

SOME LAGGARDS YET

THE PERFECT HUMAN VOICE

Stating it briefly and pointedly I should suggest that the human voice is a cultivation or form'd growth on a fair native foundation. This foundation probably exists in nine cases out of ten. Sometimes nature affords the vocal organ in perfection, or rather I would say near enough to whet one's appreciation and appetite for a voice that might be truly call'd perfection. To me the grand voice is mainly physiological--(by which I by no means ignore the mental help, but wish to keep the emphasis where it belongs.) Emerson says manners form the representative apex and final charm and captivation of humanity: but he might as well have changed the typicality to voice.

Of course there is much taught and written about elocution, the best reading, speaking, &c., but it finally settles down to best human vocalization. Beyond all other power and beauty, there is something in the quality and power of the right voice (timbre the schools call it) that touches the soul, the abysses. It was not for nothing that the Greeks depended, at their highest, on poetry's and wisdom's vocal utterance by *tete-a-tete* lectures--(indeed all the ancients did.)

Of celebrated people possessing this wonderful vocal power, patent to me, in former days, I should specify the contralto Alboni, Elias

Hicks, Father Taylor, the tenor Bettini, Fanny Kemble, and the old actor Booth, and in private life many cases, often women. I sometimes wonder whether the best philosophy and poetry, or something like the best, after all these centuries, perhaps waits to be rous'd out yet, or suggested, by the perfect physiological human voice.

SHAKSPERE FOR AMERICA

Let me send you a supplementary word to that "view" of Shakspeare attributed to me, publish'd in your July number,[47] and so courteously worded by the reviewer (thanks! dear friend.) But you have left out what, perhaps, is the main point, as follows:

"Even the one who at present reigns unquestion'd--of Shakspeare--for all he stands for so much in modern literature, he stands entirely for the mighty esthetic sceptres of the past, not for the spiritual and democratic, the sceptres of the future." (See pp. 55-58 in "November Boughs," and also some of my further notions on Shakspeare.)

The Old World (Europe and Asia) is the region of the poetry of concrete and real things,--the past, the esthetic, palaces, etiquette, the literature of war and love, the mythological gods, and the myths anyhow. But the New World (America) is the region of the future, and its poetry must be spiritual and democratic. Evolution is not the rule in Nature, in Politics, and Inventions only, but in Verse. I know our age is greatly materialistic, but it is greatly spiritual, too, and the future will be, too. Even what we moderns have come to mean by spirituality (while including what the Hebraic utterers, and mainly perhaps all the Greek and other old typical poets, and also the later ones, meant) has so expanded and color'd and vivified the comprehension of the term, that it is quite a different one from the past. Then science, the final critic of all, has the casting vote for

future poetry.

Note:

[47] This bit was in "Poet-lore" monthly for September, 1890.

"UNASSAIL'D RENOWN"

The N. Y. Critic, Nov. 24, 1889, propounded a circular to several persons, and giving the responses, says, "Walt Whitman's views [as follow] are, naturally, more radical than those of any other contributor to the discussion":

Briefly to answer impromptu your request of Oct. 19--the question whether I think any American poet not now living deserves a place among the thirteen "English inheritors of unassail'd renown" (Chaucer, Spenser, Shakspeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats,)--and which American poets would be truly worthy, &c. Though to me the deep of the matter goes down, down beneath. I remember the London Times at the time, in opportune, profound and friendly articles on Bryant's and Longfellow's deaths, spoke of the embarrassment, warping effect, and confusion on America (her poets and poetic students) "coming in possession of a great estate they had never lifted a hand to form or earn"; and the further

contingency of "the English language ever having annex'd to it a lot of first-class Poetry that would be American, not European"--proving then something precious over all, and beyond valuation. But perhaps that is venturing outside the question. Of the thirteen British immortals mention'd--after placing Shakspeare on a sort of pre-eminence of fame not to be invaded yet--the names of Bryant, Emerson, Whittier and Longfellow (with even added names, sometimes Southerners, sometimes Western or other writers of only one or two pieces,) deserve in my opinion an equally high niche of renown as belongs to any on the dozen of that glorious list.

INSCRIPTION FOR A LITTLE BOOK ON GIORDANO BRUNO

As America's mental courage (the thought comes to me to-day) is so indebted, above all current lands and peoples, to the noble army of Old-World martyrs past, how incumbent on us that we clear those martyrs' lives and names, and hold them up for reverent admiration, as well as beacons. And typical of this, and standing for it and all perhaps, Giordano Bruno may well be put, to-day and to come, in our New World's thankfulest heart and memory.

W.W. CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY, February 24th, 1890.

SPLINTERS

While I stand in reverence before the fact of Humanity, the People, I will confess, in writing my L. of G., the least consideration out of all that has had to do with it has been the consideration of "the public"--at any rate as it now exists. Strange as it may sound for a democrat to say so, I am clear that no free and original and lofty-soaring poem, or one ambitious of those achievements, can possibly be fulfill'd by any writer who has largely in his thought the public--or the question, What will establish'd literature--What will the current authorities say about it?

As far as I have sought any, not the best laid out garden or parterre has been my model--but Nature has been. I know that in a sense the garden is nature too, but I had to choose--I could not give both. Besides the gardens are well represented in poetry; while Nature (in letter and in spirit, in the divine essence,) little if at all.

