

# HENRY A. BEERS

THE CONNECTICUT WITS  
AND OTHER ESSAYS

**Henry Beers**  
**The Connecticut Wits**  
**and Other Essays**

*[http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio\\_book/?art=24165676](http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24165676)*

*The Connecticut Wits and Other Essays:*

# Содержание

|                                     |    |
|-------------------------------------|----|
| THE CONNECTICUT WITS                | 4  |
| THE SINGER OF THE OLD SWIMMIN' HOLE | 24 |
| EMERSON AND HIS JOURNALS            | 35 |
| THE ART OF LETTER WRITING           | 55 |
| Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.   | 57 |

# Henry A. Beers

## The Connecticut Wits and Other Essays

### THE CONNECTICUT WITS

IN the days when Connecticut counted in the national councils; when it had *men* in the patriot armies, in Washington's Cabinet, in the Senate of the United States – men like Israel Putnam, Roger Sherman, Oliver Wolcott, Oliver Ellsworth, – in those same days there was a premature but interesting literary movement in our little commonwealth. A band of young graduates of Yale, some of them tutors in the college, or in residence for their Master's degree, formed themselves into a school for the cultivation of letters. I speak advisedly in calling them a school: they were a group of personal friends, united in sympathy by similar tastes and principles; and they had in common certain definite, coherent, and conscious aims. These were, first, to liberalize and modernize the rigidly scholastic curriculum of the college by the introduction of more elegant studies: the *belles lettres*, the *literae humaniores*. Such was the plea of John Trumbull in his Master's oration, "An Essay on the Use and Advantages of the Fine Arts," delivered at

Commencement, 1770; and in his satire, "The Progress of Dulness," he had his hit at the dry and dead routine of college learning. Secondly, these young men resolved to supply the new republic with a body of poetry on a scale commensurate with the bigness of American scenery and the vast destinies of the nation: epics resonant as Niagara, and Pindaric odes lofty as our native mountains. And finally, when, at the close of the Revolutionary War, the members of the group found themselves reunited for a few years at Hartford, they set themselves to combat, with the weapon of satire, the influences towards lawlessness and separatism which were delaying the adoption of the Constitution.

My earliest knowledge of this literary coterie was derived from an article in *The Atlantic Monthly* for February, 1865, "The Pleiades of Connecticut." The "Pleiades," to wit, were John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, David Humphreys, Lemuel Hopkins, Richard Alsop, and Theodore Dwight. The tone of the article was ironic. "Connecticut is pleasant," it said, "with wooded hills and a beautiful river; plenteous with tobacco and cheese; fruitful of merchants, missionaries, peddlers, and single women, – but there are no poets known to exist there.. the brisk little democratic state has turned its brains upon its machinery.. the enterprising natives can turn out any article on which a profit can be made – except poetry."

Massachusetts has always been somewhat condescending towards Connecticut's literary pretensions. Yet all through that very volume of the *Atlantic*, from which I quote, run Mrs.

Stowe's "Chimney Corner" papers and Donald Mitchell's novel, "Doctor Johns"; with here and there a story by Rose Terry and a poem by Henry Brownell. Nay, in an article entitled "Our Battle Laureate," in the May number of the magazine, the "Autocrat" himself, who would always have his fling at Connecticut theology and Connecticut spelling and pronunciation ("Webster's provincials," forsooth! though *pater ipse*, the Rev. Abiel, had been a Connecticut orthodox parson, a Yale graduate, and a son-in-law of President Stiles), – the "Autocrat," I say, takes off his hat to my old East Hartford neighbor, Henry Howard Brownell.

He begins by citing the paper which I have been citing: "How came the Muses to settle in Connecticut?.. But the seed of the Muses has run out. No more Pleiades in Hartford."; and answers that, if the author of the article asks Nathanael's question, putting Hartford for Nazareth, he can refer him to Brownell's "Lyrics of a Day." "If Drayton had fought at Agincourt, if Campbell had held a sabre at Hohenlinden, if Scott had been in the saddle with Marmion, if Tennyson had charged with the six hundred at Balaclava, each of these poets might possibly have pictured what he said as faithfully and as fearfully as Mr. Brownell has painted the sea fights in which he took part as a combatant."

Many years later, when preparing a chapter on the literature of the county for the "Memorial History of Hartford," I came to close quarters with the sweet influence of the Pleiades. I am one of the few men – perhaps I am the only man – now living who have read the whole of Joel Barlow's "Columbiad." "Is old

Joel Barlow yet alive?” asks Hawthorne’s crazy correspondent. “Unconscionable man!.. And *does* he meditate an epic on the war between Mexico and Texas, with machinery contrived on the principle of the steam engine?” I also “perused” (good old verb – the right word for the deed!) Dwight’s “Greenfield Hill” – a meritorious action, – but I cannot pretend to have read his “Conquest of Canaan” (the diaeresis is his, not mine), an epic in eleven books and in heroic couplets. I dipped into it only far enough to note that the poet had contrived to introduce a history of our Revolutionary War, by way of episode, among the wars of Israel.

It must be acknowledged that this patriotic enterprise of creating a national literature by *tour de force*, was undertaken when Minerva was unwilling. These were able and eminent men: scholars, diplomatists, legislators. Among their number were a judge of the Connecticut Supreme Court, a college president, foreign ministers and ambassadors, a distinguished physician, an officer of the Revolutionary army, intimate friends of Washington and Jefferson. But, as poetry, a few little pieces of the New Jersey poet, Philip Freneau, – “The Indian Student,” “The Indian Burying Ground,” “To a Honey Bee,” “The Wild Honeysuckle,” and “The Battle of Eutaw Springs,” – are worth all the epic and Pindaric strains of the Connecticut bards. Yet “still the shore a brave attempt resounds.” For they had few misgivings and a truly missionary zeal. They formed the first Mutual Admiration Society in our literary annals.

Here gallant Humphreys charm'd the list'ning throng.  
Sweetly he sang, amid the clang of arms,  
His numbers smooth, replete with winning charms.  
In him there shone a great and godlike mind,  
The poet's wreath around the laurel twined.

This was while Colonel Humphreys was in the army – one of Washington's aides. But when he resigned his commission, – hark! 'tis Barlow sings: —

See Humphreys glorious from the field retire,  
Sheathe the glad sword and string the sounding lyre.  
O'er fallen friends, with all the strength of woe,  
His heartfelt sighs in moving numbers flow.  
His country's wrongs, her duties, dangers, praise,  
Fire his full soul, and animate his lays.

Humphreys, in turn, in his poem “On the Future Glory of the United States of America,” calls upon his learned friends to string *their* lyres and rouse their countrymen against the Barbary corsairs who were holding American seamen in captivity: —

Why sleep'st thou, Barlow, child of genius? Why  
See'st thou, blest Dwight, our land in sadness lie?  
And where is Trumbull, earliest boast of fame?  
'Tis yours, ye bards, to wake the smothered flame.  
To you, my dearest friends, the task belongs

To rouse your country with heroic songs.

Yes, to be sure, where *is* Trumbull, earliest boast of fame? He came from Watertown (now a seat of learning), a cousin of Governor Trumbull – “Brother Jonathan” – and a second cousin of Colonel John Trumbull, the historical painter, whose battle pieces repose in the Yale Art Gallery. Cleverness runs in the Trumbull blood. There was, for example, J. Hammond Trumbull (abbreviated by lisping infancy to “J. Hambull”) in the last generation, a great sagamore – O a very big Indian, – reputed the only man in the country who could read Eliot’s Algonquin Bible. I make no mention of later Trumbulls known in letters and art. But as for our worthy, John Trumbull, the poet, it is well known and has been often told how he passed the college entrance examination at the age of seven, but forebore to matriculate till a more reasonable season, graduating in 1767 and serving two years as a tutor along with his friend Dwight; afterwards studying law at Boston in the office of John Adams, practising at New Haven and Hartford, filling legislative and judicial positions, and dying at Detroit in 1831.

