

Broadcast Talks

on

Three Leaders of American Thought

'THOREAU' (16-9-1945)

'EMERSON' (23-9-1945)

'WHITMAN' (30-9-1945)

By

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(Madras Station)



TRIVANDRUM :
PRINTED BY THE SUPERINTENDENT, GOVERNMENT PRESS,
1945

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INTRODUCTION.

America's Declaration of Independence and her subsequent history as well as her pioneering experiences in a rich and undeveloped country not unnaturally led to her progress along special and aggressively individual lines. Physical isolation from the mother country engendered a psychological isolationism which even the impacts, the conjoint efforts and inevitable comradeships of two world wars have not wholly eliminated. Dickens wrote his "American Notes" and "Martin Chuzzlewit" in the eighteen forties and the manner in which Gen. Fladdock, Col. Diver and Jefferson Brick chose to twist the lion's tail and to demonstrate American superiority, the journalistic and election experiences of Martin and the invincible curiosity of the American journalist were satirised by the English author almost as unmercifully as "The New York Rowdy Journal" and "The New York Keyhole Reporter" were said to have dealt with England's errors and deficiencies.

Writing almost a hundred years later, that accomplished Chinese litterateur, Lin Yutang, whose sense of humour is only equalled by his expertness in the handling of the English language poked gentle fun at what he called the three great American vices—efficiency, punctuality and the desire for achievement and success which, according to this writer, make the American unhappy and nervous. The same point was made by Thoreau who objected

in his essays to America's frenzied addition to business and the post office. Relations are always keen critics of each other, but beneath all this mutual rivalry and good-humoured disparagement, there are certain traits which are the fundamentals of American life. In American philosophy, life has been regarded as a very strenuous affair and the average man is determined to make a real struggle to come out on the top. Speed and efficiency are the prime ideals. At the same time, the American's devotion to family life is intense and the real rulers of America are the women and they have set the pace for everything including even the creation of that new American language which threatens to overwhelm the stately and leisurely Victorian diction.

The politics and the life of the United States have been a *terra incognita* to the average Englishman and only recently did the United States begin to develop the typical phenomena of European life including a leisured aristocracy of business and wealth, a prosperous middle-class and a proletariat. At bottom, however, America and England pursue different paths and cherish different ideals. Their human values are different and the divergences may be discerned in the quality and outlook of the civil service, in the system of checks and balances between the Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary, in the position occupied by political, business and journalist caucuses and in several other particulars.

The English and the American people and not only they but the American people and the rest of

the world have been thrown together at a decisive moment in world history. There is no point in assigning good and bad marks to countries or nations, or in bestowing uniform praise as Washington Irving did, or in being uncritically and virulently censorious like Miss Mayo and her tribe including her journalistic disciple who has been recently seeking to achieve notoriety.

Commercial and diplomatic primacy now being thrust upon America and Russia and the complicated workings of the Time Spirit have made it not only important but essential for all nations to understand each other, realise each other's failings and good points and evolve new methods of approach. As outlined by Wendell Willkie, peace and life have to be planned on a world basis hereafter and, in essence, the western world and its presumed supremacy must be regarded as being on trial. America has had an amazing economic development and there have been no internal barriers in North America and no barriers to the exchange of goods and ideas. The removal of all such barriers between India on the one hand and China, Russia, England and America on the other is no less called for and there is no better means of effecting such an exchange than by considering and appraising the mental and spiritual outlook of other nations. Such an appraisal is best achieved by an analysis of the work of the leaders of thought in various countries. In America, the foremost of such leaders are Thoreau, Emerson and Whitman, who will form the subjects of this and two following talks.

THOREAU.

Thoreau was one of the most original and consistent of men. He made few friends but one of them was Ralph Waldo Emerson with whom he lived for some years. But he was perfectly at home with bird and beast. Owing to a marvellous and innate characteristic, he was completely at ease in the forest and in the wild. Birds used to perch on his shoulders and wild squirrels fed out of his hands. Mentally he was a thoroughgoing revolutionary.

