorded them in his Journal:

I read with delight a casual notice of Wordsworth in the London Reader, in which, with perfect aplomb, his highest merits were affirmed.¹⁰³

.....

101 English Traits, pp. 10, 11.

102 The Dial, Vol. II, p. 262.

103 Journals, Vol. X, p. 68.

Of Matthew Arnold's criticism he spoke highly.

In a letter to Carlyle in 1862, he writes:

I delight in Matthew Arnold's fine criticism in two little books.¹⁰⁴

In his Journals, he writes six years later:

Matthew Arnold has the true critical perception and feeling of style, and has shown more insight on that subject than any contemporary. See his "Celts" and his "Homer."¹⁰⁵

In the critic Hallam, Emerson sees his own judgments anticipated as well as Hallam's other literary qualities, both good and bad:

Hallam is a proof of the English prowess today. A good mathematician, the historian of the Middle Ages, and of English liberty; he has written this history of European Literature for three centuries, a vast performance attempting a judgment of every book. He has not genius, but has a candid mind: the Englishman is too apparent, the judgments are all dated from London, and that expansive element which creates literature is steadily denied. Plato is resisted, and Giordano Bruno, Behem, Swedenborg, Donne... Yet he lifts himself to own, better than almost any, the greatness of Shakespeare; and he shows such true gentlemanlike and loving esteem for good books that I respect him. Shall I say it? I often find a nearer coincidence, and find my own opinions anticipated.¹⁰⁶

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104 Correspondence of Carlyle and Emerson, Vol. II, p. 317.

105 Journals, Vol. X. p. 240.

106. Ibid., Vol. VIII, pp. 460-61.

As a final judgment of some of the critics of his day he says,

Landor is a Plutarch again, and there is always a spiritual minority. Thus, in the age of bronze, appeared Wordsworth and Coleridge, and now Wilkinson and Carlyle.¹⁰⁷

He says concerning Sidney, one of the earliest of the English critics:

Sir Philip Sidney is a Platonist and stands well for poetry.¹⁰⁸

Emerson's deep admiration for Plato led him to give especial preference to English literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, because many of the writers were Platonists, and he regarded the English literature of the period as mainly idealistic in character.

He finds in these writings greater freedom, less affectation, greater emphasis, bolder figures and homelier idiom than in modern books.¹⁰⁹

He cites Izaak Walton, a prose writer, as representative of the age:

Izaak Walton and all the writers of his age betray their reading in Greek literature. Plutarch, Plato, and the Greek philosophers, especially of the Stoic sect, nourish them.¹¹⁰

.....

107 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 449.

108 English Traits, "Literature", pp. 240-3.

109 Journals, Vol. V, p. 22.

110 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 449.

Of the Greeks, Emerson praised Plato more highly than any other writer of the intellectual life.

Of him he says,

Out of Plato come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought.¹¹¹

Again he says,

Boethius, Rabelais, Erasmus, Bruno, Locke, Rousseau, Alfieri, Coleridge, each is come reader of Plato, translating into the vernacular, wittily, his good things.¹¹²

But even Plato, the greatest intellect of the Greeks, has his weakness as a man of letters, according to Emerson's high standard. He says in his discussion of Plato in Representative Men,

The defect of Plato in power is only that which results inevitably from his quality. He is intellectual in his aim; and therefore, in expression, literary... He is literary and never otherwise. It is almost the sole deduction from the merit of Plato that his writings have not the vital authority which the screams of the prophets and the sermons of unlettered Arabs and Jews possessed. ...In the second place, he has not a system. He attempted a theory of the universe, and his theory is not complete or self-evident. One man thinks he means this, and another that; he has said one thing in one place and the reverse of it in another place.¹¹³

.....

¹¹¹ Works, Vol. IV, p. 39.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Representative Men, "Plato", pp. 75-76.

The Neo-Platonists were interesting to Emerson as the successive representatives of the stages through which the newer Greek thought passed:

I read Proclus, and sometimes Plato, as I might read a dictionary, for a mechanical help to the fancy and the imagination. I read for the lustres, as if one would use a fine picture in a chromatic experiment, for its rich colors. 'Tis not Proclus but a piece of nature and fate that I explore. It is a greater joy to see the author's author than himself.¹¹⁴

I think the Platonists may be read for sentences, though the reader fails to grasp the argument of the paragraph or chapter. He may yet obtain gleams and glimpses of a more excellent illumination from their genius, outvaluing the most distinct information he ~~owns~~ to other books. For I hold that the grandeur of the impression that the stars and the heavenly bodies make on us, is surely more valuable than our exact perceptions of a tub or a table on the ground.¹¹⁵

After finding that Emerson considers Plato as the greatest intellectual writer of literature, let us see what he has to say concerning the literary status of the different countries. We have seen that America is still unworked, and looking to the future for its literary genius. Of France he says,

.....

