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TANTALUS

Of this edition, one hundred copies have been printed from type, – 90 copies on hand-made paper and 10 copies on Imperial Japan paper, – in commemoration of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

May 25th, 1903

TANTALUS

BY

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

WITH A
MEMORIAL NOTE
BY
F. B. SANBORN

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This vol. is not to be discarded

NOTE

In the new edition of Emerson now going through the press at Boston, the Notes give useful information as to the date of the Essays and Poems, and the various readings they have contained. I am curious to learn just when 'Tantalus' was composed. Too short for a lecture (which most of Emerson's essays were), was it a paper read at one of the meetings of the Transcendental Club, gathered informally about Emerson and Al-

cott, the two recognized leaders in that spiritual philosophy, vaguely termed 'Transcendentalism?' It has more distinctly a beginning, middle and end than many of the Essays,—in that resembling Emerson's, 'Nature,' published eight years before 'Tantalus' came out, early in 1844, in the last volume of the 'Dial.' We might call it a chapter added to 'Nature,' bringing that sublime idealism a little nearer the ordinary life of men in Massachusetts. It is an exposition of the paradoxes of human nature, as the book is a charming interrogation of "the great apparition that shines so

peacefully around us" in outward Nature.

More than most, Emerson was the Tantalus he here portrays; ever seeking the treasure at the foot of the rainbow; but Nature was too much for him. As he says here, "Nature's mighty orbit vaults like the fresh rainbow into the deep; but no archangel's wing was yet strong enough to follow it, and report of the return of the curve." A celestial dissatisfaction was ever the attribute of this dear lover of Beauty, Justice, eternal Truth. But what pictures drawn, what confessions made, in this incessant circuit of dis-

appointments! This tale of the ardent youth and his tear-stained diary is from his own experience; the child whose delight in novelty delightfully portrayed, was his own 'hyacinthine boy;' in his own household he found wealth good "as it silenced the creaking door, cured the smoky chimney, brought friends together in a warm and quiet room, and kept the children and the dinner-table in a different apartment." And from these conveniences came the leisure for the written manifestations of Emerson's genius.

F. B. S.

TANTALUS



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The astronomers said, Give us matter and a little motion, and we will construct the universe. It is not enough that we should have matter, we must also have a single impulse, one shove to launch the mass, and generate the harmony of the centrifugal and centripetal forces. Once heave the ball from the hand, and we can show how all this mighty order grew.—A very unreasonable postulate,

thought some of their students, and a plain begging of the question. Could you not prevail to know the genesis of projection as well as the continuation of it? — Nature, meantime, had not waited for the discussion, but, right or wrong, bestowed the impulse, and the balls rolled. It was no great affair, a mere push, but the astronomers were right in making much of it, for there is no end to the consequences of the act. That famous aboriginal push propogates itself through all the balls of the system, and through every atom of every

ball; through all the races of creatures, and through the history and performances of every individual. Exaggeration is in the course of things. Nature sends no creature, no man, into the world, without adding a small excess of his proper quality. Given the planet, it is still necessary to add the impulse; so to every creature nature added a little violence of direction in its proper path, a shove to put it on its way; in every instance a slight generosity, a drop too much. Without electricity the air would rot, and without this violence of direction

which men and women have, without a spice of bigot and fanatic, no excitement, no efficiency. We aim above the mark to hit the mark. Every act hath some falsehood of exaggeration in it. And when now and then comes along some sad, sharp-eyed man, who sees how paltry a game is played and refuses to play, but blabs the secret; how then? is the bird flown? O no, the wary Nature sends a new troop of fairer forms, of lordlier youths, with a little more excess of direction to hold them fast to their several aim; makes them a little

wrong-headed in that direction in which they are rightest, and on goes the game again with a new whirl for a generation or two more. See the child, the fool of his senses, with his thousand pretty pranks, commanded by every sight and sound, without any power to compare and rank his sensations, abandoned to every bauble, to a whistle, a painted chip, a lead dragoon, a gilt gingerbread horse; individualizing every thing, generalizing nothing, who thus delighted with every thing new, lies down at night overpowered by the fatigue, which

this day of continual pretty madness has incurred. But Nature has answered her purpose with the curly, dimpled lunatic. She has tasked every faculty and has secured the symmetrical growth of the bodily frame by all these attitudes and exertions; an end of the first importance, which could not be trusted to any care less perfect than her own. This glitter, this opaline lustre plays round the top of every toy to his eye, to ensure his fidelity, and he is deceived to his good.