Trumbull was the satirist of the group. As a young man at Yale, he amused his leisure by contributing to the newspapers essays in the manner of “The Spectator” (“The Meddler,” “The Correspondent,” and the like); and verse satires after the fashion of Prior and Pope. There is nothing very new about the Jack Dapperwits, Dick Hairbrains, Tom Brainlesses, Miss Harriet

Simpers, and Isabella Sprightlys of these compositions. The very names will recall to the experienced reader the stock figures of the countless Addisonian imitations which sicklied o'er the minor literature of the eighteenth century. But Trumbull's masterpiece was "M'Fingal," a Hudibrastic satire on the Tories, printed in part at Philadelphia in 1776, and in complete shape at Hartford in 1782, "by Hudson and Goodwin near the Great Bridge." "M'Fingal" was the most popular poem of the Revolution. It went through more than thirty editions in America and England. In 1864 it was edited with elaborate historical notes by Benson J. Lossing, author of "Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution." A reprint is mentioned as late as 1881. An edition, in two volumes, of Trumbull's poetical works was issued in 1820.

Timothy Dwight pronounced "M'Fingal" superior to "Hudibras." The Marquis de Chastellux, who had fought with Lafayette for the independence of the colonies; who had been amused when at Windham, says my authority, by Governor Jonathan Trumbull's "pompous manner in transacting the most trifling public business"; and who translated into French Colonel Humphreys's poetical "Address to the Armies of the United States of America," – Chastellux wrote to Trumbull *à propos* of his burlesque: "I believe that you have rifled every flower which that kind of poetry could offer... I prefer it to every work of the kind, – even 'Hudibras.'" And Moses Coit Tyler, whose four large volumes on our colonial and revolutionary literature are, for the most part, a much ado about nothing, waxes dithyrambic on

this theme. He speaks, for example, of “the vast and prolonged impression it has made upon the American people.” But surely all this is very uncritical. All that is really alive of “M’Fingal” are a few smart couplets usually attributed to “Hudibras,” such as —

No man e’er felt the halter draw  
With good opinion of the law.

“M’Fingal” is one of the most successful of the innumerable imitations of “Hudibras”; still it is an imitation, and, as such, inferior to its original. But apart from that, Trumbull was far from having Butler’s astonishing resources of wit and learning, tedious as they often are from their mere excess. Nor is the Yankee sharpness of “M’Fingal” so potent a spirit as the harsh, bitter contempt of Butler, almost as inventive of insult as the *saeva indignatio* of Swift. Yet “M’Fingal” still keeps a measure of historical importance, reflecting, in its cracked and distorted mirror of caricature, the features of a stormy time: the turbulent town meetings, the liberty poles and bonfires of the patriots; with the tar-and-feathering of Tories, and their stolen gatherings in cellars or other holes and corners.

After peace was declared, a number of these young writers came together again in Hartford, where they formed a sort of literary club with weekly meetings — “The Hartford Wits,” who for a few years made the little provincial capital the intellectual metropolis of the country. Trumbull had settled at Hartford

in the practice of the law in 1781. Joel Barlow, who had hastily qualified for a chaplaincy in a Massachusetts brigade by a six weeks' course of theology, and had served more or less sporadically through the war, came to Hartford in the year following and started a newspaper. David Humphreys, Yale 1771, illustrious founder of the Brothers in Unity Society, and importer of merino sheep, had enlisted in 1776 in a Connecticut militia regiment then on duty in New York. He had been on the staff of General Putnam, whose life he afterwards wrote; had been Washington's aide and a frequent inmate at Mount Vernon from 1780 to 1783; then abroad (1784–1786), as secretary to the commission for making commercial treaties with the nations of Europe. (The commissioners were Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson.) On returning to his native Derby in 1786, he had been sent to the legislature at Hartford, and now found himself associated with Trumbull, who had entered upon his Yale tutorship in 1771, the year of Humphreys's graduation; and with Barlow, who had taken his B.A. degree in 1778. These three Pleiades drew to themselves other stars of lesser magnitude, the most remarkable of whom was Dr. Lemuel Hopkins, a native of Waterbury, but since 1784 a practising physician at Hartford and one of the founders of the Connecticut Medical Society. Hopkins was an eccentric humorist, and is oddly described by Samuel Goodrich – “Peter Parley” – as “long and lank, walking with spreading arms and straddling legs.” “His nose was long, lean, and flexible,” adds Goodrich, – a description which suggests

rather the proboscis of the elephant, or at least of the tapir, than a feature of the human countenance.

Other lights in this constellation were Richard Alsop, from Middletown, who was now keeping a bookstore at Hartford, and Theodore Dwight, brother to Timothy and brother-in-law to Alsop, and later the secretary and historian of the famous Hartford Convention of 1814, which came near to carrying New England into secession. We might reckon as an eighth Pleiad, Dr. Elihu H. Smith, then residing at Wethersfield, who published in 1793 our first poetic miscellany, printed – of all places in the world – at Litchfield, “mine own romantic town”: seat of the earliest American law school, and emitter of this earliest American anthology. If you should happen to find in your garret a dusty copy of this collection, “American Poems, Original and Selected,” by Elihu H. Smith, hold on to it. It is worth money, and will be worth more.

The Hartford Wits contributed to local papers, such as the *New Haven Gazette* and the *Connecticut Courant*, a series of political lampoons: “The Anarchiad,” “The Echo,” and “The Political Greenhouse,” a sort of Yankee “Dunciad,” “Rolliad,” and “Anti-Jacobin.” They were staunch Federalists, friends of a close union and a strong central government; and used their pens in support of the administrations of Washington and Adams, and to ridicule Jefferson and the Democrats. It was a time of great confusion and unrest: of Shays’s Rebellion in Massachusetts, and the irredeemable paper currency in Rhode

Island. In Connecticut, Democratic mobs were protesting against the vote of five years' pay to the officers of the disbanded army. "The Echo" and "The Political Greenhouse" were published in book form in 1807; "The Anarchiad" not till 1861, by Thomas H. Pease, New Haven, with notes and introduction by Luther G. Riggs. I am not going to quote these satires. They amused their own generation and doubtless did good. "The Echo" had the honor of being quoted in Congress by an angry Virginian, to prove that Connecticut was trying to draw the country into a war with France. It caught up cleverly the humors of the day, now travestyng a speech of Jefferson, now turning into burlesque a Boston town meeting. A local flavor is given by allusions to Connecticut traditions: Captain Kidd, the Blue Laws, the Windham Frogs, the Hebron pump, the Wethersfield onion gardens. But the sparkle has gone out of it. There is a perishable element in political satire. I find it difficult to interest young people nowadays even in the "Biglow Papers," which are so much superior, in every way, to "M'Fingal" or "The Anarchiad."

Timothy Dwight would probably have rested his title to literary fame on his five volumes of theology and the eleven books of his "Conquest of Canaan." But the epic is unread and unreadable, while theological systems need constant restatement in an age of changing beliefs. There is one excellent hymn by Dwight in the collections, – "I love thy kingdom, Lord." His war song, "Columbia, Columbia, in glory arise," was once admired, but has faded. I have found it possible to take a mild interest

in the long poem, "Greenfield Hill," a partly idyllic and partly moral didactic piece, emanating from the country parish, three miles from the Sound, in the town of Fairfield, where Dwight was pastor from 1783 to 1795. The poem has one peculiar feature: each of its seven parts was to have imitated the manner of some one British poet. Part One is in the blank verse and the style of Thomson's "Seasons"; Part Two in the heroic couplets and the diction of Goldsmith's "Traveller" and "Deserted Village." For lack of time this design was not systematically carried out, but the reader is reminded now of Prior, then of Cowper, and again of Crabbe. The nature descriptions and the pictures of rural life are not untruthful, though somewhat tame and conventional. The praise of modest competence is sung, and the wholesome simplicity of American life, under the equal distribution of wealth, as contrasted with the luxury and corruption of European cities. Social questions are discussed, such as, "The state of negro slavery in Connecticut"; and "What is not, and what is, a social female visit." Narrative episodes give variety to the descriptive and reflective portions: the burning of Fairfield in 1779 by the British under Governor Tryon; the destruction of the remnants of the Pequod Indians in a swamp three miles west of the town. It is distressing to have the Yankee farmer called "the swain," and his wife and daughter "the fair," in regular eighteenth century style; and Long Island, which is always in sight and frequently apostrophized, personified as "Longa."