114 Works, Vol. III, p. 233.

115 Ibid., Vol. VII, p. 409.

The genius of France has not even in her best days, yet culminated in any one head - not in Rousseau, not in Pascal, ... as to entitle it to any rivalry... In Germany the greatest writers are still too recent to institute a comparison, and yet we are tempted to say that art, not life, seems to be the end of their effort.¹¹⁶

The Germans generalize; the English cannot interpret the German's mind... Burke was addicted to generalizing. Hume's abstractions are not deep nor wise... Doctor Johnson's writings have little value; the tone or feeling in them make their chief worth.¹¹⁷

Emerson considers Doctor Johnson as the representative Englishman:

Johnson, with his force of thought and skill of experience, with his large learning and his true manliness, with his piety and his obstinate narrow prejudices, and withal his rude impulses, is the representative Englishman.¹¹⁸

The poems and histories of the Hebrews cling to the soil, to this globe like the primitive socks.¹¹⁹

.....

116 Natural History of Intellect, p. 105.

117 English Traits, "Literature", p. 232.

118 Journals, Vol. X, p. 212.

119 Lectures and Biographical Sketches, p. 233.

The Greeks were so perfect in action and imagination, their poems from Homer to Euripides, so charming in form and so true to the human mind, that we cannot forget or outgrow their mythology.¹²⁰

In another volume he says,

We are all agreed that we have not on the instant better men to show than Plutarch's heroes. The world is always equal to itself; we cannot yet afford to drop Homer, nor Aeschylus, nor Plato, nor Aristotle, nor Archimedes. Later, each European nation after the breaking up of the Roman Empire, had its Romantic era, and the productions of that era in each rose to about the same height. Take for example in literature the Romance of Arthur in Britain, or in the opposite province of Brittany; the Chanson de Roland in France; the Chronicles of the Cid in Spain; the Niebelungen Lied, in Germany; the Norse Sagas in Scandinavia; and I may add, the Arabian Nights on the African Coast.¹²¹

Thus we see that Emerson loved and admired the Greeks and found among them the greatest literary men of all ages. But not even among them does he find his ideal. A fitting close to a study of his criticism of prose writers is found in the Dial:

.....

120 Lectures and Biographical Sketches, p. 233.

121 Works, Vol. VIII, p. 213.

We have in literature few specimens of magnificence. Plato is the purple ancient, and Bacon and Milton the moderns of the richest strains. Burke sometimes reaches to that exuberant fullness, though deficient in depth; Carlyle, in his strange, half-mad way, has entered the Cloth of Gold, but he is too burly.¹²²

Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man... whom all things await...¹²³

.....

122 works, Vol. IV. "The Dial Papers," p. 96.

· 123 Works, Vol. III, p. 37.

Chap. 4.

(1.)

CHAPTER IV.

EMERSON'S POSITION AS A CRITIC OF LITERATURE.

As has been brought out in the foregoing sections, Emerson was abundantly prepared for his work as a critic of literature; aside from his cultured rearing in the home, his Harvard career, his trips abroad, his personal acquaintance with the leading literary men and women of his day, in two nations, he possessed a private library unequalled by that of many scholars of his time, where he read, sifted, and assimilated what the author had for him and left the rest. John Morley says of Emerson's scholarship:

Though Emerson was always urgent for 'the soul of the world, clean from all vestige of tradition,' yet his work is full of literature. He at least lends no support to the comforting fallacy of the indolent, that originating power does not go with assimilating power. Few thinkers on his level, display such breadth of literary reference. Unlike Wordsworth, who was content with a few tattered volumes on a kitchen shelf, Emerson worked among books. When he was a boy, he found a volume of Montaigne and he never forgot the delight and wonder in which he lived with it. His library is described as filled with

well-selected authors; with curious works from the Eastern world; with many editions in both Greek and English of his beloved Plato; while portraits of Shakespeare, Montaigne, Goethe, Dante, looked down upon him from the walls. 'Produce a volume of Plato, or of Shakespeare, he says... or only remind us of their names; and instantly we come into a feeling of longevity.' That is the scholar's speech.¹

