

ENTERING ON LIFE

A BOOK FOR YOUNG MEN

BY

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NEW YORK

JOHN B. ALDEN, PUBLISHER.

1887

I." "As if," says he, "he had said, All is for the soul, and the soul is Vishnu; and animals and stars are transient paintings, and light is whitewash . . . and heaven itself a decoy." Elsewhere he gives his estimate of himself, thus: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God." Can you make any sense of this? Is there any sense in it?

It is a favorite theme with our new religion that whatever is not new in our faith is worthless, as if morals grew old and truth decayed. Carlyle exalts the Bible, but hardly makes it a rule of faith. Mr. Emerson asks "why we should grope among the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe?" but it is an awkward question for himself after his quotations from Vishnu and the like as his confessions of faith. To reject the Bible as old and then turn to Hindooism provokes a smile.

The new creed heartily adopts Hegel's deification of man. "Empedocles," says Mr. Emerson, "undoubtedly spoke a truth of *thought* when he said, 'I am God.'" "That which shews God outside of me makes me a wart and a wen." "So much of nature as man is ignorant of, so much of *his own mind* does he not yet possess." There is indeed no reality but human thought—all we see is but an appearance and dream; our ideas are the only truth; they are the one divine fact—that is, God. There is no God besides man. This is the reasoning—not very much worth after all—by which Mr. Emerson follows Hegel like his shadow.

"In his mind all creation is duly respected
As parts of himself—just a little projected;
And he's willing to worship the stars and the sun,
A convert to—nothing but Emerson.
Life, Nature, Love, God, and affairs of that sort,
He looks at as merely ideas; in short,
As if they were fossils stuck round in a cabinet,
Of such vast extent that our earth's a mere dab in it;
Composed just as he is inclined to conjecture her,
Namely, one part pure earth, ninety-nine parts pure
lecturer."*

* J. R. Lowell.

The new religion, having turned its back on revelation, finds no rest in any one system. It wears a motley show of speculation, borrowed, like Falstaff's linen, from a great many hedges. Germany will not do without the addition of India. As Lord Houghton said of Harriet Martineau, it believes anything, provided it be not in the Bible. It is half inclined to believe in Transmigration. As the Brahmin fancies he existed in other forms on earth before the present life, and that, unless specially pleasing to Brahma, he will have still further migrations hereafter, so Mr. Emerson speaks of "the Deity sending each soul into nature, to perform one more turn through the circle of beings"—language which a Hindoo would think very orthodox. "The soul," says he, "having been often born, is, as the Hindoos say, 'travelling the path of existence through thousands of births'—having beheld the things which are here, those which are in heaven, and those which are beneath, there is nothing of which she has not gained the knowledge; no wonder that she is able to recollect, in regard to anything, what she formerly knew." This is simply the Brahmin doctrine of Transmigration, jumbled up with the fancy of Socrates—his long-vanished dream of reminiscence, dead these two thousand years, but raised again to turn a sentence, and add a touch of mysteriousness.

There is something very sad in the following confession of darkness and ignorance, after all the wild talk of our being "part of God," as to our future destiny. "I cannot tell if these wonderful qualities which house to-day in this mortal frame, shall ever re-assemble in equal activity in a similar frame, or whether they have before had a natural history like that of this body you see before you; but this one thing I know, that these *qualities* did not now begin to exist, cannot be sick with my sickness, nor buried in any grave; but that they circulate through the universe." The confidence of one page is lost in the other; bold dogmatizing fades into timorous doubt, until we are left by

this new dispensation in blank ignorance and uncertainty as to eternity. John Sterling can only shut out the questions that meet him in his slow-dying, and "sit on the lid" till he has found the answer, beyond. Emerson, hoping at one moment for transmigration and final absorption, falters the next, and owns that the darkness is too deep for his vision. Compared with this, how grand was the dream of Socrates, when he saw a beautiful and majestic woman, clad in white, approaching him as he lay in prison, about to die, cheering him by the words, "Socrates, three days hence you will reach fertile Phthia."* But especially, compared to this, how unspeakably grand the composure with which Christianity looks on death, and turns the close of life into a triumph! Set over against it the chant of St. Paul, like the cry of land after a weary and stormy voyage, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." How immeasurably nobler, more consoling, and more true to the instinctive longings of nature, than to be coldly told, "The individual is ascending out of his limits into a catholic existence," or that "Death is but the return of the individual to the infinite." It is a poor result of so much philosophy, to tell me that I am like a raindrop, destined presently to fall into the ocean, or, like a wave rising from the great waste of waters, never distinct from them, and even now sinking back into their bosom. It is little to me to be told that, though I must cease to be, nature will continue the same, and that all that lives is only a cloud, which the ocean gave, but will soon reclaim, or that all the universe, seen and unseen, is like the little shells cast out from the depths of the shoreless sea; seen for an hour—but to be washed back again by retiring tides. If not in

* A name, from a fertile district of Greece, for region of future happiness.

these words, at least in their full meaning, our new religion annihilates man and makes nature an unconscious soul—an unintelligent intelligence!

