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THE MODERN ANALOGUE
OF THE
ANCIENT PROPHET.

A DISCOURSE

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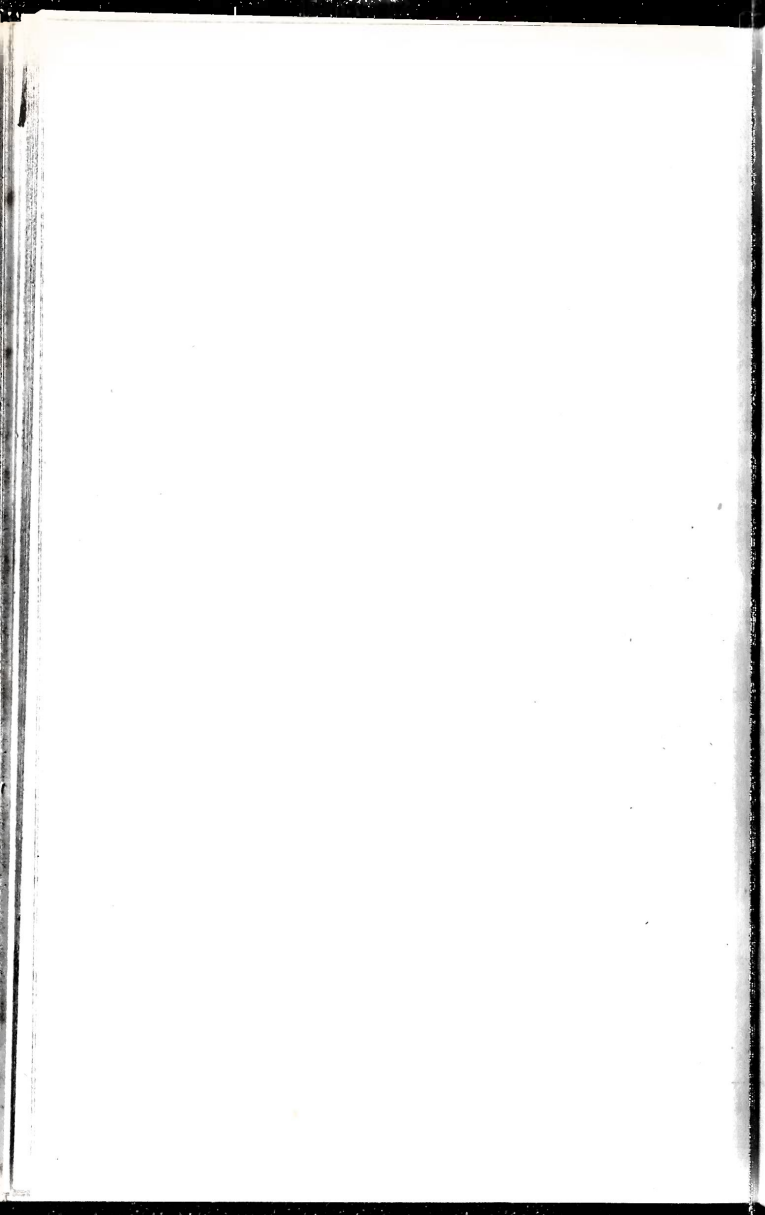
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BY

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DISCOURSE.

“What went ye out into the wilderness to gaze upon? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in king’s houses. But wherefore went ye out? To see a prophet? Yea! I say unto you, and more than a prophet.”—
Jesus.