Emerson may be given the same praise as he gave to Landor, as a critic, who has "examined before he has expatiated."²

Again we have noted that he trained himself daily in the art of writing, from childhood, and that he has been concerned about his own and others' style and manner in composition, and these theories he recorded. He wrote an abundance of literary criticism, which may be found scattered through twelve volumes of his 'works' and ten volumes of his Journals. By an examination of the pages of these books we have found that little of his criticism is concerned with the lesser writers. It deals principally with abstractions and literary essentials. But much of it, as we have tried to show, is also concrete and concerned with individual artists and their art. All

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1 The Critic and Good Literature, Vol. I, no. 25, June 21, 1884.

2 Natural History of Intellect: "Landor", p. 347.

deal with central principles, or with the classics of literature, or with outstanding contemporaries. Emerson restates; attacks repeatedly, from various angles, the great questions of art, so that in spite of inconsistencies he may be understood.

According to Emerson the poet and critic are of the same genius.

Criticism is an art when it does not stop at the words of the poet, but looks at the order of his thoughts and the essential quality of his mind. Then the critic is poet. 'Tis a question not of talents but of tone; and not particular merits, but the mood of mind into which one and another can bring us.³

The poets cannot be served by the critics, especially if the criticism is destructive. Poets cannot be forced.

A man of genius or a work of love of beauty will not come to order, can't be compounded by the best rules, but is always a new incalculable result, like health; we must behave as we can.⁴

As has been said, Emerson calls for an absolute criticism, a comparison of the particular work of art with the supreme or ideal art. Emerson asserts

.....

³ Natural History of Intellect, p. 305.

⁴ Ibid.

in the fourth section of Nature, "Language", that
 "Thought is supreme and Nature is its vehicle."⁵

His literary creed, though not formulated into a system, was conscious and fairly definite. He regarded all great art as organic expression and to him it was a fundamental conception capable of answering all questions about the nature and practice of literary composition. In his own practice he recognized deficiencies in the organic law. Yet if he could not observe the rule, he could interpret it; he could see more than he could do. Because of this spiritual insight, Matthew Arnold says,

Emerson is the friend and aider
 of those who would live in the
 spirit. All the points in think-
 ing which are necessary for this
 purpose he takes.⁶

We have seen that Emerson demands unity of thought, word, and tone and that it was his belief that the degree of inspiration may be measured by the work's nearness to this unity. How completely has intuition been realized is the critic's first question, but not the only question. The answer to the first question

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⁵ Works, Vol. I, p. 25.

⁶ Essays in Criticism, p. 381.

determines the 'quantitative' beauty but not the 'qualitative' beauty. It is not enough that the writer should receive impressions and write them; he should question the authority of his impressions, whether inferior or superior, as his reader will do. The critic of art is to consider, then, not only the exterior excellence, but also and even more, the interior excellence or the virtue of truth. The beauty of a work depends upon both, and it is of the highest degree when there is a perfect union of thought and design; form, as we have seen, has a subjective origin. By submitting to the guidance of Nature, and helping her to make herself known, the writer reaches success. This doctrine, perhaps, is taken from the Greeks. According to Butcher, the Greeks held that

Prose, in order to be vital, must have the coherence, the perfection of a living organism. ...It must be clothed with beauty, it must learn a music of its own, and so become imperishable.⁷

With Emerson there must be a perfect union of reality and virtue, and beauty will result. He says,

.....

⁷ Some Aspects of Greek Genius, by H. S. Butcher, p. 195.

This truth, that perfect beauty and perfect goodness are one, was made known to Michael Angelo.⁸

That Emerson had early adopted the classical conception of the ideal in art is shown through^{out} his Journals and in several volumes of his 'Works'. In his first published volume: Nature, he says,

The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth which is beauty, is the aim of both.⁹

Aristotle says that

Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.¹⁰

Again Emerson says in writing of Homer:

It holds through all literature that our best history is still poetry.¹¹

But of all the Greeks, we have seen that Emerson speaks more often and with more enthusiasm of Plato than of any other, principally on account of Plato's doctrine of inspiration, which is found or referred to in nearly every volume of Emerson's writings. Butcher says that

.....

