

## WALT WHITMAN.

## I.

**T**HIRTY years ago, when Emerson published his essay upon "The Poet," America had no great national bard. The essayist confessed that he looked in vain for the poet whom he described. "We do not," wrote he, "address ourselves to life, nor dare we chant our own times and social circumstance. . . . We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer; then in the middle age, then in Calvinism. . . . Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats, and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues, and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon, and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem . . . ; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres."

When Emerson wrote these words, he had himself composed a volume of poems, some of which were of remarkable beauty and of great depth of thought and spirit; but his verses came far wide of answering the demand he himself made upon the poetic nature. In so far as he was representative, he was the poet of the later Puritanism; and, like Pope, he touched his lyre, and sang, mainly for the ears of gentlemen and scholars. He was another Hafiz or Herbert, come into New England to chant in chosen syllables some meanings of her hills and Indian streams, and some of the old and everlasting rules of ethics and of immortal life; but he was not the minstrel of America. The

Genius of the continent had not chosen him for its muse,—for its interpreter and representative. His presentiment of the significance of his time, and of the national life, was true; but he prophesied from his intellect rather than from his heart. He discerned clearly that one value of our democracy consists in the incomparable, all-pervading educational influences it exerts; but his tastes, derived from a line of clerical and scholastic ancestry, forbade his zealous and full acceptance of its tutelage. Perceiving with his intellect the uses of our political agitations and of association with the throng, his sympathies led him to shun publicity, and to seek books, solitude, and the company of polite persons and of scholars. A democrat in philosophy, he was patrician at heart. Glorifying the West, he carefully kept himself in the East. Characterizing Texas and Oregon as poems, he avoided those Elysian realms, though he has twice journeyed into Europe, and once into the land of the mummy and the Sphinx.

But not in such sympathies nor by such habits as these could the robust bard whom he foretold be trained. It was essential that the poet of America should be an apter pupil of democracy than that. His schools should be the thronged streets, workshops, ships and the sea, rivers with their barges, prairies with their flocks and herds, forests with their trails; and not merely universities, and clubs, and libraries. Nought should this autochthonal son of America receive from the East which would not readily assimilate with his native character. Well for him if his country were enriched with much that the past affords. Importers of old-world art and thought there may well be: translators, interpreters, colporteurs of antique forms; but the national poet is none of these. He may receive and assimilate the choicest of the products brought. Fixed in his native soil, whatever fertilizes that, nourishes and strengthens him. But his genius is inherent,—intrinsic as the blood within his veins. He is begotten of his own time. The true poet of a nation is its product, and the best sample of his race.

The bard of America must be as American as America,—perhaps even in her faults. No Puritan or Cavalier; no Celt or Teuton just grafted on the natural stem; no mere New Englander; no border ruffian; no priest, no professor, no provincial,—

can stand for America. She contains an individuality all her own; and, while these characters belong to her, there is something more than either or all of these; something which only the national life can yield; which could result only from that sense of liberty which in this nation is profounder than in any other that ever was or is: something which is the indigenous and rare product of American democracy.

And, as the national poet is representative, he must conceive by instinct, and be the mouthpiece of his own land. Isaiah and the authors of the Psalms were the tongues of Judæa; Homer and Æschylus of Greece; Shakspeare of feudal Europe; the Scotch minstrels were the chroniclers of early Scotland; the poem of the Cid is a living picture of the chivalrous times of Spain; and the Nibelungen Lied voiced the love and valor which characterized the early Teutonic race. The national poet is the true interpreter and revealer. He detects harmony in the vast and varied life of his land and time. He is the one most inspired with the significance of his age; is most penetrated with its spirit; feels its power, and enjoys obedience to it; and hence can best express its purposes. He does not speak from without. What he says is inspired from his heart. He loves the materials with which he deals. If he is Chaucer, he mirrors Saxon and Norman manners in his poetry,—the youth-time of a feudal land—his own land, and the land of his birth and of his joy. If he is Tennyson, poet-laureate, his elegant verses and his chosen metres betray, in the daintiness of their melody, the *ennui* and *delicatesse* of an ancient, heroic and mighty, but decaying aristocracy. But, if he be the national poet of America, he will chant, in strains of new music, the new story of a new nation: one founded upon unprecedented and unequalled principles of national government and of individual life. He will write the history of a great people, among whom each person is encouraged to be self-dependent, and to maintain the noblest personal relations; a people freed from superstition, from the disease of excessive sentiments, and from baneful theories of caste; a people not afraid of work, believing in human nature, self-reliant, hopeful, good-willing towards all.

And with such a national character as America possesses; with her immense geographical area; with a favorable climate,

and all varieties of landscape,—surely she might well anticipate the coming of a poet who should represent and celebrate her composite virtues. As reason is better than superstition, and reality than romance, and work than idleness, and liberty than slavery, and equality than caste; as faith is superior to despair, and energy to *ennui*, and good-will to hatred; as law is better than miracle, and commerce than the chase, and peace than vengeful warfare—so, surely, does the West to-day afford a higher order of themes for poetry than the East. And no one less than a poet could fitly represent a people with characteristics such as the West affords,—the outgrowth of liberty and undaunted faith. And no one truly representing America; delineating her distinctive traits of character; celebrating her virtues (finding them at the base, even in her vices), and prophesying of her future,—could communicate his thought in any language which was less than poetry, in any speech which was not melodious and strong.

Emerson's essay upon "The Poet," with its sanguine prophecy of the coming bard, was published about the year 1845; and at that time there was a certain young American trying the various experiences of life in the United States, who was destined, ten years later, to appear as an American poet: an original, a singer of a new song, in a new strain; a singer of America, of democracy; one who addressed himself to life, and chanted his "own times and social circumstance." And this new poet received from Emerson the most cordial and commendatory greeting, probably, that was ever extended from one mortal to another. Walt Whitman's first volume of poems, "Leaves of Grass," was published in the year 1855; and a few weeks after its appearance the author received from Emerson the following remarkable letter:—

"CONCORD, MASSACHUSETTS, 21 July, 1855.

