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1-15-1915

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Louise Pound
University of Nebraska

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EMERSON AS A ROMANTICIST

Literature is, on the whole, a social product. An author needs for his highest imaginative reach the stimulus and the encouragement of an audience. "An author writes for everybody," wrote George Sand, "for all those who need to be initiated. When one is not understood, one submits and recommences; when one is understood, one rejoices and continues. There is all the secret of our perseverance and of our love of art. What is art without the hearts and the intelligences to which it ministers ? A sun projecting no rays, and giving life to nothing." There may be fluctuation in the attitude of men of letters toward the creative impulse; for instance, the creed of "art for art's sake" still has its followers; but in the long run George Sand's observations may be accepted as sound.

George Sand historically belongs to the group known as the French romanticists of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless her view of the artist's inspiration, as here set forth, is not that usually designated as the "romantic"; at least it is not the romantic view of the inspiration of the poet. In the typical romantic conception, the poet is a lonely special soul born superior to other human beings, between whom and himself he feels a chasm. He is like the hero of Shelley's *Alastor*, of whom it is said, "He lived, he died, he sung in solitude." Or better, his feeling is that expressed by Goethe's Poet in the "Prelude on the Stage" of the First Part of Faust :

> " Oh, speak not of the motley multitude
> At whose aspect the spirit wings its flight;
> Shut off the noisy crowd, whose vortex rude
> Still draws us downward with resistless might.
> Lead to some nook, where silence loves to brood,
> Where only for the bard blooms pure delight. . . ."

Contemporary society has neither attraction nor inspiration for such a poet. He loathes the "vulgar herd," the "crowd." He writes not for the applause of a world which cannot comprehend him. He cares only for his own ideals, and works in the aloofness and solitude of his own genius. This tacitly is the attitude of Byron, who "feels alone" only when he is with

others, and whose favourite heroes "stalk apart in joyless reverie," or refuse to be "caged in cities' social home." At times the same note is struck by Landor:

> " I know not whether I am proud,
> But this I know, I hate the crowd."

Both poets may really have had in mind readers for their verse. Byron did surely, else why pose for their benefit so often ? Yet neither chose to admit this; and that their verse was anti-social in its inspiration and its tendencies is partly true. But even for them the romantic creed must be qualified. To have been consistent they should have published nothing; their communion should have been only with themselves.

Among American poets of our one creative period the isolated professor of the romantic doctrine of the poet as a lonely superior being is, strangely enough, Emerson. There is nothing of this feeling in Whittier, Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes. We are not much in the habit of associating Emerson with the poets who express the body of ideas launched for European readers by Rousseau, and familiar to English readers mainly from Byron; yet in stray but still characteristic passages Emerson becomes hardly distinguishable from his Old World forebears. He at least touches the hem of the mantle of Rousseau, which enveloped Byron:

> " I am not poor but I am proud
> Of one inalienable right
> Above the envy of the crowd,
> Thought's holy light."

Here the American poet proclaims that he, too, is not like other men; while in the following stanza from an early poem is heard the voice of the lonely special soul in revolt :

> " Goodbye, proud world, I'm going home.
> Thou art not my friend and I'm not thine. ..
> Long I've been tossed by the driven foam;
> But now, proud world, I'm going home."

Another stanza shows something surprisingly like Byronic cynicism :

> " Goodbye to Flattery's fawning face;
> To Grandeur with his wise grimace;

To Upstart Wealth's averted eye;
To supple office low and high.
To crowded halls, to court and street;
To frozen hearts and hasting feet. . . ."

The poem closes on the same note of lofty self-sufficiency and contempt for an unworthy world. The author has unmistakable affinity with the type so long admired on the continent and so much imitated, the type of the voluntary social exile. Good-bye, it is only fair to recall, was a youthful poem which Emerson retained with some reluctance in his later volumes; but the underlying thought of the last stanza is often repeated in his later poetry:

" 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 wholly shines,
I laugh at the lore and pride of man,
At the sophist schools and the learned clan."