8 Natural History of Intellect, p. 217.

9 Nature: "Idealism", p. 55. (1836)

10 "Definition of Tragedy", by Aristotle. Greek Literary Criticism, by J. D. Dennison, p. 125.

11 Works, Vol. VIII, "Books" p. 197.

Plato "attributes much to inspiration."¹²

Cold allegory makes us yawn, whatever excellence it may have.¹³

We do not listen with much respect to the verses of a man who is only a poet, ... but if the man is at the same time acquainted with the geometrical foundations of things and with their moral purposes, and sees the festal splendor of the day, his poetry is exact.¹⁴

The writer must be inspired, but there is also need of restraint:

The restraining grace of common sense is the mark of all the valid minds, - of Aesop, Aristotle, Alfred, Luther, Shakspeare, Cervantes, Franklin, Napoleon. The common sense which does not meddle with the absolute but takes things as they appear.¹⁵

Nearly all Emerson's artistic principles are derived from what he regarded as the Greek tradition. His own words show that he is not a romantic critic, though at times he is satisfied to accept the terms romantic leaders use and sometimes agrees with their doctrines; he interprets them in his own characteristic manner. He says,

.....

12 Some Aspects of Greek Genius, by H. S. Butcher, p. XXXIV.

13 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 40.

14 Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 43.

15 Works, Vol. III, "Poetry and Imagination," p. 3.

What is popularly called Transcendentalism, among us is idealism, idealism as it appears in 1842.¹⁶

Emerson, in Natural History of Intellect, distinguishes between the romantic and the classic art of writing:

The modern or romantic bears the stamp of caprice, or chance. One is the product of inclination, of caprice; the other carries laws and necessity within itself. The classic unfolds, the romantic adds; the classic should, the romantic would; the classic is healthy, the romantic is sick.¹⁷

Thus, his own words show that he was not a romantic critic, for to him the Middle Ages were barbarous and Calvinistic. He says,

Every poetic mind is a pagan and to this day prefers Olympian Jove, Apollo and the muses and Fates, to all the barbarous indigestion of Calvin and the Middle Ages.¹⁸

The only modern literature that he unreservedly approved was that of the Classical Revival in England. It was a delight with him from his college days on:

What is called the Revival of Letters, or the letting-in of the Hebrew and Greek mind on the Gothic brain, wrought this miracle, and produced the English inspiration which culminated in Shakspeare.

.....

16 Works, Vol. I, p. 329.

17 Natural History of Intellect, p. 203.

18 Journals, Vol. VII, p. 123.

For two centuries England was philosophic, religious, poetic: as that influence declined, it cooled common sense into materialism again, and lost the fine power of transition, of imagination, and of unity; lost profoundness and connection, and a mind with this endowment, like Coleridge, Wordsworth, Swedenborg, is not only ungenial, but unintelligible.¹⁹

Later it is still clear with him that the best English literature is that of the Platonic age. He says,

I find the writing and speaking of Englishmen in Elizabeth's, James', and Charles I, and Charles II's days, to have a greater breadth, and, at the same time, more delicacy with a negligent greatness than any since George I came in.²⁰

He notes that Platonism dies, in the eighteenth century and that classicism of the French mind rules, paying attention to form and losing sight of substance. The tendency of the eighteenth century is to pay more attention to design than to facts; of this fault he concedes exceptions however, to Doctor Johnson and to Burke:

Addison, Pope and Swift played with trappings and not with the awful facts of nature. There is in all the great writers, especially in Dr. Johnson and Burke, occasional perception and representation of the Necessary, the Plain, the True,

.....

19 Journals, Vol. VIII, p. 417.

20 Works, Vol. VIII, p. 544.

the Human; ... but the political changes of the time, ... have shown the nullity of these once highly prized circumstances.²¹

The only exception Emerson made in his rejection of the English Romanticists was Wordsworth, whom he ridiculed in his early manhood. In a letter written at the age of twenty-three to his Aunt Mary, he expressed the feeling that Wordsworth had set out like the

undisciplined minds of the Middle Ages, upon an ill-advised enterprise, immodestly inquisitive in his search for the essence of things. The worthy gentleman gloats over a bullrush, moralizes on the irregularity of one of its fibers and suspects a connection between an excrescence of the plant and its own immortality.²²

By the time he was publishing his papers in the Dial, Emerson had found that according to the high office of the poet Wordsworth had achieved

More for the sanity of this generation than any other writer. ...He once for all forsook the styles and standards and modes of thinking of London and Paris, and the books read there... and wrote Helvellyn and Windermere and the dim spirits which these haunts harbored.²³

.....