"DEAR SIR,—I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'Leaves of Grass.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean.

"I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find in

comparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

"I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sun-beam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits; namely, of fertilizing and encouraging.

"I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

“R. W. EMERSON.”

The young American who could call forth such encomium as this from the author of "Representative Men" and "English Traits,"—the best portraiture of character in the English tongue,—must surely possess some commanding qualities. And if Walt Whitman meets the demand which his distinguished eulogist has made upon the poetic nature, his career must have had "a long foreground" indeed; one commensurate with the life of America itself, and little visible in his personal history. And yet, some notice of the poet's life is undoubtedly essential to a proper study of his character and genius.

Born in 1819 on Long Island, thirty miles from New York City, his youth and training were nothing extraordinary for a boy in the United States. His father was of English stock, and the family was one of the oldest on the Island. His mother belonged to an old Hollandic family, which had also early settled in that region. The father was for some years a farmer, but later a carpenter. While Walt was yet a child, his family moved to Brooklyn, then a large rural town. There he went to the public school, returning every summer to his birth-place in the country.

He entered the poor boy's college, the printing-office, when only thirteen. At sixteen, he engaged in the traditional first profession of a young man in the United States; namely, school-teaching in the country, "boarding 'round." At the age of eighteen, we find him writing sketches for the weekly papers and magazines, and reporting for the daily press. A number of his stories were published in the "Democratic Review," and, though of no particular merit, they show somewhat of the sentiments and opinions he then entertained. One of the stories was an argu-

ment against capital punishment; another a temperance story; and a third, entitled "The Blood-Money," was written to illustrate the wickedness of the Fugitive Slave Law. At this time, also, he spoke occasionally at political meetings, out of doors, on Long Island and in New York City, and was a great favorite with the crowd. Although opposed to slavery, he was on the Democratic side, and spoke for Van Buren; and, afterwards, for Polk.

And now began in earnest the rough training which American democracy peculiarly affords, and the results of which were afterwards to appear in "Leaves of Grass." For the next twelve years his time was divided between New York City, the seashore on Long Island, and the inland farm-country of the island. In the city, nominally a newspaper man, he was in reality lot and part with nearly all of what are called the "common classes" of society; with mechanics, marketmen, Broadway stage-drivers, firemen, expressmen, railroad men, and the like. On the sea and seashore he was the companion of boatmen, fishermen, and pilots; and in the country he was welcomed by the farmers' sons and daughters, as being one of themselves; ever ready to help in harvesting; fond of animals; of barns, and fields, and woods; of excursions, country fairs, and picnics.

There were certain classes of the really common people in the city with whom Walt never fraternized, despite his cosmopolitan nature; and these were the fancy men and the rich fops. It was not from any want of good-will on his part; but, with all his breadth of character, he lacked the qualities which attract those sorts of men. His physical proportions, and dress, were not of the flashy or dandy order. Six feet high, weighing over two hundred pounds; flesh solid; skin sunburnt; hair cropped short; bearded; loose trowsers; box coat; shirt-collar wide open in front; necktie loose,—he belonged to the robust, rather than the exquisite, order of men. In one of his poems he calls himself "one of the roughs," and in some of his flights of democratic passion he claims consanguinity with the worst and lowest. But this was a poetic and never a real relationship. For, with all his roughness and virility, Walt Whitman was ever essentially a true man. One of "the boys," and fond of the city and a crowd, he was equally fond of home; and was devoted to his

mother, whom he adored. Lusty, he was never moved by a morbid lust; thoroughly masculine, he was tender-hearted as a child; large and strong, he was gentle and debonair. He was also a lover of music, and of flowers. There is a portrait of him, painted in the height of his physical virility and health, which affords some idea of his wonderful physique, the rich abundance of blood and brawn, the pure red skin, the clear blue eyes, and a genial, but dignified, expression; indicating intellect as well as heart; spirituality as well as animal life.

In these twelve years, to this young, healthy, large-hearted, and large-brained man life was a perpetual festival. He was a Bacchus, drunk with the wine of health. To him all sights were picturesque, all sounds melodious; and all people were his friends. And in this joyous period we see how his mind came to be filled with pictures which he was afterwards to paint in words. For all of the thousand scenes he has described in his poems, giving only a line perhaps to each, are scenes which he himself has witnessed and enjoyed. Though ordinary and unnoticeable to others, to him, as to some wandering and wiser child, all objects of Nature and art, and all scenes of life, were sources of enchantment. They were music to his ear, and beauty to his eye. He would ride a whole forenoon on a Broadway stage-top, listening to the hum of the busy street. The noisy hammers of the ship-builders in the ship-yards, where he would saunter by the day, made music to his ears, welcome as strains of symphony or march. He often sat by the hour at home, rapt in observation of his mother going about her household work, in her kilt, or sitting in her arm-chair after her work was done, with glasses on, reading the weekly newspaper. Here is the picture, as he has painted it, with a stroke, as it were, of his Pre-Raphaelistic pencil:—

"The mother at home, quietly placing the dishes on the supper-table;

The mother with mild words—clean her cap and gown, a wholesome odor falling off her person and clothes as she walks by."

Often and often he has gone to a neighboring farm-house to idle on the porch, and watch, unnoticed, the farmer's daughter going about her kitchen work; and, in his poem of "Walt Whitman," he writes:—

"I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the farmer's girl boiling her iron tea-kettle and baking short-cake."

Not Juno nor the Greek Helen was clothed in rarer beauty by the imagination of the ancient Homer, than were this homely mother and this farmer's girl to the loving eye of this young democrat of the Western world.

