A STUDY OF

EMERSON'S ESSAY "COMPENSATION"

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by

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Foreword

All quotations from the essays of Emerson are taken from the Centenary Edition, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1903. All quotations from the essay "Compensation," with the exception of the first, are followed by the page number in parentheses.

Most of the material dealing with Emerson's reading was obtained from Emerson the Essayist by Kenneth W. Cameron, Raleigh, N.C., The Thistle Press, 1945. Emerson's background in Oriental reading was obtained from Emerson and Asia by Frederic Ives Carpenter, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1930.
CHAPTER I
GROWTH OF THE IDEA

We would give a great deal to know the exact sermon that fired Emerson to write "Compensation." The slenderness of materials available renders that impossible, but few readers will have difficulty in remembering a sermon of similar sense and sentiment. There was no justice in this life—the wicked prospered and the good suffered; that was the substance of the text. And as a desperate corrective for the manifest injustice of the present world, both parties were to be rewarded or punished in the next world.

The sermon cannot be considered out of vogue. Its thought is still echoed, though perhaps less frequently and certainly less vehemently. Moreover, the pervading lack of proper equity seems to constitute the principal moral observation even of many who believe neither in God nor future life. The whole matter, in short, is still a live issue, and "Compensation" is today the essay of Emerson's which occasions the most puzzlement and provokes the most disparagement.

That a sermon should have been the spark which set the essay off is not remarkable; the implications of the doctrine of atonement or reward in the next life smack far more of materialism than of the spirituality which
religion aims at. Materialism is fitting for the world, but not for the pulpit. Emerson felt that the world itself was wiser than its theologians. People at least did not dogmatize upon the subject, and in their everyday lives they unconsciously made use of the law of compensation. Perhaps they denied it as theory, but they lived it as life.

The world needed such a doctrine, Emerson thought, to bring it in touch with reality. The visible world was the unreal, and the invisible was the real. He considered Berkeley's absolute idealism a "useful hypothesis," not so much because it presented a true statement of conditions as because it put the emphasis in the right place — on the unseen world.

In detailing his first reaction to the sermon Emerson treats us to one of his occasional humorous passages. He reduces the dogma to absurdity. "Yet what was the import of this teaching? What did the preacher mean by saying that the good are miserable in the present life? Was it that houses and lands, offices, wine, horses, dress, luxury, are had by unprincipled men, whilst the saints are poor and despised; and that a compensation is to be made to these last hereafter, by giving them the like gratifications another day, - bank-stock and doubloons, venison and champagne? . . . The legitimate inference
the disciple would draw was, - 'We are to have such a
good time as the sinners have now'; - or, to push it to
its extreme import, - 'You sin now, we shall sin by and
by; we would sin now, if we could; not being successful
we expect our revenge to-morrow.'\(^1\)

The makings of a great satirist lay in Emerson,
but he disliked satire as being too negative.

"Compensation" did not spring into bloom with one
stroke upon the advent of the unfortunate sermon. He
had, he says, been thinking about the matter for a great
many years, and his journals offer a fairly lucid picture
of the developing idea. Many entries in the journal were
transplanted almost verbatim into the essay. Some of
these are omitted here when they seem to add little to
the development of the idea.

The first observation on compensation in the
journal has a certain droll connotation. It is dated
December 15, 1820, when Emerson was only seventeen years
old. "It is impossible that the distribution of rewards
hereafter should not be in gradation."\(^2\) After "gradation"
we might add "to the suffering of the individual." The
martyr who has suffered torments for his faith deserves a
better place than the comfortable Christian who has trod

\(^1\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Compensation," *Essays, First
Series* (Boston and New York, 1903), p. 94.

\(^2\) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals* (Boston and New York,
placidly up the path to salvation. Even at this age Emerson was rebelling against the absolute divisions of good and bad, Heaven and Hell. He perceived that there existed an infinite gradation in human worth, and any Divine justice worth the name must take that into account.

The next entry is in January of 1822. "In this principle (of contrast) is lodged the safety of human institutions and human life."¹ Further on, speaking of the tyrant, he says, "Day and night contend against him."² Evidently the fact had struck him that the tyrant builds up his own opposition and his own destruction.

In April, May of 1823 he notes: "The balancing and adjustment of human pleasures, privileges, and graces, so that no man's share shall outrun all competition, nor be diminished to an extreme poverty, is so obvious in the world, as to be a daily topic of conversation."³ Even circumstances apparently did not seem so unequal to him as they had before.

In January of 1826 a flood of observations on compensation poured into the journal. "Every suffering is rewarded; every sacrifice is made up; every debt is paid."⁴

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¹ Jour., I, p. 96.  
² Jour., I, p. 96.  
³ Jour., I, p. 249.  
⁴ Jour., II, pp. 72-76.
The familiarity of this passage needs no comment.

Of compensation, which word he had selected as expressing the principle in its most complete form, he says that it is "... more than any other [moral feature] fit to establish the doctrine of Divine Providence." He did not so much deduce compensation from the idea of God as he inferred God from the (to him) observable fact of compensation. There is some resemblance here to Kant's inference of God from the moral sentiment.

Again, "To come nearer to my design, I will venture to assert that whilst all moral reasonings of necessity refer to a whole existence, to a vaster system of things than is here disclosed, there are, nevertheless, strong presumptions here exhibited that perfect compensations do hold, that very much is done in this world to adjust the uneven balance of condition and character." The emphasis upon a whole existence deserves to be noted and remembered.

He seems principally concerned with the retributive side of compensation in these passages. "I say that sin is ignorance, that the thief steals from himself; that he who practices fraud is himself the dupe of the fraud he practices, that whoso borrows runs in his own debt; and whoso gives to another benefits himself to the same amount."

"Shall I count myself richer that I have received an hundred favors and rendered none?"
He concludes with, "We have, we trust, made it apparent, that in the aspect of \textit{Self} our doctrine that nothing in the intercourse of men can be \textit{given} is sound."

In June of the same year we find, "But moral actions seem not a mere bundle of facts, but of relations, relations to something unseen, and because thus related to something to which the body was not, possess for themselves a principle of life in which the body had no share. Since Virtue was imperishable, every act contrary to it would seem to tend to the destruction of the agent. Vice is the soul's suicide."\footnote{Jour., II, p. 99.} Of great importance is the "principle of life" which the soul possesses exclusively, not a doctrine of universal agreement, but one which lies at the core of compensation.

In September of \textnumero1826\textnumero he remarks: "For if man is immortal, this world is his place of discipline and the value of pain is then disclosed."\footnote{\textit{\textdegree}Jour., II, p. 120.} This entry indicates a place in Emerson's complete philosophy for compensation; it is one of the disciplines mentioned in "Nature."

Clearly he had by the end of 1826 definitely formulated his idea of compensation. He saw it by then as a universal fact, and succeeding entries only served to clarify and extend the idea - an idea of infinite ramifications.
The idea continued to expand. It was not a barren conception of the mind, but seemed to possess a life and a growth of its own. In no better way than by watching its growth can we comprehend how much reality a "Platonic Idea" had to Emerson. He perceived it working in more and more things and in new relationships, and it appeared, wherever distinctly seen, perfect.

He remarks in January, 1827, upon the inability of an unprincipled man to retain the popularity for which his duty was abandoned.

In January of 1827 is found an entry indicating the essentially inward working of compensation. "He [God] secured the execution of his everlasting laws by committing to every moral being the supervision of its own character, by making every moral being the unrelenting, inexorable punisher of its own delinquency."\(^1\)

The source for his comment upon the baseness of ingratitude can be found in the journal under the heading, January, February, 1827. "'I have seen,' said a preacher, 'a drunkard who acknowledged his fault, a profane man who confessed profanity, a loose man who owned licentiousness, & C., but I never saw an ungrateful man who owned his ingratitude. An ungrateful man! A monster in the universe.'"\(^2\)

May of 1827 finds him recording, "In the view of Compensation nothing is given. There is always a price. . . .

\(^1\)Jour., II, p. 160.
\(^2\)Jour., II, p. 164.
No man ever had pride but he suffered from it; or parted with it for meekness, without feeling the advantage of the blessed change."¹ The latter part of this entry has a curiously personal note, as though he were speaking from direct experience.

In September of 1828 he made two entries which concern both self-reliance and compensation. "Don't you see that you are the universe to yourself? You carry your fortunes in your own head."² And then he quotes from the Bible, "The Kingdom of God is within you."

That the soul had a nature just as the body had he did not doubt. In January of 1830 he remarks, "...if the animal did not give out its young, it would perish; if the soul do not bear its good deed, it will wither and die..."³

And in November of 1830 he recorded a significant passage. "Heaven is not something else than virtue."⁴ His practical nature was fixing its attention upon this world, not the next, and lasting benefit proceeded only from the proper activity of the individual.

In June of 1831 he notes, "Is not the law of compensation perfect? It holds as far as we can see..."

Heraelitus grown old complained that all resolved itself into identity. . . And I have nothing characterized in my brain that outlives this word Compensation.¹ And again, "Consider it well; there's no cheating in nature, not a light half-penny; not a risk of a doit which is not insured to the total amount on the credit of the king of nature."

In July of 1831 he records a poem on compensation which is little more than a series of rhetorical questions. It illustrates his conception of the inward working of compensation, and was later incorporated into the poem "Gnothi Seauton."

"Who approves thee doing right?  
God in thee.  
Who condemns thee doing wrong?  
God in thee.  
Who punishes thine evil deed?  
God in thee.  
What is thine evil need?  
Thy worse mind, with error blind  
And more prone to evil  
That is, the greater hiding of the God within."²

In September of 1831 he makes reference to the Sandwich Islander who believes that the strength of the enemy he kills passes into himself, which thought he later incorporated into the essay. He speaks also of the fixed eternity of moral laws which rule over the soul as the physical laws do over the body.

