

Prefaces

Preface to the Centenary Edition

A year ago Mr. James Elliot Cabot died, a good citizen of the Republic, a gentleman, brave, modest and kind, a thorough scholar, especially a master-mind in metaphysics, and a man of wide culture in letters, knowledge of Nature and taste in the fine arts. Younger by many years than Mr. Emerson, he was his friend, increasingly honored and prized for forty years, yet, living in the country twenty miles asunder, each respected the other's tasks and privacy, and until the last few years of Mr. Emerson's life they seldom met, except at Mr. Emerson's lectures and at the Transcendental, afterwards at the Saturday Club.

In the preface to the Riverside Edition of this volume, retained in the present, Mr. Cabot gave a conscientious account of his share in its preparation. It owed to his thorough work and wise judgement in dealing with the sibylline leaves of confused manuscript its careful arrangement and its finish.

After the illness that followed the burning of his house in 1872, Mr. Emerson saw that it was time for him to consider the disposition of his manuscripts, and the thought, recurring, troubled him, for he did not know what fit person would be willing to undertake the task. The name of Mr. Cabot came constantly to his lips on these occasions, but was dismissed, for it seemed too great a favor to ask. His family, seeing this strong desire, wished to make the request, but with some difficulty wrung from him permission to do so.

When he was told that Mr. Cabot's consent had been most generous and cordial, his heart was set entirely at rest. This occurred in July, 1874, a year after his return from Europe, whither his friends had sent him to recruit his strength. But it soon became evident that Mr. Emerson's working days were over; it was more and more difficult for him to apply his mind, and his memory was failing. The publishers called for the promised book. He applied himself diligently day by day to revising the lecture-sheets and correcting the proofs, dropped on the night before the fire, but accomplished so little that his family saw that the time was come when skilled assistance must be called in. Therefore they visited Mr. Cabot and proposed to him to begin his task during Mr. Emerson's lifetime. He came with all kindness at once, and it was cheering to see the tangled skein smoothed in his hands, and the relief this afforded Mr. Emerson. When the sheet was laid before him with the weak places marked he was able to write the needed sentence, or recast the defective one, and so, thanks to Mr. Cabot's frequent visits, the book, which had for so long presented seemingly insuperable difficulties, took definite shape and was ready in season for the publishers.

Not only was this done, and the long anxiety which Mr. Emerson had felt concerning his literary executor set at rest to his full satisfaction, but he found ever-new pleasure in the now frequent visits to the house of this friend of whom in past years he had never seen as much as he desired.

Mr. Emerson's family also, with his sanction, asked Mr. Cabot to write his Memoir when the time should come, and this he did with the temperance and discrimination that Mr. Emerson would have

wished.

Here also should be gratefully acknowledged the great work which this faithful friend did in going carefully through the great mass of the lectures, journals and loose papers, and bringing them to order as far as circumstances allowed. This work Mr. Cabot did as a labor of love, helped by his wife, who accompanied him on his visits to Concord, adding to the pleasure of these occasions; and it not only prepared the way for the three posthumous volumes, *Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, *Miscellanies* and *Natural History of Intellect and the Memoir*, but was a work of lasting value to those who deal with the literary remains later. The present editor would not have assumed the annotation of the Centenary Edition, had it not been Mr. Cabot's wish that he should do so, and in all his work, that previously so well done by this hereditary friend has been of inestimable value to him.

It should be remembered that Mr. Emerson always disclaimed the credit for *Letters and social Aims*, and in speaking to Mr. Cabot always called it "your book."