Then on the borders of this sapphire plain  
Shall growing beauties grace my fair domain

\* \* \* \* \*

Gay groves exult: Chinesian gardens glow,  
And bright reflections paint the wave below.

The poet celebrates Connecticut artists and inventors: —

Such forms, such deeds on Rafael's tablets shine,  
And such, O Trumbull, glow alike on thine.

David Bushnell of Saybrook had invented a submarine torpedo boat, nicknamed "the American Turtle," with which he undertook to blow up Lord Admiral Howe's gunship in New York harbor. Humphreys gives an account of the failure of this enterprise in his "Life of Putnam." It was some of Bushnell's machines, set afloat on the Delaware, among the British shipping, that occasioned the panic celebrated in Hopkinson's satirical ballad, "The Battle of the Kegs," which we used to declaim at school. "See," exclaims Dwight, —

See Bushnell's strong creative genius, fraught  
With all th' assembled powers of skillful thought,

His mystic vessel plunge beneath the waves  
And glide through dark retreats and coral caves!

Dr. Holmes, who knew more about Yale poets than they know about each other, has rescued one line from “Greenfield Hill.” “The last we see of snow,” he writes, in his paper on “The Seasons,” “is, in the language of a native poet,

The lingering drift behind the shady wall.

This is from a bard more celebrated once than now, Timothy Dwight, the same from whom we borrowed the piece we used to speak, beginning (as we said it),

Columby, Columby, to glory arise!

The line with the drift in it has stuck in my memory like a feather in an old nest, and is all that remains to me of his ‘Greenfield Hill.’ ”

As President of Yale College from 1795 to 1817, Dr. Dwight, by his sermons, addresses, and miscellaneous writings, his personal influence with young men, and his public spirit, was a great force in the community. I have an idea that his “Travels in New England and New York,” posthumously published in 1821–1822, in four volumes, will survive all his other writings. I can recommend Dwight’s “Travels” as a really entertaining book, and full of solid observation.

Of all the wooden poetry of these Connecticut bards, David Humphreys's seems to me the woodenest, – big patriotic verse essays on the model of the “Essay on Man”; “Address to the Armies of the United States”; “On the Happiness of America”; “On the Future Glory of the United States”; “On the Love of Country”; “On the Death of George Washington,” etc. Yet Humphreys was a most important figure. He was plenipotentiary to Portugal and Spain, and a trusted friend of Washington, from whom, perhaps, he caught that stately deportment which is said to have characterized him. He imported a hundred merino sheep from Spain, landing them from shipboard at his native Derby, then a port of entry on the lordly Housatonic. He wrote a dissertation on merino sheep, and also celebrated the exploit in song. The Massachusetts Agricultural Society gave him a gold medal for his services in improving the native breed. But if these sheep are even remotely responsible for Schedule K, it might be wished that they had remained in Spain, or had been as the flocks of Bo-Peep. Colonel Humphreys died at New Haven in 1818. The college owns his portrait by Stuart, and his monument in Grove Street cemetery is dignified by a Latin inscription reciting his titles and achievements, and telling how, like a second Jason, he brought the *auream vellerem* from Europe to Connecticut. Colonel Humphreys's works were handsomely published at New York in 1804, with a list of subscribers headed by their Catholic Majesties, the King and Queen of Spain, and followed by Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and

numerous dukes and chevaliers. Among the humbler subscribers I am gratified to observe the names of Nathan Beers, merchant, New Haven; and Isaac Beers & Co., booksellers, New Haven (six copies), – no ancestors but conjecturally remote collateral relatives of the undersigned.

I cannot undertake to quote from Humphreys's poems. The patriotic feeling that prompted them was genuine; the descriptions of campaigns in which he himself had borne a part have a certain value; but the poetry as such, though by no means contemptible, is quite uninspired. Homer's catalogue of ships is a hackneyed example of the way in which a great poet can make bare names poetical. Humphreys had a harder job, and passages of his battle pieces read like pages from a city directory.

As fly autumnal leaves athwart some dale,  
Borne on the pinions of the sounding gale,  
Or glides the gossamer o'er rustling reeds,  
Bland's, Sheldon's, Moylan's, Baylor's battle steeds  
So skimmed the plain..  
Then Huger, Maxwell, Mifflin, Marshall, Read,  
Hastened from states remote to seize the meed;

\* \* \* \* \*

While Smallwood, Parsons, Shepherd, Irvine, Hand,

Guest, Weedon, Muhlenberg, leads each his band.

Does the modern reader recognize a forefather among these heroic patronymics? Just as good men as fought at Marathon or Agincourt. Nor can it be said of any one of them *quia caret vate sacro*.

But the loudest blast upon the trump of fame was blown by Joel Barlow. It was agreed that in him America had produced a supreme poet. Born at Redding, – where Mark Twain died the other day, – the son of a farmer, Barlow was graduated at Yale in 1778 – just a hundred years before President Taft. He married the daughter of a Guilford blacksmith, who had moved to New Haven to educate his sons; one of whom, Abraham Baldwin, afterwards went to Georgia, grew up with the country, and became United States Senator.

After the failure of his Hartford journal, Barlow went to France, in 1788, as agent of the Scioto Land Company, which turned out to be a swindling concern. He now “embraced French principles,” that is, became a Jacobin and freethinker, to the scandal of his old Federalist friends. He wrote a song to the guillotine and sang it at festal gatherings in London. He issued other revolutionary literature, in particular an “Advice to the Privileged Orders,” suppressed by the British government; whereupon Barlow, threatened with arrest, went back to France. The Convention made him a French citizen; he speculated luckily in the securities of the republic, which rose rapidly with the

victories of its armies. He lived in much splendor in Paris, where Robert Fulton, inventor of steamboats, made his home with him for seven years. In 1795, he was appointed United States consul to Algiers, resided there two years, and succeeded in negotiating the release of the American captives who had been seized by Algerine pirates. After seventeen years' absence, he returned to America, and built a handsome country house on Rock Creek, Washington, which he named characteristically "Kalorama." He had become estranged from orthodox New England, and lived on intimate terms with Jefferson and the Democratic leaders, French sympathizers, and philosophical deists.

In 1811 President Madison sent him as minister plenipotentiary to France, to remonstrate with the emperor on the subject of the Berlin and Milan decrees, which were injuring American commerce. He was summoned to Wilna, Napoleon's headquarters in his Russian campaign, where he was promised a personal interview. But the retreat from Moscow had begun. Fatigue and exposure brought on an illness from which Barlow died in a small Polish village near Cracow. An elaborate biography, "The Life and Letters of Joel Barlow," by Charles Burr Todd, was published by G. P. Putnam's Sons in 1886.

Barlow's most ambitious undertaking was the "Columbiad," originally printed at Hartford in 1787 as "The Vision of Columbus," and then reissued in its expanded form at Philadelphia in 1807: a sumptuous quarto with plates by the best English and French engravers from designs by Robert

Fulton: altogether the finest specimen of bookmaking that had then appeared in America. The “Columbiad’s” greatness was in inverse proportion to its bigness. Grandiosity was its author’s besetting sin, and the plan of the poem is absurdly grandiose. It tells how Hesper appeared to Columbus in prison and led him to a hill of vision whence he viewed the American continents spread out before him, and the panorama of their whole future history unrolled. Among other things he saw the Connecticut river —

Thy stream, my Hartford, through its misty robe,  
Played in the sunbeams, belting far the globe.  
No watery glades through richer vallies shine,  
Nor drinks the sea a lovelier wave than thine.