THERE are few things more difficult to understand, interpret, and figure truthfully to our minds, than our own time with all its relations and interests. It is so near that it lacks perspective. We cannot focus our eyes upon it; and its elements are confused and hazy. We are so personally implicated and interested that we cannot keep our judgments undisturbed by personal equation; and things take to us exaggerated, reversed, and deceptive forms. Are we indeed living in a crisis or epoch-making time in the history of mind and thought? or do we, in imagination, born of our vanity, merely fancy so? Who can tell us? Our great grand-children will be able to

decide perhaps, but that will be too late to help us. Even for our wisdom there is left no resource but to try to think as clearly and broadly as possible ; to hold tenaciously by such reality as we can see ; to do the duty of the day which is given to us, so as not to be ashamed and confounded when the night comes, and leave the rest to the Power that shapes out of darkness the destinies of men and of the race. We do seem, however, to live in a period when the long conflict of all historic time between the rival forces which strive for the control and leadership of men, is deepening into an intensity which is exciting, and may become tragic. We cannot, if we would, remain disinterested and quiescent in the struggle, for we are necessarily involved in it, either as partizans or as portions of the territory in dispute ; and it is demanded of us, by our very humanity, that we do not consent to be played with as pawns in a game ; perhaps, no less, that we ought not to stand by indifferently when such great issues are at stake.

This contest of which I speak is called by many names, takes many forms, but is being waged everywhere. Here, with a quiet and determined persistency ; there, with much noise and smoke of angry battle. In spirit, it lies between slavery and freedom ; between an alliance of priest-craft with state-craft, and free-thought with free institutions. It concentrates itself most around the functions of the Priest, as the

dogmatic asserter of a metaphysical theology and sacerdotal rules of life; and the functions of the Teacher, as an instructor of the intellect, the ethical judgment, and the conscience of men, and an awakener and inspirer of their automatic self-poise and self-control. On the one hand, the Priest! on the other, the Prophet! to which of these is it just and fit that men should listen and hold themselves ready to follow? One or other, I say, it must be in the end. Which? is a vital question—vital to individual character; more so to social order, liberty, and progress; most so to all the highest hopes and divinest prospects of the race. There is, indeed, a third pretender to this right of leading men, which must have a word, but upon which it is not safe that I should trust myself to speak much. I might say things more strong than graceful, or indeed useful here. I mean the so-called teacher who is not a teacher at all, but a reflector; not so much as a “voice crying in the wilderness” even; only an echo! whom the people like and follow because he just reflects back upon them their own opinions, thoughts, and notions; in whom they see themselves reflected, and are never weary of admiring their own smirking faces; a plane surface, echoing back whatever the popular voice shouts against it. In such, there can exist only utter despair of spiritual health and guidance. We are sometimes called upon to admire

their sincerity and conscientious energy, and the great numbers of people they attract compared with men of large and free thought. By all means, whatever is good and admirable let us admire ; but it should not be forgotten what millions of men these echo-teachers have repelled, stultified, and rendered altogether indisposed for the exercise of either thought or effort. In a mere echo there is no added wisdom ; a reflection adds nothing to fact. As well might a sick man take for physician his image in a mirror, or a love-sick maiden, Narcissus-like, seek to wed the bright dream of her face mirrored in a lake ! As well might a lost and benighted traveller ask his way of the echoes of the dark places into which he has stumbled ! “Vanity of vanities, this also is vanity !” Believe me, sirs, in all high things we are helped more by challenge of the old in us, and by words which awaken longings and aspirations after the unattained, than by mere reiteration or fine-phrased illustration of our own thoughts. We are vain enough, any way, without being taught, in the name of philosophy and religion, to make ourselves the measure of universal and absolute truth.

It is a notable fact in the history of the world that the Prophet always—never the Priest or the Echo—has been the saviour and inspirer of society. All the great movers of men—Reformers, Patriots, Revealers, Guides—have been men of the Prophetic faculty. In

the old Hebrew times, from Moses, who laid the basis of the Nationality, to John the Baptist, who cried in the wilderness "Prepare ye the way of the Lord," every step in the progress of liberty of thought, every new influx of patriotic enthusiasm or religious life is marked by the name of some Prophet—Samuel, David, Huldah, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezra, and the rest. Every decadence of power; every usurpation of tyranny; every idolatrous relapse; and every national humiliation is linked with the name of some foolish King; some venial Priest, some mere echo-voice which cried Peace! Peace! when no peace was possible; some spiritual quack who healed the hurt of the people slightly and but for a time. Call over the bead-roll of the true saints and heroes who have blessed mankind most permanently, and whose spirits to-day rule and inspire us from afar; there is no Priest amongst them except he be one in outward form and name alone, but whose universal soul has risen out of mere priestly limitations into the comparatively free life of the prophetic spirit; a phenomenon more common under Christianity than any other form of religion; because theoretical Christianity is confessedly "without Priest, Temple, or Ritual;" and, however in practice this ideal may be degraded, any impulse of reform or tendency to wider application, turns instinctively to this as its point of departure: so that whenever a Christian Priest has been a Reformer or Patriot, he has, to that extent,