Emerson. like Thoreau, who, however, lived the creed, finds it better to flee to the unsocial woods, where he is safe from the corrupt and degenerating influences of society; where there is so much more to be learned that is worth while than is possible in the cities of men. These are favourite romantic themes: the love of elemental nature as a refuge for the special human spirit, the superiority of the lessons to be found there, love of natural description, and care for conveying "local colour."

In Emerson's prose are to be found many passages illustrating these beliefs-already noticed in his earlier poetry-which so qualify his democracy; the note of self-sufficiency and egoism, the note of unsociability, and the exaltation of solitude with nature as superior to human intercourse. He was not much attracted by the common social joys.

"The hunger for company is keen, but it must be discriminating, and must be economized. 'Tis a defect in our manners that they have not yet reached the prescribing a limit to visits. That every well-dressed lady or gentleman should be at liberty to exceed ten minutes in his or her cal1 on serious people shows a civilization still rude."

Reformers he could tolerate, and he could lend them a somewhat Olympian sympathy; but if he had to associate with them too closely his nerves were on edge.

"The strong and worthy persons who support the social order without hesitation or misgiving, I like these; they never incommode us by exciting grief, pity, or perturbation of any sort. But the professed philanthropists, it is strange and horrible to say, are altogether an odious set of bores and canters."

Sometimes he becomes undemocratic to a degree that is disconcerting.

"Enormous populations, if they be beggars, are disgusting, like moving cheese, like hills of ants, or of fleas-the more the worse." Or, "Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them. The worst of charity is that the lives you are asked to preserve are not worth preserving. Masses! The calamity is the masses."

A strong sense of human comradeship Emerson very plainly did not feel. Sympathetic he was, but his sympathy was of the intellect alone. Perhaps it was for this reason that he lent active help to so few movements. He took a detached and benevolent interest in them, but he did not, like Whittier, put his shoulder to the wheel. He preferred to leave practical activities to others. Perhaps in this way also may be explained his acceptance of the favourite transcendental doctrine that "being is better than doing," a doctrine with which Margaret Fuller, so she tells us, took issue.

But let us return to illustration of the "romantic" attitude of Emerson toward the poet, looking this time at his maturer work. In one of his *Fragments on the Poet and the Poetic Gift*, he affirms :

" Pale genius roves alone,
No scout can track his way,
None credits him till he have shown
His diamonds to the day."

Similarly in the poem entitled *Saadi*, a name, says his son, sometimes for the ideal poet and sometimes for the author's actual self :

" Trees in groves,
Kine in droves,
In ocean sport the scaly herds,
Wedge-like cleave the air the birds;

To northern lakes fly wind-borne ducks,
Browse the mountain sheep in flocks,
Men consort in camp and town,
But the poet dwells alone. . . .

" But he has no companion ;
Come ten or come a million,
Good Saadi dwells alone."

Of the "Poet" Emerson writes: "He pursues a beauty half seen which flies before him," "The poet pours out verse in every solitude." This calls up visions from Shelley's *Alastor*, and so do touches in the following :

" Was never form and never face
So sweet to Seyd as only grace
Which did not slumber like a stone,
But hovered gleaming and was gone.
Beauty chased he everywhere,
In flames, in storm, in clouds of air."

To the poet himself he says :

"Thou shalt leave the world and know the muse only. Thou shalt not know any longer the times, customs, graces, politics, or opinions of men, but shalt take all from thy muse. . . . Thou shalt lie close hid with nature, and canst not be afforded to the Capitol or the Exchange."