Very early in life, he made up his mind that people waste their existences in working for a living. He determined not to save or put by anything and he exclaims, "How vigilant we are—determined not to live by faith if we can avoid doing so." Starting with the doctrine that man only wants even in the American climate very little in the way of food, clothing, shelter and fuel, and reasoning that most of the luxuries and many of the so-called efforts of life are not only not indispensable but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind, he established himself in Walden Pond, his purpose being, in his own words, not to live cheaply, not to live dearly, but to transact the necessary business of life with the fewest obstacles. He supported himself by surveying and doing carpenter's work. He built his own log hut in the midst of a forest next to a

lake. He made and repaired his own clothes and when he wanted to buy anything he calculated how many hours' work would be necessary for the purpose and he cut some wood or did some surveying and earned only enough to pay for the thing that he needed most urgently. Whilst still young, he came to the conclusion that there was something essentially unclean about flesh diet, basing his objection upon what he calls an unusually complete experience arising from having been his own butcher and scullion and cook as well as the gentleman for whom the dishes were served. A little bread and a few potatoes would have done as well, he says, but with much less trouble and filth. When a person said to him, "I wonder that you do not lay by any money when you love to travel and love the country," his answer was: "I am wiser than that. I have learnt that the swiftest traveller is he who goes by foot." Referring to the incident of his building a house he says, "I borrowed an axe, went down to the woods, cut down some tall arrowy white pines. I returned the axe sharper than I received it". And in his own quaint manner, he added that at a cost of 28 dollars, which was all that his house cost him, he had enough shelter against the winter. In the accounts relating to this transaction set down carefully in his essay entitled "Walden" he puts down the cost of transportation at 1 dollar 45 cents. This amount is the wage that he allots to himself for carrying the requisite timber and lime and the nails, hinges and screws on his back. For more than five years, he says in his essay on "Economy", that he main-

tained himself solely "by the labour of his hands" and he further asserts in his own inimitable way, "I thus found that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of my living and thus save the rest of the year for myself." In another essay headed "Where I lived and what I lived for" he calls upon all men to "simplify and simplify."

It will thus be seen that he was somewhat of an ascetic as well as a revolutionary and, in the language of one of his critics, an essentially wild man. These characteristics revealed themselves in his life. He rebelled against the puritan mode of life in New England. He was one of the most outspoken opponents of slavery; he refused to pay poll-tax to a Government which supported slavery and was sent to jail as he refused to pay the fine imposed upon him. Much to his disgust one of his aunts paid the fine and he spent only one night in jail. He was a protagonist of non-co-operation and was willing to abide by the consequences. The expression "Civil Disobedience" owes its origin to him. Emerson, who was one of his closest friends, described him thus: "He was bred to no profession. He was never married. He lived alone. He never went to church. He would never vote. He refused to pay any taxes to the State. He ate no flesh, drank no wine, never used tobacco. Never used a trap nor a gun; and when once asked at dinner "What dish do you prefer?", his only answer was "the nearest." He could "guide himself about the woods on the darkest night by the touch of his feet. He could pick up at once an exact dozen of pencils, by

the feeling, pace distances with accuracy, and gauge cubic contents by the eye."

In his sketch "Winter Visitors" he writes "I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment while I was hovering in a garden. I felt I was more distinguished by that incident than by any epaulet that I could have earnt."

There have been very few to equal Thoreau in his ardent love and observation of Nature, whether it be on the rough seas or in the fields and forests around Walden. The records of these observations are a landmark in American literature. At the same time and in a real sense he was a cosmopolitan. He and his great contemporaries Hawthorne and Emerson at one time lived in the same village of Concord and the influence of their ideas radiated throughout the world, but those ideas to no small extent originated in Asia.

As in the case of Emerson, so with Thoreau, Indian thought played a vital part in his mental education. His avowed object was to get spiritual happiness by direct contact with Nature, thus rebelling against the whole machinery of western civilization. Writing in Walden, he says, "I grew in those seasons, like corn in the night. I realise what the orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works." He devotes a whole chapter in a series of essays entitled "The Week" to an exposition of Hindu thought and in particular to Bhagavat Gita. "It would be worthy of another occasion" he said, "to print together the collected scriptures of the Chinese, the Hindus, the Persians, the Hebrews

and others as the scripture of mankind. Such a juxtaposition and comparison will help to liberalise the faith of man."

Thoreau was not a religious man as we usually understand religion. Of him, however, it could be said in the language of Romain Rolland: "It is the quality of thought and not its object which determines its source and allows us to decide whether or not it emanates from religion. If it turns fearlessly towards the search for truth at all costs with single-minded sincerity prepared for any sacrifice, I should call it religious."

In one of his brilliant essays Robert Louis Stevenson, making an appraisal of Thoreau's work, after paying a fine tribute to his passion for and absorption in nature denies to him the quality of humanity and terms him—essentially selfish. He says: "I could as well shake hands with him as with the branch of an elm tree." He goes on to add that he was not altogether one of us and was shockingly devoid of weaknesses. We may venture to differ from Stevenson, for Thoreau was a man who proved that he believed in great causes and who could be roused in their defence as in the case of Captain John Brown. He could and did suffer for his faith, although many human ideals and tendernesses evoked no response in him.

