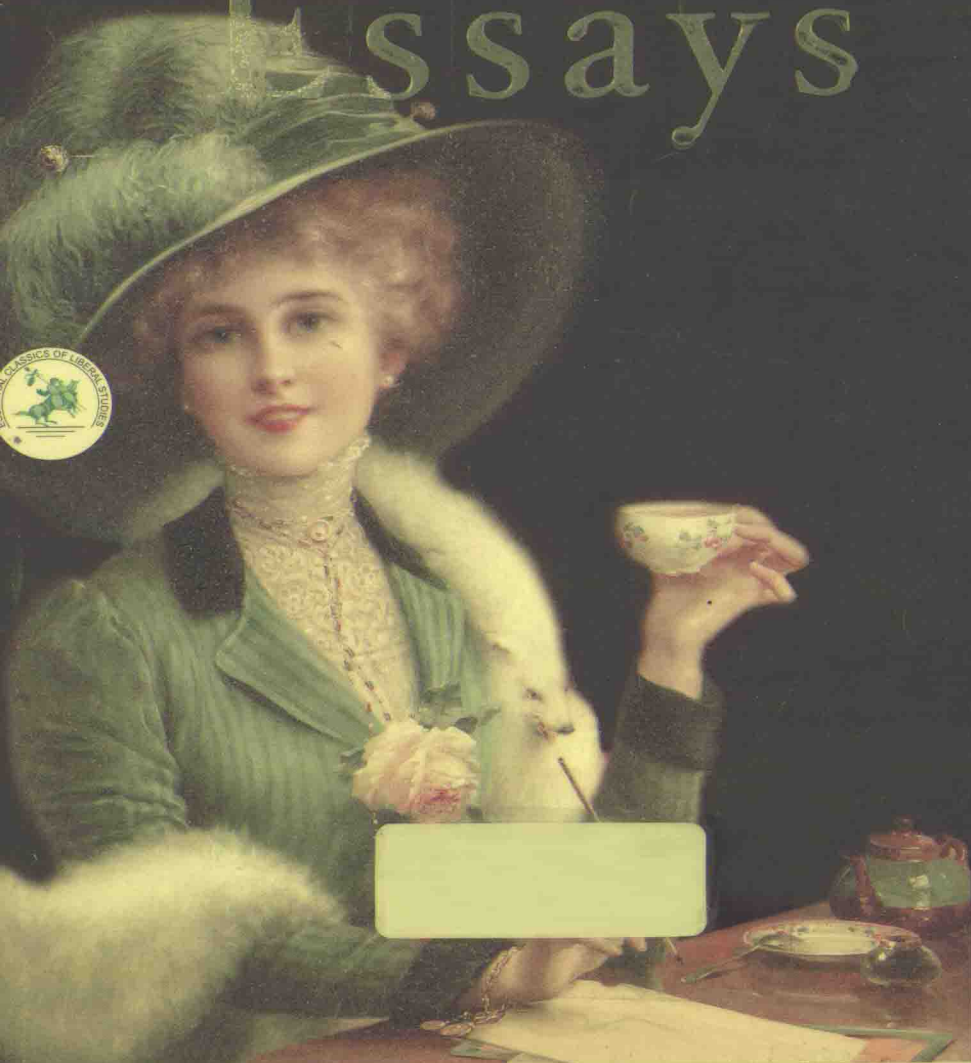


Ralph Waldo
EMERSON

Essays



Central Classics of Liberal Studies



全国百佳出版社
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Essential Classics of Liberal Studies

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INTRODUCTION I

By Editor of Charles E. Merrill Co.

LIFE OF EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson was born in Boston, May 25, 1803. He was descended from a long line of New England ministers, men of refinement and education. As a schoolboy he was quiet and retiring, reading a great deal, but not paying much attention to his lessons. He entered Harvard at the early age of fourteen, but never attained a high rank there, although he took a prize for an essay on Socrates, and was made class poet after several others had declined. Next to his reserve and the faultless propriety of his conduct, his contemporaries at college seemed most impressed by the great maturity of his mind. Emerson appears never to have been really a boy. He was always serene and thoughtful, impressing all who knew him with that spirituality which was his most distinguishing characteristic.