¹Jour., II, pp. 389, 390.  
²Jour., II, p. 398.
The continual suggestiveness of his ideas and the close relation which they bore to each other is shown by this selection from November, 1831: "[Compensation] teaches that prayer does not at all consist in words, but wholly is a state of mind."¹

Closely following this statement comes, "And when he is wholly Godly, or the unfolding God within him has subdued all to himself, then he asks what God wills and nothing else, and all his prayers are granted." From his idea of compensation has sprung a notion of prayer which is exalted, to say the least. Since he perceives that all essential good springs from himself, not from outside him, then he prays only for what God wills, which is to follow his true nature. Prayer, state of mind, and action coalesce into a unit.

In April, 1833 during his visit to Italy, Emerson made an ironic observation on Italian compensation. "If you accept any hospitality at an Italian house a servant calls upon you next day and receives a fee, and in this manner the expense of your entertainment is defrayed."²

Emerson had known tragedy in these years. His first wife, Ellen Tucker, had died in 1831, and in 1832 he had resigned his pastorate at Boston. The first event must have been a great blow to him, and the second must have

¹Jour., II, pp. 431, 432.
²Jour., III, p. 84.
caused him considerable inward struggle. In December, 1834, he reaffirms his faith in compensation. In June of 1835 we find, "In this age of seeming, nothing can be more important than the opening and promulgation of the gospel of Compensation to save the land."\(^1\) Shortly after comes, "The irresistible conclusion of your chapter on Compensation should be, Therefore, the Devil is an Ass." He had by then definitely decided to write an essay on the subject.

Significant entries become sparser after this. In March of 1836 he writes, "Misery is superficial. . . ."\(^2\) And in October of 1838 we find, "How soon the sunk spirits rise again, how quick the little wounds of fortune skin over and are forgotten."\(^3\) He had married Lydia Jackson in 1835, and apparently the hurt of his first wife's death had healed. When his son Waldo died, he "mourned that he could not mourn." Margaret Fuller complained of a certain coldness and aloofness about him, and it must be admitted that the love of universals and eternals which gleams through all his writings would militate somewhat against attachment to the particular and the transient. Of his warmth and generosity of sentiment there can be no doubt; yet his philosophy contains steel and stone, a strong Stoical element worthy of note when considering compensation,

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\(^1\) Jour., III, pp. 486, 487.  
\(^2\) Jour., IV, p. 231.  
\(^3\) Jour., V, p. 75.
which is far from being the doctrine of pulpy optimism it is sometimes thought.

In March, 1838, he speaks of being disgusted with a sermon he heard, and in March of the following year he says, "I am weary of hearing at church of another state. When shall I hear the prophet of the present state?"\(^1\) This may have been the sermon which touched the essay off. At any rate he writes to Alcott on April 16 of the same year, "I have been writing a little and arranging old papers more, and by and by, I hope to get a shapely book of Genesis."\(^2\) He was working on *Essays, First Series* then, and may have been writing "Compensation" during that month.

The last pertinent entry before the publication of *Essays, First Series* is in November, 1839. "The poor therefore are only they who feel poor."\(^3\) This entry finds no counterpart in "Compensation, though it is repeated verbatim in a later essay, "Domestic Life."

Thus a fairly clear picture of Emerson's development of the idea may be had. Commencing with dissatisfaction with the absolute divisions of good and bad, Heaven and Hell, he proceeded to glimmerings of compensation in this

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\(^1\)Jour., V, p. 172.  
\(^3\)Jour., V, p. 324.
life, and by 1826 he had the doctrine firmly established. By 1835 he had decided upon writing an essay on the subject, and the actual writing may have been done in March and April of 1839, if the sermon he mentions was the one that spurred him to show the compensations of the "present state."

The sermon, he felt, was built upon a huge falsehood, upon seeming as against being. The order of values seemed to be inverted, and the purpose of "Compensation," as he gives it in the essay, was to restore values to their proper places. "The blindness of the preacher consisted in deferring to the base estimate of the market of what constitutes a manly success, instead of confronting and convicting the world from the truth; announcing the presence of the soul; the omnipotence of the will; and so establishing the standard of good and ill, of success and falsehood." (p. 95)

"I shall attempt in this and the following chapter to record some facts that indicate the path of the law of Compensation; happy beyond my expectation if I shall truly draw the smallest arc of this circle." (p. 96) The "following chapter" was "Spiritual Laws," in which compensation appears as a subordinate part of the general subject - as indeed it appears in many of the other essays, subtly harmonized with their content.
CHAPTER II
BASIS OF BELIEF

The basis of Emerson's belief in compensation may be divided into four headings: optimism, intuition, observation and experience, and systematic philosophy. It would be short of the truth to regard these elements as being completely separate one from the other, but careful analysis demands their individual examination.

Considering Emerson's optimism first, we encounter two apposite entries in the journal. In January of 1832 he quotes from Mendelssohn's Phaedo, "All that which, being admitted as true, would procure the human race a real advantage or a feeble consolation, acquires by that alone a high degree of probability." Then he goes on to say, "Why do I believe in a perfect system of compensations, that exact justice is done? Certainly not upon a narrow experience of a score, or a hundred instances. For I boldly affirm and believe the universality of the law. But simply that it is better in the view of the mind than any other way, therefore must be the true way." The same thought occurs in "Nature."

At first glance this may seem like out and out pragmatism, and undeniably it has an eminently practical ring. But a decided difference separates Emerson's optimism from the pragmatism of James. There is a finality of belief in Emerson which pragmatism lacks.

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1Jour., II, pp. 446, 447.
The distinction might be stated thus: Emerson's optimism would say, "The Good is the True"; pragmatism would say, "Regard the Good as if it were the True." The practical results might be the same, but the difference in attitude is manifest.

His optimism is in a sense a last fact, beyond which we cannot go. It is perhaps more a matter of temperament than of intellect. An elaborate logical support of it would not convince the pessimist or strengthen the belief of the optimist. It has its superiority as a practical way of thinking, but to Emerson it was more than merely a matter of practicality.

Another very interesting idea closely connected with his optimism is the idea of necessity - not the necessity spoken of in regard to fate and free-will, but the necessity of the structure of things. If behind the apparent injustice of the world there exists a perfect law of compensation, then that law will also explain why the structure of things is as it is. It not only justifies the order of things, it indicates the necessity of the order. In his essay on "Fate" we find the following statement in which necessity is used in this larger sense rather than to denote the individual's lack of freedom. "Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity. If we thought men were free in the sense that in a single exception one fantastical will could prevail over the law
of things, it were all one as if a child's hand could pull down the sun. If in the least particular one could derange the order of nature, - who would accept the gift of life?"\(^1\)

His optimism stated that the Good was the True; once perceived by his intellect, that Good was seen to be a "Beautiful Necessity," - a radical departure from pragmatic optimism. The union of the two ideas of optimism and necessity is too important to be overlooked.

Intuition largely comprehends the other three elements. His optimism may be regarded as an intuition, his conclusions from observation and experience may be called intuitions, and his systematic philosophy seems to be largely composed of individual but not unrelated intuitions.

The intuitionist believes that the truth is its own evidence, that the comprehension of it carries with it the necessity of belief. Every rationalistic philosopher has been an intuitionist in that he started with ideas which were "self-evident." With the advent of Henri Bergson intuitionism has taken on a more restricted meaning, being applied to apprehensions of reality which cannot be put into the artificial concepts of the intellect. Emerson is an intuitionist in the more general sense,

\(^1\)Emerson, "Fate," Conduct of Life, p. 48.
though he too has references to unsayable realities, as in "The Oversoul." Intuition has that character of necessity which renders proof superfluous to him who receives the intuition. Emerson's appeal was always to the intuition of mankind. The very force of his writings is largely derived from his disinclination to logical persuasion, his desire to make the truth as he saw it stand on its own feet. Even in conversation he was averse to the sort of debate which may easily degenerate into wrangling. In a letter to Henry Ware, Jr., on October 8, 1838, he says, "I could not give an account of myself if challenged... For I do not know, I confess, what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought."¹

Little can be said on the subject of experience and observation as a basis for compensation. He traveled widely, he experienced poverty and tragedy, and he was a keen observer. The important thing is that both in his experience and his observation he saw the law vindicated to his satisfaction. He saw no inconsistency between the theory and the fact, however wide the gap might seem to some.

It is the last of the four elements with which we are most concerned in this paper, partly because it is the only one in which a semblance of general agreement is

possible, partly because Emerson is so frequently criticized for his lack of philosophical system. Many readers feel that they go away, as Lowell says in his Fable for Critics, "converts to they know not what." Professional philosophers for this reason often regard Emerson as a minor quantity.

What then is the truth of the matter: How much coherence, how much graspable unity exists in his thought? It will be the purpose of this paper to find that unity as it reveals itself in his reflections on compensation. It will be necessary to determine the consistency of the doctrine in itself, and its harmony with those other aspects of his thought which it touches.

A degree of unfairness attends any attempt to systematize Emerson. As a way of presenting thought, methodical proof was alien to his nature. While he admired the great systematic thinkers, he was wary of them. In Natural History of Intellect he says, "I confess to a little distrust of that completeness of system which metaphysicians are apt to affect. 'Tis the gnat grasping the world. All these exhaustive theories appear indeed a false and vain attempt to introvert and analyze the Primal Thought. That is upstream, but what a stream!"

1Emerson, Natural History of Intellect, p. 12.
System had its dangers. A tyrannical method might shut out the truth just as surely as it enclosed it. A new intuition or insight might throw the hard-won system out. Worse still, an adherence to method might stifle those intuitions, might kill that receptivity to truth he prized so dearly. On this point Cabot says, "Intuition, with him, means something very different from infallible knowledge; it means, to use his own words, the openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power from the Divine Mind."¹ Though Emerson's trust in his intuitions would indicate that he did consider them infallible guides, it must be admitted that Cabot has expressed here a truth which is more important. Intuitions may carry irresistible belief with them; but they come only by virtue of an openness of mind, a receptivity which is prior to them. We do not so much find the truth as it seeks us out.