We are made alive and kept alive by the same arts. Let

the stoics say what they please, we do not eat for the good of living, but because the meat is savory, and the appetite is keen. Nature does not content herself with casting from the flower or the tree a single seed, but she fills the air and earth with a prodigality of seeds, that, if thousands perish, thousands may plant themselves, that hundreds may come up, that tens may live to maturity, that at least one may replace the parent. All things betray the same calculated profusion. The excess of fear with which the animal frame is hedged round, shrink-

ing from cold, starting at sight of a snake, at every sudden noise or falling stone, protects us through a multitude of groundless alarms from some one real danger at last. The lover seeks in marriage his private felicity and perfection, with no prospective end; and nature hides in his happiness her own end, namely, progeny, or the perpetuity of the race.

But the craft with which the world is made runs also into the mind and character of men. No man is quite sane, but each has a vein of folly in his composition, a slight determination of blood to the

head, to make sure of holding him hard to some one point which nature had taken to heart.

Great causes are never tried on their merits; but the great cause is reduced to particulars, to suit the size of the partisans, and the contention is ever hottest on minor matters. Not less remarkable is that over-faith of each man in the importance of what he has to do or say. The poet, the prophet has a higher value for what he utters, than any hearer, and therefore it gets spoken. The strong, self-complacent Luther declares,

with an emphasis not to be mistaken, that "God himself cannot do without wise men." Jocob Behmen and George Fox betray their egotism in the pertinacity of their controversial tracts, and James Naylor once suffered himself to be worshipped as the Christ. Each prophet comes presently to identify himself with his thought, and to esteem his hat and shoes sacred. However this may discredit such persons with the judicious, it helps them with the people, and gives pungency, heat, and publicity to their words. A similar ex-

perience is not infrequent in private life. Each young and ardent person writes a diary, into which, when the hours of prayer and penitence arrive, he inscribes his soul. The pages thus written are to him burning and fragrant; he reads them on his knees by midnight and by the morning star; he wets them with his tears. They are sacred; too good for the world, and hardly yet to be shown to the dearest friend. This is the manchild that is born to the soul, and her life still circulates in the babe. The living cord has not yet been cut. By and

by, when some time has elapsed he begins to wish to admit his friend or friends to this hallowed experience, and with hesitation, yet with firmness, exposes the pages to his eye. Will they not burn his eyes? The friend coldly turns them over, and returns from the writing to conversation with easy transition, which strikes the other party with astonishment and vexation. He cannot suspect the writing itself. Days and nights of fervid life, of communion with angels of darkness and of light, bear witness in his memory to that tear-stained

book. He suspects the intelligence or the heart of his friend. Is there then no friend? He cannot yet credit that one may have impressive experience, and yet may not know how to put his private fact into literature, or into harmony with the great community of minds; and perhaps the discovery, that wisdom has other tongues and ministers than we, that the truth, which burns like living coals in our heart, burns in a thousand breasts, and though we should hold our peace, that would not the less be spoken, might check too suddenly the

flames of our zeal. A man can only speak so long as he does not feel his speech to be partial and inadequate. It is partial, but he does not see it to be so whilst he makes it. As soon as he is released from the instinctive, the particular, and sees its partiality, he shuts his mouth in disgust. For no man can write any thing, who does not think that what he writes is for the time the history of the world; or do anything well, who does not esteem his work to be of greatest importance. My work may be of none, but I must not think it of none,

or I shall not do it with impunity.

In like manner, there is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere, keeps no faith with us; all promise outruns the performance. We live in a system of approximations, not of fulfillment. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere. We are encamped in nature, not domesticated. Hunger and thirst lead us on to eat and to drink, but bread and wine, mix and cook them

how you will, leave us hungry and thirsty after the stomach is full. It is the same with all our arts and performances. Our music, our poetry, our language itself, are not satisfactions but suggestions.

