EMERSON'S PERSONALITY.

THE death of Emerson rounds into a perfect orb one of those radiant lives scattered at wide intervals through history, which become the fixed stars of humanity. A youth of purest, fiery aspiration, a manhood devoted to the eloquent exposition in word and act of moral truths, an old age of serene benevolence —in his case the traditional fourscore years allotted to our kind were literally passed upon the heights, in daily familiarity with ideas and emotions which are generally associated only with moments of exaltation. His uncompromising devotion to Truth never hardened into dogmatism, his audacious rejection of all formalism never soured into intolerance, his hatred of sham never degenerated into a lip-protest and a literary trick, his inflexible moral purpose went hand in hand with unbounded charity. In him the intellectual keenness and profundity of a philosopher, and the imagination of a poet, were combined with that child-like simplicity and almost divine humility which made him the idol of his fellow-townsmen and the easily accessible friend of the ignorant and the poor. No discrepancy exists between his written words and the record of his life. He fought his battle against error and vice, not with the usual weapons of denunciation and invective, but by proclaiming in speech and deed the beauty of truth and virtue. He has founded no school, he has formulated no theory, he has abstained from uttering a single dogma, and yet his moral and intellectual influence has made itself felt as an active and growing power for highest good over the whole breadth of the continent. It is not my purpose to criticise his literary achievement, nor to estimate his value as poet and essayist; I shall simply endeavor to indicate, however inadequately, the genius of his personality.

Probably few American readers are unacquainted, through photograph, portrait, or written description, with Emerson's outward characteristics: the tall, spare figure, crowned by the small head carrying out, with its bird-like delicacy and poise, the aquiline effect of the beaked nose and piercing eyes. But no art can reproduce the luminous transparence, as it were the sun-accustomed gaze, of those unforgettable eagle eyes, nor the benign expression of smiling wisdom which in his old age transfigured his naturally rugged features. This expression revealed something brighter than resignation or even cheerfulness: it was the external sign of a spirit that had faced without shrinking the problems of existence, had suffered with the poet's two-fold suffering, as keenly through sympathy as through experience—and that none the less found only a pledge of joy in the beauty of life and the promise of death. "That which was ecstasy had become daily bread." His very presence seemed like a benediction to those who saw him pass through the streets and outlying fields of his beloved town. To complete this general sketch of his appearance, it may be added that his coloring was Saxon; the effect of the inward light which tempered the austerity of his vigorously molded countenance was not a little enhanced by the freshness of complexion which he retained almost to the end, by the clear gray-blue of his eyes, and the dry, twinkling humor of his smile. His manner toward strangers, while extremely simple, was marked by an exquisite suavity and dignity which peremptorily, albeit tacitly, prohibited undue familiarity or conventional compliment. Sought after as he was, particularly during recent years, by literary novices who saluted him as master, and pestered, like all prominent persons, by visits and letters from the ordinary notoriety-mongers, he found no occasion to resort to inveterate exclusiveness or repelling harshness. He seemed indeed to hit upon the happy medium between that amiable weakness which has made the approval of some elderly poets considered equivalent to a "brevet of mediocrity," and that impenetrable self-absorption which on the other hand shuts out many great minds in advancing age from sympathy with a rising generation. He never acknowledged the receipt of works sent to him by authors, unless he could offer them encouragement, preferring to disappoint them by his silence rather than by his dispraise. Let me not be understood as implying that his literary judgment was infallible. The strong religious bias of his nature necessarily developed in him certain idiosyncrasies of taste and opinion. For him, Shelley and Poe were distinctly not poets; he had little or no acquaintance with Heine, and I am inclined to think, though of this I have no positive knowledge, that Swinburne's name was similarly absent from his list of singers. On the other hand, in defiance of all æsthetic canons, very inferior as well as obscure writers might be exalted by him to a dizzy eminence,

almost lifted into immortality, by one of his golden sentences, simply because such a writer had struck or tried to strike that note of moral aspiration with which every chord of Emerson's great heart throbbed in unison. And his praise, when he bestowed it, was royal, almost overpowering the recipient by its poetic hyperbole. His friends and correspondents had to make liberal allowance for this splendor of enthusiasm which led him to magnify the merits of others, and for his peculiar eloquence, which adorned them with ideal loveliness, and which flowed as freely in his familiar letters and his serious conversation as in his books and lectures. Within the sharply defined limits fixed by his temperament, he was one of the most searching, discriminating, fresh, and delicate of critics. With his penetrating vision and glowing imagination, he gave us new insight into the genius of Plato, Plutarch, Shakspere, Milton, Goethe, Burns, and many others concerning whom the final word seemed long since uttered. He invariably lifted us up to a higher point of observation of the most familiar objects. And in estimating the worth of a new production, his clear judgment (always within the above-mentioned limitations) seemed little less than oracular. On one occasion, only a few years ago, a friend consulted him for advice in regard to the poems of a then unknown writer, who has since won high recognition. The manuscript was read to him in the presence of two or three persons of culture and intelligence; the poems were crude, rugged, and strongly individual. So strange and uncouth did they seem that, when the reader ceased, no one else present had been able to form the vaguest opinion as to their artistic value; but Mr. Emerson himself, without pause or hesitancy, gave utterance to a criticism so incisive and comprehensive as to supply in the briefest compass all the advice and encouragement which the young poet needed at the time. "No discouragement must damp his ardor," concluded Mr. Emerson, "no rebuff be sufficient to quell this impulse which urges him to write. A single voice in his favor should be enough to support him till he attain the mastery of style and taste which shall complete and perfect his gift. Indeed, a single voice is more than I had myself as a beginner," he added with his wise, subtle smile. "My friends used to laugh at my poetry, and tell me I was no poet."