For this reason then, systematizing Emerson may give a false impression of him. But if his attitude toward method be borne in mind, a study of the logical consistency in his thought may safely be undertaken. He was not an enemy to logic. Far from being so, he extolled its merit as "silent method," and held the possession of it to be indispensable. The principle of contradiction was as inviolate to him as to the most rigorous logician. That

¹James Elliot, A Memoir of Ralph Waldo Emerson, (Boston & New York, 1888), p. 252.
which was true had to harmonize, and one of the most remarkable qualities in his writings is the harmony among ideas which were independently explored. No matter where he started, he always came back, as he said, to the One.

The problem is to find the "silent method" behind the essay, the method which Emerson certainly could have mustered had he wished, but which he considered unable either to prove the truth or convince the skeptic. Logic could state what was impossible by the principle of contradiction, but of what was possible it could not state the necessity. Though it could cast out inconsistencies, it could say no more of a consistent theory than that it "might be." Thus logic was for Emerson a largely negative function. It clarified the situation, but did not produce insight or proof - in the common sense, for, if the truth were not its own guarantee, what could go bond for it?

The whole question of logical system in Emerson becomes more intelligible when the distinction between Reason and Understanding is understood. This distinction between the Understanding, or logical faculty, and the Reason, or faculty of direct insight, was taken over by Emerson from earlier writers, probably Coleridge, as Cameron points out in Emerson the Essayist. But the idea was far older than Coleridge. Plato, the master of logical hair-splitting when he wished, had held that Reason which apprehends principles makes contact with reality, while Under-
standing merely classifies and organizes appearances, never rising to principles. Spinoza, the supreme logician, had declared that his constant effort was to know things by Reason rather than merely by the pallid light of Understanding, and that furthermore, for a sign of truth, nothing else was needed beyond the presence of a "true idea."
Paradoxically, these masters of logic gave a secondary place to logic.

It was thought that Coleridge took the distinction from Kant, but the Englishman's application of it followed that of Plato and Spinoza, as Emerson's did. Reason was far from being a faculty of direct insight for Kant.

Since Reason then perceived ideas or principles intuitively in a fashion that rendered "proof" an impertinence, and Understanding saw, not the "idea in itself," but only its logical relation to other ideas, it followed that the Understanding's primary use was to organize Nature in the physical world and to reject contradictory ideas in the theoretical. Reason saw what was true; Understanding saw what was not true. And Emerson was concerned with affirmations, with what was true. His apparent lack of logical method is actually a method which he considered higher. He recorded the principles of Reason as insight revealed them to him, confident that logic would also demonstrate them to be in harmony with each other. The fact that they sometimes seemed to offer little connection whereby logic could decide upon their agreement did not
deter him. They were "arcs" in a greater "circle," which he could perceive only in part. The defect was his own, not Nature's. Here indeed was an optimistic rationalism that outdid the 18th Century.

The literary form of his essays proceeded from this distinction. He followed the method of Reason, making many facts luminous with the light of one principle. This form made the sequence of facts secondary to the principle which enlivened them, and explains the apparent lack of transition between many paragraphs. Furthermore, it explains why one can change the order of the paragraphs and derive the same full sense from them. They are largely independent units, just as the journal entries which formed the bases of the essays need no context.¹

In considering his organization of the essay - or lack of it, as many would say - it must be remembered that he liked to think of truths as great circles on the earth. One circle contains all others and is itself contained by them. This notion differs from the principle of logical subsumption in which, to use circles again, there is one containing circle, smaller circles within it, and so on down to the last degree of particularity. What we mean by logical order in a writing is this logical subsumption

of one idea upon another. In Emerson we find less emphasis upon the subsumption and more upon the value of the individual idea. He does use a certain amount of logical order, as indeed anyone must use in order to write at all, but it is not the distinction between ideas which concerns him; it is the likeness of principle or idea showing itself in many different things. The easiest image in which to conceive the organization of one of his essays is that of a string sustaining many beads. He selects one principle of thought which enlivens and explains many things. He finds one key which unlocks many doors in Nature. Logical progression and subsumption exist, but he calls no attention to them. From this habit arises his persistent use of analogy, and, insofar as he can be said to argue at all, he argues analogically.

The organization of "Compensation" will be treated in a later chapter.
CHAPTER III
COMPENSATION IN EARLIER WRITERS

Emerson followed little system in his reading. He read what interested him, a wise choice, and his excursions into books took him to many lands till he was not only widely read but curiously read. He preferred translations to originals. Holmes in his biography quotes George Ripley as saying, "I doubt whether Emerson ever read ten pages of his great authorities in the original."¹

His attitude toward books proclaimed his essentially practical nature. Their purpose was to inspire. When they failed to do that, they were useless. Neither was he concerned to read them with meticulous thoroughness. What he sought most was their point of departure, the direction their thought was taking. The rest he could fill out for himself. His reading was dynamic and eclectic. For him the scholar was "Man Thinking," not a collector of other men's thoughts. He took what he wanted and disregarded the rest. Whenever he quotes an author, it is to agree with him.

Because of his individualistic bias the question of the influence of other writers upon him offers difficulty. No writer ever acknowledged his debt so freely, not merely to his great influences as given in Representative Men,

¹Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, (Boston & New York, 1884), p. 380.
but to a host of others. It was, he thought, a hopeless task to try to disentangle the threads of the past that are woven into the fabric of the present. Each man contributes very little compared to all that is given to him, and the only originality, he decided, is to be yourself. What writers influence you will be decided by your constitution anyway. Like gravitates to like. Those writers of great influence are in a very real sense parts of you, or rather they render back to you parts of yourself. The truth is anybody's property, and the fact that one can see it at all indicates his right to use it. If an earlier writer has said the truth in a better fashion, then one might as well quote him. Emerson himself shows an aptness and originality of quotation that entitle him to that comment of Dubuc upon Voltaire's quoting, which he makes use of: "'He is like the false Amphitryon; although the stranger, it is always he who has the air of being master of the house.'"

Saying the truth concerned him more than saying something original, and because he honestly concentrated upon the truth, his utterances are marked by a striking originality. This fact has peculiar significance in our age in which novelty is prized so highly for itself.

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1Emerson, "Quotation and Originality," Letters and Social Aims, p. 192.
The first great influence, to take the earlier writers in probable order of reading, was Plato, who gathered up all the fragments of pre-Socratic and Socratic philosophy, added to them his own genius, and produced a work which Emerson considered the fountain-head of all subsequent philosophy and literature, in short, of the culture of Europe.

Emerson had started the reading of Plato early. At Harvard he had written an essay on the "Character of Socrates," and we find Plato mentioned among the readings in his earliest journals, 1820-1821. The Works of Plato, translated by Sydenham and Taylor, were drawn by him from the Boston Athenaeum in 1830 and at various times thereafter. Plato was an early and constant influence upon him.

Those works of Plato in which the doctrine of compensation appears are, first and most important, the Republic, then the Charmides, the Laches, the Gorgias, and the Protagoras. It also reappears in other dialogues whenever the subject of ethics arises. The most comprehensive statement of it appears in the Republic.

Briefly stated, Plato's doctrine proceeds in the following manner. The soul has a particular nature or function just as a lute for instance has, and in order to be healthy it must abide by the laws of its nature. Thus we see an early precedent for Emerson's spiritual laws.
The nature of the soul may be divided into three functions, the appetitive, the spirited, and the rational, in ascending order. The good or happiness of the soul consists in the proper harmony of the three parts, the rational being dominant over the other two. The individual then is in a state of justice. When either of the two lower functions takes to itself the character of master and allows its impulses free rein, the individual becomes a spectre of disharmony and self-conflict. To give a few examples, the avaricious man becomes bound to his money and fearful of its loss; the sensualist is never satisfied; the ambitious man is tormented by the prospect of what he has not achieved. Reason acts as an impersonal, almost divine lawgiver, and from this it follows that the only virtue is knowledge or good sense, a completely Socratic idea.

Two basic workings of compensation may be discerned in Plato. First of all, the disharmony or conflict of the individual constitutes his punishment. He is amply repaid by being the kind of person he is. Secondly, the individual who allows one of the lower functions to become master does not know the pleasures of the higher functions. The purely appetitive man does not know the benefits of the spirited or rational functions; the essentially spirited man does not know the pleasure of reason; but the rational or just man comprehends the pleasures of the other two
faculties as well. In short, he possesses more being, a more comprehensive existence.

These two forms of compensation, incidentally, strikingly resemble two supposedly modern ideas, integration of personality and sublimation.

The idea of spiritual laws which determine the nature of the soul finds its place in Emerson's "Compensation," as do the two forms of compensation. The Socratic doctrine of virtue being knowledge is a natural corollary to compensation.

Emerson had a great admiration for the Stoics. What they believed they lived, in marked contrast to the usual Christian practice. Again in his first journals we find Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus mentioned, and they proved a strong influence. The Stoical element in his thought has certainly not been overemphasized.

The Stoic world was a rational world in which law reigned paramount. The individual had to find those laws and subordinate himself to them. The wise man sought his private good only when it harmonized with the good of the universe. His action prospered in only one direction; in any other it turned upon itself. Strict justice was executed within the individual, and as more and more emphasis came to be placed upon the good as being a state of soul in harmony with the universe, the importance of circumstances came to decline until the Stoic aim was to be above or "indifferent" to them. Not merely did the Stoic try to
be calm in misfortune, but he would scarcely welcome the benefit that did not arise from his own nature. In "Compensation" we find, "I no longer wish to meet a good I do not earn, . . ." (p. 123) Here is a purely Stoical attitude.

Stoicism was implicit in the ethical theories of Socrates and Plato, but unlike Plato at least, the Stoics largely ignored metaphysics and concentrated upon ethics. Philosophy was for them a way of living, and this consistency of thought and action could not but delight Emerson.

