

# AMERICAN CHARACTER

## II.

### A Frenchman Contends That We Are the Farthest Removed From Perfection

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It is well to probe deeper into the question and to face the fact that not only in the arts but also in the sciences we are not doing all that may fairly be expected from us. Athens was a trading city as New-York is; but New-York has had no Sophocles and no Phidias. Florence and Venice were towns whose merchants were princes; but no American city has yet brought forth a Giotto, a Dante, a Titian.

It is now nearly three-score years and ten since Emerson delivered his address on the "American Scholar," which has well been styled our intellectual Declaration of Independence, and in which he expressed the hope that "perhaps the time is already come . . . when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fulfil the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of mechanical skill." Nearly seventy years ago was this prophecy uttered which still echoes unfulfilled.

But we like sentries are obliged to stand in starless nights, and wait the appointed hour.

In the nineteenth century, in which we came to maturity as a nation, no one of the chief leaders of art, even including literature in its broadest aspects, and no one of the chief leaders in science, was native to our country. Perhaps we may claim that Webster was one of the world's greatest orators and that Parkman was one of the world's greatest historians; but probably the world outside of the United States would be found unprepared and unwilling to admit either claim, however likely it may be to win acceptance in the future. Lincoln is indisputably one of the world's greatest statesmen; and his fame is now firmly established throughout the whole of civilization. But this is all we can assert; and we cannot deny that we have given birth to scarcely one of the foremost poets, dramatists, novelists, painters, sculptors, architects or scientific discoverers of the past hundred years.

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Alfred Russell Wallace, whose fame is linked with Darwin's and whose competence as a critic of scientific advance is beyond dispute, has declared that the nineteenth century was the most wonderful of all since the world began. He asserts that the scientific achievements of the nineteenth century, both in the discovery of general principles and in their practical application, exceed in number the sum total of the scientific achievements to be credited to all the centuries that went before. He considers first of all the practical applications which have made the aspect of civilization in 1900 differ in a thousand ways from what it was in 1800. He names thirteen of these practical applications, including railways, steam navigation, the electric telegraph, the telephone, friction-matches, gas-lighting, electric-lighting, the photograph, the Röntgen rays, spectrum analysis, anesthetics and antiseptics. It is with pride that an American can check off at least six of these utilities as being due wholly or in part to the ingenuity of one or another of his countrymen.

But his pride has a fall when Wallace draws up a second list not of mere inventions but of those fundamental discoveries, of those fecundating theories underlying all practical applications and making them possible, of those principles "which have extended our knowledge or widened our conceptions of the universe." Of these he catalogues twelve; and we are pained to find that no American has had an important share in the establishment of any one of these broad generalizations. We may have added a little here and there; but no single one of all the twelve discoveries is either wholly or in large part to be credited to any American. It seems as though our French critic was not so far out when he asserted that we were "terribly practical." In the mere application of principles, in the devising of new methods, our share was larger than that of any other nation. In the working out of the stimulating principles themselves our share was not even "a younger brother's portion."

Practical we are, even though we may not have



brought forth a supreme leader of art or science to adorn the wonderful century; and there are other evidences of our practical sagacity than those set down by Wallace, evidences more favorable and of better augury for our future. We derived our language and our laws, our public justice and our representative government, from our English ancestors. In our time we have set an example to others and helped along the progress of the world.

President Eliot holds that we have made five important contributions to the advancement of civilization. First of all, we have done more than any other people to further peace-keeping, and to substitute legal arbitration for the brute conflict of war. Second, we have set a splendid example of the broadest religious toleration—even though Holland had first shown us the path. Thirdly, we have proved the wisdom of universal manhood suffrage. Fourth, by our welcoming of new-comers from all parts of the earth, we have shown that men belonging to a great variety of races are fit for political freedom. Finally, we have succeeded in diffusing material well-being among the whole population to an extent without parallel in any other country in the world.

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These five American contributions to civilization are all of them the result of the practical side of the American character. To some of us they will seem commonplace, as compared with the conquering exploits of other races. But they are more than merely practical; they are all essentially moral. As President Eliot insists, they are "triumphs of reason, enterprise, courage, faith and justice over passion, selfishness, inertness, timidity and distrust. Beneath each of these developments there lies a strong ethical sentiment, a strenuous moral and social purpose."