After graduating from college he taught school for a time, and then entered the Harvard Divinity School under Dr. Channing, the great Unitarian preacher. Although he was not strong enough to attend all the lectures of the divinity course, the college authorities deemed the name Emerson sufficient passport to the ministry. He was accordingly "approbated to preach" by the Middlesex Association of Ministers on October



10, 1826. As a preacher, Emerson was interesting, though not particularly original. His talent seems to have been in giving new meaning to the old truths of religion. One of his hearers has said: "In looking back on his preaching I find he has impressed truths to which I always assented in such a manner as to make them appear new, like a clearer revelation." Although his sermons were always couched in scriptural language, they were touched with the light of that genius which avoids the conventional and commonplace. In his other pastoral duties Emerson was not quite so successful. It is characteristic of his deep humanity and his dislike for all fuss and commonplace that he appeared to least advantage at a funeral. A connoisseur in such matters, an old sexton, once remarked that on such occasions "he did not appear at ease at all. To tell the truth, in my opinion, that young man was not born to be a minister."

Emerson did not long remain a minister. In 1832 he preached a sermon in which he announced certain views in regard to the communion service which were disapproved by a large part of his congregation. He found it impossible to continue preaching, and, with the most friendly feelings on both sides, he parted from his congregation.

A few months later (1833) he went to Europe for a short year of travel. While abroad, he visited Walter Savage Landor, Coleridge and Wordsworth, and Thomas Carlyle. This visit to Carlyle was to both men a most interesting experience. They parted feeling that they had much intellectually in common. This belief fostered a sympathy which, by the time they had discovered how different they really were, had grown so strong a habit that they always kept up their intimacy. This year of travel opened Emerson's eyes to many things of which he had

previously been ignorant; he had profited by detachment from the concerns of a limited community and an isolated church.

After his return he began to find his true field of activity in the lecture-hall, and delivered a number of addresses in Boston and its vicinity. While thus coming before the open public on the lecture platform, he was all the time preparing the treatise which was to embody all the quintessential elements of his philosophical doctrine. This was the essay *Nature*, which was published in 1836. By its conception of external Nature as an incarnation of the Divine Mind it struck the fundamental principle of Emerson's religious belief. The essay had a very small circulation at first, though later it became widely known.

In the winter of 1836 Emerson followed up his discourse on Nature by a course of twelve lectures on the "Philosophy of History," a considerable portion of which eventually became embodied in his essays. The next year (1837) was the year of the delivery of the *Man Thinking*, or the *American Scholar* address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Cambridge.

This society, composed of the first twenty-five men in each class graduating from college, has annual meetings which have called forth the best efforts of many distinguished scholars and thinkers. Emerson's address was listened to with the most profound interest. It declared a sort of intellectual independence for America. Henceforth we were to be emancipated from clogging foreign influences, and a national literature was to expand under the fostering care of the Republic.

These two discourses, *Nature* and *The American Scholar*, strike the keynote of Emerson's philosophical, poetical, and moral teachings. In fact he had, as every great teacher has, only a limited number of principles and theories to teach. These



principles of life can all be enumerated in twenty words—self-reliance, culture, intellectual and moral independence, the divinity of nature and man, the necessity of labor, and high ideals.

Emerson spent the latter part of his life in lecturing and in literary work. His son, Dr. Edward Emerson, gave an interesting account of how these lectures were constructed. "All through his life he kept a journal. This book, he said, was his 'Savings Bank.' The thoughts thus received and garnered in his journals were indexed, and a great many of them appeared in his published works. They were religiously set down just as they came, in no order except chronological, but later they were grouped, enlarged or pruned, illustrated, worked into a lecture or discourse, and, after having in this capacity undergone repeated testing and rearranging, were finally carefully sifted and more rigidly pruned, and were printed as essays."