Emerson received the influence of Emmanuel Swedenborg through four channels: Sampson Reed, whose writing career began in 1821: The New Jerusalem Magazine, established in September, 1827; the writings of Swedenborg, some few of which Emerson owned before 1837 and G. Oegger's True Messiah, sixty pages of which had been translated by Elizabeth Peabody and circulated in manuscript in 1835.

The influence was profound and complex, but insofar as compensation is concerned, it may be quickly summed up. An instantaneous compensation reigned in Swedenborg's thought. Heaven and Hell were not places, but states of will and understanding; self-love constituted the essence of Hell, and love of God and neighbor the essence of Heaven. Though in different language and portrayed in a setting of gloomy majesty, the idea did not differ basically from that of Plato or the Stoics.
Emerson cared little for the narrowness and morbidity he described in Swedenborg. The latter, he felt, lacked universality of appeal, was too immersed in the Scriptures and too dominated in his later years by an almost Gothic blackness of mood. Yet Emerson, in true eclectic fashion, chose what he wanted and rejected the rest. With the idea of inward compensation he completely agreed.

Of the influence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge Professor Cameron has given a very thorough account in his *Emerson the Essayist*. From 1825 to 1836 the works of Coleridge stimulated Emerson’s mind.

Compensation enjoyed a minor but nonetheless definite place in Coleridge’s works. It may be found in such writings as *The Friend* and *On the Constitution of Church and State*.

The particular, Coleridge thought, could never usurp the place of the universal. A particular or selfish end could seldom be realized; it was constantly beaten back until a universal end was substituted. Moreover, the law of compensation was visible to a wide extent. Emerson differed from Coleridge in stating the universality of the law. Coleridge never allowed himself to go that far.

*L'Histoire Compares* of Baron Gerando deserves mention because of the wealth of ancient writers it opened up to Emerson. He began the systematic study of the work in October of 1830. It contained accounts of the pre-Socratic philosophers, the Orientals, and finished with the Neo-
Platonists. It is of peculiar interest in regard to the pre-Socratics, insofar as the idea of compensation or the germs of it may be discerned in their thought. And those beginnings are evident.

In the few extant writings of these thinkers we can see little evidence of an ethical compensation, but the fundamental principle of polarity is clearly visible in their metaphysics. Anaximander thought that an eternal motion caused the separation of opposites and thereby brought things into being. Pythagoras held that opposites are the first principles of things. Again in Heraclitus we find that all things are One, that opposites unite. In Empedocles the dynamic principle takes the form of Love and Strife - attraction and repulsion. According to Anaxagoras a portion of everything exists in everything - the idea of microcosm and macrocosm which finds expression in "Compensation."

It might be well to repeat that Plato synthesized the thought of his predecessors, and that Emerson had undoubtedly become familiar with the ideas of the pre-Socratics through his reading of the Dialogues long before he read Gerando.

Emerson found in Victor Cousin an attitude that corresponded to his own. Eclecticism was the method he had always followed in his use of writers. Cousin's Cours de Philosophie was published in 1829, and Emerson bought the three-volume set some time soon after. By May of 1831 he had read a considerable portion of the first volume. Just
as the eclectic method and the idealism of Cousin appealed to Emerson, so the strict compensation expressed must also have agreed with his views.

Compensation, according to Cousin, was a universal and necessary fact, arising from the structure of things. It was a law of iron and one which usually executed itself instantaneously, applying to nations as well as individuals.

Though Emerson later expressed a distrust of the eclectic attempt to corral all truth, and seemed to think Cousin less profound as time passed, he continued to agree with the eclectic method of choosing the positive elements in a writer and dispensing with his negations.

One other modern writer remains to be mentioned, one whose effect on Emerson is difficult to trace. Emerson knew Spinoza's thought, but when he read him or what particular books he read is an unknown quantity. Emerson mentions him in Literary Ethics, an address delivered at Dartmouth in July, 1838, and in "The Oversoul" he speaks of him as ranking with Kant and Coleridge. Clearly he regarded Spinoza with favor.

Spinoza affords great interest to the student of "Compensation," because the Ethics offer the most systematic if dry presentation of the idea to be found. Spinoza might be considered a modern Stoic. Again the task of the individual is to conform himself to the universal will. Any deviation from this universal will brings with it a passion
(suffering - passion having also the old meaning of being passive) which is its own punishment; correspondingly, an alignment with universal ends brings inevitably the good or pleasant emotions. With elaborate and consistent psychology Spinoza sets forth the consequences of the individual desires. Knowledge is the way to the desires that conform to universal ends. One does not come to desire what is better because he has denied what is worse; rather, because he comes to see what is better, that is, more profitable, he foregoes the worse.

At the very least, Emerson was acquainted with Spinoza through the works of Cousin and undoubtedly through Coleridge.

In his book Emerson and Asia Frederic Ives Carpenter states that Emerson had done little reading in Oriental literature prior to 1836. Of the two Orientals that he read that year, Confucius and Zoroaster, his Zoroaster was a questionable translation. He also had read The Code of Menu, and, with the exception of interpretations such as Gerando's, very little more in the field. By 1840 he had read Buddha and the Indian Vedas. His wide reading of Oriental literature seems to have come considerably after the publication of Essays, First Series.

The Persians, the Hindus, and nearly all Oriental religions expressed the law of compensation, but there is little basis for believing that Emerson was influenced greatly by the Orientals in developing the idea. The essay contains none of the cryptic Oriental quotations which would
have lent themselves so easily to the subject. Neither
does it contain a reference to the expression of the idea
in Oriental mythology, though other mythologies are
mentioned. His Oriental reading confirmed, but probably
did not help him formulate his conception of compensation.

Of special interest is Emerson's constant use of the
scientific findings of his day to illustrate his points.
Nature, scientifically viewed, seemed to offer him
startling confirmation of his ideas - ideas whose most
practical significance was in the realm of ethics.
"Compensation" contains many instances of the moral law
analogically conveyed by means of scientific laws. Polarity
found its perfect illustration in the new science of
electricity. The scientific conceptions of the relation
of power to speed, of mass to inertia, of chemical affinity,
of the adaptation of animals to environment, of the com­
pensatory forces exerted by planets on each other, all
these things proved welcome corroboration to Emerson.

He read the Bridgewater Treatises which were intended
to show "the power, wisdom and goodness of God as manifested
in Creation." Most of Boston was reading them after their
publication, 1833-1837. They were an attempt to utilize
the current scientific knowledge to prove the essential
justice and goodness of God, and amounted to a sort of
rational theology. They showed the wisdom of Nature in
her laws and in her provisions for all forms of life. A strict compensation reigned in man's moral nature as well as in the physical world. Nature, as shown by science, was adapted to the external moral condition of man. This union of science and theology must have pleased Emerson.

Combining the evidence afforded by the Journals with what is known of his reading, we can conclude that if his idea of compensation was completely formulated by 1826, then the strongest formative influences were probably Plato, the Stoics, Swedenborg, and perhaps Coleridge. It is difficult to say how strong the influences were. He quotes none of them in the essay. Neither does he state the doctrine in their terms. The whole essay is marked by individuality and novelty of approach, and the reader, though he knows the general direction of thought, is continually surprised by the force of independent insights.
CHAPTER IV
POLARITY AND IDEALISM

To proceed with the explication of the essay, we find these passages after the introduction.

"Polarity, or action and reaction, we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female; in the inspiration and expiration of plants and animals;..." (p. 96)

"An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; ..." (p. 97)

"Whilst the world is thus dual, so is every one of its parts." (p. 97)

This principle of dualism, or its more dynamic counterpart, polarity, suggests itself to every beholder. Emerson does not deduce it from prior principles. He starts with experience, with observation, and by building up examples he tries to give the reader a feeling of the universality of the principle. To a great extent he is using scientific method. Everything he observes seems subject to the law of polarity, and hence he infers the all-pervasiveness of the law. Few scientists, however, would agree to his extension of the principle to all parts of the universe. That assertion properly comes under the heading of intuition, a bold (some might call it rash) projection of idea that no amount of observation could ever verify. Refutations of this general law would consist of finding manifest
contradictions of it. The test of it, as well as the most practical use of it, lies in the moral nature of man. As a metaphysical abstraction it is interesting, but scarcely exciting. Once brought down to particular everyday affairs, "The One in the Many," it assumes a new and impressive guise. It becomes useful. Emerson's power rests in no small degree upon his ability to show metaphysical ideas as actively at work.

He then discusses the faculties and conditions of man as they are ruled by this principle. "The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man. Every excess causes a defect, every defect an excess. Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse." (p. 98)

He is stating here simply what ordinary prudence tells anybody. To give force to his analogies he usually begins with statements which are generally agreed upon. It is pertinent to quote here a criticism made by O. W. Firkins upon the thought in this passage. "'Compensation' is, of all the essays of Emerson, the most harassing - not to say the most harrowing - to the analyst. We may remark first of all that there is a fusion - or confusion - between the two doctrines that every sweet has its sour and that every sin has its punishment, - an unhappy conjunction, since, if pleasure as such is penal, the provision which
makes guilt penal likewise loses half its dignity and
effectiveness."

An examination of the context in which "Every sweet
hath its sour" is set will quickly reveal that Emerson did
not intend pleasure as such to be construed as penal. The
subject is the faculties of man and the use of them. They
are to be used in accordance with the Golden Mean, neither
too much nor too little. A sweet which produces pleasure
will, if overdone, inevitably bring its sour. What is
penal is not the pleasure but the faulty intelligence which
does not know how to use it.

Plunging into history, Emerson shows the workings
of the law in the larger units of society. "This law
writes the laws of cities and nations. It is in vain to
build or plot or combine against it. Things refuse to be
mismanged long... Though no checks to a new evil appear,
the checks exist, and will appear." (p. 100)

He is upon firm ground here, for history would seem
to demonstrate no fact more surely than that one extreme
begets its opposite. Anything which is counter to the
public good will generate its own opposition, an opposition
which will grow in proportion to the malignancy. The
opposition may in turn bring its own evils, but these too

1. W. Firkins, Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston and New
will speedily raise up their adversaries. The success of the two-party system in American and English democracy may have its foundation in a fundamental law of nature.