A "strong ethical sentiment" and a "strenuous moral purpose" cannot flourish unless they are deeply rooted in idealism. And here we find an adequate answer to the third assertion of Tolstoi's visitor, who maintained that we were "hostile to all idealism." Our idealism may be of a practical sort, but it is idealism none the less. Emerson was an idealist, although he was also a sagacious man of affairs. Lincoln was an idealist, even if he was also a practical politician, an opportunist, knowing where he wanted to go but never crossing a bridge before he came to it. Both Emerson and Lincoln were realists as well as idealists, with a firm grip on the facts of life.

There is a sham idealism, boastful and shabby, which stares at the moon and stumbles in the mud, as Shelley did and Poe also. But the basis of the highest genius is always a broad common-sense. Shakespeare and Molière were held in esteem by their comrades for their understanding of affairs; and they each of them had money out at interest. Sophocles was intrusted with command in battle; and Goethe was the shrewdest of the Grand Duke's

counsellors. The idealism of Shakespeare and of Molière, of Sophocles and of Goethe, is like that of Emerson and of Lincoln; it is vigorous and vital; it is also un-faillingly practical, and thereby it is sharply set apart from the aristocratic idealism of Plato and of Renan, of Ruskin and of Nietzsche, which is founded on obvious self-esteem and which is sustained by arrogant and inexhaustible egotism. True idealism is liberal and tolerant, as well as practical.

Perhaps it might seem to be claiming too much to insist on

certain points of similarity between us and the Greeks of old. The points of dissimilarity are only too evident to most of us; and yet there is a likeness as well as an unlikeness. Professor Butler has recently asserted that "no people was ever less detached from the practical affairs of life" than the Greeks, "less insensible to outward utility; yet they regarded prosperity as a means, never as an end. The unquiet spirit of gain did not take possession of their souls. Shrewd traders and merchants, they were yet idealists. They did not lose sight of higher and distinctively human aims which give life its significance." It will be well for us if this can be said of our civilization two thousand years after its day is done; and it is for us to make sure that "the unquiet spirit of gain" shall not take possession of our souls. It is for us also to rise to the attitude of the Greeks, among whom, as Professor Butler points out, "money lavished on personal enjoyment was counted vulgar, oriental, inhuman."

There is comfort in the memory of Lincoln and of those whose death on the field of Gettysburg he commemorated. The men who there gave up their lives that the country might live had answered to the call of patriotism, which is one of the noblest images of idealism. There is comfort also in the recollection of Emerson, and in the fact that for many of the middle years of the nineteenth century he was the most popular of lecturers, with an un-fading attractiveness to the plain people, perhaps because—in Lowell's fine phrase—he "kept constantly burning the beacon of an ideal life above the lower region of turmoil." There is comfort again in the knowledge that idealism is one manifestation of imagination, and that imagination itself is only a higher form of energy. That we have energy and to spare, no one denies; and we may reckon him a near-sighted observer who does not see also that we have our full share of imagination, even though it has not expressed itself fully in the loftier regions of art and of science.

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The foundations of our commonwealth were laid by the sturdy Elizabethans who bore across the ocean with them a full portion of the imagination which in England flamed up in rugged prose and in splendid and soaring verse. In two centuries and a half the sons of those stalwart Elizabethans have lost nothing of their sturdiness and nothing of their ability to see visions and to dream dreams, and to put solid foundations under their castles in the air. The flame may seem to die down for a season, but it springs again from the embers most unexpectedly, as it broke forth furiously in 1861. There was idealism at the core of the little war for the freeing of Cuba—the very attack on Spain, which the Parisian journalist cited to Tolstoi as an instance of our predatory aggressiveness. We said that we were going to war for the sake of the ill-used people in the suffering island close to our shores; we said that we would not annex Cuba; we did the fighting that was needful—and we kept our word. It is hard to see how even the most hostile of bigots can discover in this anything selfish.

There was imagination in the sudden stopping of all the steam-craft, of all the railroads, of all the street-cars, of all the incessant traffic of the whole nation at the moment when the body of a murdered chief magistrate was lowered into the grave. This pause in the work of the world was not only touching, it had a large significance to anyone seeking