Freedom of the will, which alone redeems our nature from mere mechanical instincts, and makes us at once accountable and rational, has no place in this school. Since "the human race is God in distribution," no power from without can influence us either for good or evil. We must act, by a necessity of our constitution, as we do, and since we have no separate personality, we can have neither control nor responsibility. "Let man learn," says Mr. Emerson, "that he is here, not to work, but to be worked upon." "The spiritualist"—that is not the spirit-rapper, but the idealist of Mr. Emerson's school—"cannot bring himself to believe either in Divine Providence or in the immortality of the soul." This ghastly gospel knows no hope. For immortality it gives us annihilation; for moral freedom it proclaims only the irresponsible working of blind machines; and for Providence we have Fate, which grows over us like grass—that is, as the grass grows over the helpless dead! Is this the new revelation? Nothing beyond this life, and nothing in it better than to be crushed under the wheels of inexorable destiny! It reminds one of the agonies of the old Roman epitaphs, in which broken hearts and crushed hopes, in their poor Pagan desolation, bewail and reproach cruel death and remorseless doom. For ourselves we prefer the God and the future Christianity.

The different qualities of actions necessarily cease with the extinction of free will. To do right, or to do wrong, carries no blame. As with the old Stoics, evil is a misfortune, or a disease of the mind, as fever might be of the body. Indeed, Mr. Emerson plainly tells us that there is no such distinction as that of right and wrong. "Ethics," he says, "degrade nature," as does also "religion." "The less we have to do with our sins the better." "Evil is good in the making—the Divine effort is never

relaxed; the carrion in the sun will convert itself into grass and flowers; and man, *though in brothels, or gaols, or on gibbets, is on his way to all that is good and true.*" A fine world this would make, if acted on! After this, "Queen Mab" and "Don Juan" ought to be submitted to the Religious Tract Society as eminently moral. What parallel is there between carrion turning to flowers, and the relations of vice to virtue? Carrion and flowers are the same matter in different combinations; the one is as good as the other of its kind; but evil and good are opposites. To say that the west is the east "in making," or that cold is heat in "the making," or darkness, light, would be to the point, but not the absorption by a plant of its appropriate food. We are favored with repeated warnings against thinking that there is anything in a worthy life. "Nature," we are told—that is, all the god there is—"is no saint. . . . She comes eating and drinking and *sinning*. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of the law, do not come out of the Sunday-school, nor weigh their food, nor punctually keep the commandments." The entertainment of the "proposition of depravity," it seems, "is the last profligacy and profanation." What can all this mean? Do "ethics"—that is, principles of morals—"degrade nature?" If so, no virtue should be taught; no duty insisted on. Henceforth, cannibals and philosophers alike are to look upon morals as a degradation of their nature. They may act wisely or selfishly, if they like, for their own good, but there is no right and wrong to guide them. Thompson was right in speaking of God as "from seeming evil still educating good," but to say that evil and good are two names for the same thing, is an outrage on all our moral instincts. If it be true that man, though in brothels, or gaols, or on gibbets, is on his way to all that is good and true, morality is of no account, vice is as good as virtue; theft and all crime, as good as their opposites, and is as well for a man to die by the halter ~~after~~

life of infamy, as to end life in honor after a career of public and private excellence! But, however this Atheistic Fatalism may shock most people, Mr. Emerson not only teaches it in words of his own, but enforces it by a quotation from his favorite Indian divinity, Vishnu:—"I am the same to all mankind. There is not one who is worthy of my love or hatred. They who serve me with adoration, I am in them and they in me. If one whose ways are altogether evil, serve me alone, he is as respectable as the just man; he is altogether well employed; he soon becometh of a virtuous spirit, and obtaineth eternal happiness." It may seem hard to simple minds to conceive how any god can be served by "ways which are wholly evil"—the new religion sees no difficulty. Is crime as much worship as virtue? or, if it ape the postures and words of religion, is that enough? In the one case, the universal sentiment of mankind is outraged; in the other, you have hypocrisy or sound, count as much as sincerity.

No rites or forms of worship of any kind can be expected from a philosophy which gathers into one the worst and the best, with equal approval. Very general instructions alone can be given. We are to let our hearts throb with the throbbing heart of nature, and to commune with the spirits of the stars, and woods, and fields; but what this means we are not informed more closely. One passage alone seems clear enough to quote. "To lead a heavenly life, one is to listen with insatiable ears to the voice which speaks to us from behind, till he rises to an ecstatic state, and becomes careless of his food and of his house, and is the fool of ideas." Or he is "to go and be dumb, and sit with his hands on his mouth, a long, austere Pythagorean lustrum." Christianity says—"Work;" the new religion substitutes mystic dreaming for the healthful medicine of action. To get so heated, it is not said with what, as to forget one's meals, or family duties, and to be the fool of ideas, and, having reached this vacant *idiotcy*, so sit dumb, with our hands on our

mouth for five years, is surely little better than the rule of the Bhagavad Gita—the favorite book of the Hindoos, which Mr. Emerson frequently quotes—that the devotee who can sit for days looking at the point of his nose and thinking of nothing has reached religious perfection.