After he has presented more illustrations of moral compensation, Emerson states the law in its finality. "These appearances indicate that the universe is represented in every one of its particles." (p. 101) "Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law." (p. 102)

In other words, morality consists in aligning oneself with that which makes for the good of the whole. A private benefit which runs counter to the public good does not benefit, as the laws of nature and the soul - which are the same, one being seen outwardly, the other inwardly - automatically protect and insure the wellbeing of the whole.

At this point it would be well to leave the essay and survey compensation in the light of Emerson's complete thought. Does compensation harmonize with the doctrines set forth in "Nature," "Self-Reliance," or "The Oversoul," to mention only the most important? Do those essays contain doctrines which could serve as the basis for a systematic rendering of compensation?

In the first place, his declaration that all things are moral and the universe is alive assumes the idealism of "Nature." There is a spirit or soul - call it what you like as long as it is not material - in everything, and this
soul is One. We recognize ourselves in Nature. "The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious."¹ The notion of "God in the unconscious," incidentally, finds a curious parallel in Henri Bergson's treatment of instinct in *Creative Evolution*.

The idea of a spirit in everything has to many people a suspicious flavor of pantheism. Yet Emerson also evinces a high regard for Berkeley's absolute idealism wherein all things are contained in the Mind of God. Could Emerson be placed in one category or the other, presumably a great problem would be solved. Inability so to classify him has led critics to pronounce him vague or inconsistent. What then is the truth of the matter?

We cannot do better than to let Emerson speak his own hard Yankee sense on the subject. "...what difference does it make, whether Orion is up there in heaven, or some god paints the image in the firmament of the soul? The relations of parts and the end of the whole remaining the same, what is the difference, whether land and sea interact, and worlds revolve and intermingle without number or end, - deep yawning under deep, and galaxy balancing galaxy, throughout absolute space, - or whether, without relations of time and space, the same appearances are inscribed in

¹Emerson, "Nature," *Nature Addresses and Lectures*, p. 64.
the constant faith of man? Whether nature enjoy a substantial existence without, or is only in the apocalypse of the mind, it is alike useful and alike venerable to me.\(^1\)

And there we have an example of Emerson's supreme good sense. An ingenious man could devise a theory of idealism - perhaps a number of theories - but only a wise man could evaluate it so clearly and simply.

Some sort of idealism Emerson believes in. The type is not important. What is important is the fact that idealism stresses the spiritual world over the material. Since it emphasizes what is more real, it is more practical. The unity of the underlying spirit has very practical consequences for Emerson.

For one thing law reigns in the visible world. "But it [the universe] differs from the body in one important respect. It is not, like that, now subjected to the human will. Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind. It is a fixed point whereby we may measure our departure. As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident."\(^1\) Nature is God in the unconscious, working by eternal laws or ideas. Man, though possessed of a will and having a wider range of action than any other creature, is still bound by the same laws, both in his

\(^1\)Emerson, "Nature," Nature Addresses and Lectures, p. 47.
physical and spiritual parts. Visible nature is the measure of his alignment with these laws. His ethics ought to repeat the principles of physics: "The whole is greater than any of its parts;" "Reaction is equal to action and opposite in direction." Both spiritual and material worlds are ruled by the same inexorable laws, and, to get closer to the truth, man never actually breaks the moral law - he merely illustrates it.

Curiously enough, we find here the implication that, since the soul is ruled by ideas or principles, the latter constitute a higher realm than that consciousness or awareness which we think of when speaking of soul, spirit, or mind.

This Oversoul, being One in all things, is always in harmony with itself. Natural law and moral law proceed from spirit's consistency with itself. Law or harmony is the condition of all life, and insofar as that which is complete within itself can be thought of as having a purpose, the Oversoul strives for greater expression or being in its particular parts, that is, for greater variety, greater particularity, greater faculties in the individual.

Law, then, exists for the benefit of all parts of the whole. There are no favorites in Nature; with sublime indifference she offers the conditions, for acceptance or

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rejection. What is contrary to the good of the whole is contrary to natural and moral law. In man indications of the law are felt in the moral sentiment, which is a perception of his identity with others. The sentiment of "ought" implies that people are other selves, and it would have no meaning without a fundamental spiritual unity. Thus the dualism which Emerson uses for the central idea in "Compensation" is derived from a unity more basic.

From the presence of spiritual laws it follows that the soul has a nature of its own, that certain functions within it are more important than others, and that an undue tyranny of one faculty over another results in the person's being so much less a person. Moreover the functions of the soul are made for universal ends, and any perversion of them to purely private benefits, running counter to the public good, is instantly punished. "Every secret is told, every crime is punished, every virtue rewarded, every wrong redressed, in silence and certainty. What we call retribution is the universal necessity by which the whole appears wherever a part appears." (p. 102) The very notion of law assumes polarity, that one thing being done, another must follow from it. There is no isolated thought or act; each brings its inevitable consequence.

The reader very properly asks, "How does the law work?" A systematic metaphysic may show why it should work, and at the same time lack insight to show its actual workings. In short, the intuitive perception of the principle as active
in real life is what concerns us, and is what gives conviction. As many things as we can see it animating, just so much existence will it have for us. And if we cannot descry it working in some things, does the fault lie with the principle or with us?

Idealist though he is and should be considered, Emerson is first of all a sage critic of life, and the judgments he delivers are frequently independent of any ideal theory. Truth is its own guarantee. One either sees the principle in the object, the universal in the particular, the absolute in the relative, - or he does not. No amount of argument avails. Many statements of Emerson appeal instantly to everybody, idealist or materialist. These may be merely the "truisms" for which he has been castigated, but they suggest to the student of "Compensation" that many instances of the principle at work may hold good even in a materialistic universe. Emerson held close to facts, and preferred his insights to spring naturally from them, rather than to be laboriously deduced from hypotheses. He always, as Alcott commented, left Nature in the same order in which he found it.
CHAPTER V

RETRIBUTION

Retribution appeals to the imagination. For some reason people are usually more concerned to see indignant justice overtake the malefactor than to behold the patient sufferer recompensed. A reader will wade through a thousand pages to get his villain caught, but can hardly be enticed through ten to rejoice in the saint's reward. Perhaps he feels that the saint flourishes best in hardship anyway and ought to be kept in his element. At any rate, retribution is the more spectacular part of justice, and the more poetic it is, the more it intrigues.

Emerson was impressed by this universal hunger for retribution. He remarks in "Compensation" that it finds a tongue in literature unawares and seems to be expressed in the proverbs and fables of all nations. And proverbs he considered the wisdom of the race, "the sanctuary of the intuitions."

Moved possibly by a desire to keep a consistent dualism, he asserts that every act has not one, but two compensations. "Every act rewards itself, or in other words integrates itself, in a twofold manner; first in the thing, or in real nature; and secondly in the circumstance, or in apparent nature. Men call the circumstance the retribution." (p. 102)
The real compensation takes place at once in the character of the individual, while the visible retribution may not occur until long after. It was an unfortunate choice on Emerson's part to include compensation of circumstance in the essay. The journals up to the time of the essay contain no mention of it, and we are moved to wonder if he included it merely to achieve a consistent dualism. It has a faint smack of "trimming" to it.

Certainly no fact is more generally deplored than that the biter is not always bit, the killer not always killed, and the thief not always exposed. In many cases circumstantial compensation occurs, but there are too many glaring exceptions. Nor does the necessity of this doctrine logically follow from his idealism, as the necessity of inward compensation does. Such statements lend credence to Henry David Gray's criticism of "Compensation": 

\[\ldots\]

many others, after reading the flat absurdities in the over-famous essay on 'Compensation,' have felt that Emerson's optimism could be nothing but a wilful disregarding of the facts of life.\footnote{Henry David Gray, *Emerson* (San Francisco: 1917), p. 75.} Ignoring for a while the fact that inward compensation can be shown as something more than flat absurdity, we must admit that Emerson must have disregarded some pertinent facts in proclaiming the universality of circumstantial compensation.

In all fairness, circumstances may generate to a degree
their own retribution. The lessons of history, cited before, provide a good example. The individual who transgresses upon another's rights does set in motion hatreds which seek his destruction, but his downfall or survival depends upon his strength, his cleverness, and his luck. With sufficient of these he will get through, and to call in a later retribu-
tion of adventitious circumstances seems like straining Providence - to say nothing of credulity. The doctrine is reminiscent of Emerson's Puritan forbears who saw God's retribution in every calamity.

The inward compensation is the real one, and, if it exist, the outward manifestation can more easily be spared. The moral world is its own sphere, and its laws are executed within itself.

In what ways then does the tendency to act partially and selfishly bring on retribution? In the first place, the term "being" must be stated in terms which are applicable to human personality. To say that the thief is punished by imprisonment is understandable - and is the only sort of retribution that many people comprehend; to say that the thief suffers from the emotions of fear, hate, and occasionally remorse is also clear to the mind; but to say, as Emerson does, that to act selfishly is a decrease from "being" and that "the retribution is so much death," (p. 105) perplexes the reader.

If we refer back to Plato and Spinoza, the term
takes on more practical significance. In both writers "being" in the human personality refers to knowledge—especially wisdom, power to do or create things, sympathy with others, awareness of or aliveness to the physical world, — in short, character. If we substitute "character" for being, we shall not be too far wrong. All of these attributes — and they may not be exhausted here — have the characteristic of promoting universal as well as particular being. They are in tune with the universe, which strives perpetually to promote being, to become. In the final analysis they all reduce to knowledge.

