

## EMERSON AND THE ELDER HENRY JAMES

By Hansell Baugh

TEN years before the publication of *Representative Men*; two years after the appearance of his first published essay, *Nature*; six years after his departure from the ministry of the Unitarian church, Emerson had already become a member of the Transcendental Club, had strung himself on Margaret Fuller's "necklace of diamonds". He had met Bronson Alcott, in whose company, Mr. Brooks says, Emerson's "mind . . . kindled and burst into flame". And he had met a man named James, whose friendship left no recognizable mark on Emerson. The elder Henry James was to another of their contemporaries "a little, fat, rosy Swedenborgian amateur, with the look of a broker and the brains and heart of a Pascal"; but to Emerson, he was always "a true comfort—wise, gentle, polished, with heroic manners, and a serenity like the sun". His keen appraisal of the nascent sage is one of the least known and best founded judgments of Emerson in existence. It is little known because it is buried in a mass of books almost impossible to read; well founded because their friendship was prolonged, and was as intimate as friendship in their time and in their circle could manage to be.

Their friendship goes back to some time between Henry James's twenty-fifth and thirtieth years. Emerson was eight years his elder. The earliest anecdote relates that in January, 1842, Emerson was "taken upstairs" to see the newly born infant who later became known as William James. Already, at that epoch, both men had gone sufficiently far on the way toward their mature characters to establish at once a relation that had scarcely to suffer a variation in the remaining forty-two years of Emerson's survival. This meeting preceded by several years James's first acquaintance with the doctrines that were henceforth to be his dogma. With the dogma of the Presbyterian church he had already found it impossible to agree, as Emerson had found his case to be with the ritual of Unitarianism.

James had at that time reached perhaps the climax of his persistent religious debate with himself upon the question of the nature of man. The absence of egotism ("selfhood" he called it, after Swedenborg; "conscience" after Calvin) was the first noticeable trait in Emerson—a negative one—in the estimate of James. Himself saturated with the conviction of evil in his soul, he beheld this young man named Emerson who had just become known to him, and: "Good heavens! how soothed and comforted I was by the innocent lovely look of my new acquaintance, by his tender courtesy, by his generous laudatory appreciation of my crude literary ventures!" His very appearance seemed to James an indication of his total unconsciousness of any personal struggles with the idea or the conviction of evil; there appeared to be something unmistakably "virgin-born" in his manner.

James would go to see Emerson time and again, would lock himself up with the avatar in his sacred bedroom, making a solemn vow to "uncover the secret of his immense superiority to the common herd of literary men" before the door was opened. But James found that he might as well have locked himself up in the room with "a handful of diamonds, so far as any capacity of self cognizance existed" in Emerson. Before their acquaintance had survived its first week, it dawned upon James that the breath-taking superiority he had attributed to his friend consisted exactly in his friend's charming social behavior, even in his personal appearance, and did not consist in any extraordinary intellectual capacity. More brightly it dawned upon him that this superiority came to his friend "by birth or genius, like a woman's beauty or charm of manners; that no other account was to be given of it than that Emerson himself was an unsexed woman"—woman symbolizing for James the equally unsexed divine complement of man's human nature. And though his friend continued to exercise the same

charm for him, James felt at once that Emerson's "intellectual prestige" had been permanently damaged by the narrowness of his understanding. On the whole, says James,

"... at first I was greatly disappointed in him, because his intellect never kept the promise which his lovely face and manners held out to me. He was to my senses a literal divine presence in the house with me; and we can not recognize literal divine presences in our houses without feeling sure that they will be able to say something of critical importance to one's intellect. . . . Any average old dame in a horse-car would have satisfied my intellectual rapacity just as well as Emerson."

Whenever his until-lately-Presbyterian friend fell back into ecclesiasticisms, Emerson merely relaxed the muscles of his admirable face in a benign smile—the Emersonian equivalent of derision: his only feeling on the burning question of the church was one of polite antagonism: "he was to all appearance entirely ignorant of the church's existence until you recalled it to his imagination; and even then I never knew anything so implacably and uniformly mild as his judgments of it were".

The same "implacable" mildness was evident in Emerson's responses to all the questions on the mention of which James invariably rose with vigor to attack or to defend. He was equally lukewarm, equally incredulous, about the State: "Judge Hoar and Mr. John Forbes (the father of Emerson's son-in-law) constituted his spontaneous political conscience; and his domestic one, equally spontaneous, was supplied by loving members of his own family—so that he only connected with the race at second hand". Since he was thus relieved of all the material business of existence, all the voting, all the tax-paying, all the church-going, his life rolled along as smooth as his own Olympian brow, which never became ruffled except in commiseration of his less serene friends. It was only in his later years that he took any interest in the ardent political theories of James, whose last published book during his own lifetime was a complicated account, scarcely an "elucidation", of long-cherished ideas about a social redemption for mankind; and

James adds his regretful doubts that Emerson's interest even at that late day was very serious.

