

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Benjamin De Casseres

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O, when I am safe in my sylvan home,
I tread on the pride of Greece and Rome;
And when I am stretched beneath the pines,
Where the evening star so holy shines—
I laugh at the lore and pride of man,
At the sophist schools and learned clan,
For what are thy all in their high conceit
When man in the bush with God may meet?

RALPH Waldo Emerson, of the eagle face and multiple soul; Ralph Waldo Emerson, bearer of glad tidings, scuttled of rotten ships, discoverer of the spiritual mother-lode; Ralph Waldo Emerson, carrying the shackled secrets of the East in the dungeon-keeps of his soul, his brain cells laden with chrism of light and in his hands the keys which were to unlock the doors against which the imprisoned Self had thundered for ages—how many have, with these thoughts in their souls, looked up to that name for assistance; and to how many in ages to come shall he be a lamp!

He achieved the miraculous by disclaiming all belief in miracles. Miracles! Do we not welter in them? Is not the coming and going of my breath a miracle? The weeds in my garden shall be my miracle, and yon blue-misted hills—the thaumaturgy of my wondrous eyes—shall be a bubble blown from my dream-skull. We are tyrannized by the commonplace, and like polyps and puppies, are the slaves of reflex-action. The habitual has indurated us, and the days are drab because we allow ourselves to become mere dray horses. Emerson's soul was born anew every day, and his fluid spirit melted the solid seeming world to a brain figment. The cameo dream of the ant and the unplumbed thought of God dwelt in that mind. A miracle? He smiled at the question—and pointed to the fly on the window-pane.

Transcendentalism is a big word that has frightened men, women and priests. It means that man is greater than the event; that nothing can happen to you—you happen on things. Fate is portable, and every man comes into the world with his troubles ready-made. Like the spider, every soul spins its own web. Everything pertains to the individual. Mount Sinai is within you. There is a Vatican of authority under the scalp. You are God in the making. The whole history of mankind is a picture of a ragged, pain-bitten tramp waiting in the anteroom of Time for an audience with the Man Behind the Arras. To crawl and cringe and fawn and fumble seem to

have been man's chief occupation. Take the crook out of your back and out of your soul! cries Emerson. You wear cups in your knees praying to these senile gods. Up, and look at the heavens, and dare to say, "I am I," and what I do I do, and what I do not I do not do. Did I knead this dough? That is transcendentalism.

Most men are mere kitchen-hash; leavings of the gods; celestial junk. They desire above all things, that no one shall discover that they are masked. They are optimists because they dare not be anything else. Their heads are their stomachs intellectualized. They live in crevices, and when they scent danger they, like the turtle, draw in their heads—and this they call humility. For this counterfeit man, Emerson had the profoundest contempt. Oh! that we could plug a child's head at birth, as we do a melon, to find whether there is mush or music within! We are "parlor soldiers" and most souls are bankrupt. Reverence is the salaam that defeat makes to achievement—and few natures rise as high as their instinct. We are wheeled by the lying days and our finest aspirations are postprandial.

Men's brains are only attics stuffed with disused antiques; crumbling castles where bats whirr and the moths devour; ghost-walks for ancestral sins. Their gray matter is mere soufflé. Their souls are card-houses; their actions mere addenda; their triumphs are as bilious as their failures. Successful ragpickers all!

This sleazy individual bulked and herded in our cities by the million, is the product of conformity. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson uttered his Declaration. The blessed lowly who cringe beneath the rod of Power, the jiggling ape without a tail, the saintly sentimental sots who utter their pater-nosters on Sunday and go snacks with the devil on Monday, Mrs. Grundy who lives next door to every man and woman—these are all labeled and flouted in this great essay—this Magna Charta of Self.

"Good or bad are but names readily transferrable to this or that; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it." Morals are local; a cussword current in New York is counterfeit in Timbuctoo. Our boasted virtues are accidents of physical organization; our highest dreams are but the reflex of a physical need. Charities spring from the philanthropic instincts, but they perpetuate the weak, who made war upon the gods of life, and with craft and guile, and law, and lamentation seduce them to their boudoir ideals. What is good? What is bad? asks Emerson. Was there ever a fulfilled action, a rounded deed, an ideal realized? Your best intentions are ground to powder in the mills of the mob and a good action grows mouldy in a day. Everything rusts, stales, changes; men are runners to an unstaked goal. Systems are but rope bridges to swing us over the yawning chasma of the contingent, and codes are cobwebs.

And what have I to do with consistency? asks Emerson. Each day is a finality. Sufficient unto the day is the consistency thereof. To-morrow is x. My instincts do not say "by your leave." Neither shall my intellect. To-day I lie iceberg-like in the frozen zone of contemplation, and I dabble in strange secrets. To-morrow I shall be the man of action and smile at my dilly-dallying with yesterday's Arctic moonshine. All things go in pairs; "all things are double, one against the other." We are the slaves of contrarities; our minds are but the proving-grounds of opposing theories. The brain is but a dramatic climax, where antagonistic laws struggle for mastery and where thoughts are twin-born—the same, but different. "Consistency!—the hobgoblin of little minds," indeed.

