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ESSAYS

LECTURES AND ORATIONS.

BY

RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

"Thus deeply drinking in the soul of things
We shall be wise perforce."

WORDSWORTH.

LONDON:

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EMERSON AND HIS WRITINGS.

ON introducing to the public the present edition of these Essays and Orations of Emerson, some notice of their gifted author may not be unacceptable. His life, indeed, like that of many literary men, although rich in that mental history which may be read in his works, has in it few external incidents that demand special notice from the biographer.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON was born in 1803, at Boston, U. S. There seems a fitness in that being the native city of Emerson, which is not only the most intellectual of the Union, but has long been distinguished as the soil in which those opinions and tendencies that characterize his writings have taken deepest root. From his boyhood he seems to have exhibited the same original and thoughtful turn of mind that marks his later years. He made considerable proficiency in his studies, and took his degree, as Bachelor of Arts, at Harvard University, in his 18th year. He now began to devote some attention to theological pursuits. Holding a very exalted idea of the duties and responsibilities of the religious teacher, he had for some time felt a strong and growing dissatisfaction with the views of faith and practice generally inculcated in the pulpits of New England. His active and inquiring mind gave itself freely up to the investigation of theology; and this, at length, terminated in his becoming pastor of an Unitarian congregation in Boston. But a difference of opinion, that might have easily been foreseen in a mind like that of Emerson, with its dislike and impatience of mere forms, and indifference to "minor points and dogmas dim," arose between the pastor and his flock. The result was the resignation, by the former, of his ministerial charge. He now began to devote himself with greater ardour to purely literary pursuits, and accumulated those stores of learning, the variety and richness of which so frequently surprise and please us in his writings.

A few years ago, Emerson made the tour of Europe. Some of his

Essays had already preceded him, and obtained for him a ready welcome from several of the most eminent men of literature and science, both here and on the Continent; among others, from our own Wordsworth, a mind in some degree kindred.

Since that period he has continued chiefly to reside in comparative retirement at Concord, in Massachussets. Here have been penned the children of many a thoughtful ramble, amid the calm and beautiful Nature, to him so instinct with poetry and expression—most of those compositions that have long delighted us. From fortune Emerson has, we believe, received enough to place him beyond that thick and feverish atmosphere, where the freedom and honesty of the scholar gradually perish in his struggles with poverty, till he sinks into the mere caterer for the vulgar appetites of the hour. Part of his time is occupied in editing the "Dial," a review of considerable talent, and the American organ of transcendental views. An occasional address at the celebration of some literary festival, in one or other of the neighbouring towns, constitutes nearly the whole of his public life. To these opportunities, however, we are indebted for some of his most popular and successful efforts.

His Essays, which, like the writings of Montaigne, might often be called soliloquies, so completely are they coloured by the personality of the writer, dwell chiefly on the great topics of life, such as love and friendship, nature and history, self-reliance, heroism, and intellect, as they present themselves to the individual mind; as they can give it helps and admonitions, whereby it may attain a clearer vision, a nobler spiritual growth. All things he views in this aspect. What hopes, what new insight into the "method of nature," what inspiration they can give him, is the sole measure of their worth. Thus, physical appearances only become of interest as media for teaching certain spiritual truths, and to the same eye, however diverse they may seem, they but repeat the same lessons.

His lectures and orations occasionally take a more popular topic for their subject, such as *The Conservative*, *Man the Reformer*, *Man Thinking*, and others.

With Emerson the great study, to which all science and inquiry should converge and minister, is the knowledge, the training, the development, of whatever is most manly in the man—most noble and enduring in the human soul. With him, the chief disgrace in the world is, "not to be an unit; not to be reckoned one character; not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear; to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand of the party, the section, to which we belong; and our opinion predicated geographically, as the north or the south." And to further this formation of a high individual character is

his chief aim. He has no full and exact system of metaphysics, nor seeks to class the mental powers with phrenological accuracy; scarcely indeed stops to inquire into the details of how we shall train up those faculties which it may please the philosophers to assign us; but he pours out, in continuous stream, the wealth of his own experience, in full faith, that, to many a poor brother struggling towards the light, these revelations of the manner in which the world and human life appear to, and affect, a solitary New England thinker, cannot fail to have some interest for him also, and may, perhaps, incite him anew to hopeful and earnest effort.

In explaining and enforcing still further his leading idea, the lessons Emerson most frequently inculcates are these: that, under all circumstances, we should possess a grand self-reliance, coupled with a reverent attention and obedience to the voice of our moral nature—that, heedless of mere custom and courtesy, wealth or ease, we should strive to attain a noble simplicity, and truthfulness of life and language—that, while books and teachers, facts and systems, may aid us much, they must ever be servants, to aid us if they can, but in no case masters, to mould our free and natural thoughts into their forms—and that, above all, we should keep our minds in a constant state of receptivity for that divine thought or idea, which, underlying the sensuous appearances and mechanical uses of things, has for us manifold teachings, that are the truest and highest ends of this “real work-day world.” Only in proportion to a man’s reception of the voice of Deity, thus speaking, is he great, is he true, in impulse and action; does he stand in unison with the order of the universe.

Not the least attractive portion of Emerson’s writings are those Essays in which he comments on our social and domestic life. He delights to note that, despite all our selfishness, we have more real kindness than is ever spoken; and to him the affections are so divine and deifying—can so gild and gladden, and carry out the soul to so great heights of grandeur and heroism, and can impart so full and serene a pulse to our existence, that he, too, refuses the task of deciding the old quarrel for precedence between the Cherubim who know most, and the Seraphim who love most. The soul that would make its alliances hallowed and enduring must rest them on a common harmony and nobleness of nature between itself and its object; must neither be desirous to intrude its own partialities and dislikes on its friend, nor show a smooth and hollow compliance towards his, and, in conserving its own freedom and plainness of speech, respect them in him, also.

With Emerson, the sentiment of duty stands neither upon tradition nor common agreement, on the principle of “utility,” or “the preponderance of the moral sentiments acting with enlightened intellect.” For