

# EMMA LAZARUS

*Woman with a Torch*



*Selected from the collection of her essays  
of the period 1880-1890, these essays  
are the best of her work, and the best of her life.*

BY EVE MERRIAM

1956

## 9

### INNER CONFLICTS

✠ In her studies, in conversations with people like Philip Cowen and Michael Heilprin, in meeting with committees to raise funds for the needy refugees and help find work for them, in all that she now did, Emma's mind ranged over a multitude of questions.

Several years before, Emma had become interested in the work of Henry George. The American economist and social reformer had published his book *Progress and Poverty* in 1879. Disturbed by the greatly uneven relationships between the rich and the poor, George suggested that one of the ways to adjust such inequality would be to impose a single tax—a tax on land. “We hold,” George wrote, “that to tax land values to their full amount will render it impossible for any man to exact from others a price for the privilege of using those bounties.”

He added, “. . . it will provide opportunities of work for all men and secure to each the full reward of his labor; and . . . as a result involuntary poverty will be abolished, and the greed, intemperance and vice that spring from poverty will be swept away.”

George's book was widely read and discussed; within a short time it was translated into a dozen different languages. His followers organized “single-tax” clubs to promote the idea.

Emma was stirred by George's vision and wrote a sonnet in tribute to his book. In the fall of 1881 the *New York Times* published her poem.

## PROGRESS AND POVERTY

(After Reading Mr. Henry George's Book)

*Oh splendid age when Science lights her lamp  
At the brief lightning's momentary flame,  
Fixing it steadfast as a star, man's name  
Upon the very brow of heaven to stamp!  
Launched on a ship whose iron-cuirassed sides  
Mock storm and wave, Humanity sails free;  
Gayly upon a vast, untraveled sea,  
O'er pathless wastes, to ports undreamed she rides,  
Richer than Cleopatra's barge of gold,  
This vessel, manned by demi-gods, with freight  
Of priceless marvels. But where yawns the hold  
In that deep reeking hell, what slaves be they,  
Who feed the ravenous monster, pant and sweat,  
Nor know if overhead reign night or day?*

Her image for Progress is well-chosen; in the ship we have a feeling of forward motion. She goes on to give us a sharply contrasting picture of life above and below deck. The language is clear and bold; she does not substitute Hades for *hell*. Her use of the word *sweat* was extremely daring for that time when "only horses sweat—men perspire and ladies glow." Her use of the word is no accidental search for a rhyme, for it is the only word in the entire sonnet scheme that does not rhyme! And she could easily have found the rhyme that was required by conventional standards: *wait, Fate, late, state, create*: the possibilities are many. Obviously, her use of the unconventional word was deliberate.

Emma sent George a copy of her poem and he replied promptly and graciously, enclosing a recent pamphlet of his on economics. His letter expressed to Emma "the gratification of feeling that one of your gifts hears that appeal that once heard can never be forgotten."

Writing in return to thank him for the pamphlet, Emma said: "I wish I could convey to you an idea of the feelings aroused in me by your book. No thinking man or woman in

these days can have remained altogether deaf to that mute 'appeal which once heard can never be forgotten'. But the same appeal when interpreted by your burning eloquence takes possession of one's mind and heart to such a degree as overpowers all other voices. Your work is not so much a book as an event—the life and thought of no one capable of understanding it can be quite the same after reading it—and even in the small circle of my personal friends I have had abundant evidence of the manner in which it sets the minds of men on fire—'all men capable of feeling the inspiration of a great principle.' And how should it be otherwise? For once prove the indisputable truth of your ideas, and no person who prizes justice or common honesty can dine or sleep or read or work in peace until the monstrous wrong in which we are all accomplices be done away with. I congratulate you most heartily on the natural gifts with which you have been endowed for the noble cause you have espoused. Great as is the idea, it would certainly fail to kindle men's minds as it does now, if pleaded with less passionate eloquence, by less authoritative knowledge.

"I am glad to hear that your stay abroad is to be a short one, for I shall allow myself the pleasure of looking forward confidently to the hope of seeing you on your return. We have many mutual friends—but I am proud to think that I need not rely upon any one else to bring us together. We have spoken with each other and know each other's voices, and at the end of six months or six years, if I were still here, I should be no less sure of your sympathy and friendly remembrance. Meantime with earnest wishes for yourself and your cause, believe me,

Gratefully and sincerely yours,

Emma Lazarus."

Years later a message from Henry George troubled her. "I did not propose to you," he said, "to write songs for *your* people, but for *the* people."

She was startled. The Jewish cause, she felt, was wide and deep, ranging over many areas, crossing many boundaries of beliefs. But was she so absorbed, so caught up in its core, its center, that she could not see beyond?

Emma sought within herself and her studies for the answer. Finally, she felt justified in replying to George. In writing for her own, she was addressing herself to all the peoples of the world. For were not the foundations of truth, of justice, laid down in the Mosaic Code?

But George's prodding required a longer, more thoughtful response. Her opinions were not changed. She felt the truth and weight of her argument, that the Jewish cause concerned Jews and non-Jews alike. But she must reach out for a wider audience. If George felt as he did, there must be many more whom she needed to convince.

She would continue with her *Epistle* in the weekly pages of the *American Hebrew*, but she would also open her ideas to a general audience, to broader discussion. There was the *Century* magazine, devoted to the arts and topics of the day. She would use its pages to make clear that the Jewish cause concerned the whole thoughtful world.

"The Jewish problem," her article began, "is as old as history, and assumes in each age a new form. The life or death of millions of human beings hangs upon its solution; its agitation revives the fiercest passions for good and for evil that inflame the human breast. From the era when the monotheistic, Semitic slaves of the Pharaohs made themselves hated and feared by their polytheistic masters, till today when the monstrous giants Labor and Capital are arming for a supreme conflict, the Jewish question has been inextricably bound up with the deepest and gravest questions that convulse society . . .

"Even in America, presumably the refuge of the oppressed, public opinion has not yet reached that point where it absolves the race from the sin of the individual. Every Jew, however