It is odd to come upon familiar place-names swollen to epic pomp. There is Danbury, for example, which one associates with the manufacture of hats and a somewhat rowdy annual fair. In speaking of the towns set on fire by the British, the poet thus exalteth Danbury, whose flames were visible from native Redding: —

Norwalk expands the blaze; o’er Redding hills  
High flaming Danbury the welkin fills.  
Esopus burns, New York’s deliteful fanes  
And sea-nursed Norfolk light the neighboring plains.

But Barlow’s best poem was “Hasty Pudding,” a mock-heroic

after the fashion of Philips's "Cider," and not, I think, inferior to that. One couplet, in particular, has prevailed against the tooth of time: —

E'en in thy native regions how I blush  
To hear the Pennsylvanians call thee mush!

This poem was written in 1792 in Savoy, whither Barlow had gone to stand as deputy to the National Convention. In a little inn at Chambéry, a bowl of *polenta*, or Indian meal pudding, was set before him, and the familiar dish made him homesick for Connecticut. You remember how Dr. Holmes describes the dinners of the young American medical students in Paris at the *Trois Frères*; and how one of them would sit tinkling the ice in his wineglass, "saying that he was hearing the cowbells as he used to hear them, when the deep-breathing kine came home at twilight from the huckleberry pasture in the old home a thousand leagues towards the sunset."

# THE SINGER OF THE OLD SWIMMIN' HOLE

MANY years ago I said to one of Walt Whitman's biographers: "Whitman may, as you claim, be the poet of democracy, but he is not the poet of the American people. He is the idol of a literary *culte*. Shall I tell you who the poet of the American people is just at present? He is James Whitcomb Riley of Indiana." Riley used to become quite blasphemous when speaking of Whitman. He said that the latter had begun by scribbling newspaper poetry of the usual kind – and very poor of its kind – which had attracted no attention and deserved none. Then he suddenly said to himself: "Go to! I will discard metre and rhyme and write something startlingly eccentric which will make the public sit up and take notice. I will sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world, and the world will say – as in fact it did – 'here is a new poetry, lawless, virile, democratic. It is so different from anything hitherto written, that here must be the great American poet at last.' "

Now, I am not going to disparage old Walt. He was big himself, and he had an extraordinary feeling of the bigness of America with its swarming multitudes, millions of the plain people, whom God must have loved, said Lincoln, since he made so many of them. But all this in the mass. As to any dramatic

power to discriminate among individuals and characterize them singly, as Riley does, Whitman had none. They are all alike, all “leaves of grass.”

Well, my friend, and Walt Whitman’s, promised to read Riley’s poems. And shortly I got a letter from him saying that he had read them with much enjoyment, but adding, “Surely you would not call him a great national poet.” Now since his death, the newspaper critics have been busy with this question. His poetry was true, sweet, original; but was it great? Suppose we leave aside for the moment this question of greatness. Who are the great poets, anyway? Was Robert Burns one of them? He composed no epics, no tragedies, no high Pindaric odes. But he made the songs of the Scottish people, and is become a part of the national consciousness of the race. In a less degree, but after the same fashion, Riley’s poetry has taken possession of the popular heart. I am told that his sales outnumber Longfellow’s. This is not an ultimate test, but so far as it goes it is a valid one.

Riley is the Hoosier poet, but he is more than that: he is a national poet. His state and his city have honored themselves in honoring him and in keeping his birthday as a public holiday. The birthdays of nations and of kings and magistrates have been often so kept. We have our fourth of July, our twenty-second of February, our Lincoln’s birthday; and we had a close escape from having a McKinley day. I do not know that the banks are closed and the children let out of school – Riley’s children, for all children are his – on each succeeding seventh of October; but

I think there is no record elsewhere in our literary history of a tribute so loving and so universal to a mere man of letters, as the Hoosier State pays annually to its sweet singer. Massachusetts has its poets and is rightly proud of them, but neither Bryant nor Emerson nor Lowell nor Holmes, nor the more popular Longfellow or Whittier, has had his natal day marked down on the calendar as a yearly state *festa*. And yet poets, novelists, playwrights, painters, musical composers, artists of all kinds, have added more to the sum of human happiness than all the kings and magistrates that ever lived. Perhaps Indianians are warmer hearted than New Englanders; or perhaps they make so much of their poets because there are fewer of them. But this is not the whole secret of it. In a sense, Riley's poems are provincial. They are intensely true to local conditions, local scenery and dialect, childish memories and the odd ways and characters of little country towns. But just for this faithfulness to their environment these "poems here at home" come home to others whose homes are far away from the Wabash, but are not so very different after all.

America, as has often been said, is a land of homes: of dwellers in villages, on farms, and in small towns. We are common people, middle-class people, conservative, decent, religious, tenacious of old ways, home-keeping and home-loving. We do not thrill to Walt Whitman's paeans to democracy in the abstract; but we vibrate to every touch on the chord of family affections, of early friendships, and of the dear old homely

things that our childhood knew. Americans are sentimental and humorous; and Riley abounds in sentiment – wholesome sentiment – and natural humor, while Whitman had little of either.

To all Americans who were ever boys; to all, at least who have had the good luck to be country boys and go barefoot; whether they dwell in the prairie states of the Middle West, or elsewhere, the scenes and characters of Riley's poems are familiar: Little Orphant Annie and the Raggedy Man, and the Old Swimmin' Hole and Griggsby's Station "where we ust to be so happy and so pore." They know when the frost is on the "punkin," and that the "Gobble-uns'll git you ef you don't watch out"; and how the old tramp said to the Raggedy Man: —

You're a *purty* man! — *You* air! —  
With a pair o' eyes like two fried eggs,  
An' a nose like a Bartlutt pear!

They have all, in their time, followed along after the circus parade, listened to the old village band playing tunes like "Lily Dale" and "In the Hazel Dell my Nellie's Sleeping" and "Rosalie, the Prairie Flower"; have heard the campaign stump speaker when he "cut loose on monopolies and cussed and cussed and cussed"; have belonged to the literary society which debated the questions whether fire or water was the most destructive element; whether town life was preferable to country life; whether the Indian or the negro had suffered more at the hands of the

white man; or whether the growth of Roman Catholicism in this country is a menace to our free institutions. And *was* the execution of Charles the First justifiable? Charles is dead now; but this good old debate question will never die. They knew the joys of “eatin’ out on the porch” and the woes of having your sister lose your jackknife through a crack in the barn floor; or of tearing your thumb nail in trying to get the nickel out of the tin savings bank.

The poets we admire are many; the poets we love are few. One of the traits that endear Riley to his countrymen is his cheerfulness. He is “Sunny Jim.” The south wind and the sun are his playmates. The drop of bitterness mixed in the cup of so many poets seems to have been left out of his life potion. And so, while he does not rouse us with “the thunder of the trumpets of the night,” or move us with the deep organ tones of tragic grief, he never fails to hearten and console. And though tragedy is absent from his verse, a tender pathos, kindred to his humor, is everywhere present. Read over again “The Old Man and Jim,” or “Nothin’ to Say, my Daughter,” or any of his poems on the deaths of children; for a choice that poignant little piece, “The Lost Kiss,” comparable with Coventry Patmore’s best poem, “The Toys,” in which the bereaved father speaks his unavailing remorse because he had once spoken crossly to his little girl when she came to his desk for a good-night kiss and interrupted him at his work.

Riley followed the bent of his genius and gave himself just the

kind of training that fitted him to do his work. He never had any regular education, adopted no trade or profession, never married and had children, but kept himself free from set tasks and from those responsibilities which distract the poet's soul. His muse was a truant, and he was a runaway schoolboy who kept the heart of a boy into manhood and old age, which is one definition of genius. He was better employed when he joined a circus troupe or a travelling medicine van, or set up as a sign painter, or simply lay out on the grass, "knee deep in June," than if he had shut himself up in a school or an office. He did no routine work, but wrote when he felt like it, when he was in the mood. Fortunately the mood recurred abundantly, and so we have about two dozen volumes from him, filled with lovely poetry. Most of us do hack work, routine work, because we can do nothing better. But for the creative artist, hack work is a waste. Creative work, when one is in the mood, is more a pleasure than a toil; and Riley worked hard at his verse-making. For he was a most conscientious artist; and all those poems of his, seemingly so easy, natural, spontaneous, were the result of labor, though of labor joyously borne. How fine his art was perhaps only those can fully appreciate who have tried their own hands at making verses. Some of the things that he said to me about the use and abuse of dialect in poetry and concerning similar points, showed me how carefully he had thought out the principles of composition.