God himself is not consistent. See His gypsy existence from protoplasm to brain dust. He is a metamorphic amorphic, an ever-changing God—vengeful, merciful, tender, stern, cruel, benignant, beautiful, forbearing, dynamic, and static: Zeus, Jehovah, Scarab, Manitou, Allah, Brahma—

what names He takes. He is a reflection from those unsounded abysses of man—the brain cells, a shadow on the waters of the spirit, heart mist; a subtle hint. And He is born anew every hour.

How shall we who seek to live our lives withstand the wreckful siege of battering days? What measures shall we take to balk this conspiracy of the all against the one? To most men these questions are beside the mark. Breakfast, dinner and supper—and there you are. But there is a highly differentiated class in every community who seek answers to these questions. The Viking of Concord has an answer. Just be yourself. Hard? Well, so much the better. You will win so much more of yourself. Pray for enemies. All things noble are born in travail. Friction extracts the spark. Consciousness itself was born of the impact of the warring molecules. Necessity creates the organ it needs. If a man desires to be great he will be. Mere wishing is not desire. Most men wish to achieve themselves; few desire it. The soul is infinite, and Shakespeare lives in every man. Michael Angelo was yourself in different environment. Look within and battle without; drag-net the beautiful which lies quiescent at the bottom of every soul, and hammer the external commonplace to shape and use.

This is Emerson's esoteric secret—which he made exoteric. The divine sheathes all men. Mystery and beauty and power everywhere, and you—I—the hub of all! Infinity and eternity—Space and Time in transit; whatever was, whatever shall be, meet in your mind each moment. If they meet not there, pray, where then? Below us lie infinite steps—but we are the below; above us a ladder that is lost in the mystic canopy of imperiled exaltations—but we are the above. Arcturus is in your heart, and the heavens, the earth and the abysses beneath the earth are mind-mirage. Here and now, within, and nowhere else, is the golden fleece you seek. If you wish to see, close your eyes. The senses muffle the eternal truths, and we are lost in shadowy seemings.

Life is Death on a furlough, and Time, like a mouse, nibbles at our edifices. Everything is deferred. To-day wears no glamour; to-morrow is always a holiday. We never are; we are going to be—and so on a day we awake to find we have been swindled. Emerson divined the trick in youth and nailed the Everlasting Now above his door, and each moment brought its treasure, and no hour went by but he was not richer in spirit. He used grief, and ground pain beneath his iron-heeled soul. Life, with her ogres, her chicaneries, her hypocrisies, her seductions, slunk away shamefaced before that presence. For he knew a trick worth two of hers. He utilized the Now.

A straight line is the longest route between two given points. What we achieve we achieve obliquely. Things come to us en passant. No man ever reached his goal by going straight toward it. His prizes come to him accidentally, unexpectedly. His dreams have one logic, life has another, and the way to be happy is not to desire to be. What I need I'll get, and if I don't get it, it merely proves that I didn't need it. Stand still and watch the stars tumble into your net. The immovable man is a magnet; the strenuous, hotly intent man is not even magnetic.

This is the underlying thought in that wonderfully brilliant essay, "Compensation." Everything is equalized; nothing is realized. For everything we get, something is taken away; for whatever is taken away, something is given. Gain or loss is impossible. For every expansion there is a contraction. There is a kernel of wisdom in every misfortune. In the husk of our failures lies buried the nut of knowledge. Each act pulls two ways, and all bottoms are false bottoms. No man is ever undone; he is obtuse—that's all. No soul can ever be lost.

Genius is defective on its social side; the social animal is defective on the side of his genius. The poet misses the half of life; the merchant misses the other half. It is all one not to desire and

to have, says Seneca. Those who are in place and wield power have doled out their souls for it; and those who stay at home and drowse by the grate have missed the exaltation of self-sowing.

Sensuality has its secrets; sin is a training school; pain breeds art; adversity is the mother of strength—and a well rounded character is one that has not been too good. See-saw, tweedle-dum and tweedle-dee—all things are Janus-faced, and the contrarities of life are but thin masks for one power. The Same is spilled into a million matrices, and the lambent flame of the One spires into myriad shapes; but you cannot add to or subtract from it; you may change the balances, but the quantity is unchangeable. “In Nature,” says Emerson, “nothing can be given; all things are sold.” You pay for all your goodnesses, and Nemesis keeps the tally-sheet.

System stringers seek to “place” Emerson. Was he this? Was he that? Was he t’other? As well try to systematize sunlight, or shunt starshine, groove moonlight, or box East Aurora. His thought rounded the spheres; his dreams topped the Cosmos. He walks in ether and is part of the barred and crimson sunset; he flushes in the dawn and pales with the day. He is woven into our souls and his thought is blown round about our brains. With Socrates, Jesus, and Marcus Aurelius, he is an incorporate influence, a disembodied world-power.

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