At thirty, Whitman began to travel through the United States; his motive being, not pecuniary gain, as with most American travelers in their own land, but a desire to see all that was to be seen of his own country and countrymen, of whom he had formed so favorable an opinion from the specimens he had witnessed in the narrow region where, hitherto, he had spent his life. He passed leisurely through Pennsylvania and Maryland. Reaching the Ohio river, he went aboard a steam-boat, and, stopping often at towns along the shore, he traveled in this way down the Ohio and the Mississippi to New Orleans. There he lived a year, editing a newspaper, and becoming acquainted with an entirely new phase of American life. In 1830, he ascended the Mississippi to St. Louis, and thence moved north-eastward through Illinois and Wisconsin, through the wonderful region of the great northern lakes, and into Canada, returning, by way of Niagara, to his favorite Long Island; having been from home, in all, two years.

What he saw and felt in that time, upon that journey, we learn from the poems which he was soon to be moved by his deepening inspirations to compose. For his preparation was now well-nigh completed. In the curriculum of that university which America is, and in which democracy is the teacher and the thing taught, he was now far advanced. Granting that he had by nature the poetic instinct and the democratic passion, he had now fulfilled the conditions requisite for his development into the genius and representative which America and the times demanded. Other travelers had gone forth from New York, no doubt, while he was gone, and had brought back reports valued at the stock-exchange, welcome to speculators and money-lenders,—reports of railroads that might be built with profit, of sites of cities that were to be, of water-courses that could be utilized, of certain regions that would avail for grazing, and of others

that would yield abundantly, if tilled, of this or that cereal or fruit, of cotton, or hay, or hemp. But our traveler returned with other freight. Much that they had seen he had also seen,—for he was no visionary; but he had discerned much, very much, besides, that they had not observed, or, seeing, had forgotten, not knowing of its meanings. They saw what percentage was to be realized in the West; he realized what manner of men and women the West had produced, and foresaw some traits of the stalwart race that was to come.

Soon after his return to Brooklyn he engaged in a newspaper enterprise, but he soon abandoned it, and went into his father's business of house-building. It was while working at this trade, in 1853-55, that, in leisure months in the winter, he wrote his first poems. For years he had felt impelled to give expression to his thoughts and feelings about democracy and the democratic character and life; and it was this impulse, doubtless, which had prompted him to associate himself with newspapers as being the readiest vehicles of thought. But at length, as his perceptions widened, and he attained larger freedom, he became aware that expression through such a medium must ever be inadequate, and at last his deepening thought found utterance in chant and song.

It has been represented, in one of the sketches made of Whitman, that, when he began to write his book, he composed slowly, and made many alterations and revisions. This does not seem to be exactly the fact. In his later editions he made some verbal changes, and sub-divided certain of the longer poems; but his first volume was written in a brief period, and under the mastery of impulses which dictated both substance and form; and, when the poems were finished, the poet himself was not less astonished at them than the public was when they appeared. In regard to certain passages which have given offence, as being statements too free and naked, his reply has always been that he was moved to write them so, and that he could not help himself; and to his friends he has said, in regard to these, that when they were done he felt a sense of immense relief and joy, as well as surprise, at having achieved by the aid of unsuspected powers that which he had long felt must be done, but which he had not hitherto seen how to accomplish.

In the spring of 1855, he published his first book, setting part of the type himself. It contained twelve poems, a long preface in prose, and an engraving of the author, which represented him in his shirt-sleeves, with a slouch hat on his head, shirt-collar turned back on his shoulders, one hand in his trousers pocket, and the other resting easily on his hip. The book called forth the highest praises and the severest condemnation, both in this country and in Europe. Emerson, as we have seen, greeted it as the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America had yet contributed. In England, an eminent man averred that the volume would in time become "a pregnant text-book, out of which quotations as sterling as the minted gold" would "be taken and applied to every form and phase of the 'inner' and 'outer' life," and that the author gave "a clearer conception of what manly modesty really is, than any thing we" had "in all conventional forms of word, deed or act so far known of." On the other hand, the "London Critic" declared its disgust with what it called the "indecencies" of the book; the "London Examiner" burlesqued the style, and professed to be immensely amused; while "The London Leader" and the New York "Putnam's" found in it much to praise and much to condemn.

In 1856, Whitman published a second book, which contained the twelve poems hitherto published, and other new ones,—in all thirty-two,—together with an appendix which consisted of Emerson's letter, an open letter from himself in reply, and quotations from the press, commendatory and adverse. Both of these volumes were published by the author himself, and a small edition of each was readily sold. About this time a firm in New York offered to publish the poems, and to guarantee a considerable sum to the author, if he would allow them to omit a certain passage, some six lines in all; but this he declined to do, much as he needed a publisher. He assured them—with considerable metaphor no doubt,—that he wrote the whole book to get in those six lines, and that to leave them out would be an act of emasculation to which he never could consent. Some years later, an abridged edition of the poems was printed in England, with a preface by W. M. Rossetti; but the omissions were made without the author's consent, and against his wish. Another complete edition was published

in Boston in 1860-61; and, while it was in process of publication, Whitman went to that city to read the proofs. While there, he lived at one of the favorite boarding-houses of the Boston omnibus-drivers, with whom he speedily fraternized. The house was kept by a homely, motherly woman, with whom, surrounded by a great family of sons and daughters, he came to be much pleased, and of whom he always speaks in the warmest terms when referring to his Boston visit. While in Boston, Emerson came to see him, and urged him to go home with him to Concord; but he declined, fearing, as he said, that he should meet too many super-refined persons, and be kept too much in parlors. He preferred to tarry in the neighborhood of his good landlady and his drivers. He had several interviews with Emerson, generally on Boston Common. Emerson also introduced him to many distinguished persons in the city. This was not the beginning of their acquaintance, for Emerson had previously been to New York to see Whitman, as had also the other Concord celebrities, Thoreau and Alcott. His personal acquaintance with Emerson gave him great pleasure. In one of their interviews on the Common, Emerson endeavored to persuade him to withhold from future editions of his poems certain passages in which he referred to sexual acts and feelings, arguing that, while he (Emerson) was not easily frightened by any freedom and nakedness of statement, after Rabelais, Montaigne, and Shakspeare, yet that the frequent allusions in his poems to those relations were impolitic. But Whitman could not be persuaded; and it may here be mentioned that, while there is no one for whose judgment Mr. Whitman has greater respect than for Emerson's, yet, in all matters connected with his literary work, while he patiently listens to advice, he seldom, if ever, heeds it; likeocrates, deeming his own instincts always his safest guides.

