

**EMERSON'S ESSAY
ON
COMPENSATION**

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Emerson's essay on compensation by Ralph Waldo Emerson & Lewis Nathaniel Chase

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RALPH WALDO EMERSON & LEWIS NATHANIEL CHASE

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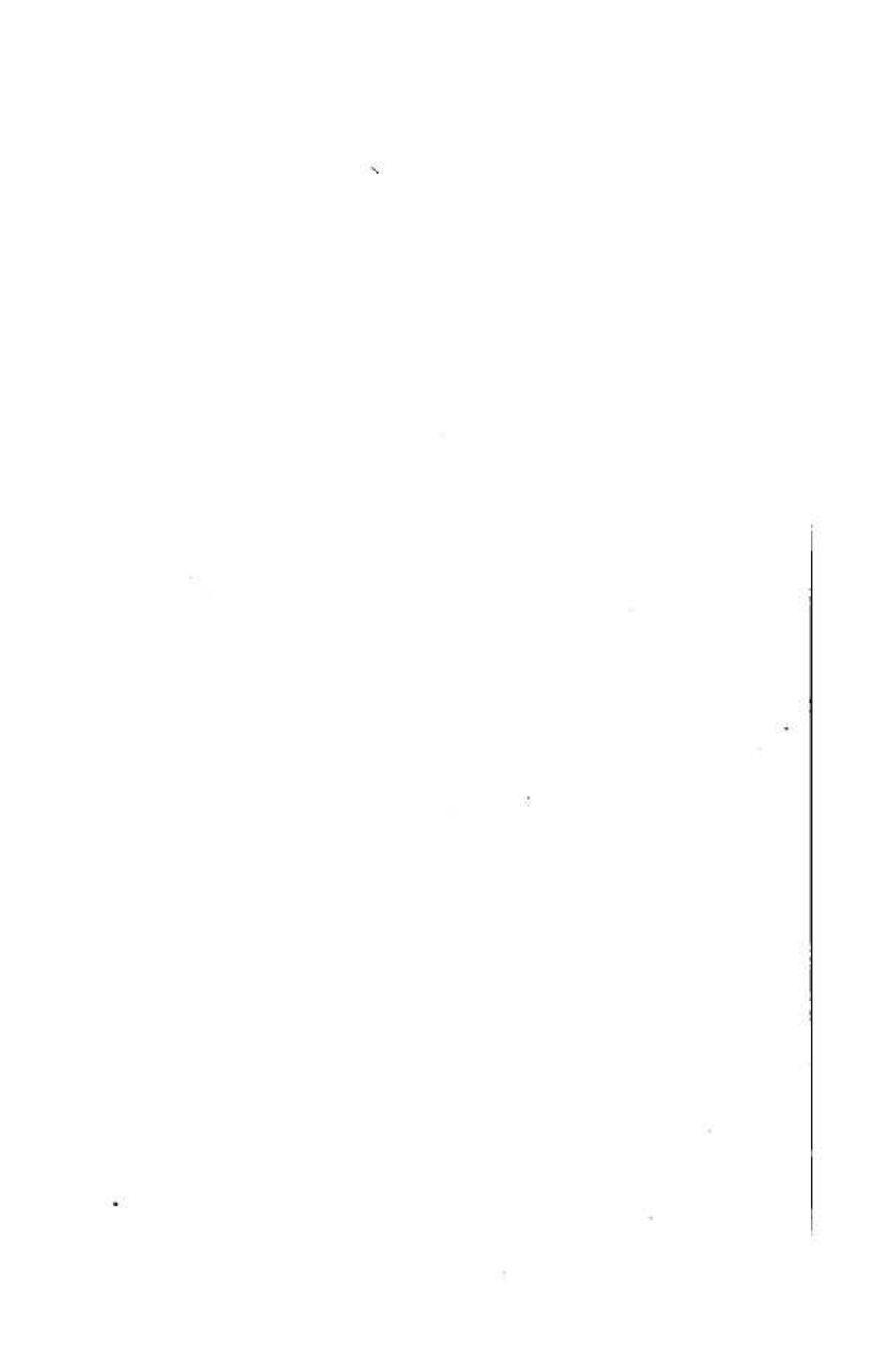
EMERSON'S ESSAY
ON
COMPENSATION

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY
LEWIS NATHANIEL CHASE

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I have nothing characterized in my brain that
outlives this word Compensation.