These attributes also make for the happiness of the individual in the following ways: they tend to produce the pleasurable emotions; they enlarge the sphere of man's enjoyment, making use of all his faculties, so that he comes more and more, as Emerson says, to take the world up into himself; they place man's wellbeing in his own character, thus making it less dependent upon circumstances. "The natural measure of this power [character] is the resistance of circumstances."¹ Man is to live from within outward, rather than to strive always for what is outward in a vain effort to compensate for his inner poverty. He is to be active rather than passive, independent rather than dependent, for such things accord with Nature. We find an

extreme expression of this self-reliant independence in Thoreau's paradox of a man's being rich in proportion to the number of things he can do without.

Thus action toward universal ends - which is what Emerson understands by moral action - accords with the individual's wellbeing, and it may disconcert the idealist to note that the superiority of pursuing universal ends does not, in the above paragraph, depend upon idealism. The above reasoning might very well have been offered by a disciple of Epicurus. It applies as easily to a materialistic world as to an idealistic one. Again, it should be remembered that Emerson considered the principle of compensation - if agreed upon - to be itself suggestive of idealism. He did not, as this paper has been at pains to do, start with idealism and descend to facts. Rather, like Plato, he started with facts, then ascended to principles or ideas, and finally to a principle which accounted for the ideas, a more natural and practical way. Idealism then explains compensation and the moral sentiment.

The soul is formed for universal ends; for wholes, not parts; for complete action and use of faculties, not abnormal exaggerations of one faculty. Yet, "Whilst thus the world will be whole and refuses to be disparted, we seek to act partially, to sunder, to appropriate; for example, - to gratify the senses we sever the pleasure of the senses from the needs of the character." (p. 103) "The
soul strives amain to live and work through all things. It would be the only fact." (p. 104) To act partially is to decrease the being of the soul. "We can no more halve things and get the sensual good, by itself, than we can get an inside that shall have no outside, or a light without a shadow." (p. 105) The unwise seek to avoid the price of outward benefits, but experienced men of the world pay as they go along, knowing that they pay a dearer price in the long run for what they do not actually earn.

The compensation in character sometimes has a poetic quality. "The exclusive in fashionable life does not see that he excludes himself from enjoyment, in the attempt to appropriate it. The exclusionist in religion does not see that he shuts the door of heaven on himself in striving to shut out others. Treat men as pawns and ninepins and you shall suffer as well as they. If you leave out their heart you shall lose your own." (p. 110)

The religious exclusionist, by striving to make a private heaven, is debarred from that sympathy with and love of others which constitute heaven - for it is a state of mind. The fashionable exclusive shuts himself out from the society of those people who could do him the most good. He restricts his world, which is to say, his soul, whereas the principle of life is to expand and comprehend. He who treats others merely as means to his own benefit does not perceive that by leaving out their heart he has lost his own - or, more properly, by failing to perceive that they
have a heart, he signifies that he does not know that he possesses one either. The world renders back to each person his own image. What he sees indicates what he is. He who sees everyone as untrustworthy proclaims the measure of his self-trust. Who despises others proclaims that he despises himself, and he who fears others fears himself. The actions resulting from these states of soul confirm and intensify the original malady, so that the compensation is contemporaneous with the deed. There is no separation of the two. And in all these retributions one element is obvious - ignorance of the true self, an ignorance shown by the failure to perceive that same self in others.

Compensation sometimes takes a more readily recognizable form. "All infractions of love and equity in our social relations are speedily punished. They are punished by fear." (p. 111) The abuses in society are punished in the same manner.

The section on fear is followed by a paragraph which may offer some difficulty. "Of the like nature is that expectation of change which instantly follows the suspension of our voluntary activity. The terror of cloudless noon, the emerald of Polycrates, the awe of prosperity, the instinct which leads every generous soul to impose on itself tasks of a noble asceticism and vicarious virtue, are the tremblings of the balance of justice through the heart and mind of man." (p. 112) Everything we gain must be paid for by activity, a fact which the soul recognizes
unconsciously. To suspend activity is to stop paying, and we wait uneasily to see how Nature will take her price. Continued prosperity, like that of Polycrates who cast his emerald away to appease the gods, disquiets the recipient because he feels that he will somehow have to pay for his good fortune. These things have the expectation of counter-action setting in; they are too passive, the still hush before the storm, the terror of cloudless noon. Sooner or later, the blow will fall, and the wise man feels it necessary to pay in advance.

This passage illustrates Emerson's strange combination of poet, writer, and philosopher. The thought is a poetic one, rich with an almost eerie suggestiveness. The majority of writers would have developed it at considerably more length, yet Emerson dismisses it with a few sentences, so terse as to be nearly obscure. A philosopher would probably not have bothered to write it at all, even supposing that it occurred to him. Thus we have a poetic thought, written in prose, to illustrate a philosophic principle.

If those who act partially or evilly must pay the price, so also are those who receive benefits forced to recompense the universe. "Benefit is the end of nature. But for every benefit which you receive, a tax is levied. He is great who confers the most benefits. He is base, - and that is the one base thing in the universe, - to receive favors and render none." (p. 113) The ungrateful
man has not even the merit of activity, which the energetic
criminal - however misdirected his forces - can claim. He
is a negation upon the world.

The borrower lives under the shadow of perpetual
obligation and does not know reality. "The cheat, the
defaulter, the gambler, cannot extort the knowledge of
material and moral nature which his honest care and pains
yield to the operative. The law of nature is, Do the thing,
and you shall have the power; but they who do not the
thing have not the power." (p. 114)

Power or skill is being, which is its own compensation.
Those who seek to gain the benefit without learning the
power have deprived themselves of the real benefit.
CHAPTER VI
REWARD

The complement of retribution appears to many people still more doubtful, perhaps because, as Emerson points out at the beginning of the essay, the worthy do not possess the houses, lands, and luxuries that they should. Yet, is it in such things that true compensation lies? Emerson believes that it does not, that compensation executes itself in the soul. What compensation we can behold in circumstances is only a minor working of the law. After all, life resolves itself, for Emerson, to a succession of thoughts, to what a man is thinking about all day.

"On the other hand the law holds with equal sureness for all right action. Love, and you shall be loved. All love is mathematically just, as much as the two sides of an algebraic equation. The good man has absolute good, which like fire turns every thing to its own nature, so that you cannot do him any harm . . . so disasters of all kinds, as sickness, offence, poverty, prove benefactors: . . . " (p. 116)

That love produces love may be accepted as true, but the statement that disasters prove benefactors will commonly produce only a smile. Poverty and sickness are solid facts that settle grimly down around one and wait to be recognized. They show no disposition to be routed by a theory. Is Emerson then actually ignoring the facts of life?

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He does not gloss over these facts; he simply states a higher fact - the soul. The Stoic element becomes very strong in this section. The soul's proper good comes from itself; and from the same source comes its evil. The advantage of misfortune to the good man is that it forces him to increase in being, that is, in knowledge, in power, in sympathy. He builds his compensation up within himself, just as animals, in the course of evolution, develop structures to overcome the obstacles of environment. Difficulty produces growth. "In general, every evil to which we do not succumb is a benefactor." (p. 118)

But what if we do succumb? What compensates if poverty leaves us bitter and frustrated? Have we not been lessened inwardly as well as outwardly?

We reach at this point the harshest part of the doctrine of compensation, and after examining it, we may conclude that the adjective "optimistic" does not apply to the complete doctrine. The measure of character, as Emerson says, is its ability to resist circumstances, the Stoic fortitude. The person who succumbs to misfortune signifies that he has not enough being to triumph over it, and the penalty derives, not from the misfortune, but from his defect. He has not seen in what his being or good consists, and must pay the price. The law is adamant in physical nature as well as moral. The animal which has not the capacity to adapt itself dies. Nature does not pamper.
She is interested in securing strength or being, and, to do so, produces and destroys whole species and whole races. If the individual overcomes the obstacle, his nature grows correspondingly; if he does not, then a defect or negation is indicated and only he can supply the absent strength.

If man's good comes from within, it follows that he who has been cheated has not been injured in any vital part. "Men suffer all their life long under the foolish superstition that they can be cheated. But it is as impossible for a man to be cheated by any one but himself, as for a thing to be and not to be at the same time." (p. 118)

The greatest calamity, death, is dealt with by Emerson in the section on persecution. "The martyr cannot be dishonored. Every lash inflicted is a tongue of fame; every prison a more illustrious abode; every burned book or house enlightens the world; every suppressed or expunged word reverberates through the earth from side to side. Hours of sanity and consideration are always arriving to communities, as to individuals, when the truth is seen and the martyrs are justified." (p. 120)

Perhaps principles are always finally vindicated in the course of history, but, we may object, what comfort is that to the martyr? He may not be dishonored, but he is quite certainly dead.

Compensation, as such, is not concerned with death, but with life. Coldly viewed, death is the perfect com-
pensation for birth and may be due at any time. It is scarcely a solacing thought, but observation shows that it accords well with the facts. Death itself, Emerson suggests, may not be a calamity. The greatest objection to Emerson's "Compensation" lies in the almost superhuman detachment the individual would need to surmount certain evils.

From the widespread working of compensation in the moral world Emerson concludes that the physical world is less important. The primacy of the individual is his teaching. "Thus do all things preach the indifferency of circumstances. The man is all. Everything has two sides, a good and an evil. Every advantage has its tax. I learn to be content. But the doctrine of compensation is not the doctrine of indifferency. The thoughtless say, on hearing these representations, 'What boots it to do well? there is one event to good and evil; if I gain any good I must pay for it; if I lose any good I gain some other; all actions are indifferent.'" (p. 120)

Then follows what is probably the most important and the most obscure paragraph in the entire essay, obscure because the only terms in which Emerson could express the thought are pure abstractions.