The pursuit of wealth, of which the results are so magical in the contest with nature, and in reducing the face of the planet to a garden, is like the headlong game of the children in its reaction on the pursuers. What is the end sought? Plainly to secure the ends of good sense and beauty from the intrusion of deformity or vulgarity of any

kind. But men use a very operose method. What an apparatus of means to secure a little conversation! This great palace of brick and stone, these servants, this kitchen, these stables, horses, and equipage; this bankstock and file of mortgages; trade to all the world; countryhouse and cottage by the waterside; all for a little conversation, high, clear, and spiritual! Could it not be had as well by beggars on the highway? No, all these things came from the successive efforts of these beggars to remove one and another interference. Wealth

was applied first to remove friction from the wheels of life; to give clearer opportunity. Conversation, character, were the avowed ends; wealth was good as it silenced the creaking door, cured the smoky chimney, brought friends together in a warm and quiet room, and kept the children and the dinner-table in a different apartment. Thought, virtue, beauty, were the ends, but it was known that men of thought and virtue sometimes had the headache, or wet feet, or could lose good time whilst the room was getting warm in winter

days. Unluckily in the exertions necessary to remove these inconveniences, the main attention had been diverted to this object; the old aims had been lost sight of, and to remove friction had come to be the end. That is the ridicule of rich men, and Boston, London, Vienna, and now the governments generally of the world are *cities and governments of the rich* and the masses are not men, but *poor men*, that is, men who would be rich; this is the ridicule of the class, that they arrive with pains and sweat, and fury, nowhere; when all

is done, it is for nothing. They are men who have interrupted the whole conversation of a company to make their speech, and now have forgotten what they want to say. The appearance strikes the eye, everywhere, of an aimless society, an aimless nation, an aimless world. Were the ends of nature so great and cogent as to exact this immense sacrifice of men?

Quite analogous to these deceits in life, there is, as might be expected, a similar effect on the eye from the face of external nature. There is in woods and waters

a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape. I have seen the softness and beauty of the summer clouds floating feathery overhead, enjoying, as it seemed, their height and privilege of motion, whilst yet they appeared not so much the drapery of this place and hour, as fore-looking to some pavilions and gardens of festivity beyond. Who is not sensible of this jealousy? Often you shall find yourself not near enough to your object. The pine tree, the

river, the bank of flowers, before you, does not seem to be nature. Nature is still elsewhere. This or this is but outskirt and far-off reflection and echo of the triumph that has passed by, and is now at it's glancing splendor and heyday, perchance in the neighbouring fields, or, if you stood in the field, then in the adjacent woods. The present object shall give you this sense of stillness that follows a pageant which has just gone by. It is the same among the men and women, as among the silent trees; always a referred existence, an

absence, never a presence and satisfaction. Is it that beauty can never be grasped? in persons and in landscape is equally inaccessible? The accepted and betrothed lover has lost the wildest charm of his maiden in her acceptance of him. She was heaven whilst he pursued her as a star. She cannot be heaven if she stoops to such an one as he. So is it with these wondrous skies, and hills and forests. What splendid distance, what recesses of ineffable pomp and loveliness in the sunset! But who can go where they are, or lay his

hand, or plant his foot thereon? Off they fall from the round world for ever and ever; glory is not for hands to handle.

What shall we say of this omnipresent appearance of that first projectile impulse, this flattery and baulking of so many good well-meaning creatures? Must we not suppose somewhere in the universe a slight treachery, a slight derision? Are we not engaged to a serious resentment of this use that is made of us? Are we tickled trout, and fools of nature? Unhappily, there is not the smallest prospect of advantage from

such considerations. Practically, there is no great danger of their being pressed. One look at the face of heaven and earth puts all petulance at rest, and soothes us to wiser convictions. We see that Nature converts itself into a vast promise, and will not be rashly explained. Her secret is untold. Many and many an Œdipus arrives; he has the whole mystery teeming in his brain. Alas! the same sorcery has spoiled his skill; no syllable can he shape on his lips. Her mighty orbit vaults like the fresh rainbow into the deep, but no archan-

gel's wing was yet strong enough to follow it and report of the return of the curve. But it also appears, and the experience might dispose us to serenity, that our actions are seconded and disposed to greater conclusions than we designed. We are escorted on every hand through life by great spiritual potentates, and a beneficent purpose lies in wait for us. It is not easy to deal with Nature by card and calculation. We cannot bandy words with her; we cannot deal with her as man with man. If we measure our individual forces against hers,

we may easily feel as if we were the sport of an overwhelming destiny. But if, instead of identifying ourselves with the work, we feel that the soul of the Workman streams through us, that a paradise of love and power lies close beside us, where the Eternal Architect broods on his thought and projects the world from his bosom, we may find the peace of the morning dwelling first in our hearts, and the fathomless powers of gravity and chemistry, and over them of life, pre-existing within us in their highest form.