He once stated "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I call life which is required to be exchanged for it immediately or in the long run." Or, in other words, the price we have to pay for

money is paid in liberty. He determined to pay as little in liberty as he possibly could. In his own arresting phraseology he proclaimed that to maintain oneself on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime if we will live simply and wisely. Ultimately, according to him :

“We are not what we are nor do we esteem or treat each other for such, but for what we are capable of being.”

EMERSON.

Emerson, for all his universality and varied culture, was intrinsically a product of the 19th century and was greatly influenced by its technique and its particular approach to world problems. He inherited a strongly religious tradition, studied theology, and was even ordained as a priest, but it is characteristic of his innate independence of thought that he resigned his calling as he came to reject the nature of the sacrament and could not accept it as a divinely appointed ordinance of religion. He visited Europe in his thirties and earned the friendship of such varying types of men as Coleridge, Wordsworth and Carlyle. Returning to America, he established his reputation as a lecturer on topics relating to literature, biography and history. Philosophy was, however, his main objective. He strove throughout his life to correlate Nature with the soul of man and all his writings are in truth mystical and idealistic. The range of his studies was immense and he united a knowledge of the Upanishads and of Indian philosophy with a study of Persian poetry and specially of the contemplative allegorists, Hafiz and Nizami. Writing about another Persian mystic Feriduddin Attar he quotes from his *Bird Conversations* :

1. "The Highest is a sun mirror ;
2. "Who comes to him sees himself therein ;
3. "Sees body and soul and soul and body."

His poem entitled "Brahma" is an indication of his absorption of Indian ideology.

"If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways ;
I keep, and pass, and turn again

* * *

They reckon ill who leave me out ;
When me they fly, I am the wings :
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings."

Modern scientific thought and mathematical concepts are approximating to the old mystical idea that there is nothing real excepting thought and thought processes. Emerson was one of the most clear-sighted and practical of mystics. One of his maxims was that Nature was the incarnation of thought ; the world is the precipitation of the mind. But his essays are not mere philosophic exercises. Therein he expounded his own theory of life in all its aspects. He insisted in one of his most remarkable passages :

"Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

In another essay entitled "Compensation," he stated that "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.

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 circumstance, whose waters ebb and flow with perfect balance, lies the aboriginal abyss of real Being.”

It will be perceived how closely he approaches to Vedantic thought. In his “Over-soul” he preaches :

“From within or from behind, a light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all. A man is the facade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as know him, represent himself but misrepresents himself.”

These passages disclose both his utter sincerity and his disdain of convention. Even when he discourses on culture, he is anxious to emphasise that a man has a range of affinities through which he can modulate the violence of any mastertones that have a droning preponderance in his scale and succour himself. He insisted upon the importance and the influence of great men in the history of the

human race. He studied individuals, historical characters, and even nations from the same point of view. Whether he wrote or spoke of Plato or Shakespeare or Napoleon or whether he discoursed on English traits, he asserted the importance of human values. He perceived the seamy side of English life and shrewdly observed that what are called English principles too often mean a primary regard to the interests of property. At the same time he was bold enough to assert to America that England was the best of actual nations, although he was careful to add that Englishmen cannot readily see beyond England and that their political contact is not decided by general views. In a remarkable passage, he added that England is not public in its bias; private life has its place of honour. His literary criticism was always penetrating and profound. He begins his essay on Shakespeare with the statement that great men are generally more distinguished by range than by originality; and dealing with the stuff that has been written about Shakespeare he utters a truth which we shall do well to remember. "Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare, and even he can tell nothing excepting to the Shakespeare in us; that is, to our most apprehensive and sympathetic hour."

In very different language from the Gita, though ultimately expounding the same message, he asks us to "build altars to the Blessed Unity which holds nature and souls in perfect solution, and compels every atom to serve a universal end." "Let us build altars to the Beautiful Necessity, which

secures that all is made of one piece ; that plaintiff and defendant, friend and enemy, animal and plant food and water, are of one kind."

Like Thoreau, he was a strong opponent of slavery in every one of its forms and took an active part in the anti-slavery campaign. Outwardly, his life was uneventful but his transcendental philosophy and the rare combination in him of robust common sense with the mystic's introspection have profoundly influenced English as well as American thought, and today he may well serve as an antidote to a partisan, narrow or purely utilitarian philosophy of life.