ceased to be a Priest. Such a man was Luther, Priest only in name ; Prophet by birth and in substance of soul. Such other men there have been, but not with them can the priest-idea be credited at all. In the Classic lands and times it was not less so. It was not to Priests at all that Greece and Rome owed their strength, their place, their brilliant immortality of genius and power. While the Priests were laughing in each other's faces at the sacrifices, it was the Poets, the Patriots, and the great creative Artist-souls who revelled in universal beauty and sought eternal order and truth, who built the Peoples' names into an imperishable glory.

We are not surprised to find how prominently the Prophet often stood out in the olden times, and what various parts he played ; the spirit of his work always the same, the form determined by the needs of each age for itself. The groundwork idea of the Prophet is that he is a Seer,—that he sees,—clearly realising, in essence and in relation, that which is hidden from, or unheeded by, common men. It is further characteristic of him, that he is possessed by his vision. Not so much that he has the truth, as that the truth has him. Not that he has an idea, one amongst many others, but that his idea is incarnated in him ; consecrates him thoroughly ; uses him constantly : so that he is grandly sincere, single-natured, self-sacrificing. All this has been summed up in past time and called

a divine inspiration ; a God's message to men ; a revelation from the Most High Unseen Power ; a thing to be considered supernatural, miraculous ; a voice from which no man must dare appeal ; and much more of this sort which some of us now call nonsense, not without a certain fitness of speech. But it is not all nonsense : for if the Supreme Power never breaks the blank, despairing, awful, silence—speaks never a word of light and strength to bewildered humanity ; leaving us in unresolvable doubt as to whether there be a Supreme Power at all ; Life and Time are indeed, to all, except the smallest fraction, but vanity and vexation of spirit. Perhaps it were far more true to say that we and all things are surrounded and pervaded by perennial revelation, and that a prophetic soul big with Truth, on fire with genius, glowing with a high, pure, enthusiasm for righteousness, is a concentration in time and place of such revealing power, and, indeed a God's message to common men, to which, whoso is wise will take heed as to a light shining in a dark place. Without this faculty of seeing, and this delirium of abandonment to one high purpose, there can be no true Prophet : for though these things are possible in some degree to all men, to a great leader their fulness is indispensable. To such the spirit of God must be given without measure, and when present in the flesh it must be counted a divine bestowment. We may note also how penetrative is this prophetic

vision ; a kind of unconscious analysis first, synthesis afterwards ; going beyond things into their ground of being, their relations and consequences ; and hence in dealing with human affairs, it often takes the character of prevision and fore-announcement,—so often, that the exaggeration of this feature has come to be counted as almost the one characteristic of a prophet, and prophecy, which means revealing,—teaching—has come to be understood only as forecast and foretelling. This is the sense in which theological people speak of the prophecies and Prophets of the Bible : but such view may easily be so put as to be a degradation both of the man and his function. A Prophet is surely something more than a superior kind of fortune-teller. There are shallow critics, however, who say that all so-called prophecies are but instances of being wise after the event ; not seeing that a true prophetic insight actually does and must foresee many things,—just as Science can foresee certain phenomena,—because it deals with eternal principles, which, whenever they come out in special instances, tend to take a similar complexion and similar forms : and it only needs an average amount of worldly wisdom and induction from experience, to make the requisite corrections and show how these principles will reveal themselves in any particular case. It would be easy, as instances of this, to quote many passages from the speeches and writings of Theodore Parker, on the certain results of slavery in

North America, which read, to-day, like historical statements respecting the war which did not break out until after his death.