What, in the case of Byron, we may call arrogance of spirit, I may not with propriety be so termed with Emerson. Let us say rather that his attitude is that of the intellectual aristocrat. We may speak of "the strange vanity of being alone and of admiring and understanding himself" of the typical romanticist yet, while Brunetiere's words may hold for certain continental and English romanticists, they will never do for Emerson. The latter never appears vain-glorious, and he does not allow the personal pronoun to dominate his verse. There is kinship nevertheless with the Europeans; and upon all is the mark of the originator, Rousseau, from whom every romanticist borrowed, and by whom all were influenced. The American's was not an ego that is agitated or passionate; it was as serene as the typical romanticist's is stormy; but it was an ego conscious of itself, and consciously attentive to the spectacle about it. If the romanticists looked haughtily on the world from their lonely wilds and mountain fastnesses, is not Emerson benevolently confident upon Olympus ? Humility, deference, dependence,

these words have no place in the scheme of things for the philosopher of Concord, more than for the dweller in the "ivory tower." No wonder that social questions found him unresponsive, and that he preferred nature or his "pleached garden" to social interests. To the romanticists the individual is all, and he must be developed to his own best, whatever the cost in the way of relations of fellowship. In our own day individualistic teaching, having done its work, is a diminishing force, and the social sense is increasingly an impulsive force. It is not strange that the twentieth century cannot always read Emerson in the same way as did the generation for whom he was prophet and emancipator. Too much self-contemplation, too much self-attention will not do, we think. Men must confront an exterior world, and keep in mind the existence of others.

Clear, too, to the reader of to-day is the affinity, in some of their ideas, between Emerson and Whitman. Whitman's exploitation of "myself," and Emerson's reiterated doctrine of self-dependence and self-reliance, his determination to look within and nowhere else, to reverse his own intuitions, ideas, instincts, his " trust thyself," "obey thyself, "—what have we in each but Rousseau's *culte de moi*, finding voice, after a lapse of time, in the New World ? There is the divergence that Whitman lacks taste. He flaunts the Whitman ego in the faces of his readers—far more to his own detriment than was really necessary since his "myself" was not wholly egoistic, but was meant to stand for the many. Emerson omitted or disguised the pronoun. But when we read carefully it becomes clear that Emerson's personal confidence is as great as Whitman's. His ego is exempt from error. "Build then thy own world," "obey thyself," "trust thyself, " are precepts which he never tempers. It is significant, thinks one critic, that Nietzsche carried about Emerson's works in his pocket, as Napoleon carried Ossian, or Shelley the works of the Greek dramatists. "No law," says Emerson. "can be sacred to me but that of my own nature." Here once more the present generation cannot accept without qualification the practical philosophy of the Sage of Concord. "Trust thyself," "follow your inner light, "are not safe teachings if your light is a flickering candle. "Examples are only too numerous," says a recent essayist," of persons who in exclusive reliance on the inner oracle have thought themselves inspired when they were only peculiar."

From Emerson's reliance on self and his failure to be interested in all that lay outside of himself, comes probably his special attitude toward culture. His whole emphasis is turned against the surrender of self to acquiring or profiting by the ideas of others. Culture becomes as unimportant to him, on its acquisitive side, as was history or science. Witness his use of reading. It has often been pointed out that Emerson never used books as wholes, as enshriners of systematized thought. He used them only for the texts or illustrations which they might afford to his private meditations. What he wanted from a book was not its organized presentation of its subject, but an anecdote, or some finely chiselled sentence which would serve an immediate personal end. All might be neglected in other men's books, which was not grist to his own mill. It was as though he declined to consider valuable all that did not touch himself. The doctrine of self-sufficiency and independence, the *culte de moi*, as applied to reading, could hardly be carried farther. He teaches in *The American Scholar* that the scholar should examine his own mind and not let himself be influenced by genius.

> "Books," he says in a familiar passage, "are for the scholar's idle time. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings." "I had rather never read a book than be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit and become a satellite."