He thought most dialect poetry was overdone; recalling that delightful anecdote about the member of the Chicago Browning

Club who was asked whether he liked dialect verse, and who replied: "Some of it. Eugene Field is all right. But the other day I read some verses by a fellow named Chaucer, and he carries it altogether too far."

In particular, Riley objected to the habit which many writers have of labelling their characters with descriptive names like Sir Lucius O'Trigger and Birdofredum Sawin. I reminded him that English comedy from "Ralph Roister Doister" down had practised this device. (In Ben Jonson it is the rule.) And that even such an artist as Thackeray employed it frequently with droll effect: Lady Jane Sheepshanks, daughter of the Countess of Southdown, and so forth. But he insisted that it was a departure from *vraisemblance* which disturbed the impression of reality.

In seeking to classify these Hoosier poems, we are forced back constantly to a comparison with the Doric singers: with William Barnes, the Dorsetshire dialect poet; and above all with Robert Burns. Wordsworth in his "Lyrical Ballads," and Tennyson in his few rural idyls like "Dora" and "The Brook" dealt also with simple, country life, the life of Cumberland dalesmen and Lincolnshire farmers. But these poets are in another class. They are grave philosophers, cultivated scholars, university men, writing in academic English; writing with sympathy indeed, but from a point of view outside the life which they depict. In our own country there are Will Carleton's "Farm Ballads," handling the same homely themes as Riley's; handling them truthfully, sincerely, but prosaically. Carleton could not

.. add the gleam,  
The light that never was, on sea or land,  
The consecration, and the poet's dream.

But Riley's world of common things and plain folks is always lit up by the lamp of beauty. Then there is Whittier. He was a farmer lad, and was part of the life that he wrote of. He belonged; and, like Riley, he knew his Burns. I think, indeed, that "Snow-Bound" is a much better poem than "The Cotter's Saturday Night." Whittier's fellow Quaker, John Bright, in an address to British workingmen, advised them to read Whittier's poems, if they wanted to understand the spirit of the American people. Well, the spirit of New England, let us say, if not of all America. For Whittier is in some ways provincial, and rightly so. But though he uses homely New England words like "chore," he does not, so far as I remember, essay dialect except in "Skipper Ireson's Ride"; and that is Irish if it is anything. No Yankee women known to me talk like the fishwives of Marblehead in that popular but overrated piece. Then there are the "Biglow Papers," which remind of Riley's work on the humorous, as Whittier's ballads do on the serious side. Lowell made a careful study of the New England dialect and the "Biglow Papers" are brilliantly true to the shrewd Yankee wit; but they are political satires rather than idyls. Where they come nearest to these Hoosier ballads or to "Sunthin' in the Pastoral Line" is where they record old local ways and institutions. "This kind o' sogerin'," writes

Birdofredum Sawin, who is disgustedly campaigning in Mexico, like our National Guards of yesterday: —

This kind o' sogerin' aint a mite like our October trainin',  
A chap could clear right out from there ef 't only looked like  
rainin',  
An' th' Cunnles, tu, could kiver up their shappoes with  
bandanners,  
An' send the insines skootin' to the bar-room with their  
banners  
(Fear o' gittin' on 'em spotted),.

Isn't that something like Riley? Lowell, of course, is a more imposing literary figure, and he tapped intellectual sources to which the younger poet had no access. But I still think Riley the finer artist. Benjamin F. Johnson, of Boone, the quaint, simple, innocent old Hoosier farmer, is a more convincing person than Hosea Biglow. In many of the "Biglow Papers" sentiment, imagery, vocabulary, phrase, are often too elevated for the speaker and for his dialect. Riley is not guilty of this inconsistency; his touch here is absolutely correct.

Riley's work was anything but academic; and I am therefore rather proud of the fact that my university was the first to confer upon him an honorary degree. I cannot quite see why geniuses like Mark Twain and Riley, whose books are read and loved by hundreds of thousands of their countrymen, should care very much for a college degree. The fact remains, however,

that they are gratified by the compliment, which stamps their performances with a sort of official sanction, like the *couronné par l'Académie Française* on the title-page of a French author.

When Mr. Riley came on to New Haven to take his Master's degree, he was a bit nervous about making a public appearance in unwonted conditions; although he had been used to facing popular audiences with great applause when he gave his delightful readings from his own poems, with humorous impersonations in prose as good as Beatrice Herford's best monologues. He rehearsed the affair in advance, trying on his Master's gown and reading me his poem, "No Boy Knows when He Goes to Sleep," which he proposed to use if called on for a speech. He asked me if it would do: it did. For at the alumni dinner which followed the conferring of degrees, when Riley got to his feet and read the piece, the audience broke loose. It was evident that, whatever the learned gentlemen on the platform might think, the undergraduates and the young alumni knew their Riley; and that his enrolment on the Yale catalogue was far and away the most popular act of the day. For in truth there is nothing cloistral or high and dry among our modern American colleges. A pessimist on my own faculty even avers that the average undergraduate nowadays reads nothing beyond the sporting columns in the New York newspapers. There were other distinguished recipients of degrees at that same Commencement. One leading statesman was made a Doctor of Laws: Mr. Riley a Master of Arts. Of course a mere man of

letters cannot hope to rank with a politician. If Shakespeare and Ben Butler had been contemporaries and had both come up for a degree at the same Commencement – supposing any college willing to notice Butler at all – why Ben would have got an LL.D. and William an M.A. Yet exactly why should this be so? For as I am accustomed to say of John Hay, anybody can be Secretary of State, but it took a smart man to write “Little Breeches” and “The Mystery of Gilgal.”

# EMERSON AND HIS JOURNALS

THE publication of Emerson's journals,<sup>1</sup> kept for over half a century, is a precious gift to the reading public. It is well known that he made an almost daily record of his thoughts: that, when called upon for a lecture or address, he put together such passages as would dovetail, without too anxious a concern for unity; and that from all these sources, by a double distillation, his perfected essays were finally evolved.

Accordingly, many pages are here omitted which are to be found in his published works, but a great wealth of matter remains – chips from his workshop – which will be new to the reader. And as he always composed carefully, even when writing only for his own eye, and as consecutiveness was never his long suit, these entries may be read with a pleasure and profit hardly less than are given by his finished writings.

The editors, with excellent discretion, have sometimes allowed to stand the first outlines, in prose or verse, of work long familiar in its completed shape. Here, for instance, is the germ of a favorite poem:

*“August 28. [1838.]*

“It is very grateful to my feelings to go into a Roman

---

<sup>1</sup> *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1820–76.* Edited by E. W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1909–14.

cathedral, yet I look as my countrymen do at the Roman priesthood. It is very grateful to me to go into an English church and hear the liturgy read. Yet nothing would induce me to be the English priest. I find an unpleasant dilemma in this nearer home.”

This dilemma is “The Problem.” And here again is the original of “The Two Rivers,” “as it came to mind, sitting by the river, one April day” (April 5, 1856):

“Thy Voice is sweet, Musketaquid; repeats the music of the rain; but sweeter rivers silent flit through thee, as thou through Concord plain.

“Thou art shut in thy banks; but the stream I love, flows in thy water, and flows through rocks and through the air, and through darkness, and through men, and women. I hear and see the inundation and eternal spending of the stream, in winter and in summer, in men and animals, in passion and thought. Happy are they who can hear it.

“I see thy brimming, eddying stream, and thy enchantment. For thou changest every rock in thy bed into a gem; all is real opal and agate, and at will thou pavest with diamonds. Take them away from thy stream, and they are poor shards and flints: So is it with me to-day.”