The third essential thing to the Prophet is that he should possess a magnetic soul, quick with universal human sympathies and affinities ; capable of awakening in men that divine hunger and thirst which are the root-conditions of life ; and of attracting men to the beauty of his own ideal, against the gravitation of all the forces of ignoble passion, of material interest, of slavish fear, and imbecile indifference, which paralyze and charm souls to their death. These, then, are the necessary qualities of the Prophet,—sight in the sense involving insight, complete Consecration, and the power to move men. These given, the form of the prophetic activity is determined by the temperature and the needs of its own time. There are accidents of various kinds, which arise in connexion with things, from the special individuality, culture, or condition of the man himself ; or from the state of civilization and general culture of his age ; for, whatever may be the grandeur of his figure and the promise of his genius and work, there is a sense in which all are products of the past ; and, as to the form they take, it can never very greatly transcend the limits of the current civilization. Hence, in the study of past particular instances, we find that such men have been fearlessly uncompromising, rigidly dog-

matic; pertinaciously insistent; men very much of one idea, and disposed to realise it by what seemed the nearest way, going straight to their aim. Qualities which in certain aspects and circumstances must be pronounced good; indispensable, indeed, when the rough work of the world has to be done; inseparable, perhaps, from intensity of conviction, and possession by a dominant purpose when associated with imperfect culture and unscientific modes of thought. But in certain other aspects these qualities are defective; tending to narrow the mind, to blind it to compensations and equivalents, to lead it to make no allowances, and so become sour, fanatical, uncharitable, persecuting, but this is the prophetic spirit demoralised and run to seed. Perhaps we are near the truth when we say that the form of the prophetic mission, at any particular time, is the result of a certain automatic and unconscious self-adaptation to the existing want. Hence Moses was a patriot-deliverer and law-giver. Samuel was an administrator and consolidator of national polity. David, and Cromwell long afterwards, were battle-heroes and kings. Socrates, for his part, followed the profession of his mother, and was a deliverer of fair youths, who in the philosophic schools of Greece, felt the birth-throes of new thoughts and divine inspirations. Plato was a seer and thinker, who was contented quietly to sow the seed of philosophic thought, and leave all to time and the orderly

laws of development. John was a voice crying in the wilderness. Jesus a teacher of spiritual and practical religion ; a revealer of the Fatherhood of God and of human brotherhood. Paul was a missionary of the new faith, and wrote its gospel in wanderings over many lands. Milton was a patriot and a poet : and Shakespeare the revealer of the human heart to itself. Wesley and Whitfield poured the life and day of a new, divine inspiration upon a dead age and upon the commonest ways of life ; and Theodore Parker, in many respects more like a Hebrew prophet than any man of the Christian ages, was, like a second Moses, the deliverer of an enslaved race, though he also died on Pisgah, seeing the promised land only from afar : like a second Elijah, too, he was, denouncing all idolatries and hollow hypocrisies ; though braver than Elijah, for Parker fled from the face of no woman or man. He was like John the Baptist rather, the stern rebuker of crowned and gilded sin, the forerunner of a diviner age ; nor, indeed, all unlike Jesus himself, for intensity of ethical purity ; for sweetness of reverence ; breadth of sympathy ; tenderness of love ; capacity for self-sacrifice and strong trust in God. What Carlyle and Emerson have been to this age it is, as yet, impossible fully to say ; for not yet, thank God, has death rounded their work into completeness ; but I think it will still be seen that each has given us light and help specially suited to our needs. What do we not owe to Carlyle ! for

having said so much which ought to clear from our eyes all baseless fabrics of vision, to drive all aching unrealities out of our hearts, and teach us that only what is true and good can be beautiful and eternal. And of Emerson, what shall we say? he is indeed a prophet, and more than a prophet. All these years he has lived with us, his eyes seeing the truth in the deep, calm eyes of Nature; his words vibrating in unison with Nature's mighty heart. How wonderful in passionless serenity! How tenderly human in emotion! How sweeping in philosophic vision! How grandly patient, and full of hope and faith. Two mighty helpers these, who, with other thinkers and workers still with us, are laying broadly and deeply the foundations of the new City of God; that thrice-consecrated temple, which is yet to rise in a purified and glorified humanity; and in the beauty of which the nations to come shall dwell and worship and serve.