It might be expected that the new religion wholly rejects such restraints as the positive morals of the Bible. Churches and Sunday-schools are only food for a sneer, and benevolent associations only so many of modes of folly. Prayer is supremely ridiculous. "The dull pray, geniuses are light mockers." The Brahmins of this creed, like their brethren in the East, think him who turns from all other duties that he may give himself up to meditation on Om, a holier man than the pilgrim who wearily toils from afar to fulfil the prescriptions of his faith. "A heavenly life," it appears, is no longer one adorned by practical godliness and breathing its spirit, but the falling into reveries at a landscape, and working ourselves into raptures of sentiment over it.

As all things are only conjurers' counters which may pass for each other without notice, we have startling results in science. We are gravely informed that the reason why natural philosophers know about the substances which they study, is that they are *identical with them*. "*Animated chlorine* knows of chlorine, and animated zinc knows of zinc. Their qualities make his career, and he can variously publish their virtues, *because they compose him*." Perhaps this is an illustration in Mr. Emerson's own case of what he means by a man "becoming the fool of ideas;" certainly it illustrates Addison's theory, that only a thin membrane, sometimes invisible, decides whether one be ranked in that hapless class or turn out a philosopher.

It is a favorite habit with this school to throw the reader off his guard by retaining the words of Scripture when their sense is totally changed; another, to claim for heathenism,

every other system by turns, the same morality, or even doctrines, as Christianity. We are told that Christianity is in Plato's *Phædo*, though any one who has read it knows that it gives, at best, only a dim glimpse of our immortality. But assertion goes for proof with the mass.

A depth of reverential feeling, and a solemnity of thought in the presence of great truths, are marks of all lofty minds. Subdued sorrow runs like low music through real genius. Carlyle shows a deep and earnest sadness in all that concerns the future life, tempered only by strong faith in the goodness of God—a sadness only becoming in a world where "evil, grief, horror, shame, follies, errors, and frailties of all kinds press on the eye and heart." But Mr. Emerson, like Theodore Parker, can treat all that happens to come in his way lightly. He is not awed even by the idea of God, which hushes most men into a reverent silence. He speaks of "God's grand politeness," as if audacity was in place in such a connection. Contrast with this Jonathan Edwards, in spite of his unimaginative cast, so filled with the sense of the Divine Majesty—as he tells us—that he would sit and sing in a low voice to himself in the fields. Or take Milton's hymn put into the mouth of our great parent Adam—which Burke's son died in repeating—or take any of the utterances of lofty souls when gazing on the Divine glory, and the contrast is complete. The new religion quenches the imagination and poisons the heart. With nothing nobler than man or grander than the present, it is chained to the earth, and has only a ghastly smile where faith glows like a seraph. Bad taste and inability to conceive a grand ideal mark both Emerson and Parker. Jesus is a "*hero*," says Emerson, and "we cloy of him as of all such; if we get too much of Him He becomes a *bore at last*." "The universe," we are told, "has three children, which reappear under different names in every system of human thought whether they be called Cause, Operation, and Effect; or, more poetically, Jove, Neptune, Pluto; or, theologically, the Father,

the Spirit, and the Son." Another flower of his rhetoric is as follows: "Meantime, there are not wanting gleams of a better light—occasional examples of the action of man upon nature with his entire force, with reason as well as understanding. Such examples are the traditions of miracles in the earliest antiquity of all nations; the history of Jesus Christ; the achievements of a principle, as in political and religious revolutions, and in the abolition of the slave trade; the miracles of Swedenborg, Hohenlohe, and the Shakers; many obscure and yet contested facts, now arranged under the name of animal magnetism; prayer, eloquence, self-healing, and the wisdom of children." How candid, how delicate, to class together Jesus Christ, Prince Hohenlohe, Anne Lee, and the Spirit-Rappers! How full of profound reflection and wisdom the whole sentence!

Having heard from the lips of its chief apostle the doctrines and characteristics of the new religion—what shall we say of it? Can we accept it as true when tried at the bar of philosophy itself? Assuredly we cannot. The same process of thought by which it reaches the belief that self exists, carries us on to the idea of a great first cause. Pantheism is the first step in an argument, with the rest a-wanting, and stands useless as a broken arch. Does it satisfy the demands of the imagination in things of religion—those demands which are pictures reflected from the heart on the brain? Assuredly not. "It is a stream without a spring, a tree without a root, a shadow projected by no substance, a sound without a voice, a drama without an author, a pervading thought without a thinking mind, a universe without a God." Do its doctrines meet any better fate when tried by the standard to which they appeal, "the moral sentiment" of the race? The testimony in each of us to the prevalence of law, the obligation of right, the consequences of wrong, the perpetual government of an invisible God, the need of redemption and the inexpressible grandeur and fitness