These journals differ from common diaries in being a chronicle of thoughts, rather than of events, or even of impressions. Emerson is the most impersonal of writers, which accounts in part, and by virtue of the attraction of opposites, for the high regard in which he held that gossip, Montaigne.

Still, there are jottings enough of foreign travel, lecture tours, domestic incidents, passing public events, club meetings, college reunions, walks and talks with Concord neighbors, and the like, to afford the material of a new biography,<sup>2</sup> which has been published uniformly with the ten volumes of journals. And the philosopher held himself so aloof from vulgar curiosity that the general reader, who breathes with difficulty in the rarefied air of high speculations, will perhaps turn most readily to such more intimate items as occur. As where his little son – the “deep-eyed boy” of the “Threnody” – being taken to the circus, said *à propos* of the clown, “Papa, the funny man makes me want to go home.” Emerson adds that he and Waldo were of one mind on the subject; and one thereupon recalls a celebrated incident in the career of Mark Twain. The diarist is not above setting down jests – even profane jests – with occasional anecdotes, *bons mots*, and miscellaneous witticisms like “an ordinary man or a Christian.” I, for one, would like to know who was the “Miss – of New Haven, who on reading Ruskin’s book [presumably “Modern Painters”], said ‘Nature was Mrs. Turner.’” Were there such witty fair in the New Haven of 1848?

In the privacy of his journals, every man allows himself a license of criticism which he would hardly practise in public. The limitations or eccentricities of Emerson’s literary tastes are familiar to most; such as his dislike of Shelley and contempt for Poe, “the jingle man.” But here is a judgment, calmly penned,

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ralph Waldo Emerson*. By O. W. Firkins. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915.

which rather takes one's breath away: "Nathaniel Hawthorne's reputation as a writer is a very pleasing fact, because his writing is not good for anything, and this is a tribute to the man." This, to be sure, was in 1842, eight years before the appearance of "The Scarlet Letter." Yet, to the last, the romancer's obsession with the problem of evil affected the resolved optimist as unwholesome. Indeed he speaks impatiently of all novels, and prophesies that they will give way by and by to autobiographies and diaries. The only exception to his general distaste for fiction is "The Bride of Lammermoor," which he mentions repeatedly and with high praise, comparing it with Aeschylus.

The entry concerning Moore's "Life of Sheridan" is surprisingly savage – less like the gentle Emerson than like his truculent friend Carlyle: "He details the life of a mean, fraudulent, vain, quarrelsome play-actor, whose wit lay in cheating tradesmen, whose genius was used in studying jokes and *bons mots* at home for a dinner or a club, who laid traps for the admiration of coxcombs, who never did anything good and never said anything wise."

Emerson's biographers make a large claim for him. One calls him "the first of American thinkers": another, "the only great mind in American literature." This is a generous challenge, but I believe that, with proper definition, it may be granted. When it is remembered that among American thinkers are Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, William James, and Willard Gibbs, one hesitates to subscribe to

so absolute a verdict. Let it stand true, however, with the saving clause, “after the intuitional order of thought.” Emerson dwelt with the insights of the Reason and not with the logically derived judgments of the Understanding. (He capitalizes the names of these faculties, which translate the Kantian *Vernunft* and *Verstand*.) Dialectics he eschewed, professing himself helpless to conduct an argument. He announced truths, but would not undertake to say by what process of reasoning he reached them. They were not the conclusions of a syllogism: they were borne in upon him – revelations. At New Bedford he visited the meetings of the Quakers, and took great interest in their doctrine of the inner light.

When the heresies of the “Divinity School Address” (1838) were attacked by orthodox Unitarians (if there is such a thing as an orthodox Unitarian) like Andrews Norton in “The Latest Form of Infidelity,” and Henry Ware in his sermon on “The Personality of God,” Emerson made no attempt to defend his position. In a cordial letter to Ware he wrote: “I could not possibly give you one of the ‘arguments’ you cruelly hint at, on which any doctrine of mine stands; for I do not know what arguments are in reference to any expression of a thought. I delight in telling what I think; but if you ask me how I dare say so, or why it is so, I am the most helpless of mortal men.”

Let me add a few sentences from the noble and beautiful passage written at sea, September 17, 1833: “Yesterday I was asked what I mean by morals. I reply that I cannot define, and

care not to define... That which I cannot yet declare has been my angel from childhood until now... It cannot be defeated by my defeats. It cannot be questioned though all the martyrs apostatize... What is this they say about wanting mathematical certainty for moral truths? I have always affirmed they had it. Yet they ask me whether I know the soul immortal. No. But do I not know the Now to be eternal?.. Men seem to be constitutionally believers and unbelievers. There is no bridge that can cross from a mind in one state to a mind in the other. All my opinions, affections, whimsies, are tinged with belief, – incline to that side... But I cannot give reasons to a person of a different persuasion that are at all adequate to the force of my conviction. Yet when I fail to find the reason, my faith is not less.”

No doubt most men cherish deep beliefs for which they can assign no reasons: “real assents,” rather than “notional assents,” in Newman’s phrase. But Emerson’s profession of inability to argue need not be accepted too literally. It is a mask of humility covering a subtle policy: a plea in confession and avoidance: a throwing off of responsibility *in forma pauperis*. He could argue well, when he wanted to. In these journals, for example, he exposes, with admirable shrewdness, the unreasonableness and inconsistency of Alcott, Thoreau, and others, who refused to pay taxes because Massachusetts enforced the fugitive slave law: “As long as the state means you well, do not refuse your pistareen. You have a tottering cause: ninety parts of the pistareen it will spend for what you think also good: ten parts for mischief. You

cannot fight heartily for a fraction... The state tax does not pay the Mexican War. Your coat, your sugar, your Latin and French and German book, your watch does. Yet these you do not stick at buying.”

Again, is it true that Emerson is the only great mind in American literature? Of his greatness of mind there can be no question; but how far was that mind *in* literature? No one doubts that Poe, or Hawthorne, or Longfellow, or Irving was *in* literature: was, above all things else, a man of letters. But the gravamen of Emerson’s writing appears to many to fall outside of the domain of letters: to lie in the provinces of ethics, religion, and speculative thought. They acknowledge that his writings have wonderful force and beauty, have literary quality; but tried by his subject matter, he is more a philosopher, a moralist, a theosophist, than a poet or a man of letters who deals with this human life as he finds it. A theosophist, not of course a theologian. Emerson is the most religious of thinkers, but by 1836, when his first book, “Nature,” was published, he had thought himself free of dogma and creed. Not the least interest of the journals is in the evidence they give of the process, the steps of growth by which he won to his perfected system. As early as 1824 we find a letter to Plato, remarkable in its mature gravity for a youth of twenty-one, questioning the exclusive claim of the Christian Revelation: “Of this Revelation I am the ardent friend. Of the Being who sent it I am the child... But I confess it has not for me the same exclusive and extraordinary claims it has for

many. I hold Reason to be a prior Revelation. . . I need not inform you in all its depraved details of the theology under whose chains Calvin of Geneva bound Europe down; but this opinion, that the Revelation had become necessary to the salvation of men through some conjunction of events in heaven, is one of its vagaries.”

Emerson refused to affirm personality of God, “because it is too little, not too much.” Here, for instance, in the journal for Sunday, May 22, 1836, is the seed of the passage in the “Divinity School Address” which complains that “historical Christianity.. dwells with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus”: “The talk of the kitchen and the cottage is exclusively occupied with persons. . . . And yet, when cultivated men speak of God, they demand a biography of him as steadily as the kitchen and the bar-room demand personalities of men. . . . Theism must be, and the name of God must be, because it is a necessity of the human mind to apprehend the relative as flowing from the absolute, and we shall always give the absolute a name.”

The theosophist whose soul is in direct contact with the “Oversoul” needs no “evidences of Christianity,” nor any revelation through the scripture or the written word. Revelation is to him something more immediate – a doctrine, said Andrews Norton, which is not merely a heresy, but is not even an intelligible error. Neither does the mystic seek proof of God’s existence from the arguments of natural theology. “The intellectual power is not the gift, but the presence of God. Nor do we reason to the being of God, but God goes with us into

Nature, when we go or think at all.”