In arrogance of spirit few have gone beyond this. It is instructive, as Miss Cary has noted, to place beside these quotations the words of Arnold. The latter finds that if perfection resides in an "inward condition of the mind and spirit, and not in an outward set of circumstances," we must attain this perfection by getting to know," on all matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and known in the world; and through this knowledge turning a stream of .fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits which we follow stanchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them stanchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically." To the modern reader, in reaction from individualism, Arnold seems the wiser guide. The mediocre must not be encouraged to trust themselves too confidently, rejecting the help which may come from culture. Those who take pride in their emancipation from the influence of others may be taking pride in their own limitations.

Emerson had in common with the romanticists his wish to

think with complete independence, to build his own world aloof and unfettered—that ideal, in the period after Rousseau, of so many rebellious spirits of the Old World. Like them he was in general revolt against tradition and convention, although his revolt was never aggressive but serene; and it was limited to matters intellectual. In practical affairs his preference was for quiet submission, for acquiescence in the existing order of things. Here contrast is afforded by Thoreau, whose revolt was thorough-going and unqualified.

The sovereignty of the poet, his transcendent insight, are, expectedly enough, recurrent ideas with Emerson. To Emerson the poet alone can see through and relate all things, can interpret and foretell. He is the seer, the vaticinator. The rapt impassioned intuition that is Wordsworth's is shared by Emerson; both have in them, as do all transcendentalists, an element of the mystic. To both the poet alone is gnostic; he sees and hears what others do not notice. Emerson's best known words concerning the function of the poet are the familiar, "Poetry is the perpetual endeavour to express the spirit of the thing, to pass the brute body and search the life and reason which causes it to exist." But it is well to go somewhat farther for a fuller setting forth of his theories. "The poet did not stop at the colour or form but read their meaning." "The poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man. He is isolated among his contemporaries by his truth and by his art." "The charming landscape I saw this morning is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he (sic) who can integrate all the parts, the poet." "Science was false by being unpoetical. It aspired to explain a reptile or a mollusk and isolated it. ... Reptile or mollusk or man or angel exists only in system, in relation. The metaphysician, the poet, sees only each animal form as an inevitable step in the path of the creating mind. . . . The poet gives us the eminent experiences only—a god stepping from peak to peak, nor planting his foot but on the mountain." "The poets are liberating gods." "The only teller of news is the poet. When he sings, the world listens with the assurance that now a secret of God is to be spoken." "The birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology ."

Returning to Emerson's verse, we find these lines, similar in import to the foregoing passages from his prose, prefixed to the chapter on "Poetry and Imagination" in *Letters and Social Aims:*

> " The Muse can knit
> What is past, what is done,
> With the web that is just begun."

In *Fragments on the Poet and the Poetic Gift* we are told once more of the poet's sovereignty:

> " The gods talk in the breath of the woods,
> They talk in the shaken pine,
> And fill the long reach of the old seashore
> With dialogue divine;
> And the poet who overhears
> Some random word they say
> Is the fated man of men
> Whom the ages must obey."

The poet has nature to learn from, the free winds, omens and signs that fill the air, and these are better worth his while than the words of other men:

> "The birds brought auguries on their wings,
> And carolled undeceiving things "
> Him to beckon, him to warn ;
> Well might then the poet scorn
> To learn of scribe or courier
> Things writ in vaster character."

To Emerson, too, "one impulse from the vernal wood" teaches "more than all the sages can":

> " Think me not unkind and rude
> That I walk alone in grove and glen.
> I go to the god of the wood
> To fetch his word to men."

Both nature and man were to the romanticists intrinsically good. Nature was a kind and sympathetic mother, a sure refuge in time of despondency or social ennui. From her streamed a peculiar power, stimulating or tranquillizing, as the need might be, him who held communion with her. And as nature, so man. Weakness or evil in him came from external circumstances, from shackling traditions, or from the corrupting influences of society. Leave him free and untrammelled, let him live close to nature,