In 1862, after the breaking out of the war, he was called to Fredericksburgh, on behalf of a brother who had been wounded; and, while there, he realized that his place, for the time being, was among the sick and suffering soldiers; and from that time till the restoration of peace he followed the army, or visited the hospitals in Washington and elsewhere, laboring tirelessly in his own way; nursing the sick and wounded; watching by their cots; supplying them with necessaries, which he took pains to

obtain from friends in the North; writing letters for them to their friends; and, in countless ways, giving comfort and hope, prompted by that spirit of good-will and love which hitherto he had profusely expressed in words, but which he was now able, and most ready, to express with equal profusion in deeds. The value of the work he did in this way cannot be estimated. Independent, he was able to supplement the labors of organized forces in most essential service; and, moved as he was by the deepest sympathy and love, he worked with great effect. He always addressed the soldiers by their Christian names, or by their nick-names, if they had them. His arrival in a hospital, hearty and strong, with a haversack, perhaps, slung across his shoulder, was always the brightest hour in the wounded soldier's long and weary day. There are many interesting anecdotes of his career in the hospitals, but the following will suffice to illustrate the character of his influence and service. There was a certain young soldier in one of the Washington hospitals, who was suffering a tedious confinement on account of a wound; and a gentleman of the city, a relative of the young man, called often to see him. He generally found him in a despondent mood. One day, as the gentleman entered the hospital, he saw Whitman passing from cot to cot, having just visited the cot of the young friend whom he had come to see. As he approached, he found the boy with his head buried in his pillow, and, when he spoke, asking what was the matter, the young fellow looked up, with tears in his eyes, but with an expression of happiness in his face despite his tears, and, with choked utterance, replied: "Walt—Walt kissed me!" and immediately hid his face again in his pillow. Walt had found him dispirited, and, stooping down, had slipped an orange under his pillow, and kissed him, saying, probably, as he did so, "Don't give up, my dear boy; you will come out of this all right, yet!" and so had passed on to serve each poor sufferer in some tender and fitting way. "There was no one in Washington," says the "New York Tribune," "who spent more of his life for the benefit of the soldiers than Mr. Whitman. His open collar and snowy head were as well known to the boys in camp and hospital as the bright uniform of the young Napoleon himself." Although Whitman was at this period but forty-five years of age, yet, as indicated in the

above paragraph, his hair was gray; and this, with his gait, which was remarkably dignified and slow, gave him a venerable appearance beyond his years. A stranger, meeting him, was pretty sure to inquire who he was, struck by his majestic and genial air, as well as by the contrast between his ruddy complexion and his gray hair. This contrast was once the cause of an amusing incident. Passing along one of the streets in the suburbs of Washington, at a time when the city was surrounded by the Confederate forces, he was stopped by two policemen, who proposed to arrest him, supposing that he wore false hair and beard, or a false face. He easily convinced them of their error, and said, with epigrammatic wit: "Well, boys, if you have undertaken to arrest every man who wears a false face, you will have your hands full."

His experiences of the war and among the hospitals have been told by himself in a series of letters first published in the "New York Graphic," and recently collected in a small volume published by himself. But the richest fruit of his experience in camp and hospital is the volume of poems published in 1865, entitled "Drum-Taps," which contain hymns and rapt psalms of war, and death, and victory, not surpassed or equalled by any war-songs of the world; for they are keyed to the genius of America, which is a spirit of peace, and only suffers war as a last resort, and in the interest of Liberty and Home.

After the war, Whitman was appointed to a clerkship in the Department of the Interior, in Washington, from which situation he was, however, shortly after dismissed, on the ground that his poems were immoral. This removal, outrageous as it was, aroused but little indignation, being regarded by people generally as a proper act on the Secretary's part; but it had its compensation; for it called forth from the pen of William D. O'Connor, in vindication of the poet, a pamphlet entitled "The Good Gray Poet," which is, perhaps, the most brilliant monograph in American literature.

The poet was immediately restored to the government service, being appointed to a place in the office of the Attorney General. There he remained eight years, occupying himself, in his leisure hours, in writing occasional poems, and in revising his early

works. During this period, he composed and published a series of prose essays entitled, "Democratic Vistas," in which he discusses American democracy. This volume, I am told, Wendell Phillips places in his library side by side with his beloved De Tocqueville. Still later, the poet wrote two poems for delivery before the Mechanics' Institute of New York and at a Dartmouth college commencement.

In 1873, there occurred an event in Whitman's life which was wholly unexpected, and caused the greatest anxiety and grief among his friends. Apparently in perfect health, he was suddenly stricken with partial paralysis. The left side only was affected, and in a few weeks he was able to walk, though with some difficulty. This sickness, though unforeseen and unaccountable to his friends at first, was readily traced by his physician to an illness of six months which came upon him in the summer of 1864,—the result of disease incurred by a reckless expenditure of strength in his hospital work, and by assiduous care of patients, whose wounds, through neglect and excessive heat, had become mortified and corrupt. In his weak state his system absorbed the poison of hospital malaria, and, though he apparently entirely recovered from its effects, the insidious virus seems to have lurked in his system.