E. W. E., December, 1903.

Preface to the First Edition

It seems proper to mention here the circumstances under which this volume was put together, as they may have some bearing upon the estimate to be placed upon it. Some time perhaps in 1870, Mr. Emerson learned that a London publisher was intending, without consulting him, to make up a volume of his uncollected writings, from the *Dial* and elsewhere. He was much disturbed by this intelligence, and wrote to his friend, Mr. Moncure Conway, to stop the publication if possible. In this Mr. Conway succeeded, but only upon the agreement that Mr. Emerson would himself make such a collection, adding some new pieces, and would send advance-sheets to England, so that the book might appear simultaneously in both countries. This being settled, the American and the English publishers began to urge speed, and Mr. Emerson applied himself to the task, though with heavy heart, partly from a feeling of repugnance at being forced into an enterprise which he had not intended, but still more perhaps from a sense of inability, more real than he knew, which was beginning to make itself felt. He made, accordingly, but slow progress, so that in the summer of 1872 he had got ready little more than the first piece, *Poetry and Imagination*, the proof-sheets of which were in his hands,—indeed had been for some time in his hands,—when on the 24th of July his house was burned and all possibility of work put an end to for the time, not merely by the confusion of his papers and the destruction of his wonted surroundings, but yet more effectually by an illness resulting from the shock.

The proof-sheets showed that already before this accident his loss of memory and of mental grasp had gone so far as to make it unlikely that he would in any case have been able to accomplish what he had undertaken. Sentences, even whole pages, were repeated, and there was a confusion of order beyond what even he would have tolerated. Now, at any rate, nothing was to be thought of but rest and the attempt to restore the tone of his mind by some diversion. The Nile tour was suggested and made feasible by kind friends, and he wrote to England explaining the necessity for some delay. Soon after his return home he heard of the death of the English publisher, and supposed himself free. But in 1875 he was informed that the claim had passed on to the successors of the London firm, and that they were asking what had become of their book. The old proof-sheets were again taken in hand, but again with a painful sense of incapacity to deal with them. By degrees and with much reluctance he admitted the

necessity of some assistance. It was known to his family that he intended to make me his literary executor, and he now acceded to their asking me to help him with the book. Before long he had committed the business of selection and preparation for the press, almost entirely to me. Of course he was constantly consulted, and he would sometimes, upon urging, supply a needed word or sentence, but he was quite content to do as little as possible, and desired to leave everything in my hands.

This will appear to be of the more consequence in view of the fact that with the exception of four, viz., The Comic, Persian Poetry, Quotation and Originality, and Progress of Culture, the essays contained in this volume, though written in great part long before, had never been published: and, further, of the state of the manuscripts, which consisted of loose sheets, laid together in parcels, each marked on the cover with the title under which it was last read as a lecture, but often without any completely recoverable order or fixed limits. Mr. Emerson was in the habit of repeating, on different occasions, what was nominally the same lecture, in reality often varied by the introduction of part of some other, or of new matter. This, with his freedom of transition and breadth of scope, which were apt in any case to render the boundaries of the subject somewhat indistinct, made it often difficult or impossible for any one to determine with confidence to what particular lecture a given sheet or scrap originally belonged. Nor indeed did I attempt, in preparing the copy for the press, to adhere always to a single manuscript. To have attempted this would have been contrary to Mr. Emerson's wishes. What he desired was simply to bring together under the particular heading whatever could be found that seemed in place there, without regard to the connection in which it was found. This had been his own practice, and all his suggestions to me were to this effect. Most of the time that he spent (which was not very much) over the work was spent in searching his note-books, new and old, for fresh matter that might be introduced with advantage. In this way it happened sometimes that writing of very different dates was brought together: e. g., the essay on Immortality, which has been cited as showing what were his latest opinions on that subject, contains passages written fifty years apart from each other. Then, as to the selection of the essays, there were, it is true, lists prepared by Mr. Emerson with a view to future volumes, but many of the papers had been lying by him for years unpublished, and it is open to any one to say that he never really decided upon publishing them, and, if he had been left to himself, never would have published them.

There is nothing here that he did not write, and he gave his full approval to whatever was done in the way of selection and arrangement; but I cannot say that he applied his mind very closely to the matter. He was pleased, in a general way, that the work should go on, but it may be a question exactly how far he sanctioned it.

J. E. CABOT., August 27, 1883.

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