21 Journals, Vol. IV, p. 92.

22 Ibid., Vol. II, p. 108.

23 Natural History of Intellect, p. 368.

He now held Wordsworth to be the greatest poet since Milton.

Aside from his love of Wordsworth, his admiration of Coleridge as a critic, and his guarded approval of Goethe, the romantic age holds a small place in his esteem.

Emerson himself, embodied a mingling of the romantic and classical traits. He had an exaggerated love of nature; he sympathized with the romantic tendency in its rejection of tradition; he objected to logical thought and expression; he was an individualist, and in many other ways he apparently belonged to the romantic movement, that still prevailed in his day; nevertheless, the more we study him and his works, the more we are led to believe that he was even more inclined toward the doctrine of Christian philosophy and Greek Humanism. We have seen by his own words that he had a hostile attitude toward the Romantic revival. Turning away from the romanticism of the nineteenth century and the pseudo-classicism of the eighteenth century, he found his examples of great art in the English renaissance, and still more in the ancient world itself, - or rather, in the Greek world; for Rome, as he states, was conquered by the Greeks. He says,

The Greeks surpass all men until they face the Romans, when the Roman character prevails over the Greek genius, which in turn conquers the Romans.²⁴

Thus according to Emerson, Rome never equalled the artistic achievements of her conqueror, and with this great conqueror, he determined to acquaint himself. At the age of sixteen Emerson enters in his first 'Wide World' Journal a resolution to make himself acquainted with the Greek language and antiquities depending upon circumstance. Therefore, in spite of a few romantic tendencies, we must conclude that Emerson was a classic critic of literature. In his essay on "Art and Criticism," Emerson says

Writing is the greatest of arts, the subtlest, and of the most miraculous effect.²⁵

And for this art, he sought in the spirit of Greek humanism a pattern that would lift humanity to "new heights of spiritual grace and dignity without disturbing its strength." He observed that the Greeks through a union of aspiration and restraint held themselves in control and at the same time fixed their vision on ideal beauty, and attained thus a lofty

.....

24 Works, Vol. VIII, p. 318.

25 Natural History of Intellect, p. 283.

serenity; permitting no violence of mirth or wrath or suffering. This was true to human nature.²⁶

When a man is thus centered in harmony with himself, he shows us that

all melancholy, as all passion belongs to the exterior life.²⁷

For the complete life as well as for a perfect piece of literature, Emerson requires truth, beauty, and goodness, and a writer of true vision shows a balance of the three elements. For morals alone, Emerson has an aversion, especially if they are combined with melancholy, or with an inclination to rebuke or preach: "Goodness hath ever a smile."²⁸ And again he says

I have goodies. I hate goodness that preaches. Goodness that preaches undoes itself.²⁹

For an example of the highest form of goodness he turns to Milton,

who has discharged better than any other the office of every great man, namely, to raise the idea of Man in the minds of his contemporaries and to posterity - to draw after nature a life of man exhibiting such a composition of grace, of strength and of virtue, as a poet had not described nor hero lived. Human nature in these

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26 Natural History of Intellect, "The Tragic," p. 412.

27 Ibid., p. 413.

28 Works, Vol. IV, p. 197.

29 Ibid., p. 491.

ages is indebted to him for its best portrait.³⁰

Thus we see that in life as in art, the moral is inseparable from the beautiful; but even though Milton expresses for Emerson the highest form of goodness, he is not for him the ideal poet. He says, as was brought out in the chapter on "poetry";

when we adhere to the ideal of the poet, we have difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary and Homer too literal and historical.³¹

After expressing the facta again and again that the highest form of art is a union of truth, beauty, and virtue, he ends his argument by preferring virtue and calling prophets of God, poets in the 'great sense.' He says,

The Poet should not only be able to use nature as his hieroglyphic, but he should have a still higher power, namely, an adequate message to communicate; a vision fit for such a faculty. Therefore, when we speak of poet in the great sense, we seem to be driven to such examples as Ezekiel, and saint John with their moral burdens; and all those we commonly call Poets become rhymssters and poetasters by their side.³²

.....