Is it not true, as I said, that the interest of all past history centres itself around prophetic souls? Hero-worship is the light of history. All history resolves itself into reverence for heroes, and the story of their thoughts and works. Contemporaneous history, too often, alas! does not see its heroes; or ignores them with a supercilious scorn, in its anxiety to push to the front Tyrants who have sold Justice, trampled upon Truth, and ground down the faces of good men to the earth: or puppet Kings, whose weak heads had much

ado to support the weight of their crowns ; or Potentates, who have been powerful only in the mockery and poison of their gilded sin. What we call history has been, until of late, all too full of slaves set on horseback and riding to the devil—as such must, with a swift celerity—while, bespattered with the mud of their horses' heels, the true princes of men have toiled on foot behind. But the large generalisation and the sure justice of Time sets that all right at length, and the despised Prophet takes his rank. The common consent of men, and the innate gratitude of the race, set his name amongst the stars ; or if, his name being forgotten, that may not be, his words become the terms of justice and the boundary lines of law ; his acts are the landmarks of civilization ; and his ideas the paths of an ever-progressive righteousness.

In earlier times the Prophet stood out with considerable boldness of relief. He was a central figure, to whom men looked up, and from whom influence and guidance radiated in every direction. Not seldom, even kings waited upon his word, and the destinies of nations lay in his hands. It is, perhaps, not less so now in reality, but it is less obviously so. There are several things now which tend to mask the great living teacher and inspirer amongst us. We have a far larger and more generally exercised literary habit, and greater appliances for spreading thought. We live in an atmosphere constantly vibrating with intellectual

effort and result; and it is by no means easy to sort out such a babel of voices, and to apportion truths and the results of thought to their proper owners. The world is full of these echoes, not altogether truthful echoes either,—for that were not so much amiss,—but diluted echoes; distorted echoes; and echoes of echoes; each more diluted and distorted than the last, to the tenth generation. It is, indeed, grand to have a true voice amongst us; were it only one divinely-appointed, heaven-sent leader, seer, and thinker; but to have for every one such a score of badly-made journeymen who cannot think, but only “steal the thoughts of others, clip them round the edges, and challenge those whose they are to swear to them,” is not well, only a misleading and a bewilderment. What a crowd of these must any man sternly put aside, who would find a strong voice to help him, and would hear and judge for himself! It is but in few cases now that a man of genius occupies the commanding height which marks some special instances of the past. The *status* of men generally is higher. There is a more equable distribution of education; of culture; perhaps of average power. The mountains are as high as ever from the level of the sea, but the lowlands have been raised. This cannot, however, supersede genius, or compensate for its absence; but it makes exceptional men less easy to recognise—tends, perhaps, also to make them more rare. This

further fact also may be noted. The old prophetic function was of a very compound and complicated character. When there are few workers and much to be done, genius must be a man-of-all-work ; sometimes poet, prophet, philosopher, battle-hero, and lawgiver, all in one. The mythic Orpheus must use his lyre for taming beasts and building walls. David must not only sing psalms to his harp, but charm away with it the madness of Saul ; and lay it down to grasp the sword, and, by-and-by, the sceptre. Jesus must be not inspired teacher alone, but witness, confessor, martyr also, to the power of the truth he sent. Luther was not only a reformer, but a translator, a theologian, and ecclesiastical administrator to the new Church. Milton, who was a poet born, and who grew up to man's estate conscious of no other function, must put aside what he felt to be the great work of his life, and betake his quiet, stately soul into the arena of one of the stormiest times of history ; spend all the flower of his life as patriot ; as educator of public sentiment ; justifier of stern and bloody deeds of retribution ; and the performance of state offices in the midst of the very birth-throes of modern civil and religious liberty, and only, when in old age and blindness, can find in the reckless indifference of a corrupt time, the quiet to sing his immortal song. So, in varied forms, it has been true of many another. But now we have reached a stage when a division of labour becomes the more