Besides his essays and lectures Emerson left some poetry in which embodied those thoughts which were to him too deep for prose expression. Oliver Wendell Holmes in speaking of this says: "Emerson wrote occasionally in verse from his school-days until he had reached the age which used to be known as the grand climacteric, sixty-three...His poems are not and hardly can become popular; they are not meant to be liked by the many, but to be dearly loved and cherished by the few...His occasional lawlessness in technical construction, his somewhat fantastic expressions, his enigmatic obscurities hardly detract from the pleasant surprise his verses so often bring with them...The poetic license which we allow in the verse of Emerson is more than excused by the noble spirit which makes us forget its occasional blemishes, sometimes to be pleased with



them as characteristic of the writer."

Emerson was always a striking figure in the intellectual life of America. His discourses were above all things inspiring. Through them many were induced to strive for a higher self-culture. His influence can be discerned in all the literary movements of the time. He was the central figure of the so-called transcendental school which was so prominent fifty years ago, although he always rather held aloof from any enthusiastic participation in the movement.

Emerson lived a quiet life in Concord, Massachusetts. "He was a first-rate neighbor and one who always kept his fences up." He traveled extensively on his lecturing tours, even going as far as England. In *English Traits* he has recorded his impressions of what he saw of English life and manners.

Oliver Wendell Holmes has described him in this wise: "His personal appearance was that of the typical New Englander of college-bred ancestry. Tall, spare, slender, with sloping shoulders, slightly stooping in his later years, with light hair and eyes, the scholar's complexion, the prominent, somewhat arched nose which belongs to many of the New England sub-species, thin lips, suggestive of delicacy, but having nothing like primness, still less of the rigidity which is often noticeable in the generation succeeding next to that of the men in their shirt-sleeves, he would have been noticed anywhere as one evidently a scholarly thinker astray from the alcove or the study, which were his natural habitats. His voice was very sweet, and penetrating without any loudness or mark of effort. His enunciation was beautifully clear, but he often hesitated as if waiting for the right word to present itself. His manner was very quiet, his smile was pleasant, but he did not like explosive



laughter any better than Hawthorne did. None who met him can fail to recall that serene and kindly presence, in which there was mingled a certain spiritual remoteness with the most benignant human welcome to all who were privileged to enjoy his companionship."

Emerson died April 27, 1882, after a few days' illness from pneumonia. Dr. Garnett in his excellent biography says: "Seldom had 'the reaper whose name is Death' gathered such illustrious harvest as between December 1880 and April 1882. In the first month of this period George Eliot passed away, in the ensuing February Carlyle followed; in April Lord Beaconsfield died, deplored by his party, nor unregretted by his country; in February of the following year Longfellow was carried to the tomb; in April Rossetti was laid to rest by the sea, and the pavement of Westminster Abbey was disturbed to receive the dust of Darwin. And now Emerson lay down in death beside the painter of man and the searcher of nature, the English-Oriental statesman, the poet of the plain man and the poet of the artist, and the prophet whose name is indissolubly linked with his own. All these men passed into eternity laden with the spoils of Time, but of none of them could it be said, as of Emerson, that the most shining intellectual glory and the most potent intellectual force of a continent had departed along with him."

CRITICAL OPINIONS OF EMERSON AND HIS WRITINGS

Matthew Arnold, in an address on Emerson delivered in Boston, gave an excellent estimate of the rank we should accord to him in the great hierarchy of letters. Some, perhaps, will think

that Arnold was unappreciative and cold, but dispassionate readers will be inclined to agree with his judgment of our great American.

After a review of the poetical works of Emerson the English critic draws his conclusions as follows:

"I do not then place Emerson among the great poets. But I go farther, and say that I do not place him among the great writers, the great men of letters. Who are the great men of letters? They are men like Cicero, Plato, Bacon, Pascal, Swift, Voltaire—writers with, in the first place, a genius and instinct for style...Brilliant and powerful passages in a man's writings do not prove his possession of it. Emerson has passages of noble and pathetic eloquence; he has passages of shrewd and felicitous wit; he has crisp epigram; he has passages of exquisitely touched observation of nature. Yet he is not a great writer...Carlyle formulates perfectly the defects of his friend's poetic and literary productions when he says: 'For me it is too ethereal, speculative, theoretic; I will have all things condense themselves, take shape and body, if they are to have my sympathy.' ...