About this time, as if misfortunes never came singly, he lost his mother, a venerable woman, to whom he was most devoted. His residence in Washington now came to an end, and he went to Camden, New Jersey, to live with his brother. Two years later, his right side became slightly affected by paralysis, but he was still able to walk with the aid of a cane, and to do some literary work. At present Mr. Whitman lives a very quiet life in Camden. He has nearly abandoned the hope of recovery he at first persistently cherished. One physician has said that he will never get well, while others tell him that, since he does not grow any worse, he may hope to become better. He is very cheerful and genial, and nowise troubled by the prospect of a comparatively early death. Sending his love, recently, to two venerable ladies in Washington, by a friend, he said: "Tell them I am very poorly, and shall probably get no better, but that I am still pretty comfortable, and it's all right—it's all right!" He re-

<sup>1</sup> The poet is now (June 8th) improved in health and spirits, and contemplates a voyage to Europe.

ceives a large mail every day. Letters come from soldiers in all parts of the country who have heard of his illness, and remember with gratitude his care of them in hospital. He also has letters from friends and admirers in England,—from Tennyson, W. M. Rossetti, and others. His brother's house is on a quiet, shaded street, and, during the warm weather, the poet sits by an open window on the first floor, close to the sidewalk; and there is hardly a passer-by who does not know him, and nod or speak in passing; and, however he is occupied, whether writing or receiving calls, he is careful to miss no greeting from his friends without. When the window is open, in the mild weather, his conversation with his caller, if he has one, is pretty sure to be interjected with: "How are you, Charley?" "How-day, Mac?" "Good morning, Mary!" "How do you do, Bub?" "How do you do, Sis?" so hearty is his regard for his homely and everyday acquaintances.

He walks out with the aid of his cane, or leaning upon a friend's arm, and often takes the horse-car to the ferry, and crosses over to Philadelphia, where he rides, sometimes for an hour or two, upon an omnibus, or in a horse-car, enjoying, as has always been his wont, contact with various people, the passing sights, and the music of the city's myriad, mingled sounds. The young men of Camden are devoted to him, especially the young mechanics; and his influence upon them is of the most valuable sort, being of a kind to awaken their self-respect. Some of these young men have formed a "Walt Whitman Club," under the auspices of which he has once or twice given public readings from his poems. Although the poet has a venerable appearance far beyond his years,—the result of his ill health,—he still preserves the characteristic largeness and generosity of spirit of former days. He is now, as then, art and part with the crowd, and the warmest of bosom friends. There is nothing provincial about him. A stranger, meeting him, would as soon take him for a Westerner or a Southerner as an Easterner. Mechanics take him for a mechanic, drivers for a driver, scholars for a scholar, the poor for a millionaire, the sick for a physician, and every body for a friend.

And this sane and elastic spirit, which the poet has so well preserved, is the more remarkable, since, for twenty-two years,

he has been a target for slander and abuse. He has been misrepresented, ridiculed, vilified. Popular literary men have dubbed him "faddy," "fireman," "pig-eye," "b'hoy," "beast," "lunatic." While the highest praise has been bestowed upon his poetry in foreign journals, not a word of it has been copied into the journals of his own land, though every word of adverse criticism is copied and recopied from one end of the country to the other. Anthologies have been collected by his fellow-poets, but out of all his writings not a syllable has been chosen. When a noble enterprise was recently set on foot in England to relieve him from poverty by the purchase of an edition of his works, the undertaking was discouraged by the press of this country by means of misleading statements. Articles about him and his poetry by his friends,—writers of admitted ability and sincerity,—when offered to our popular magazines, have been returned unopened. These are not rumors, gathered for use in the heat of controversy, but facts; and they are only chronicled here as being part of the poet's history: shadows, which, dark in themselves, serve as background, and bring into relief and increased brightness his splendid faith in America and democracy, and his deep and tender reverence and love for humanity.

## II.

Turning from the poet to his poems, about which, as we have seen, there has been such diversity of opinion, we shall hardly avoid discoursing as an advocate, believing, as we do, that his poetry is America's first rare, indigenous literary product; and remembering, as we do, how many have condemned it, and how few have praised it. Surely, if Walt Whitman be a great poet, he is entitled to zealous defenders. We have quoted Emerson's high praise; but even Emerson, it is said, no longer praises the poet, having revoked his early judgment. He has certainly characterized Whitman of late years in harsh terms, and he put upon him the public slight of omitting him from the company of chosen songsters which he has gathered in his "Parnassus." But there stand his words; his unsolicited, uninfluenced, spontaneous utterance of twenty years ago; and, although his later verdict accords with the opinion of the majority, yet there

is a minority not insignificant in America, in England, in France, in Germany, and indeed in all the nations of Europe, who appeal from the Emerson of 1875 to the Emerson of 1855, sure that the Future will sustain the appeal. And, as even the birth-place of Homer was forgotten ere his greatness was discovered, and as it took England over a hundred years to find out that Shakspeare was her king, so shall America in time discover that the author of "Leaves of Grass" is the first great poet of democracy.

Nor do these champions of the poet rest with the claim that he represents America. For, although America is *par excellence* the nation of democracy, yet the democratic leaven is now the genesis-spirit of every land, and the most promising, if not yet the most potent, force. In England, where Whitman has had the heartiest recognition, the democratic passion is irresistible and controlling. In France, and Germany, and Denmark, and Hungary, and Italy,—in each of which nations some portions of the new American's writings have been translated into the native tongue,—democracy is steadily making headway. Indeed, it may be questioned whether the philosophy of the democratic movement is not as clearly understood, and whether the results, as embodied here, are not as highly valued, there as by us. The millions who have sailed hither from Europe represent millions left behind; and, in celebrating the achievements of those who have come, Whitman has no less chanted the longings, and encouraged the hopes, of those who have remained.

"Courage! my brother, or my sister!

Keep on! Liberty is to be subserved, whatever occurs;

That is nothing that is quelled by one or two failures, or by any number of failures,

Or by the indifference or ingratitude of the people,

Or the show of the tushes of power—soldiers, cannon, penal statutes.

What we believe in waits latent for ever through Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia,  
Cuba, and all the islands and archipelagoes of the sea."