30 Natural History of Intellect, "Art", p. 254.

31 Works, Vol. III, p. 37.

32 works, Vol. III, p. 190.

Emerson ends the discussion by concluding that

The supreme value of poetry is to educate us to a height beyond itself, or which it rarely reaches; the subduing mankind to order and virtue.³³

He expresses his discontent with the professional poet.

He says,

The poetic gift we want, but not the poetic profession.³⁴

And in his essay on Shakspeare he calls for a new type of man, the 'poet-priest', a man who will supply all our needs.³⁵ His son, E. W. Emerson, tells us that in a fragment of verse written in his father's journals of 1831, on the yearning of the poet to enrich himself from the Treasury of the Universe, he says,

And if to me it is not given
to fetch one ingot thence
Of that unfading gold of Heaven
His merchants may dispense
Yet well I know the royal mine
And know the sparkle of its ore,
Know Heaven's truth from lies that shine,
Explored, they teach us to explore.³⁶

Thus we see that Emerson, unlike his favorite critic Coleridge, who regarded literature as a work of art to be appreciated on its own merits and for its own

.....

33 Works, Vol. VIII, p. 66.

34 Journals, Vol. VII, p. 98.

35 Representative Men, p. 219.

36 Appendix of Representative Men, p. 197, note 1.

sake, begins with a similar method, but soon comes to value poetry (all literary art) not as literature but chiefly as a reflection of the writer's character and the ethical value of his message.

The subjective process by which intuitive vision and daily experience is changed into literature engaged his attention. In this respect he stands with the Romantic school of critics. The philosophical and introspective attitude was natural to him. Upon this natural bent, he began early to build up a set of principles and literary theories. His judgments were little affected by the public estimation, for he sought to found them on the spiritual and philosophic consciousness, that exists apart from the crowd. The many influences that affected this criterion, as coming from his reading of the critical reviews of his time, the classics and the literature of the Far East, have been discussed. As has been said, his literary creed, though not formulated into a system, was conscious and fairly definite; it consisted mainly of general principles. In discussing good writing in one of his Journals he says

The laws of composition are as strict as those of architecture. In writing there is always a right word and a wrong word, and every other than that is wrong. In good writing every word means something... Words become one with things. Old English writers are the standards, not because they are old, but simply because they wrote well. They deviated every day from other people but never from the truth, and so we follow them. If we write as well, we may deviate from them and our deviations shall be classical.³⁷

The standards of judgments which he applied to the interpretation of authors and their work grew out of his idea of the nature and function of the poet and his poetry, (literature.) That it is the duty of the poet, who is also the teacher and comforter of his fellow men, to console, cheer, and inspire them entered into all Emerson's criticism. To him the poetic gift is the highest of all gifts. The poet must not only "Converse with pure thought, but he must demonstrate it almost to the senses." "His words must be pictures, his verses must be spheres and cubes, to be seen and smelled and handled; his fable must be a good story, and its meaning must hold as of pure truth." He must give to the world the ideal, as it is "truer than the actual." "The poet should not leave the world as

.....

found it."³⁹ In another essay of the same volume he says, "Only that is poetry which cleanses and mans me."³⁹

He sought in books the thoughts he already possessed, or a stimulus to work. He liked that book best which helped him to express such thoughts as, when they were heard or read by others, would in turn benefit them. He disposes of all poetry, all literature, as only preliminary to a higher, spiritual living. Then according to Emerson, all

Criticism must be transcendental, that is, must consider literature ephemeral, and easily entertain the supposition of its entire disappearance. In our ordinary states of mind, we deem not only letters in general, but most famous books parts of pre-established harmony, fatal, unalterable, and do not go behind Moses, Ezekiel and St. John. But man is a critic of all these also.⁴⁰ Criticism is timid... when shall we dare to say, only that is poetry which cleanses and mans me?⁴¹

Thus we shall have to conclude that Emerson though possessing many of the qualities of the great critic, such as a knowledge of his field, a deep and penetrating insight, and ability to weigh and compare one author and his work with another and with the ideal poet; and possessing the courage to express his judgments cannot be placed with the greatest of literary critics because of his ethical bias. He refused to look at

.....

39 "Inspiration" p. 294.

40 Journals, Vol. V. p. 398.

41 Ibid., p. 402.

literature as a literary art, but rated it as secondary or preliminary to spiritual living.

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