The Journal, June 29, 1831.



INTRODUCTION

EMERSON'S was a varied life. His name is associated with many movements. Of some of them he was the vital force. Consequently to those who knew him well nothing about the man impressed them more deeply than the dimensions of his interests and influences. It is this, perhaps, that marks the widest gulf between him and all others of his generation. He was the first to make the outside world aware that there was such a thing as American letters. And at home he became in his own life time a cult in the broad sense, like Carlyle, like Browning. Compared with his influence as a social factor there is somewhat ephemeral in the brilliant careers of his platform contemporaries. Compared with his influence as an idol for the rising generation there is somewhat narrowly literary about Hawthorne and Poe for example: as there is about Stevenson and Pater and Arnold compared with Browning and Carlyle.

The variety of Emerson's accomplishments is no longer remembered for its own sake but only in the light of historical association. That many-sided genius which made him a leader in several departments of the world's work, has now passed, except in so far as it is perpetuated in his written word. It seemed

at one time, when the movements with which his name was connected gradually dwindled, that there would still be left to him a permanent double place in philosophy and literature. Now the former has shut her doors upon him, and literature claims him for her own. He is bereft for present and future time of the auxiliaries of environment which made him the most important private American of his day. But these auxiliaries have proved themselves mere adornments. The man remains the same. Now, as then, the dimensions of his interests are impressive.

Whenever it serves his purpose, Emerson, like Shakespeare, always repeats. No dissertation on the sources of his later writings would be complete which did not assign a foremost place to his own earlier work. He is not so inconsistent as he himself would be willing to admit. Put him to the test, and he the matter will re-preach of "the present action of the soul of this world, clean from all vestage of tradition." The weight of their significance in his mind at the time of writing determined the subjects of his themes. Whatever Emerson wrote was felt with such intensity of conviction that it represented his best thoughts on what was then uppermost in his mental and spiritual life. The result is — Emerson; even as "the world globes itself in a drop of dew."

It follows that the essay of the following pages miniatures the man inasmuch as there was nothing

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charactered in his brain that outlived the word Compensation.

The Latin saying comes naturally to the mind in speaking of Emerson's breadth:—nothing foreign to man was foreign to him. "Compensation" is typical of this in that the writer delivers himself of his inmost and for the most part his abiding thoughts on many matters: among them religion and government and art. It is not pertinent here that he elsewhere shifts his position or qualifies his statements.

In theology Emerson's attitude was negatively a protest against New England Protestantism, against the "base tone in the popular religious works of the day." It seemed to him that "our popular theology has gained in decorum, and not in principle, over the superstitions it has displaced." His positive position was one of unflinching belief in the dignity of man. Men are better than their dogma. "Their daily life gives it the lie. * * * For men are wiser than they know." At least on the subject of compensation life is, according to him, ahead of theology, and the people know more than the preachers teach. Emerson was a pantheist and an optimist: "The universe is represented in every one of its particles. Everything in nature contains all the powers of nature. * * * The true doctrine of omnipresence is, that God reappears with all his parts in every moss and cobweb." "The soul refuses limits, and affirms an Optimism, never a Pessimism." In his "pantheis-

tic optimism" he parts company for once and all with formal philosophy. Emerson's theology has contributed to the working faith of thousands of Americans. Perfectibility of the race is the hope and creed of democracy. Optimism is our habit of mind as a people.

In politics Emerson was theoretically a pure democrat. "Nature hates monopolies and exceptions." The result of inequality is fear. "Fear is * * * the herald of all revolutions. One thing he teaches, that there is rottenness where he appears. * * * Our property is timid, our laws are timid, our cultivated classes are timid. Fear for ages has boded and mowed and gibbered over government and property. * * * He indicates great wrongs which must be revised." Revolutionists may dwell on this passage, but there is no sympathy with lawlessness: "A mob is a society of bodies voluntarily bereaving themselves of reason, and traversing its work. The mob is man voluntarily descending to the nature of the beast."

Penetrating epigrams on letters as on life — "Proverbs are the sanctuary of the intuitions" — are not wanting. But of far deeper import to art and literature is the one brief paragraph which deals with the "voice of fable." It is, indeed, a declaration of the fundamental principle on which is based some of the firmest and most significant criticism of recent years.

"That is the best part of each writer which has nothing private in it. * * * that which in the study of a single artist you might not find, but in