natural and economic course. Carlyle may philosophise, Emerson speculate, Darwin study the occult laws of life, and Herbert Spencer generalise, each his whole life long ; with this penalty, however, that he shall remain unknown, or known only to be misunderstood, except by his select circle of followers. As thought advances and becomes more general ; as culture takes more differentiated forms ; as there is attained a more exalted condition of the ethical conscience ; and men become more greatly human, there will be less occasion for single men to become such prominent and central figures ; and, probably, less tendency for genius to manifest itself in spurts and in incalculable ways ; and the prophetic function will become more and more a thing of spirit, less and less of form. Still, none, nor all of them, will make the true Prophet any the less a fact or a necessity. So long as the world is full of wonder and mystery ; so long as passionate human hearts exist ; so long as the intellect of man feels the pressure of the ever-surrounding boundless unknown ; so long as remain the questions, What ? Whence ? Whither ? Wherefore ? so long will the Prophet be a necessity ; and must come, in answer to men's cry, if there be any pity in the sweet heavens ; or the heart will project some visionary, exalted or degraded, image of itself into objectivity and cry, "These be thy gods, O Israel ! who brought thee up out of the land of Egypt !"

For whatever the prospects of future advancement may be, the state of large masses of the people is such, and such are the conditions that relate truth, enthusiasm, and work together in the practical issues of men's lives, that, for ages to come, men will need and look for such hero-souls, as people in great darkness pine for the dawn, and will so welcome them when they come, however much at first ignorance or mistake may blind them, or hide their deliverers from their eyes.

In another respect, too, the condition of the times is greatly changed. The taunt which Jesus threw at the Jews—"Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted, from righteous Abel to Zachariah, whom ye slew before the altar?" might, until a comparatively recent period, be applied with almost equal force to any other people. The advance of civilization and the wider spread of knowledge have, at least, driven persecution into other and less obvious forms. Indeed, it had become high time for men to improve as to the way in which they treated their truest and best. It was too long the case that the "Kingliest Kings were crowned with thorns." They ought now, no longer, to come to their own, their own "receiving them not," but to a world prepared for them, and glad to hail their advent. Jesus said, in his time, that if men would but lift their eyes, they would see the fields white for harvest; how much more should it be so now!

Let us gladly say, it is so ! The true prophets of the last few generations have not been stoned or very much persecuted in any serious way. The last experiment of that kind tried in England was with Wesley and the early Methodists, and produced quite other results than short-sighted people expected to see. Now, if we hear some poor soul crying out that he is a prophet and persecuted, it is some incompetent shepherd whom no sheep will follow ;—some ridiculous fanatic of whom the world is weary ;—some priest, who will keep thrusting himself between men and the face of God ;—some poor atrabilious Churchman who being paid and having sworn to do one thing, does quite another, and cries because he cannot “ eat his cake and have it ” at the same time ; or some wretched anachronism that, born two centuries too late, is vainly trying to climb the tower of the age’s thought, to put back the clock with his hand ; and because some strong man thrusts him aside, not perhaps too gently, or some impatient foot kicks out the bottom of the ladder, fills the air with unmelodious howling. In these days, though a man be a prophet, he need not dwell in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey, and clad in a skin ; but may live in a decent house, pay scot and lot, have wife and children, and clean linen to boot : nay, may even earn “ wealth, and honour, and troops of friends ; ” for there is now, thank heaven, a calculable and increasing proportion of the people who are