Certainly, (while I have not hit it by a long shot,) I have aim'd at the most ambitious, the best--and sometimes feel to advance that aim (even with all its arrogance) as the most redeeming part of my books. I have never so much cared to feed the esthetic or intellectual palates--but if I could arouse from its slumbers that eligibility in every soul for its own true exercise! if I could only wield that lever!

Out from the well-tended concrete and the physical--and in them and from them only--radiate the spiritual and heroic.

Undoubtedly many points belonging to this essay--perhaps of the greatest necessity, fitness and importance to it--have been left out or forgotten. But the amount of the whole matter--poems, preface and everything--is merely to make one of those little punctures or eyelets the actors possess in the theatre--curtains to look out upon "the house"--one brief, honest, living glance.

HEALTH, (OLD STYLE)

In that condition the whole body is elevated to a state by others unknown--inwardly and outwardly illuminated, purified, made solid, strong, yet buoyant. A singular charm, more than beauty, flickers out of, and over, the face--a curious transparency beams in the eyes, both in the iris and the white--the temper partakes also. Nothing that happens--no event, rencontre, weather, &c--but it is confronted--nothing but is subdued into sustenance--such is the marvellous transformation from the old timorousness and the old process of causes and effects. Sorrows and disappointments cease--there is no more borrowing trouble in advance. A man realizes the venerable myth--he is a god walking the earth, he sees new eligibilities, powers and beauties everywhere; he himself has a new eyesight and hearing. The play of the body in motion takes a previously unknown grace. Merely to move is then a happiness, a pleasure--to breathe, to see, is also. All the beforehand gratifications, drink, spirits, coffee, grease, stimulants, mixtures, late hours, luxuries, deeds of the night, seem as vexatious dreams, and now the awakening;--many fall into their natural places, whole-some, conveying diviner joys.

What I append--Health, old style--I have long treasur'd--found originally in some scrap-book fifty years ago--a favorite of mine (but quite a glaring contrast to my present bodily state:)

On a high rock above the vast abyss,
Whose solid base tumultuous waters lave;
Whose airy high-top balmy breezes kiss,
Fresh from the white foam of the circling wave--

There ruddy HEALTH, in rude majestic state,
His clust'ring forelock combatting the winds--
Bares to each season's change his breast elate,
And still fresh vigor from th' encounter finds;

With mighty mind to every fortune braced,
To every climate each corporeal power,
And high-proof heart, impenetrably cased,
He mocks the quick transitions of the hour.

Now could he hug bleak Zembla's bolted snow,
Now to Arabia's heated deserts turn,
Yet bids the biting blast more fiercely blow,
The scorching sun without abatement burn.

There this bold Outlaw, rising with the morn,
His sinewy functions fitted for the toil,
Pursues, with tireless steps, the rapturous horn,
And bears in triumph back the shaggy spoil.

Or, on his rugged range of towering hills,

Turns the stiff glebe behind his hardy team;
His wide-spread heaths to blithest measures tills,
And boasts the joys of life are not a dream!

Then to his airy hut, at eve, retires,
Clasps to his open breast his buxom spouse,
Basks in his faggot's blaze, his passions fires,
And strait supine to rest unbroken bows.

On his smooth forehead, Time's old annual score,
Tho' left to furrow, yet disdains to lie;
He bids weak sorrow tantalize no more,
And puts the cup of care contemptuous by.

If, from some inland height, that, skirting, bears
Its rude encroachments far into the vale,
He views where poor dishonor'd nature wears
On her soft cheek alone the lily pale;

How will he scorn alliance with the race,
Those aspen shoots that shiver at a breath;
Children of sloth, that danger dare not face,
And find in life but an extended death:

Then from the silken reptiles will he fly,
To the bold cliff in bounding transports run,

And stretch'd o'er many a wave his ardent eye,
Embrace the enduring Sea-Boy as his son!

Yes! thine alone--from pain, from sorrow free,
The lengthen'd life with peerless joys replete;
Then let me, Lord of Mountains, share with thee
The hard, the early toil--the relaxation sweet.

GAY-HEARTEDNESS

Walking on the old Navy Yard bridge, Washington, D. C., once with a companion, Mr. Marshall, from England, a great traveler and observer, as a squad of laughing young black girls pass'd us--then two copper-color'd boys, one good-looking lad 15 or 16, barefoot, running after --"What gay creatures they all appear to be," said Mr. M. Then we fell to talking about the general lack of buoyant animal spirits. "I think," said Mr. M., "that in all my travels, and all my intercourse with people of every and any class, especially the cultivated ones, (the literary and fashionable folks,) I have never yet come across what I should call a really GAY-HEARTED MAN."

It was a terrible criticism--cut into me like a surgeon's lance. Made me silent the whole walk home.

AS IN A SWOON.

As in a swoon, one instant,
Another sun, ineffable, full-dazzles me,
And all the orbs I knew--and brighter, unknown orbs;
One instant of the future land, Heaven's land.

L. OF G.

Thoughts, suggestions, aspirations, pictures,
Cities and farms--by day and night--book of peace and war,
Of platitudes and of the commonplace.

For out-door health, the land and sea--for good will,
For America--for all the earth, all nations, the common people,
(Not of one nation only--not America only.)

In it each claim, ideal, line, by all lines, claims, ideals,
temper'd;
Each right and wish by other wishes, rights.

AFTER THE ARGUMENT.

A group of little children with their ways and chatter flow in,
Like welcome rippling water o'er my heated nerves and flesh.

FOR US TWO, READER DEAR.

Simple, spontaneous, curious, two souls interchanging,

With the original testimony for us continued to the last.