The great national poet is always a universal poet; and all the universal bards have been representative. He who speaks truly for his time says somewhat that is welcome to all mankind; for every age embodies, in some phase, universal and eternal qualities. The civilization of early Greece has passed away; but

friendship in arms, valor, beauty, and their representative, Homer, will live for ever. Chivalry, as an institution, no longer exists; but loyalty, candor, courage, and Tasso, survive. The Church, in the Middle Ages, engaged the passions and stirred the religious sentiments of men; but the struggle between the Real and the Ideal still goes on in other ways, and faith and ambition, Dante and Shakspeare, are as living in the present as in the past. Minor poets paint only the transient and unreal, and their delineations fade with the objects they represent; but the great bards interpret the ideal significance of their times. They "speak for the inexpressible purposes of Nature." They are "liberating gods," who unveil new scenes, and become themselves part of the Nature whose meanings they unfold. And yet they do not roam abroad for miracles. The wonders they describe are near: open and seen by them; open but unseen by us.

Walt Whitman, poet of nineteenth-century democracy, is a voice of the same old human nature—whose impulses, whose deep and serious emotions, and whose mighty passions, found expression in Homer's epic and in Shakspeare's play. But though the source and fountain are the same, how different the speech! Very prosy is the drama of democracy as it is acted in America in daily scenes. "Nothing conceivable," says De Tocqueville, "is so petty, so insipid, so crowded with paltry interests, in one word, so anti-poetic, as the life of a man in the United States; but," he adds, "amongst the thoughts it suggests there is always one which is full of poetry, and this is the hidden nerve which gives vigor to the whole frame." And this thought, so full of poetry, is the thought of the perfectibility of human nature. It is the perception of the unprecedented and imposing spectacle of a vast multitude of people, each one self-dependent, free to work out his destiny. It is the splendid vision of the future, when, in this nation and in all the nations of the earth, democracy, personal independence, self-respect, self-trust, good-will, charity, friendship, shall have become the rule and practice, the joy and inspiration, of the human race. But do these synonyms of democracy sound very like the text-words of Christianity? Does this vision of the citizen match the vision of the saint? Well it may; for a real republic is the one true embodiment of Christian-

ity. Feudalism was not radically Christian, although its knights made pilgrimages to the holy sepulchre; for it was founded upon the vassalage of the poor and weak. Popery is not radically Christian, although it magnifies the name of Jesus. But democracy, fully carried out, is the veritable word-made-flesh, the actual realization and result of the sentiments of the Sermon on the Mount, and of the living life and sublime death of Jesus Christ.

And this ideal autonomy; this millennial nationality of friends,—is Whitman's summit of aspiration. He leaves to the past its splendid monarchies, its aristocracy and its heroes, its legends and traditions, and celebrates simply and solely the average man and woman of to-day. Heretofore only a dozen or a score of heroes in any land have been deemed worthy to be the themes of drama or of epic song. Of the thousands who sailed the Ægean Sea with Agamemnon, only Achilles and Ulysses, Ajax and Nestor, and a few, were honored in the poet's verse. The rest were myrmidons. Even Shakspeare marries always the noble traits to rank. Hamlet is a prince, and Cordelia is a king's daughter. He gives only the humble virtues to the lowly born, or paints them as buffoons.

And this bias, born of aristocracy, is visible in all modern literature. Tennyson's favorite heroine is a princess, and even Whittier's "Maud Muller" sighs,

"Ah, me!  
That I the judge's bride might be!"

although the judge had

"Sisters proud and cold,"

and his mother was

"Vain of her rank and gold."

Longfellow's "Evangeline" has been fitly styled "a European idyl of American life," and even Emerson so far forgets his democratic birthdom as to declare that "Shakspeare wrote the text of modern life" when, to a true democrat, nothing is more undemocratic than the tone of all of Shakspeare's plays. In a

hundred years of political democracy, we have not had, except in journalism, any democracy in letters. In poetry, particularly, we have only reproduced the models of the aristocratic past.

Walt Whitman is the first poet who has found the average man an object interesting, in the highest degree, to the imagination. He is the first to whom democracy has become a centre of inspiration. Other poets have brought their heroes down from heaven, or have found them in palaces or on battle-fields; but he pays homage only to himself, or "to you, whoever you are."

"Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that you may be my poem;

\* \* \* \* \*

I will leave all, and come and make the hymns of you;  
None have understood you, but I understand you;  
None have done justice to you—you have not done justice to yourself.

\* \* \* \* \*

As for me, I give nothing to any one, except I give the like carefully to you;  
I sing the songs of the glory of none, not God, sooner than I sing the songs of the glory of you."

Never was such a democrat, and never had King or Pope larger faith in self or greater pride. He realizes the ideal sovereign at last, compared to whom all other democrats have only played at sovereignty. He is the Agamemnon, King, not of men, but *among* men.

"I know I am august;  
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood;  
I see that the elementary laws never apologize;  
(I reckon I be aye no prouder than the level I plant my house by after all)."

Yet in choosing himself as the hero of his epic, it is always himself as representative of the reader—of humanity. It is not his fault if the self-assertion and the pride are wanting which would make all other men his peers.

"What I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you."

"I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself."

"I do not call one greater and one smaller."

"In all people I see myself—none more, and not one a barley-corn less."

But, with all his self-assertion, no sighing saint ever saw more clearly than Whitman man's unlikeness to the creature of his dream and hope. And yet, this contrast never clouds the clear sky of his faith and hope. Nought ever persuades him to stint his apotheosis of himself and of humanity. What genial transcendentalism in these lines:—

"That shadow, my likeness, that goes to and fro, seeking a livelihood, chattering, chaffering;

How often I find myself standing and looking at it where it flits;

How often I question and doubt whether that is really me;

—But in these, and among my lovers, and caroling my songs,

O I never doubt whether that is really me."

Prophet, and haunted with visions of what will be, he is no sentimentalist, complaining of his earthly lot, and scolding about the world's affairs. Idealist, he does not roam abroad for his ideal, but sees it becoming real in the passing hour. Transcendentalist, he does not avoid, but seeks, society. Spiritualist, and praiser of death and immortality, he is likewise the rankest of materialists, and is intoxicated with the senses and with joy in things as they are. Panegyrist of the soul, he also celebrates the body. In his biology, body *is* soul, and soul is body.