ready to hear and follow any clear, strong, voice, that has in it the ring of honesty, intelligent sincerity, and true leadership. The time is dangerous enough to prophets, but not in the old way. The danger now is from the excitements of adulation and flattery,—the soporific effects of fulness of meat,—and a life of temptations to ease, and the saying of smooth, soft things. Do not mistake me. There is room yet for the old prophetic fire of consecration, and the stern exercise of the Prophet's function; nay! for aught I know, for neglect, persecution, and death. I cannot tell what might happen if some man should arise amongst us, fired with the passion of genius; who in burning words should tell us all the truth, and force back upon our sluggish consciences all our duties, respecting useless and effeminate luxury side by side with wretchedest poverty in its lazar-rags; about drunkenness and gluttony; sensualism and greed of gold; impatience of honest work, and the practice of small cheating, that like a wretched little devil eats out the heart of trade;—the truth about indifference to high thought, and the vapid dilettanteism that chatters about Poetry, Art, and fashionable Philosophy, of which it knows nothing;—the truth about the want of honesty in politics, and sincerity in religion, and about many things worse even than these, and which shall be nameless now. Such a Prophet, I trow, would not have a very quiet time; and would cry with

Moses, "Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them? that thou shouldest say unto me, carry them in thy bosom." Or moan with Jeremiah, "Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth! every one of them doth curse me." Or weep with Jesus, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them who are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen her brood under her wings, but ye would not!"

Where shall we look for our prophets? Are there any such souls amongst us now? Do we know them? or are they amongst us as angels entertained unawares? I think they are with us, and not altogether unknown. Our own generation seems rich in such. Some of them have gone over to the majority, but still other voices linger, and new ones are rising into power. The oldest form of prophetic afflatus,—poetry, namely, still lives, and will never be superseded; because, however the most advanced intellectual activity may be busy discovering and making sure the way of progress the feet of the people will have to tread, there will always be in advance of that, an exercise of the poetic imagination feeling among the nascent forms of things, all along the margin of the unknown, for analogies with what we know. No man can forecast the probabilities of the future who feels or affects

scorn for the poetry of his own age. Erasmus Darwin the poet was the precursor of Charles Darwin, the naturalist and all-comprehensive man of science, who has said or done little that did not lie folded in the thought of his ancestor, like a flower in the bud. I would counsel the young especially to keep well abreast of the poetry of their own age. The future lies nascent in it. It is the Morning Star resting over the cradle where the New Life is being nursed into power. I do not mean by Poets, merely musical singers, though they too are God's gift and divine. Poetry is a thing of thought and intense feeling, no less than of rhythm and music. I think that we have amongst us heavenly voices of both kinds, fitted not only to charm us from vexatious cares and empty frivolities, but to waken us into hopeful strength of purpose. I find a certain class of supercilious people, who have yet much to learn, scoffing at Tennyson and Browning, and considering such prose-poets as Carlyle and Emerson hyper-mystical and superseded ; and yet I think that these men, and others of their faculty, have still something to say to us, if we have but ears to hear. There are still amongst us a thousand things that look fair, which would take in a moment their own aborted deformity, did we but touch them with the Ithuriel's spear of Theodore Parker's fiery intensity. And there was once a voice, eloquent within these very walls like the voice of a charmer—a true

prophet he was, seer, thinker, poet, all in one. Some of you remember him well. You are now grey, and growing somewhat weary of the world, but you will never forget his voice, whose teaching nourished your youth, and made it "sublime, with the fairy-tales of science, and the long results of time." And if, this morning, my words have been uninteresting to you and wearisome, I know that your minds have looked beyond me, and seen the deep calm eyes of William Johnson Fox, with which he used to look down the future, and see all the wonder that will be, and have heard his voice, with which he being dead, yet speaketh, and shall speak, until many a grand dream which he saw afar off, but died without realizing, shall become the life of men who may perchance never hear the echo of his name.

O sirs! we are, for the most part, but small and common men. No Prophets we,—alas! Not great at all, "except it be some far-off touch of greatness to know we are not great";—but next to being a prophet is to know one when we see him; and to have humility to obey and follow our natural God-given leader when we have found him. This is sometimes a hard task; a day's work not to be done without cost and pain; but, surely, within the competency, and for the best concern, of every honest and sincere man.