Rigorously as he insisted upon the moral element in art, he was also a passionate admirer of beauty of form. He delighted in that unsurpassable master of form, Petrarch, and set a very high value upon the technical finish of Tennyson, "some of whose single words," he said, "were poems in themselves." Careful to fastidiousness in his own choice of words, he was a severe arbiter, and could not endure a feeble or inadequate epithet. His poems have been censured for their formlessness, but their peculiarities of structure arise in no instance from negligence, but from an essential lack of lyric spontaneity and an over-weight of thought. Indeed, Emerson, as is evinced by his indifference to Shelley, remained ever deaf to pure lyrism; the frank sensuousness of its appeal to the ear rather than to the soul repelled this austere spirit. Nor, even when it addressed the soul through the ear, could he be easily reached through this medium: music was to him a sealed volume. And yet, nowhere in his published works do I find a more eloquent description of the poet's prerogative than in the following words, which I am fortunately enabled to quote from a private letter, wherein he uses the musician's symbols: "I observe that my poet gains in skill as the poems multiply, and may at last confidently say, I have mastered the obstructions, I have learned the rules, and now every new thought and new emotion shall make the keys eloquent to my own and to every gentle ear. Few know what treasure that conquest brings, what independence and royalty. Grief, passion, disaster are only materials of art, and I see a light under the feet of Fate herself." I take the liberty of enriching my page with yet one more quotation from a letter written by Mr. Emerson: "Books are a safe ground and a long one, but still introductory only, for what we really seek is ever comparison of experiences—to know if you have found therein what alone I prize, or, still better, if you have found what I have never found, and yet is admirable to me also. Books so tyrannize over our solitude that we like to revenge ourselves by making them very secondary, and merely convenient as hints and counters in conversation. Yes, and I hold that we have never reached their best use until our own thought rises to such a pitch that we cannot afford to read much. I own this loftiness is rare, and we must long be thankful to our silent friends before the day comes when we can honestly dismiss them."

These brief extracts, selected almost at random, sufficiently prove, by their characteristic force of expression and nobility of tone, what a treasure-mine will be opened to the world if Mr. Emerson's correspondence be published.

I have never met with any allusion in print to Emerson's gift of elocution, and yet no one who heard him read a stanza of poetry

was likely to forget it. He indulged in no elocutionary tricks, no studied intonations, but his voice took on an added sonority, the verse seemed to flow from his lips with a mingled force and sweetness which thrilled through the listener's every fiber. It was my good fortune to hear him read one evening Mr. Stedman's ballad of "Ossawatomie Brown," which was an especial favorite of his. So powerful was the impression created by the subdued organ-tones, the majesty of his delivery, and the heroic ring with which he narrated the stirring tale and chanted the refrain, that I confess to having been then and since utterly unable to form a critical estimate of the poem itself. Whether it be one of the noblest lays ever sung by man, or a modest and unpretentious ballad, I leave it for unbiased critics to determine; for my part, I am glad to give it the full credit of the magical effect produced by its adequate interpretation.

Of late years, the pretty little village of Concord became, as the home of Emerson, the Mecca of many a reverent pilgrim from all parts of America and even of the Old World. To how many thousand youthful hearts had not his word been the beacon—nay more, the guiding star—that led them safely through periods of mental storm and struggle! For the privilege of pressing his hand, of looking into his eyes, men would travel over leagues of land and sea. And when they came from London or San Francisco, from Berlin or St. Petersburg, what did they find? In a modest home, looking out upon orchard and garden, in the midst of wholesome, natural influences, simple, domestic, obedient to every moral law, they saw him whose

"soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart,"

and yet

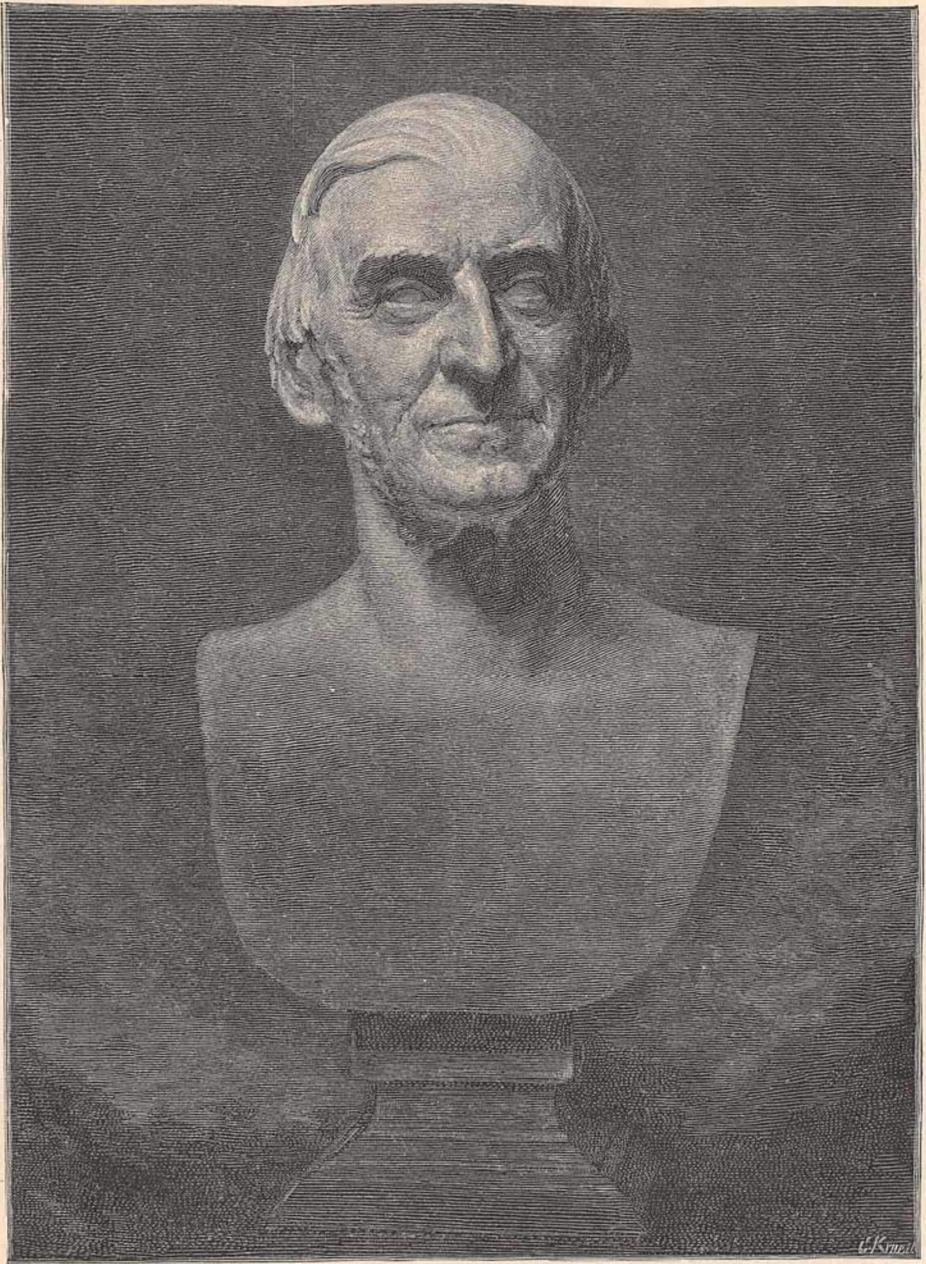
"The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

The closer one drew to that fount of wisdom and goodness, the clearer and brighter did it show. Those who only knew him through his books and appreciated his intellectual power, were prone to think of him as "a man forbid," wrapt in philosophic musings, and formidable of access. The first glance at his benevolent face, which, as Hawthorne said, wore "a sunbeam in it," sufficed to set the shyest at their ease. Nothing but falsehood, flippancy, and affectation need have felt abashed in his presence; for his courtesy, gentleness, simplicity, and boundless hospitality made "nothing that was human alien to his sympathy."

Amidst the turmoil and greed of our modern life, this radiant spirit stood erect and shining as a shaft of light shot from the zenith. All his life long he had insisted upon the infinite force of personality, and he himself proved the living embodiment of his theory. With his lofty idealism, he individually outweighed the contrary evidence of whole townsfull of his fellow-countrymen given up to "the toss and pallor of years of money-making." Had he not the right to say: "In literature, as in life, I believe that the units, or atoms, outvalue the masses"? Let us be thankful that he was not, as some people complain, a man of action. America has never been, and is not likely to be in future, at a loss for men of practical energy, of prompt and decisive deed. But Emerson alone, even if none other comparable to him shall arise again, has conferred upon her the right to smile at the reproach of being absorbed in a rank materialism. Nor is it too much to say that he was the inspirer and sustainer of countless heroes of some of the bravest deeds in our history.

He is the splendid antithesis of all that is mean and blameworthy in our politics and pursuits, for he also is the legitimate outcome of American institutions, and affords an eternal refutation of the fallacy that democracy is fatal to the production and nurture of the highest chivalry, philosophy, and virtue.

Emma Lazarus.



R Waldo Emerson