

The Emersonian Period.

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IN the Christian development of many people there comes what may, with approximate accuracy, be termed the "Emersonian" stage. Also in the Christian experience of the Church in general a similar period, lasting perhaps a generation or two, now and then arrives. "Christian" development and experience are spoken of advisedly. Of course, outside Christianity the Emersonian stage is always present. But there is a sort of Emersonian-Christian phase frequently met with within the Christian lines. It may be described as one in which large and rather vague generalizations appear very attractive, one in which the emphasis of thought falls upon universal and inevitable processes instead of upon the responsibilities and moral alternatives of the individual, one in which the unit figure of the calculation is cosmic instead of personal. At the indicated stage, one talks of the working out of world forces rather than of working out one's own salvation; of the "one far-off Divine event to which the whole creation moves," rather than of personal redemption; of linking oneself with the ascending process of things, rather than of conversion or faith; of a power not ourselves, rather than of God; of a humanity worked out to its perfection in Jesus Christ rather than of a Divine life incarnate there in Him. For the apprehension of most, the terms, it is to be feared, remain somewhat indefinite as to their actual content, with the consequence (which is the really important thing) that the religious attitude, the spiritual adjustment, is no longer clear cut, but becomes indefinite too. Religion at the Emersonian period is apt to turn into a general emotional atmosphere, clinging around the soul and creeping through its nooks and crannies—an atmosphere elusive and unanalyzable by any exact test. It involves no definite activity of the inner nature on our part, only a lying down upon a tide.

which sweeps in from far. One might almost put it that the required thing is to strike an attitude and wait rather than to fulfil an imperious condition whereon the whole spiritual issue depends.

The attraction of this attitude is not hard to understand—and this quite apart from the motive which produces it. As to this latter, it may be out of a really genuine humility, or out of a perverted pride, that the mood is born. The stress upon individual fate and destiny—implied in those views of religion which speak of strictly personal relations between man and God and of a whole “apparatus of salvation,” so to call it, for their true adjustment—may seem to make man altogether too important a thing in the universal scheme. On the other hand, an enthusiastic flinging of the individual into the cosmic process may be merely egoism satisfying itself by a sort of suicide, the bringing back upon the individual life of a reflected greatness from the greatness of that “whole” in which it is lost. It is not necessary to decide which motive usually prevails. Whatever the motive may be, the subtle attractiveness of the Emersonian mood lies in the fact that by adopting it we get rid of the sharply personal, and so diminish the weight of responsibility we have to bear. It is inevitable, if we talk of falling in with “world processes” or “cosmic developments,” of “lying down upon the stream of spiritual evolution,” and so forth—it is inevitable that we should come to look upon our destiny as being, to a great extent, the affair of the universe rather than our own, and should, in consequence, come to let the spiritual sword swing listlessly from our hands and the spiritual watch relax. We no longer feel ourselves faced by sharp and solemn alternatives, we do not become conscious of a critical moment whose consequences may run through all time and beyond, and if our adjustment to the “cosmic order” remains imperfect—well, the statement of even that contingency hardly appears to suggest very acute personal loss. In fact, the idea of a “world process,” once greatly emphasized, soon suggests the further consolatory idea that whatever we may do or be, the “world

process" cannot fail to bear us on with it to the goal. And all this is not unwelcome to the average man. The adoption of the Emersonian attitude of mind relieves him from the commanding, the sometimes stern, gaze which watched him before. He need not, therefore, watch himself so closely. He is not going to be singled out for individual judgment. He need no longer, therefore, judge himself in strictest ways.

But then, it is precisely by producing this diminished sense of responsibility that the Emersonian mood defeats itself, and brings about the failure, for the individual man, of those "processes" and "evolutions" whereof it speaks so loudly. For what is forgotten (but what is, nevertheless, forced home by experience upon every honest soul sooner or later) is this—that great ideas and "laws," all these cosmic processes, do not and cannot work themselves out *automatically* through us, and that it is only by individual effort these things can be made true. The mistake, in fact, at the back of these vague generalizings consists in taking mere size of conception for a sign of dynamic force, as though a large and all-inclusive idea (just *because* of its largeness) were better able to work itself into reality than a small one. Through so much current thinking runs the delusion that terms like "evolution" and "process" stand for actual power instead of for mere programmes, for something living and forceful instead of merely for the methods whereby something living and forceful pursues its ends. Neither "evolution" nor "process" are dynamic; they simply represent the "how" for something dynamic behind them. He who expects that through a simple lying down upon some assumed world-process his spiritual destiny can be achieved; that to fix the mind upon an "ascending progress of things" is just as good as climbing an ascending stair; that belief in an intensifying divineness of general humanity will make his own humanity more Divine—is surely the victim of a delusion both sad and grotesque. He is crediting a mere idea with life, and is taking as inevitable something which is no more than possible—and this only if certain conditions be fulfilled. And those who are caught in the

Emersonian mood may at least be asked to watch, in order that they may test the degree in which faith in a universal process, vaguely supposed to be going on, really makes for their character's growth in grace. For to every honest man, as has been said, comes, sooner or later, the conviction that no process *automatically* fulfils itself; that so far as he is concerned, the process exists only if and when he himself becomes a contributing cause. He finds that the Emersonian mood, by its diminution of the sense of responsibility, helps to defeat that very "process" to which its faith is pinned.

That is the central and crucial consideration. Yet this phase has something to teach over and above that lesson of disillusionment which is its first. And a word on this may perhaps lead some to take the lesson without waiting for the disillusionment, and by a less bitter way. If it be asked how a man may, when the Emersonian phase falls upon him, deal with himself in wisdom; or how religious teachers may, when in Christian thought at large the Emersonian phase sets in, seeks to correct it, this may be said. The phase is not without its usefulness or its truth; and even they who have emerged from it disappointed may, if they will think the thing through, feel that it was not all a mistake, and may find that the phase really results from a half-truth or a truth half-apprehended, which, clearly visioned, corrects the phase itself. For though there be no *inevitable* spiritual process that sweeps us forward and upward in its train, as for a little while we fancied there was, yet the conviction remains that there *is* some force making for righteousness at work, some real and living process being carried on by a real and living power. Those large ideas were, after all, something more than phantoms projected from our own minds. The great, sweeping forces *do* exist. "Law," "Evolution," and the rest correspond to something that is really going on. And since (as our own experience of failure has proved) these things have no dynamic in themselves, they witness to and represent effort made somewhere behind the scenes. What can be said, then, but that they witness to and represent the effort

of God? And, further, since when we merely stand idly by, the great forces leave us ungripped, does not their very existence become an appeal to us to take order with ourselves, to discipline ourselves, to put ourselves by every possible spiritual activity in their path, so that in us and through us their perfect work may be done? Thus God and God's Will, and their call to us, and our responsibility for response to them, come back; we are brought into contact with a personal Power through exploring the real implications of that mood which seemed to hand us over to impersonal forces; and the ultimate truth at the heart of the "Emersonian" phase is seen to be precisely that truth of a living God, making a living appeal to men to come into harmony with Himself, which the phase temporarily obscured. From the vague feeling that because there is a force making for righteousness at work, he can wait an inevitable issue undisturbed—from that a man will, if he tests the result of his waiting honestly, or, better still, if at the outset he thinks the thing through, pass on to the truer conviction that because there is a force making for righteousness at work, he must see that, so far as he is concerned, it shall not make its effort in vain. And so he comes once again face to face with God.