"There is a deeper fact in the soul than compensation, to wit, its own nature. The soul is not a compensation, but a life. The soul is. Under all this running sea of cir-
cumstance, whose waters ebb and flow with perfect balance, lies the aboriginal abyss of real Being. Essence, or God, is not a relation or a part, but the whole. Being is the vast affirmtive, excluding negation, self-balanced, and swallowing up all relations, parts and times within itself. Nature, truth, virtue, are the influx from thence. Vice is the absence or departure of the same. Nothing, Falsehood, may indeed stand as the great Night or shade on which as a background the living universe paints itself forth, but no fact is begotten by it; it cannot work, for it is not. It cannot work any good; it cannot work any harm. It is harm inasmuch as it is worse not to be than to be." (p. 120)

The whole distinction between virtue and vice is one of degree of being. Virtue is the presence of being or God, while vice is the absence of being. Being is the soul's nature, and what promotes being is its proper action. Insofar as one does not promote being, he ceases himself to exist.

To the man who acts rightly the thought of compensation does not occur. He does not act rightly in order that he may get something else; his nature finds its good in the act itself, just as naturally as the eye finds its good to consist in seeing. The action must spring from the nature of the individual, or it is worthless. In the final analysis, there is something cheap and unheroic about this talk of retribution and reward. The best of life is not a bargain counter. The people we admire are those who laugh at retribution and disdain reward; nor does a cautious
calculation of inward compensation appeal more to our sympathy. It misses the point of the matter. Those who practice a timorous virtue in hope of future reward or present recompense do not know their own nature, and no blind following of rules - whether given by faith or logic - will produce the absent being. Virtue signifies that the soul is. "In a virtuous action I properly am; in a virtuous act I add to the world; I plant into deserts conquered from Chaos and Nothing and see the darkness receding on the limits of the horizon. There can be no excess to love, none to knowledge, none to beauty, when these attributes are considered in the purest sense." (p. 122)

The old, and by no means outdated, notion of virtue being a very painful affair arises from ignorance of its nature. "Virtues are, in the popular estimate, rather the exception than the rule. There is the man and his virtues. Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as they would pay a fine in expiation of daily non-appearance on parade. Their works are done as an apology or extenuation of their living in the world, - as invalids and the insane pay a high board. Their virtues are penances. I do not wish to expiate, but to live."¹ Emerson would say that the logic of the understanding rather than the intuition of reason produces the reluctant morality that takes such pride in itself.

When the individual apprehends a truth by reason, the truth is actually part of him. At this point Emerson comes very close to the "unconscious" of modern psychology, but he makes the unconscious something more than a faculty which produces the "vocabulary of despair."

An individual may be motivated by an intuition which does not come clearly into his conscious mind. Most people seem to be unaware of their real virtues, or to take them for granted. They flow naturally. "We love characters in proportion as they are impulsive or spontaneous. The less a man thinks or knows about his virtues the better we like him."¹

We are led by these reflections to come inevitably back to "Self-Reliance," which has for its theme the integrity of the individual. By no accident does this essay precede "Compensation," for it deals with the "deeper fact," the individual's adherence to his true nature. We may call this adherence what we wish, integrity, honesty, reliance, sincerity, or love of truth, but in any case it denotes a fundamental solidity that cannot be overthrown. It denotes a preference for what is. "I look upon the simple and childish virtues of veracity and honesty as the root of all that is sublime in character."² What is not built upon fidelity to self is built upon falsehood - that

²Emerson, "Illusions," Conduct of Life, p. 322.
is to say, upon nothing.

But, if honesty is the primary virtue, does not "Self-Reliance" contradict the doctrine of universal ends taught in "Compensation"? It seems to remove or nullify the very standards of "Compensation."

In the first place, self-reliance is God-reliance for Emerson. Action contrary to universal ends results from too little trust rather than too much. By mistaking partial elements of the soul— which desire only to possess— for the entire soul— which desires to act for its own sake— the individual comes to act partially, to seek things outside him rather than being inside him. In his "Ode" to W. H. Channing Emerson says:

"Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind."

Like Plato's tyrant man is tyrannized over by those things which subordinate faculties desire to possess. The order of Nature is inverted. So long as things are desired in their proper proportion— a typically Greek idea— they constitute real good, but even then, "Our first mistake is the belief that the circumstance gives the joy which we give to the circumstance."¹ Above all particular things is the nature of the soul which strives to be the only fact. To it alone belongs the trust that produces intuition.

And if the intuition does not come, then trust the more. The only substitute for self-reliance is still more self-reliance. It may not be a misinterpretation of Emerson

¹Emerson, "Illusions," Conduct of Life, p. 311.
to say that he would have preferred an honest rogue to a hypocritical saint. The rogue at least has some reality to him. "...truth is handsomer than the affectation of love. Your goodness must have some edge to it, else it is none. The doctrine of hatred must be preached, as the counteraction of the doctrine of love, when that pules and whines."¹ No display of righteousness can compensate for the coming of growth, of intuition.

And in growth by intuition, or better perhaps, intuition by growth, we reach a fact which cannot be explained. It simply exists. "We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions. In that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, all things find their common origin... We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams. If we ask whence this comes, if we seek to pry into the soul that causes, all philosophy is at fault. Its presence or its absence is all we can affirm."²

The growth of the soul or character is the purpose of existence. All things, species as well as individuals, share the elan vital which strives constantly to improve

²Emerson, "Self-Reliance," Essays, First Series, p. 64.
The changes which break up at short intervals the prosperity of men are advertisements of a nature whose law is growth." (p. 124) The possible violence of individualism is reconciled to the disinterestedness of pursuing universal ends in that they represent stages of growth. Moreover, the fact that "His life is a progress, and not a station," (p. 122) shows man the benefit of calamity. Calamity forces him to help himself, to advance to a wider scope of vision and power. In his static condition he resists growth until the pressure of circumstances forces him to expand or to crack. "In proportion to the vigor of the individual these revolutions are frequent, until in some happier mind they are incessant and all worldly relations hang very loosely about him, becoming as it were a transparent fluid membrane through which the living form is seen, and not, as in most men, an indurated heterogeneous fabric of many dates and of no settled character, in which the man is imprisoned." (p. 124)

In the course of time calamity has its compensations in circumstances as well as in character. "It permits or constrains the formation of new acquaintances and the reception of new influences that prove of the first importance to the next years; and the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden-flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made the banian
of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men."

(p. 126)

A growth in love will annihilate even what Emerson calls the radical tragedy of Nature, the distinction between those who have less faculty and those who have more. Love perceives the identity of all people. "I am my brother and my brother is me." (p. 124) A spiritual substratum or idealism becomes almost a necessity to account for this merging of individuals into one soul. Thus, Emerson, the supreme individualist, tends to sink personality into the Oversoul. The greatest individualist is he who transcends his own ego, who comes to act as a universal being.
CHAPTER VII

ORGANIZATION OF "COMPENSATION"

When we examine the content of "Compensation" in the light of Emerson's own theory of literary expression, a compact and reasonable organization emerges. An outline of "Compensation" would read in the following manner: introduction, polarity, polarity in history or society, polarity in the individual, nature of the soul, and growth of the soul. There would be two divisions under polarity in the individual, retribution and good fortune, reward and misfortune - the apposite active and passive elements being placed together.

A certain amount of logical subsumption exists in the essay, but that there is not very much becomes evident from the fact that "Compensation" may be so easily outlined. Emerson commences with polarity in general, then proceeds to polarity in history and polarity in the individual, in which latter portion we find the law being expressed in mythology and proverbs. This arrangement comprises what we call logical order, but it aids not one whit in the comprehension of the essay. The order could just as easily be reversed, as comprehension is simply a matter of perceiving the one principle in its various manifestations. No argumentative order exists - with the exception of the reductio ad absurdum of the introduction. Either the principle is seen or it is not seen. Critics of "Compensation"
may say that Emerson had the remarkable power of perceiving the iron law working in things in which it had no existence, and that his analogical use of the principle working in undeniable instances constitutes a suborning of many particular truths to prove one general falsehood.

Yet, insight, for Emerson, is the perception of such principles or ideas animating the world. Where logic or facts contradict their existence - as in circumstantial compensation - they may be denied. But with inward compensation, where we are dealing with invisibles, we cannot be so sure. Emerson's Platonic Ideas apply to an infinity of things, and hence the degrees of insight may be correspondingly infinite. If we do not see the principle in a fact, does the fault lie with Emerson's imagination or with our lack of insight? Mere non-perception of the principle is no valid basis for denying it.

The two other great principles which "Compensation" contains are the soul's own nature and the perpetual growth of the soul. Here again, logical subsumption affords little help to comprehension. Both growth and polarity may be classified under the nature of the soul, but such classification does not tell us what polarity is, what growth is, or what the nature of the soul is. It does not reveal to us "the thing in itself." Only intuition can know that principle or reality which animates the object.

Of importance is Emerson's transition from the idea of compensation to a "deeper fact." This deeper fact, the
soul's nature, proclaims its superiority by the greater nobility it shows, a nobility we see or feel intuitively - as we feel a disinterested act to be nobler than one done for reward. The one idea may contain the other, but this fact becomes less important beside the relative nobility of the two ideas. And nobility is not perceived by logic; it is felt by intuition. Feeling or sentiment is a part of insight, for intuition is an activity of the whole soul.

"A blending of these two - the intellectual perception of truth and the moral sentiment of right - is wisdom."\(^1\) Thus Nature again takes on moral significance. The sun becomes sublime because it shines universally on all things - touching thereby a sympathetic chord in man's tendency toward universal action. Individual facts possess differing degrees of spiritual worth, and individual principles have each their separate worth which is sensed by intuition.

The idea of growth which follows the nature of the soul may be considered to have the superior elevation which progress has over a static condition. We sense immediately that what grows is right, what stands still is wrong. Upon this higher note Emerson leaves us, rather than upon compensation, a preoccupation with whose workings would cause us to miss the point of the essay.

\(^1\)Emerson, *Natural History of Intellect*, p. 45.
CHAPTER VIII
RELATED PROBLEMS

Though much general satisfaction with "Compensation" has been expressed, very few explicit criticisms have been hurled. O. W. Firkins, quoted previously, has contributed the most definite objections.