The popular faith does not warm to Emerson’s impersonal deity. “I cannot love or worship an abstraction,” it says. “I must have a Father to believe in and pray to: a Father who loves and watches over *me*. As for the immortality you offer, it has no promise for the heart.

My servant Death, with solving rite,  
Pours finite into infinite.

I do not know what it means to be absorbed into the absolute. The loss of conscious personal life is the loss of all. To awake into another state of being without a memory of this, is such a loss; and is, besides, inconceivable. I want to be reunited to my friends. I want my heaven to be a continuation of my earth. And hang Brahma!”

In literature, as in religion, this impersonality has disconcerting aspects to the man who dwells in the world of the senses and the understanding. “Some men,” says a note of 1844, “have the perception of difference predominant, and are conversant with surfaces and trifles, with coats and coaches and faces and cities; these are the men of talent. And other men abide by the perception of Identity: these are the Orientals, the philosophers, the men of faith and divinity, the men of genius.”

All this has a familiar look to readers who remember the chapter on Plato in “Representative Men,” or passages like

the following from “The Oversoul”: “In youth we are mad for persons. But the larger experience of man discovers the identical nature appearing through them all.” Now, in mundane letters it is the difference that counts, the *più* and not the *uno*. The common nature may be taken for granted. In drama and fiction, particularly, difference is life and identity is death; and this “tyrannizing unity” would cut the ground from under them both.

This philosophical attitude did not keep Emerson from having a sharp eye for personal traits. His sketch of Thoreau in “Excursions” is a masterpiece; and so is the half-humorous portrait of Socrates in “Representative Men”; and both these are matched by the keen analysis of Daniel Webster in the journals. All going to show that this transcendentalist had something of “the devouring eye and the portraying hand” with which he credits Carlyle.

As in religion and in literature, so in the common human relations, this impersonality gives a peculiar twist to Emerson’s thought. The coldness of his essays on “Love” and “Friendship” has been often pointed out. His love is the high Platonic love. He is enamored of perfection, and individual men and women are only broken images of the absolute good.

Have I a lover who is noble and free?

I would he were nobler than to love me.

Alas! *nous autres*, we do not love our friends because they

are more or less perfect reflections of divinity. We love them in spite of their faults: almost because of their faults: at least we love their faults because they are theirs. "You are in love with certain attributes," said the fair blue-stocking in "Hyperion" to her suitor. " 'Madam,' said I, 'damn your attributes!' "

Another puzzle in Emerson, to the general reader, is the centrality of his thought. I remember a remark of Professor Thomas A. Thacher, upon hearing an address of W. T. Harris, the distinguished Hegelian and educationalist. He said that Mr. Harris went a long way back for a jump. So Emerson draws lines of relation from every least thing to the centre.

A subtle chain of countless rings  
The next unto the farthest brings.

He never lets go his hold upon his theosophy. All his wagons are hitched to stars: himself from God he cannot free. But the citizen does not like to be always reminded of God, as he goes about his daily affairs. It carries a disturbing suggestion of death and the judgment and eternity and the other world. But, for the present, this comfortable phenomenal world of time and space is good enough for him. "So a' cried out, 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him a' should not think of God; I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet."

Another block of stumbling, about which much has been

written, is Emerson's optimism, which rests upon the belief that evil is negative, merely the privation or shadow of good, without real existence. It was the heresy of "Uriel" that there was nothing inherently and permanently bad: no line of division between good and evil – "Line in nature is not found"; "Evil will bless and ice will burn." He turned away resolutely from the contemplation of sin, crime, suffering: was impatient of complaints of sickness, of breakfast-table talk about headaches and a bad night's sleep. Doubtless had he lived to witness the Christian Science movement, he would have taken an interest in the underlying doctrine, while repelled by the element of quackery in the practice and preaching of the sect. Hence the tragedy of life is ignored or evaded by Emerson. But *ici bas*, the reality of evil is not abolished, as an experience, by calling it the privation of good; nor will philosophy cure the grief of a wound. We suffer quite as acutely as we enjoy. We find that all those disagreeable appearances – "swine, spiders, snakes, pests, mad-houses, prisons, enemies," – which he assures us will disappear, when man comes fully into possession of his kingdom, do not disappear but persist.

The dispute between optimism and pessimism rests, in the long run, on individual temperament and personal experience, and admits of no secure solution. Imposing systems of philosophy have been erected on these opposing views. Leibnitz proved that everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Schopenhauer demonstrated the futility of the will to

live; and showed that he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow. Nor does it avail to appeal from the philosophers to the poets, as more truly expressing the general sense of mankind; and to array Byron, Leopardi, Shelley, and the book of “Lamentations,” and “The City of Dreadful Night” against Goethe, Wordsworth, Browning, and others of the hopeful wise. The question cannot be decided by a majority vote: the question whether life is worth living, is turned aside by a jest about the liver. Meanwhile men give it practically an affirmative answer by continuing to live. Is life so bad? Then why not all commit suicide? Dryden explains, in a famous tirade, that we do not kill ourselves because we are the fools of hope: —

When I consider life, 'tis all a cheat.

Shelley, we are reminded, calls birth an “eclipsing curse”; and Byron, in a hackneyed stanza, invites us to count over the joys our life has seen and our days free from anguish, and to recognize that whatever we have been, it were better not to be at all.

The question as between optimist and pessimist is not whether evil is a necessary foil to good, as darkness is to light – a discipline without which we could have no notion of good, – but whether or not evil predominates in the universe. Browning, who seems to have had somewhat of a contempt for Bryon, affirms: —

.. There's a simple test

Would serve, when people take on them to weigh  
The worth of poets. “Who was better, best,  
This, that, the other bard?”  
End the strife  
By asking “Which one led a happy life?”

This may answer as a criterion of a poet’s “worth,” that is, his power to fortify, to heal, to inspire; but it can hardly be accepted, without qualification, as a test of intellectual power. Goethe, to be sure, thought lightly of Byron as a thinker. But Leopardi was a thinker and a deep and exact scholar. And what of Shakespeare? What of the speeches in his plays which convey a profound conviction of the overbalance of misery in human life? – Hamlet’s soliloquy; Macbeth’s “Out, out, brief candle”; the Duke’s remonstrance with Claudio in “Measure for Measure,” persuading him that there was nothing in life which he need regret to lose; and the sad reflections of the King in “All’s Well that Ends Well” upon the approach of age,

Let me not live after my flame lacks oil.

It is the habit of present-day criticism to regard all such speeches in Shakespeare as having a merely dramatic character, true only to the feeling of the *dramatis persona* who speaks them. It may be so; but often there is a weight of thought and emotion in these and the like passages which breaks through the platform of the theatre and gives us the truth as Shakespeare himself sees it.

Browning's admirers accord him great credit for being happy. And, indeed, he seems to take credit to himself for that same. Now we may envy a man for being happy, but we can hardly praise him for it. It is not a thing that depends on his will, but is only his good fortune. Let it be admitted that those writers do us the greater service who emphasize the hopeful view, who are lucky enough to be able to maintain that view. Still, when we consider what this world is, the placid optimism of Emerson and the robustious optimism of Browning become sometimes irritating; and we feel almost like calling for a new "Candide" and exclaim impatiently, *Il faut cultiver notre jardin!*

Grow old along with me,  
The best is yet to be.

Oh, no: the best has been: youth is the best. So answers general, if not universal, experience. Old age doubtless has its compensations, and Cicero has summed them up ingeniously. But the "De Senectute" is, at best, a whistling to keep up one's courage.

Strange cozenage! None would live past years again,  
Yet all hope pleasure from what still remain,  
And from the dregs of life hope to receive  
What the first sprightly runnings could not give.  
I'm tired of waiting for this chymic gold,  
Which fools us young and beggars us when old.

Upon the whole, Matthew Arnold holds the balance more evenly than either optimist or pessimist.

.. Life still

Yields human effort scope.

But since life teems with ill,

Nurse no extravagant hope.