No Plato, no Humboldt, was ever so well entitled as Whitman to pronounce the word *cosmos*. His imagination is all-embracing, and yet always intelligible. He sings the praises of the beautiful order of the universe with the poet's largeness, and yet with almost the naturalist's passion for accuracy and detail.

"O amazement of things! even the least particle!

O spirituality of things!

O strain, musical, flowing through ages and continents—now reaching me and America!

I take your strong chords—I intersperse them, and cheerfully pass them forward.

I praise with electric voice;

For I do not see one imperfection in the universe;

And I do not see one cause or result lamentable at last in the universe."

What an optimist he is! The preacher prates of his half-dozen miracles, but to this all-glorifying poet there is nought but miracle in the universe.

"I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is a chef-d'œuvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,  
And the narrowest hinge in my hand points to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depress'd head surpasses any statue,  
And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels."

Whitman has catalogued America, as Homer catalogued the ships of the Grecian fleet. From the mountains of New Hampshire to the bayous of Louisiana; from the shore of Paumanok to the mines of California,—nothing is omitted. He has a poem of "American Feuilleage," and one of "The Open Road" with its myriad passing sights and sounds. He apostrophizes city and country, merchant and farmer, poet and pioneer. He sings of "The Western Boy," and "The Working-men;" "Rich Givers," and "The Common Prostitute." He does not describe America as a spectacle, but as something of which he is a part. He seems alike happy among the pageants of the metropolis and amid the solitudes of the forest. He is one who can preserve his presence among roughs, or stand with *aplomb* in the company of the learned. He is the one cosmopolitan who is everywhere at home.

And painting, as he has, all aspects and phases of American geography, and character, and life, if he is not a poet, it is because America is *not* a poem, as Emerson avers it is. For Whitman not only catalogues, but computes, his time. The formula of Michelet—that the great achievements of the Renaissance were the discovery of the world and the discovery of man—applies again to the achievement of this poet of democracy. To him appear the essences, the actualities, the ideals, of his land and time. Our politics and commerce; our elections and our various enterprises; our agitations and our physical activities,—unmeaning and frivolous to many, to him are loaded with the weightiest significance and the grandest promise. And all these greatnesses, these suspected but unseen qualities, he incarnates and reveals.

"These States are the amplest poem,  
Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations,  
Here the doings of men correspond with the broadcast doings of the day and night,  
Here is what moves in magnificent masses, careless of particulars,  
Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combativeness, the Soul loves,  
Here the flowing trains—here the crowds, equality, diversity, the Soul loves."

Yet Whitman is no idle and bragging patriot. His confidence and pride in the young republic are founded, after all, mainly upon its promise and his hopes. No one has discerned the faults of American society more clearly than he, or rebuked them with greater emphasis. Hardly any European, certainly no American, has criticised America in terms more severe than these from his "Democratic Vistas."

"Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness at heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believed in (for all this hectic glow and these melodramatic screamings), nor is Humanity itself believed in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask! The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout. The men believe not in the women, nor the women in the men. A scornful superciliousness rules in literature. The aim of all the *litterateurs* is to find something to make fun of. A lot of churches, sects, &c.,—the most dismal phantasms I know,—usurp the name of religion. Conversation is a mass of badinage. From deceit in the spirit, the mother of all false deeds, the offspring is incalculable. . . . Everywhere, in shop, street, theatre, bar-room, official chair, are pervading flippancy and vulgarity, low cunning, infidelity,—everywhere the youth puny, impudent, foppish, prematurely ripe,—everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignoned; muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceased; shallow notions of beauty, with a range of manners, or lack of manners (considering the advantages enjoyed), probably the meanest to be seen in the world."

But, though Whitman is the sternest of judges of America, he is also the friendliest. For he judges always with a feeling of good-will that is divine, and in a spirit of faith, and love, and hope, which the worst cannot diminish or discourage. His diagnosis is that of the skilful, and of the tender and true, physician.

And, if the republic is to survive its maladies; if the ideal America is ever to arrive,—surely it shall be through some of those courses, and shall consist in some of those qualities, which Whitman, before all others, declares and celebrates. Plato's dream of a republic was to be realized through culture. If accomplished at all, it would have been, when completed, but a

work of art, lasting for a day. But Whitman's ideal America is to be a growth of Nature,—something not made with hands; the fruition of a few sentiments and noble passions; of self-reliance, and courage, and friendship. It is to consist of personality, and pluck, and comradeship. "Men are not to be held together by paper and seal, but by that which aggregates all in a living principle." There is not yet any professorship of such a principle in our universities. There are few preachers who preach it from their pulpits. When one does preach it, he lifts the roof off his church, and shivers the stained glass of its windows. None of our poets, who rewrite the rhymes of foreign poets, have dreamed of it in their visions. Says Whitman,—

"Who are you that would talk to America?  
Have you sped through customs, laws, popularities?  
Can you hold your hand against all seductions, follies, whirls, fierce contentions?  
Are you not of some coterie? some school or religion?  
Are you done with reviews and criticisms of life? animating to life itself?"

Again,—

"What is this you bring my America?  
Is it uniform with my country?  
Is it not something that has been better told or done before?  
Have you imported it in some ship?  
Is it a mere tale? a rhyme? a prettiness?  
Has it never dangled at the heels of the poets, politicians, literats, of enemies' lands?  
Does it answer universal needs? will it improve manners?  
Can your performance face the open fields and the seaside?  
Have real employments contributed to it? original makers, not mere amanuenses?  
Does it meet modern discoveries, calibres, facts, face to face?  
Does it respect me? America? the soul? to-day?"