"...Not with the Miltons and Grays, not with the Platos and Spinozas, not with the Swifts and Voltaires, not with the Montaignes and Addisons, can we rank Emerson. No man could see this clearer than Emerson himself. 'Alas, my friend,' he writes in reply to Carlyle, who had exhorted him to creative work,—'Alas, my friend, I can do no such gay thing as you say. I do not belong to the poets, but only to a low department of literature,—the reporters; suburban men.' He deprecated his friend's praise; praise 'generous to a fault' he calls it; praise 'generous to the shaming of me,—cold, fastidious, ebbing person that I am.'"



After all this unfavorable criticism Arnold begins to praise. Quoting passages from the *Essays*, he adds:

"This is tonic indeed! And let no one object that it is too general; that more practical, positive direction is what we want...Yes, truly, his insight is admirable; his truth is precious. Yet the secret of his effect is not even in these; it is in his temper. It is in the hopeful, serene, beautiful temper wherewith these, in Emerson, are indissolubly united; in which they work and have their being...One can scarcely overrate the importance of holding fast to happiness and hope. It gives to Emerson's work an invaluable virtue. As Wordsworth's poetry is, in my judgment, the most important done in verse, in our language, during the present century, so Emerson's Essays are, I think, the most important work done in prose...But by his conviction that in the life of the spirit is happiness, and by his hope that this life of the spirit will come more and more to be sanely understood, and to prevail, and to work for happiness,—by this conviction and hope Emerson was great, and he will surely prove in the end to have been right in them...You cannot prize him too much, nor heed him too diligently."

Herman Grimm, a German critic of great influence in his own country, did much to obtain a hearing for Emerson's works in Germany. At first the Germans could not understand the unusual English, the unaccustomed turns of phrase which are so characteristic of Emerson's style.

"Macaulay gives them no difficulty; even Carlyle is comprehended. But in Emerson's writings the broad turnpike is suddenly changed into a hazardous sandy footpath. His thoughts



and his style are American. He is not writing for Berlin, but for the people of Massachusetts...It is an art to rise above what we have been taught...All great men are seen to possess this freedom. They derive their standard from their own natures, and their observations on life are so natural and spontaneous that it would seem as if the most illiterate person with a scrap of common sense would have made the same...We become wiser with them, and know not how the difficult appears easy and the involved plain.

"Emerson possesses this noble manner of communicating himself. He inspires me with courage and confidence. He has read and seen but conceals the labor. I meet in his works plenty of familiar facts, but he does not employ them to figure up anew the old worn-out problems: each stands on a new spot and serves for new combinations. From everything he sees the direct line issuing which connects it with the focus of life....

"...Emerson's theory is that of the 'sovereignty of the individual.' To discover what a young man is good for, and to equip him for the path he is to strike out in life, regardless of any other consideration, is the great duty to which he calls attention. He makes men self-reliant. He reveals to the eyes of the idealist the magnificent results of practical activity, and unfolds before the realist the grandeur of the ideal world of thought. No man is to allow himself, through prejudice, to make a mistake in choosing the task to which he will devote his life. Emerson's essays are, as it were, printed sermons—all having this same text...The wealth and harmony of his language overpowered and entranced me anew. But even now I cannot say wherein the secret of his influence lies. What he has written is like life itself—the unbroken thread ever lengthened through the addition of the small events which make up each day's experience."