Following his criticism of pleasure as being penal, he says, "Furthermore, there is an oscillation between the principle of debt, which rests on equivalence, and the principle of the tax, which implies merely abatement."1 He refers to such statements as, "Material good has its tax, and if it came without desert or sweat, has no root in me, and the next wind will blow it away." (p. 122) The principle of debt, which is the basic assumption of the essay, rests on equality of action and reaction, while the tax implies that reaction will not be fully equal to action. A tax does not return the full value of the original amount.

Yet, this contradiction can be resolved. "Compensation" deals with the two all-inclusive aspects of the individual, what he does and what is done to him. Under the former come virtue and vice; under the latter, misfortune and good fortune. An examination of the essay shows that Emerson uses "tax" primarily in regard to good fortune, the material good quoted above. He is then dealing with the passive element in the soul, not the active. In actions, com-

10. W. Firkins, Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 176.
pensation is contemporaneous with the deed, but the goods or ills of fortune require time to be felt in character, since they are the intrusion of foreign influences upon the individual. He has to adjust himself to them. When they first occur, the circumstantial good or evil alone is perceived. Misfortune is black and good fortune is white. The true good or evil consists in the gradual adjustment of the character to the circumstances, a process which takes time. Hence, in dealing with the disadvantage of good fortune, "tax," which does indeed imply abatement - but here, continual abatement - is the more fitting term. The individual is taxed until the full amount is made up. Retaining the monetary terminology, Emerson could just as well have used "interest" to apply to the gradual growth of character after misfortune. Interest implies slow increase, just as tax does abatement, but the improvement of character is a higher fact than its degeneration, and does not deserve a term which would bring it down to valuational equality with its opposite fact. Emerson subordinates the logician to the wise man and literary artist.

"Compensation" being an ethical writing, perhaps a few words should be said about Emerson's belief or disbelief in free-will, though one cannot read the essay without feeling that the whole question has somehow become less
important. In January-February of 1827 he recorded in his journal, "The argument for Necessity can never be got the better of."\(^1\) His essay on "Fate" is Oriental in tone. Yet, in "Compensation" itself he speaks of the omnipotence of the will - which might indicate a disposition to regard it as free. The most significant of all his statements on free-will can be found in "Spiritual Laws:" "Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man, - never darkened across any man's road who did not go out of his way to seek them. These are the soul's mumps and measles and whooping-coughs, ..."\(^2\) Judging from this statement and from his comment upon Berkeley's idealism, Emerson's final answer to the problem would be, "What is the difference? In either case we will continue to act as though free." He would answer it by sheer good sense rather than by a complicated solution which made no practical difference. His commonest use of the word "freedom" is to denote the liberation, through knowledge, of the soul from circumstance.

Would not the doctrine of compensation result in a laissez-faire attitude toward social problems? If justice is triumphant everywhere, then why speak of injustice or try to remedy it?

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\(^1\)Jour. II, p. 165.  
This objection is precisely the same as the assertion that all actions become indifferent if compensation is admitted. The state, like the individual, has a nature of its own. It strives to increase its welfare, its being. The doctrine of compensation has a practical purpose, namely, to promote being, which in the state would mean the development of prosperity. Compensation is an idea to be acted upon. A sinking boat may illustrate the perfection of its working, but it is nonetheless advisable to bail the boat out.

......

The gravest objection to "Compensation" arises from the problem of evil. Aside from the extreme doubtfulness of circumstantial compensation as a universal law, the inward benefits of ill fortune may seem a questionable quantity. The squalor of poverty, the blackness of insanity, disease, war, these are the unpleasant facts which any optimism must take into account.

Emerson himself would heartily endorse the effort to take an opposing point of view - to give the devil's side of the picture. A wise man, as he says, will give his skepticism full rein. He will not bully and coerce facts into conforming to a theory. He makes no effort to believe this or to believe that; rather he waits until belief comes irresistibly to him.

Evil may be negation from a universal point of view, but unfortunately we are individuals, not universal beings -
much as we perhaps ought to be. The negation of war has a strangely positive aspect. And if it is transient and does produce final good, that is small comfort to the individuals who have been killed and maimed by it. Such general goods are best appreciated by a disinterested spectator. He can attain the universal viewpoint.

If the individual succumbs spiritually to his hardship, that is, contracts his nature rather than expands it, it may be that he is paying the penalty for his lack of character; but for him to perish, as individuals and species do when they are unfit, seems a harsh visitation. It is all very well to say that one's death is due anytime, but the majority of individuals are quietly convinced that their own ought to be deferred.

These criticisms are not to be taken as logical objections, for they are not. They represent only the emotional reaction of most people to the idea of compensation, but emotions are not to be disregarded; Emerson himself puts an element of sentiment into wisdom. The logic of compensation seems to hold together, but at a trying price. The sum of it is that in Nature's effort to produce greater being, the individual becomes hugely unimportant. Nature, apparently, has always held the American slogan of "bigger and better," to achieve which, individuals, races, and species are sacrificed. She produces quantity in the hope of finding quality. "Nature makes fifty poor melons for
one that is good, and shakes down a tree full of gnarled,
wormy, unripe crabs, before you can find a dozen dessert
apples; and she scatters nations of naked Indians and nations
of clothed Christians, with two or three good heads among
them. Nature works very hard, and only hits the white
once in a million throws. In mankind she is contented if
she yields one master in a century. ¹

Such indeed may be Nature's way, but again it is not
a comforting way. It is a view which deflates the human
ego, whereas the majority of religions gain their strength
by appealing to the ego. Man wants a Providence which is
interested in him personally, a world created for his use,
and a personal immortality. In the surge of the sea and
the fury of storms in desolate regions he senses a power
which is indifferent to him, and compensates for it by
assuming one that is interested. He revolts against the
ideas that his individuality is not an important fact
in itself. Yet, "Nature can only be conceived as existing
to a universal and not to a particular end; to a universe
of ends, and not to one, - a work of ecstasy, to be
represented by a circular movement, as intention might be
signified by a straight line of definite length."²

No Stoic ever held a colder, more impersonal view
than Emerson holds here. This is not optimism in the

¹Emerson, "Considerations by the Way," Conduct of Life, p. 250.
²Emerson, "The Method of Nature," Nature Addresses and
Lectures, p. 201.
usual sense; it may be universal optimism, but the individual is lost in it. And, to do Emerson justice, it accords with the rest of his thought. The growth of character, the adoption of universal rather than particular ends, what is that but the sluffing off by the individual of his own ego, or rather, the sinking of his ego in a greater ego? To speak of man as being simply the vessel through which the Soul pours its energy is another instance of the same principle. And in "Immortality" he says that personal immortality will come if it be best; if it be not best, it will not come. The soul is great by a power not its own. What is worthwhile is the universal element in it, and we have hints throughout Emerson's works that when man is wise, when he sees and becomes part of the universal being, he no longer wishes for personal immortality.
CHAPTER VIII

EPilogue

"... the soul holds itself off from a too trivial and microscopic study of the universal tablet. It respects the end too much to immerse itself in the means."

It may be that in the course of tracing compensation our eyes have become microscopically focused, and we are, like Hamlet, caught in a trick of thinking too precisely upon the event. Comprehension and evaluation are the end, but they are matters of wholes, not parts. The unity must not be harmed, and it is to be hoped that we may not have to say, as the doctor of his operation, "The analysis was a success, but the writing is dead."

Viewing the essay as a whole, the question is not whether one accepts or rejects the idea of compensation, but how much of it he accepts. Some manifestations of it are too obvious to be ignored. No one can agree with all of it unless he has come completely into the same point of view that Emerson wrote from. The number of things in which one can see the principle working is the measure of his agreement. At this point we might observe a proper humility, an open-mindedness, and concede that in spite of our inability to see the idea as alive in a particular instance, it may nonetheless be serenely active. In short, we must question the tendency to say, "I do not see it; therefore, it does not exist." We do not see the sun on a cloudy day, but somehow it manages to exist without us.
The idea stirs our fancy, as much in itself as by the artistry with which Emerson conveys it. We find the union of the ideal and the practical in such lines as, "Every opinion reacts on him who utters it," or "The borrower runs in his own debt." Here is an abstract idea brought down to earth and given flesh and blood. Here are common, everyday events suddenly made luminous and understandable by a principle. We begin to wonder which is the more real, the event or the idea. This is practical idealism.

In those instances in which we can see compensation clearly working, the frequently poetic quality of its justice appeals to our sense of fitness. We have hints of a craftsmanship at work which answers to our finest notion of propriety. There is no man who does not think that he could improve the scale of justice somewhat, if given the power, and he discovers with joy those seemingly rare cases where Nature has not been lax. He beholds his own handiwork. The artist, no less than the moralist, responds.

And what of the cold austerity of compensation when it attempts to explain evil? Bleak and remorseless as an Arctic frost, it does not appeal to our sympathies. But neither do the facts it deals with. The explanation may not be pleasing, but the facts are even less so - and they unquestionably are. We have to conform to them, not they to us. Compensation could scarcely construct an Oriental paradise when it came to work upon these materials.
And from a more sensible point of view, what practical difference does a theory of evil make? Misfortune is the passive side of our nature. The essence of fortune - good or bad - is that we have no control over it. Some comfort indeed may be derived, as Emerson says, from a perception of the compensations of fortune, but what most vitally concerns us is the light compensation throws on our active nature. That side of the matter is in our power, and the strongest part of the essay lies in its treatment of the active nature.

"Compensation" is great because of its insight, and still more because of its suggestiveness. It should not be taken as a dogmatic statement of the universal condition, but as a stimulant to the mind, a wealth of suggestions, a spur to the individual to find out what the universal condition is. Most of all, it should not be accepted and then rested in. The mind grows more by its questions than by its answers; the law of change is inviolable, and the supreme good sense of Emerson shows itself when he says that the truest state of mind, rested in, is false.
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