Emerson was one of those writers whose sayings have become the current coin of English speech. Some of them may be cited. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." "I advise a young person, 'Always do what you are afraid to do.'" "God offers to every mind His choice between truth and repose." "We are symbols and inhabit symbols." These utterances at once illustrate the calibre of his mind and the earnestness and bravery of his character.

Professor Laski refers to the facile optimism of Emerson and he adds that he feels the summer but does not realise that it is the prelude to a winter.

This is hardly a just estimate of one who never forgot the roughnesses on the road to attainment.

One of his well-remembered maxims is perhaps the best summation of his life's work. In his essay

on "Society and Solitude" he makes an appeal to all of us to hitch our wagon to a star. To do that and to traverse our several paths difficult or easy in the sight and by the light of a guiding star is our main task at present.

WHITMAN.

Whitman's life was as variegated as his literary output. Although on both sides he was descended from substantial middle-class families, he moved at great ease amongst plain people with whom he preferred to live. As a boy, he was a great wanderer and worker and built up a magnificent physique. There was something in him of the unsoiled freshness of Nature. He was by turn, an office-boy, a printer, a carpenter and mason, a school-teacher and an editor of various newspapers and magazines. Before he was thirty, he published the first edition of "Leaves of Grass," his avowed object being to loosen the mind of America from what he called the superstitions and the tenacious anti-Democratic authority of Asiatic and European tradition. He pointed out that most of our matchless songs had grown out of the aristocratic ideal of life and were expressive of it. He wanted to break with the past and adopted unconventional rhythms and reacted vigorously against the current ideals of society with its worship of wealth and rank. He was a champion of America and all that it stands for as well as a champion of its intellectual and physical independence. He wrote a few authentic lyrics but in the main he used a curious form of rhythmic prose or prose-poetry which was characteristic of the man. He himself described his verse by saying that its "likeness is not the stately solid palace nor the sculpture that adorns it nor the painting on its walls. Its

analogy is the ocean, its verses are the billowing waves, ever rising and falling, perhaps sunny and smooth; perhaps wild with storm", "My verses are alike in their nature as the rolling waves, but hardly any two exactly alike in size or measure, but always suggesting something beyond." At every turn he chronicled the mystery and unobtrusive greatness of Nature. He is willing to pay tribute to scientific knowledge, but says:

"Your facts are useful, and yet they are not
my dwelling;

I but enter by them to an area in my dwelling";

Of philosophy and theology, he says:

"Logic and sermons never convince,
The damp of the night air drives deeper into
my soul."

Again, like Thoreau, he feels completely at home with the cattle of the field.

"I think I could turn and live with animals,
they are so placid and self-contain'd,

I stand and look at them long and long,

They do not sweat and whine about their condition,

They do not lie awake in the dark and weep
for their sins,

They do not make me sick discussing their duty
to God,

No one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with
the mania of owning things,

Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that
 lived thousands of years ago,
 Not one is respectable or unhappy over the
 whole earth."

He made friends almost instantaneously with
 all sorts and conditions of men, sailors, ferrymen
 pilots, bus-drivers and so forth. He was a poet of
 equality and on one occasion, he sang :

"I speak the password primeval, I give the
 sign of democracy,

By God ! I will accept nothing which all can-
 not have on the same terms.

Whoever degrades another degrades me.

And whatsoever is said or done returns at last
 to me."

What he claims for man he claims also for
 woman. He advocated the potential greatness of
 humanity ; asked men to stand erect, self-possessed
 and reverencing the essentially divine in all humility.
 He would have nothing to do with religion which
 inculcated self-abasement.

"I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
 For I who am curious about each am not cu-
 rious about God.

Why should I wish to see God better than this
 day ?

I see something of God each hour of the twenty-
 four, and each moment then,

In the faces of men and women I see God, and
 in my own face in the glass,

I find letters from God dropt in the street, and
 every one is sign'd by God's name,
 And I leave them where they are, for I know
 that whereso'er I go,

Others will punctually come for ever and ever.'

Such a teaching conveyed and connoted a direct challenge to orthodox opinion, a challenge that was underlined when, as he often did, he sang of the human body and its functions and the commerce of the sexes in plain terms. His main creed and the inspiration of all that he wrote or sang was a glowing and all-embracing love of humanity. This love he clarified in these lines :

"Underneath Socrates I see, and underneath
 Christ the divine I see

The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of friend to friend,

Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and parents, of city for city, and land for land."