Froude in his famous "Life of Carlyle" gives an interesting description of Emerson's visit to the Carlyles in Scotland:

"The Carlyles were sitting alone at dinner on a Sunday afternoon at the end of August when a Dumfries carriage drove to the door, and there stepped out of it a young American [14] then unknown to fame, but whose influence in his own country equals that of Carlyle in ours, and whose name stands connected with his wherever the English language is spoken. Emerson, the younger of the two, had just broken his Unitarian fetters, and was looking out around him like a young eagle longing for light. He had read Carlyle's articles and had discerned with the instinct of genius that here was a voice speaking real and fiery convictions, and no longer echoes and conventionalisms. He had come to Europe to study its social and spiritual phenomena; and to the young Emerson as to the old Goethe, the most important of them appeared to be Carlyle...The acquaintance then begun to their mutual pleasure ripened into a deep friendship, which has remained unclouded in spite of wide divergences of opinion throughout their working lives."

Carlyle wrote to his mother after Emerson had left:

"Our third happiness was the arrival of a certain young unknown friend named Emerson, from Boston, in the United States, who turned aside so far from his British, French, and Italian travels to see me here! He had an introduction from Mill and a Frenchman (Baron d'Eichthal's nephew) whom John knew at Rome. Of course, we could do no other than welcome him; the rather as he seemed to be one of the most lovable creatures in himself we had ever looked on. He stayed till next day with us, and talked and heard to his



heart's content, and left us all really sad to part with him."

In 1841 Carlyle wrote to John Sterling a few words apropos of the recent publication of Emerson's essays in England:

"I love Emerson's book, not for its detached opinions, not even for the scheme of the general world he has framed for himself, or any eminence of talent he has expressed that with, but simply because it is his own book; because there is a tone of veracity, an unmistakable air of its being his, and a real utterance of a human soul, not a mere echo of such. I consider it, in that sense, highly remarkable, rare, very rare, in these days of ours. Ach Gott! It is frightful to live among echoes. The few that read the book, I imagine, will get benefit of it. To America, I sometimes say that Emerson, such as he is, seems to me like a kind of New Era."

John Morley, the acute English critic, has made an analytic study of Emerson's style, which may reconcile the reader to some of its exasperating peculiarities.

"One of the traits that every critic notes in Emerson's writing is that it is so abrupt, so sudden in its transitions, so discontinuous, so inconsecutive. Dislike of a sentence that drags made him unconscious of the quality that French critics name *coulant*. Everything is thrown in just as it comes, and sometimes the pell-mell is enough to persuade us that Pope did not exaggerate when he said that no one qualification is so likely to make a good writer as the power of rejecting his own thoughts...Apart from his difficult staccato, Emerson is not free from secondary faults. He uses words that are not only odd, but vicious in construction; he is sometimes





oblique and he is often clumsy; and there is a visible feeling after epigrams that do not always come. When people say that Emerson's style must be good and admirable because it fits his thought, they forget that though it is well that a robe should fit, there is still something to be said about its cut and fashion... Yet, as happens to all fine minds, there came to Emerson ways of expression deeply marked with character. On every page there is set the strong stamp of sincerity, and the attraction of a certain artlessness; the most awkward sentence rings true; and there is often a pure and simple note that touches us more than if it were the perfection of elaborated melody. The uncouth procession of the periods discloses the travail of the thought, and that, too, is a kind of eloquence. An honest reader easily forgives the rude jolt or unexpected start when it shows a thinker faithfully working his way along arduous and unworn tracks. Even at the roughest, Emerson often interjects a delightful cadence. As he says of Landor, his sentences are cubes which will stand firm, place them how or where you will. He criticised Swedenborg for being superfluously explanatory, and having an exaggerated feeling of the ignorance of men. 'Men take truths of this nature,' said Emerson, 'very fast;' and his own style does no doubt very boldly take this capacity for granted in us. In 'choice and pith of diction,' again, of which Mr. Lowell speaks, he hits the mark with a felicity that is almost his own in this generation. He is terse, concentrated, and free from the important blunder of mistaking intellectual dawdling for meditation. Nor in fine does his abruptness ever impede a true urbanity. The accent is homely and the apparel plain, but his bearing has a friendliness, a courtesy, a hospitable humanity, which goes nearer to our hearts than either literary decoration or rhetorical unction. That modest and lenient fellow-feeling which gave such charm to his companionship breathes