This profound indifference of Emerson to the problems that James considered to lie unresolved at the base of civilization—whether "worldly" or "spiritual"—seemed explicable only through an utter lack of conscience, or "consciousness of himself as either good or evil". Translating these terms into more acceptable ones, James urged that Emerson's intellectual life was not lived at all in the passing of judgments, either on himself or on other men, or even on the world in which they all existed together; but it was lived entirely on the plane of perception, which, Henry James declared, "is an altogether lower or less spiritual faculty". And yet:

"No man could look at him speaking without having a vision of the divinest beauty. But when you went to him to hold discourse about the wondrous phenomenon, you found him absolutely destitute of reflective power. He had apparently no private personality."

As for James in his personal relation with the sage, the distinction between perception and judgment takes on a greater clarity for the reader of Emerson's writings with longer acquaintance. There is a circumstance in Emerson's "private life" which is illuminating: he is said to have written his essays to the tunes of an Æolian harp played on by stray airs entering his study window. Thomas Carlyle's comment is worth remembering:

"The sentences . . . did not always entirely cohere for me . . . they did not, sometimes, rightly stick to their foregoers and their followers; the paragraph not as a beaten *ingot*, but as a beautiful square *bag of duck shot* held together by canvas!"

It is permissible to wonder what that day will be like when a reader may approach these splintered fragments with the hope of finding in them the beauty or the squareness that Carlyle found; it will not be necessary ever to approach them again with the expectation of finding a conceptual system or even a sustained attitude: it would scarcely be possible ever to have approached them

with that hope with which the elder Henry James approached their author's person—the hope that he would infallibly clarify some perplexing “difference between law and

gospel in humanity—between the head and the heart of things—between the great God Almighty, in short, and the intensely wooden and ridiculous gods of the nations”.

## FEWER AND BETTER WORDS

By John Macy

THE noble Oxford scholars and printers have finished the New English Dictionary and put into our possession nearly half a million words with two million illustrative uses. This vast thesaurus probably contains sufficient words and phrases to express our most profound and original thoughts. It seems a proper time to put to sleep for a long, long rest some words and usages which are very tired or were crippled or feeble-minded to start with. I suggest a preliminary list for a Dictionary of Dead Words:

*Culture.* More than fifty years ago Dr. Edward Everett Hale recommended that this word be put on the shelf for an indefinite period. He did not live to see what a bore it has become.

*Crass*, wedded to *Stupidity*.

*Keen*, as applied to sense of humor.

*Intrigue*, as a verb in the French meaning: *donner à penser*. The N.E.D. gives no example of such a use in English.

*Meticulous*, in the sense of exquisite, delicate, careful. The word means timid, so that the connotation of it is derogatory. There is authority for the secondary meaning, but our younger writers are working it to death. As a publisher's reader I hereby promise to reject any novel in which it appears more than once.

*Lurid*, used apparently as if the writer thought it meant something like vivid or highly colored. It really means pale yellow, wan, gray, quite the opposite of highly colored. A good word to put in the morgue.

*Terse*, in the sense of short and snappy, concise. It means polished and has no suggestion either of brevity or of length.

*Hokum*, a word utterly ruined by Mencken and his imitators. It is probably one of those comic popular words whose sound suggests the meaning, like Hocus-pocus.

*Subconscious.* A cant word in the current psychological mythology, to be eschewed in fiction and everywhere except in a technical discourse.

*Complex*, as a noun, especially when mated with *Inferiority*. Same comment as for preceding word.

*Slay*, in the sense of Murder. Murder is unlawful slaying. Slaying is any kind of violent killing, including the most honorable and righteous. Some kinds of murder, by poison for example, are not slaying. The current use of the word is due to the writers of newspaper headlines whom the exigencies of space compel to find short words. Newspaper English is often vivacious, vigorous, close to life. It is quite as often corrupt and corrupting. *Slay* and *Slayer* are perfectly used in Emerson's *Brahma*: “If the red slayer think he slays, or if the slain think he is slain”.

*Buxom*, in the sense of plump, physically robust. The word applies properly not to physique but to disposition, and means jolly, cheerful, hearty, as in Milton's

“A daughter fair,

So buxom, blithe and debonair.”

The radical first meaning is yielding, unresisting, and an obsolete secondary meaning is amorous, wanton. This suggests what the old masculine makers of the language thought a buxom lady was likely to be. The word is hopelessly spoiled for present use and may be put in the ash-can.

*Winsome*, used, by a mistaken assimilation of sound, to mean winning. It means joyful, delightful, and of course the qualities suggested by those words are winning, attractive. But the word is spoiled, currently misunderstood, and may go to the dump with Buxom.

*Poignant.* This word is not misused, but it is used too much and is so weary that it