The normal man, the daily path of ordinary humanity, he seeks to sublimate :

"Will you seek afar off? you surely come
 back at last,

In things best known to you finding the best, or
 as good as the best,

In folks nearest to you finding the sweetest
 strongest, lovingest,

Happiness, knowledge, not in another place but
 this place, not for another hour but this
 hour,

Man in the first you see or touch, always
 in friend, brother, nighest neighbour—
 woman in mother, sister, wife”

As in the case of Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman was an advocate of the fundamental rights of mankind in the mass. He hated war but saw in the American civil war a great epic of humanity and he devoted to memories of Abraham Lincoln a section of “The Leaves of Grass.” One of the poems in the series, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”, is one of the great elegies of the world. Whitman volunteered to work in the hospitals and on the field during the civil war; he devoted himself to the care of the wounded and the dying on the battlefield and in the hospital barracks and wrote in his diaries and to his mother about his experiences which were afterwards published in “Specimen Days” and “Drum Taps.” His personal magnetism was incalculable. It was in fact deeper than speech. The eyes of the patients brightened at his approach and even his common-place words were a source of invigoration. Sometimes he would read to the inmates, sometimes sit by the bedside, holding the hands of a dying man. In several years of unremitting service, he lived in the spirit of his teachings and his creed. He lost his health thereby but he never lost hope. In memorable strains, he epitomised the world’s travail:

“I sit and look out’ upon all the sorrows of the
 world, and upon all oppression and shame,
 I hear secret and convulsive sobs from young
 men at anguish with themselves, remorse-
 ful after deeds done,

I see the wife misused by her husband, I see
 the treacherous seducer of young women,
 I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unre-
 quited love attempted to be hid, I see
 these sights on the earth,

I observe the slights and degradations cast by
 arrogant persons upon labourers, the poor,
 and upon negroes, and the like ;

All these—all the meanness and agony without
 end I sitting look out upon,

See, hear, and am silent.”

But, ultimately, reconciliation was his watch-
 word.

“Reconciliation, word over all, beautiful as the
 sky,

Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage
 must in time be utterly lost,

That the hands of the sisters Death and Night
 incessantly softly wash again, and ever
 again, this soil'd world ;

He was not a facile optimist. It was enough
 for him that he was fighting on the right side. His
 song of the pioneers is symbolic of all that he
 dreamt of.

“Not for delectations sweet,

Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peace-
 ful and the studious,

Not the riches safe and palling, not for us the
 tame enjoyment, Pioneers ! O pioneers !”

Like most American writers, including the living novelists, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, Whitman typified the revolt against accepted canons, a revolt to be led by the clear-eyed and sympathetic believers in man's destiny. He regarded himself as "Imperturbe,"—"standing at ease in Nature." In his song "Broad Axe," he appeals to the populace to rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons. He pleads for a society of the faithfulest of friends, for a study of the cleanliness of the sexes. His audacity was superb. "I celebrate myself and sing myself" was the theme of one of his verses. He is not too reserved to refer to the eternal urge—the procreant urge of the world. He emphasises that it is good to fall; "Battles are lost," he exclaims, "in the same spirit in which they are won." He hates the ordinary preacher and his sermon.

"Silent and amazed even when a little boy,
I remember I heard the preacher every Sunday
put God in his statements,
As contending against some being or influence."

At the same time, he is clear as to his mission and his end.

"My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on
perfect terms,
The great Camarado, the lover true for whom
I pine will be there.

I have said that the soul is not more than the
 body,
 And I have said that the body is not more
 than the soul,
 And nothing, not God, is greater to one than
 one's self is."

Above all, as he fiercely averred, his gospel is
 not of a mere consistency.

"Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself, (I am
 large, I contain multitudes). I shout my
 barbaric yawp over the roofs of the
 world."

And so he lived and died giving his life for his
 country and his people and reaffirming by precept
 and by example his unshakable belief in the duty
 and the necessity of joy in life and in the ultimate
 destiny of all human beings. As one of his bio-
 graphers has stated, the watchwords of the modern
 world—liberty, equality, democracy—are to him
 only the presentiment of the spirit and the divine
 comradeship of man.

Notwithstanding that he was an extrovert and
 wholly American in his outlook on life, Whitman
 was much affected by eastern thought. In his
 "Passage to India" he meditated on the infinite
 greatness of the past.

"The past—the infinite greatness of the past!

(As a projectile formed, impell'd passing a
 certain line, still keeps on,

So the present, utterly form'd impell'd by the
past.)

And in his own characteristic way, he regarded
the "Passage to India" as a passage to primal
thought.

"Passage indeed O soul to primal thought,
Not lands and seas alone, thy own clear fresh-
ness,
The young maturity of brood and bloom,
To realms of budding bibles."