Because thou must not dream,

Thou needs't not then despair.

Spite of all impersonality, there is much interesting personal mention in these journals. Emerson's kindly regard for his Concord friends and neighbors is quite charming. He had need of much patience with some of them, for they were queer as Dick's proverbial hatband: transcendentalists, reformers, vegetarians, communists – the “cranks” of our contemporary slang. The figure which occurs oftenest in these memoranda is – naturally – Mr. A. Bronson Alcott. Of him Emerson speaks with unflinching reverence, mingled with a kind of tender desperation over his unworldliness and practical helplessness. A child of genius, a deep-thoughted seer, a pure visionary, living, as nearly as such a thing is possible, the life of a disembodied spirit. If earth were heaven, Alcott's life would have been the right life. “Great Looker! Great Expecter!” says Thoreau. “His words and attitude always suppose a better state of things than other men are acquainted with... He has no venture in the present.”

Emerson is forced to allow that Alcott was no writer: talk was his medium. And even from his talk one derived few definite ideas; but its steady, melodious flow induced a kind of hypnotic condition, in which one's own mind worked with unusual energy, without much attending to what was being said. "Alcott is like a slate-pencil which has a sponge tied to the other end, and, as the point of the pencil draws lines, the sponge follows as fast, and erases them. He talks high and wide, and expresses himself very happily, and forgets all he has said. If a skilful operator could introduce a lancet and sever the sponge, Alcott would be the prince of writers." "I used to tell him that he had no senses... We had a good proof of it this morning. He wanted to know 'why the boys waded in the water after pond lilies?' Why, because they will sell in town for a cent apiece and every man and child likes to carry one to church for a cologne bottle. 'What!' said he, 'have they a perfume? I did not know it.' "

And Ellery Channing, who had in him brave, translunary things, as Hawthorne testifies no less than Emerson; as his own poems do partly testify – those poems which were so savagely cut up by Edgar Poe. Channing, too, was no writer, no artist. His poetry was freakish, wilfully imperfect, not seldom affected, sometimes downright silly – "shamefully indolent and slovenly," are Emerson's words concerning it.

Margaret Fuller, too, fervid, high aspiring, dominating soul, and brilliant talker: ("such a determination to *eat* this huge universe," Carlyle's comment upon her; disagreeable, conceited

woman, Lowell's and Hawthorne's verdict). Margaret, too, was an "illuminator but no writer." Miss Peabody was proposing to collect anecdotes of Margaret's youth. But Emerson throws cold water on the project: "Now, unhappily, Margaret's writing does not justify any such research. All that can be said is that she represents an interesting hour and group in American cultivation; then that she was herself a fine, generous, inspiring, vinous, eloquent talker, who did not outlive her influence."

This is sound criticism. None of these people could write. Thoreau and Hawthorne and Emerson, himself, were accomplished writers, and are American classics. But the collected works of Margaret Fuller, in the six-volume "Tribune Memorial Edition" are disappointing. They do not interest, are to-day virtually unreadable. A few of Channing's most happily inspired and least capriciously expressed verses find lodgment in the anthologies. As for Alcott, he had no technique at all. For its local interest I once read his poem "New Connecticut," which recounts his early life in the little old hilltop village of Wolcott (Alcott of Wolcott), and as a Yankee pedlar in the South. It is of a winning innocence, a more than Wordsworthian simplicity. I read it with pleasure, as the revelation of a singularly pure and disinterested character. As a literary composition, it is about on the level of Mother Goose. Here is one more extract from the journals, germane to the matter:

"In July [1852] Mr. Alcott went to Connecticut to his native town of Wolcott; found his father's farm in possession of a

stranger; found many of his cousins still poor farmers in the town; the town itself unchanged since his childhood, whilst all the country round has been changed by manufactures and railroads. Wolcott, which is a mountain, remains as it was, or with a still less population (ten thousand dollars, he said, would buy the whole town, and all the men in it) and now tributary entirely to the neighboring town of Waterbury, which is a thriving factory village. Alcott went about and invited all the people, his relatives and friends, to meet him at five o'clock at the schoolhouse, where he had once learned, on Sunday evening. Thither they all came, and he sat at the desk and gave them the story of his life. Some of the audience went away discontented, because they had not heard a sermon, as they hoped."

Some sixty years after this entry was made, I undertook a literary pilgrimage to Wolcott in company with a friend. We crossed the mountain from Plantsville and, on the outskirts of the village, took dinner at a farmhouse, one wing of which was the little Episcopal chapel in which the Alcott family had worshipped about 1815. It had been moved over, I believe, from the centre. The centre itself was a small green, bordered by some dozen houses, with the meeting-house and horse sheds, on an airy summit overlooking a vast open prospect of farms and woods, falling away to the Naugatuck. We inquired at several of the houses, and of the few human beings met on the road, where was the birthplace of A. Bronson Alcott? In vain: none had ever heard of him, nor of an Alcott family once resident in the town: not

even of Louisa Alcott, whose “Little Women” still sells its annual thousands, and a dramatized version of which was even then playing in New York to crowded houses. The prophet and his country! We finally heard rumors of a certain Spindle Hill, which was vaguely connected with traditions of the Alcott name. But it was getting late, and we availed ourselves of a passing motor car which set us some miles on our way towards the Waterbury trolley line. This baffled act of homage has seemed to me, in a way, symbolical, and I have never renewed it.

It was Emerson’s belief that the faintest promptings of the spirit are also, in the end, the practical rules of conduct. A paragraph written in 1837 has a startling application to the present state of affairs in Europe: “I think the principles of the Peace party sublime... If a nation of men is exalted to that height of morals as to refuse to fight and choose rather to suffer loss of goods and loss of life than to use violence, they must be not helpless, but most effective and great men: they would overawe their invader and make him ridiculous: they would communicate the contagion of their virtue and inoculate all mankind.”

Is this transcendental politics? Does it belong to what Mr. Roosevelt calls, with apt alliteration, the “realm of shams and shadows”? It is, at all events, applied Christianity. It is the principle of the Society of Friends; and of Count Tolstoy, who of all recent great writers is the most consistent preacher of Christ’s gospel.

# THE ART OF LETTER WRITING

THIS lecture was founded by Mr. George F. Dominick, of the Class of 1894, in memory of Daniel S. Lamont, private secretary to President Cleveland, and afterwards Secretary of War, during Mr. Cleveland's second term of office. Mr. Dominick had a high regard for Lamont's skill as a letter writer and in the composition of messages, despatches, and reports. It was his wish, not only to perpetuate the memory of his friend and to associate it with his own Alma Mater, but to give his memorial a shape which should mark his sense of the importance of the art of letter writing.

Mr. Dominick thought that Lamont was particularly happy in turning a phrase and that many of the expressions which passed current in Cleveland's two presidencies were really of his secretary's coinage. I don't suppose that we are to transfer such locutions as "innocuous desuetude" and "pernicious activity" from the President to his secretary. They bear the stamp of their authorship. I fancy that Mr. Lamont's good phrases took less room to turn in.

But however this may be, the founder of this lecture is certainly right in his regard for the art of letter writing. It is an important asset in any man's equipment, and I have heard it said that the test of education is the ability to write a good letter. Merchants, manufacturers, and business men generally, in advertising for clerks or assistants, are apt to judge of the fitness

of applicants for positions by the kind of letters that they write. If these are illegible, ill-spelled, badly punctuated and paragraphed, ungrammatical, confused, repetitious, ignorantly or illiterately expressed, they are usually fatal to their writers' hopes of a place. This is not quite fair, for there is many a shrewd man of business who can't write a good letter. But surely a college graduate may be justly expected to write correct English; and he is likely to be more often called on to use it in letters than in any other form of written composition. "The writing of letters," says John Locke, "has so much to do in all the occurrences of human life, that no gentleman can avoid showing himself in this kind of writing.. which always lays him open to a severer examination of his breeding, sense and abilities than oral discourses whose transient faults.. more easily escape observation and censure."

*Litera scripta manet.*

# Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.