Extracts from NOTES AND FRAGMENTS Left by WALT WHITMAN
Ed. by Dr. R. M. Bucke.
Friday, April 24, '57

True vista before—The strong thought-impression or conviction that the straight, broad, open, well-marked true vista before, or course of public teacher, "wander speaker",—by powerful words, orations, uttered with copiousness and decision, with all the aid of art, also the natural flowing vocal luxuriance of oratory. That the mightiest rule over America could be thus—as for instance, on occasion, at Washington to be, launching from public room, at the opening of the session of Congress—perhaps launching at the President, leading persons, Congressmen, or Judges of the Supreme Court. That to dart hither or thither, as some great emergency might demand—the greatest champion America ever could know, yet holding no office or emolument whatever,—but first in the esteem of men and women. Not to direct eyes or thoughts to any of the usual avenues, as of official appointment, or to get such anyway. To put all those aside for good. But always to keep up living interest in public questions—and always to hold the ear of the people.

---

Erudition is low among the glories of humanity. I think if those who best embody it were collected together this day in the public assembly, it would be grand. But powerful unlearned persons are also grand.

-----

Poet! beware lest your poems are made in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things—and not from the spirit that comes from the contact with real things themselves.
No, I do not choose to write a poem on a lady's sparrow, like Catullus—or on a parrot, like Ovid—nor love-songs like Anacreon—nor even ........ like Homer—nor the siege of Jerusalem like Tasso—nor ........ nor.......... as Shakespeare. What have these themes to do in America? or what are they to us except as beautiful studies, reminiscences? All those are good—they are not what they are—I know they should have been different—I do not say I will furnish anything better—but instead I will aim at high immortal world—American, the robust, large, manly character—the perfect woman—the illustriousness of sex, which I will celebrate.*

-----:-----:

In future "Leaves of Grass". Be more severe with the final revision of the poem, nothing will do, not one word or sentence, that is not perfectly clear—with positive purpose—harmony with the name, nature, drift of the poem. Also, no ornaments, especially no ornamental adjectives, unless they have come molten hot, and imperiously prove themselves. No ornamental similes at all—not one; perfect transparent clearness sanity and health are wanted—that is the divine style—O if it can be attained——

?Outlines of lecture, I imagining myself in that condition mentioned. You must do the work—you must think.

To you. First of all prepare for study by the following self-teaching exercises. Abstract yourself from this book; realize where you are at present located, the point you stand that is now to you the centre of all. Look up overhead, think of space stretching out, think of all the unnumbered orbs wheeling safely there, invisible to us by day, some visible by night; think of the sun around which the earth revolves; the moon revolving round
the earth, and accompanying it; think of the different planets belonging to our system. Spend some minutes faithfully in this exercise. Then again realize yourself upon the earth, at the particular point you now occupy. Which way stretches the north, and what country, seas etc.? Which way the south? Which way the east? Which way the west? Seize these firmly with your mind, pass freely over immense distances. Turn your face a moment thither. Fix definitely the direction and the idea of the distances of separate sections of your own country, also of England, the Mediterranean sea, Cape Horn, the North Pole, and such like distinct places.

-----

It is a short poem. Dante's whole works appear to lie in a very moderate compass. It seems strange that he should stand as the highest type of Italian imaginative art-execution in literature--so gaunt, so haggard and un-rich, un-joyous. But the real Italian art-execution flourishes of course in other fields--in music, for instance, peerless in the whole earth, teaching high over the heads of all lands, all times.

Mark the simplicity of Dante, like the Bible's--different from the tangled and florid Shakespeare. Some of his idioms must, in Italian, cut like a knife. He narrates like some short-worded, superb, illiterate--an old farmer or some New England blue-light minister or common person interested in telling his or her story--makes the impression of bona fide in all that he says, as if it were certainly so. I do not wonder that the middle ages thought he had indeed really descended into Hell and seen what he described.
How misty, how windy, how full of diffused, only half-meaning
words! How curious a study! (Don't fall into Ossianic, by any
chance).

----- :-----

The Bucolics and Georgics are finely expressed—they are first-
rate.

-----:-----

The Paradise Lost is, to us, nonsense, anyhow, because it takes
themes entirely out of human cognizance and treats them as Homer
treats his siege and opposing armies and their disputes. The Iliad
stands perfectly well and very beautiful for what it is, and appro-
priate blooming of the poet and what he had received and what he
believed and what to him was so in a certain sense. The Para-
dise Lost is offensive to modern science and intelligence—it is a poetical fanaticism with a few great strong features but
not a great poem.

-----:-----

Milton's mind seems to have had the grandest sort of
muscle and much of the other stuff that poetry wants. The des-
criptions are large and definite. He has nothing little or nice
about him—but he was in too much with sectarian theology
and with the disputes between puritans and churchmen. For in-
stance what nations in Asia or Africa, not Christian, would see
any great point in his poem if read to them?
Keats' poetry is ornamental, elaborated, rich in wrought imagery, it is imbued with the sentiment, at second-hand, of the gods and goddesses of twenty-five hundred years ago. Its feeling is the feeling of a gentlemanly person lately at college, accepting what was commanded him there, who moves and would only move in elegant society, reading classical books in libraries. Of life in the nineteenth century it has none any more than the statues have. It does not come home at all to the direct wants of the bodies and souls of the century.