give his good impulses free play, and there need be no misgiving as to the outcome. A later generation, confronted by the laws of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest, has lost this enviable confidence. To the successors of the romanticists nature is not a comforting parent but a collection of menacing and inscrutable forces, amid which the human being is tossed helplessly and blindly. Man is not wholly good by nature but is innately weak or evil also; he must contend against evil within as well as against perversion from without. To Emerson, as to the romanticists, nature is always kind and good. To her forbidding or brutal aspects he remains oblivious. Man also is instinctively good; the stern realities of his sins and sufferings Emerson chooses to leave out of account or to ignore. His "philosophy of optimism"—an optimism which, among his remote descendants, the followers of Christian Science, has become a cult—is a form of the optimism of the romanticists deriving from Rousseau. Confidence in the goodness of nature, conviction of the innate goodness of man, together with advocacy of self-reliance, were their central teachings.

To one holding such beliefs as Emerson's, the form of poetry would be a minor matter. Beauty of expression becomes of little moment as compared with the "message." Fastidious craftsmanship is no more a vital element in poetry to Emerson than it was to Wordsworth, or to Byron, or even to Scott, who might let pass nearly any recklessness of expression rather than lose the impetus of his story. Emerson says of the bard in *Merlin*:

> " He shall not his brain encumber
> With the coil of rhythm and number;
> But, leaving rule and pale forethought,
> He shall aye climb
> For his rhyme."

Later in the same poem he rejects for his ideal poet insipidity and formalism :

> " He shall not seek to weave
> In weak unhappy times,
> Efficacious rhymes;
> Wait his returning strength.
> Bird that from the nadir's floor
> To the zenith's top can soar,—
> The soaring orbit of the muse exceeds that journey's length."

Those who believe with Foe that poetry is the "rhythmical creation of beauty," or with Keats, that the poet's dreamland should afford a "refuge from the strain of life," or with Swinburne, that the essentials of poetry are "imagination and harmony," would not, to Emerson, be poets of the highest order. With none of these would his Saadi feel kinship. His affinities would lie rather with those who regard poetry as a high and solemn ministry. Emerson has not perhaps Wordsworth's sense of awed consecration or Shelley's rapturous vision of the "sun-treader," the standard-bearer of progress into new realms of light; but it is with these, and never with the aesthetes, that his conception of the poet and the poetic gift would array him. Partly akin to him, but more social in his inspiration, is Arnold's bard, who, weighted with moral responsibility, should be a critic of life; or Mrs. Browning's, who is "God's truth-teller"; or the poet to whom Clough—who was Arnold's friend and Emerson's—addresses so passionate an appeal:

> "Come, poet, come, for but in vain
> We do the work or feel the pain,
> And gather up the seeming gain,
> Unless before the end thou come
> To take ere they are lost their sum."

The self-consciousness of the poets of the first half of the nineteenth century is another phase of their personal utterance, their tendency to exhibit themselves. Homer was not self-conscious concerning the poet's office, nor were the authors of any of the older epics, nor was Chaucer, nor Shakespeare. It was the romanticists who tended to write poetry of "autobiography," who inquired of themselves concerning themselves, and assumed that the world was interested in what they found. Nor was the habit of self-consciousness regarding the poetic office let drop by their successors. That the words poet and poetry were so often on Emerson's lips would be evidence enough to students of literature, in its changing temper and shifting modes, of his probable localization in time. It is also evidence of his relation to certain European movements of thought to which he gave—comparatively late in their currency and much tempered—American expression. In his doctrine of the superiority and the aloofness of the poet, of the latter's severance from others to whom he yet bears messages of light, in his self-sufficiency

and his sovereignty, his belief in the intrinsic goodness of nature and of man, and his concern with poetic thought rather than poetic form, Emerson may be termed the American representative of ideas which already had had wide circulation in Europe. In great part they emanated from Rousseau, and some of them, especially the gospel of the rights and the supremacy of the individual, had metamorphosed the politics and the map of Europe as well as its literature.

Louise Pound.

University of Nebraska.

Note: This article was published in The Mid-West Quarterly, *Volume II, № 2, January 1915. The pagination and line-breaks of the original are reproduced here.*