[ Richter: ] I should say that he was unnatural and lurid, judged by the calm and wholesome models. He is full of love and appears to be the originator of much of the soft and sentimental ways of the swarms of tale-writers of the last thirty years, in Britain and America.

To the little court of Weimar, to the poetical world, to the learned and literary worlds, Goethe has a deserved greatness. To the genius of America he is neither dear nor the reverse of dear. He passes with the general crowd upon whom the American glance descends with indifference. Our road is our own.
There is one point of the Goethean philosophy, which, without appeal and forever incapacitates it from suiting America and the forthcoming years. It is the cardinal Goethean doctrine too, that the artist or poet is to live in art or poetry alone apart from affairs, politics, facts, vulgar life, persons and things—seeking his "high ideal."

-----:-----

See how these fellows always take a handsome man for their God.

-----:-----

Coarse, wild, sensual and strong was this young man's nature, for coarse, wild and strong had been his life. He has large and ugly qualities enough, but he is self-complete, and his very grossness and dishonesty are noble from their candor. The castrated goodness of schools and churches he knew nothing of.

(written probably in 40's or early 50's.)

-----:-----

Peter----- -----, large, strong boned young fellow, driver. Should weigh 180. Free and candid to me the very first time he saw me. Man of strong self-will, powerful coarse feelings and appetites. Had a quarrel, borrowed $300, left his father's somewhere in the interior of the State, fell in with a couple of gamblers, hadn't been home or written there in seven years. I liked his refreshing wickedness, as it would be called by the orthodox. He seemed to feel a perfect independence, dashed with
a little resentment, toward the world in general. I never met a man that seemed to me, as far as I could tell in forty minutes, more open, coarse, self-willed, strong and free from the sickly desire to be on society's lines and points.

-----:-----

In Metaphysical Points, here is what I guess about pure and positive truths. I guess that after all reasoning and analogy, and their most palpable demonstrations of anything, we have the real satisfaction when the soul tells and tests by its own archonomic power—superior to the learnedest proofs as one glance of living sight is more than quarto volumes of descriptions and of maps.

-----:-----

The superiority of Emerson's writings is in their character—they mean something. He may be obscure, but he is certain. Any other of the best American writers has in general a clearer style, has more of the received grace and ease, is less questioned and forbidden than he, makes a handsomer appearance in the society of the books, sells better, passes his time more apparently in the popular understanding; yet there is something in the solitary specimen of New England that outvies them all. He has what none else has; he does what none else does. He pierces the crusts that envelope the secrets of life. He joins on equal terms the few great sages and original seers. He represents the freeman, America, the individual. He represents the gentleman. No teacher or poet of old times or modern times has made a better report of manly and womanly qualities, heroism, chastity, temper-
ance, friendship, fortitude. None has given more beautiful ac-
counts of truth and justice. His words shed light to the best
souls; they do not admit of argument. As a sprig from the pine
tree or a glimpse anywhere into the daylight belittles all arti-
ficial flower work and all the painted scenery of theatres, so are
live words in a book compared to cunningly composed words. A few
among men (soon perhaps to become many) will enter easily into
Emerson's meanings; by those he will be well-beloved. The flip-
pant writer, the orthodox critic, the numbers of good or indif-
ferent imitators, will not comprehend him; to them he will indeed
be a transcendentalist, a writer of sunbeams and moonbeams, a
strange and unapproachable person.

Written as note to a magazine article, date May '47. To judge
by paper and writing goes back to early fifties.--W. (it would
seem) knew Emerson pretty well in those early days.)

There is something in vast erudition melancholy and fruit-
less as an Arctic sea. With most men it is a slow dream, dreamed
in a moving fog. So complacent! So much body and muscle; fine
legs to walk--large supple hands--but the eyes are owl's eyes,
and the heart is a mackerel's heart.

-----

One having attained those insights and contents which the
universe gives to men capable of comprehending it, would publish
the same and persuade other men and women to the same. The con-
ditions are simple, spiritual, physical, close at hand....they
are long and arduous and require faith, they exist altogether with the taught and not with the teaching or teacher.


processions of races, swiftly marching and counter-marching over the fields of the Earth—the sublime creeds of different eras, some left glimmering yet, others quite faded out—the religions, the new ones rising out of the old ones, each filling its time and land yet helplessly withdrawing in due time, giving place to the more needed one that must succeed it. For all religions, all divine, are but temporary journeys subordinate to the eternal soul of the woman, the man supreme the decider of all. What are they....to the ineffable, eternal traveler through them all [to] man, before whom all religions, the divinest idols, the gods, these of ours with the rest, sink into the [ ] corners?