Interpreter of the genius of democracy, our poet keeps ever in mind a new model for man and an unprecedented ideal for society, and, throughout his poems, in giving utterance to the joy and hope that spring from his heart like flowers from the bosom of the earth, he ever holds his reader hard to this new standard; not as being his any more than theirs; not as something alien, to be learned and naturalized, but as something indigenous,—ac-

ording with the natural instincts of Americans,—to be welcomed, and developed, and *lived*. He never preaches, but rather ejaculates, apostrophizes, and sings. He is no conventional missionary; no theorizing philosopher. He is simply a thorough believer in man,—uttering his faith, and painting in gladness that which is to be. Most of the teachers address the will, or appeal to the cheaper sentiments, moving them for an hour or a day; but these poems are keyed to match the perennial instincts of mankind, and they persuade men, not so much to do, as to let Nature do; to suffer the beneficent spirit of the hour to have sway; to tear off the husks and bonds that are too much about our lives, permitting what we are to be realized; suffering the efflux of the soul.

One of America's writers,—who, however, understands Europe better than he does America,—seeking to admonish his countrymen of their greatest need, puts into the mouth of Freedom,

“Maiden half mortal, half divine,”

the following words:—

“I abide  
With men by culture trained and fortified,  
Who bitter duty to sweet lusts prefer,  
Fearless to counsel and obey.  
Conscience my sceptre is, and law my sword,  
Not to be drawn in passion or in play,  
But terrible to punish and deter,  
Implacable as God's word.”

As if it were more Harvard Colleges, and a revival of Puritanism, that America required above all else! If men were not sometimes cultured and conscientious fops, or underlings, or invalids, or dallyers, this method for keeping Freedom with us might suffice. But, alas!

Listen now to Whitman's sort of admonition:—

“Fear grace—Fear delicatesse,  
Fear the mellow sweet, the sucking of honey-juice;

Beware the advancing mortal ripening of nature,  
Beware what precedes the decay of the ruggedness of states and men.”

The blood of the brawn beloved of time is unconstraint.”

“Friendship, self-esteem, justice, health, clear the way with irresistible power.”

To Whitman, Freedom teaches, not the bitterness of duty, but the sweetness; not a lesson of tiresome constraint, but of unconstraint; not the need, *first* of all, of culture, but the supreme need of the robust disciplines which democracy affords. To his instinct, what is wanted in America is simply that the evolution shall be permitted, complete and sure, of the democratic passion out of which the republic itself has come, and the issues of which shall suffice, if suffered to develop unconstrained. Faithfully the wise necessity which is upon the nation is ever acting. The subtle web is woven through and through its individualities, although they know it not, nor the destiny to which it tends. He aims to show the people of the republic themselves, and what they are for. He interprets liberty, not merely for the citizen, but for man. He supplements the Declaration of '76, making it match the widening destinies of the present. He shows the way to freedom, not simply in politics, but in literature, and religion, and manners; in the relations of employing and employed persons; in the army and navy; and in the whole broad domain of human life.

Whitman has been described in England—by one of the many critics who have attempted to analyze his character—as “more truly Greek than any man of modern times.” And it is true that, after this long lapse of centuries, we find in his poems, and his personality, some of the hues and flavors; the blitheness, and the health; the simplicity, and the naturalness,—of that immortal race. The long divorce between body and soul; the disloyalty to human instincts; the disdain of the present, and the morbid curiosity about the future,—brought in by Hebraism and encouraged by the Church, receive from him no favor or support. His poetry finds our actual, active, complex, modern civilization based on Eternal Nature, the sun and stars, the winter and the summer, the ocean and the land. He strips away the unchaste fig-leaf, and brings again the Greek's pure and

simple reverence for Nature and esteem for man. He expresses a human athleticism perhaps even more complete than that of the Greek, for he includes always "the woman as well as the man."

"Leaves of Grass," like the "Iliad," is a microcosm of its time. The various scenes of real life, the emotions and passions of the natural man, are painted by each poet with faithful hand. Whatever scene or object Whitman describes,— "a Yankee ready for a trade;" "a Kentuckian in deer-skin leggins walking the vale of the Elkhorn;" "a boatman over the bays or lakes;" or "the carpenter dressing his plank,"—he paints each with fidelity, and in a spirit of love and joy, as if each object were related to himself. He chooses the mechanic and "the noble race of drivers" for his themes, in no parson or missionary spirit, and with no lofty-stooping air, but because he finds in them, and the like of them, the wholesome, homely, human flavors that he loves. His reverence for humanity is all-embracing. He reveres what is below just as much as he does what is above.

"And these one and all tend inward to me and I tend outward to them;  
And such as it is to be of these, more or less, I am."

One soon finds, in reading Whitman's poems, what objects and characters transcend all others in his regard. Of natural objects the one dearest to him, undoubtedly, is the sea; and "Out of the Rock'd Cradle" is perhaps the finest of his shorter poems. Charles Sumner used to say that this poem alone entitled its author to the reputation of a great poet. Of individuals, as we have already noted, Whitman prefers homely and rugged natures,—the democrat who is not yet too much refined; "the young mechanic;" "the woodman, that takes his axe and jug with him;" the farmer's daughter; the old mother with her spectacles and knitting. Hence his great love for Abraham Lincoln, upon whose death he composed a burial hymn, which, in England, at the time, was characterized as "the most sweet and sonorous nocturn ever chanted in the Church of the World," and for which the poet has not been without honor even in his own land, from many who yet find no meaning in his other poems. The poem is too long to be given entire here, but a

study of Whitman's work would be seriously imperfect without some excerpts from this remarkable and already famous piece.

"When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom'd,  
And the great star early drooped in the western sky in the night,  
I mourn'd—and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

O ever returning spring I trinity sure to me you bring;  
Lilac blooming perennial, and drooping star in the west,  
And thought of him I love.

\* \* \* \* \*  
Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,  
Through day and night, with the great cloud darkening the land,  
With the pomp of the inloop'd flags, with the cities draped in black,  
With the show of the States themselves, as of crape-veil'd women, standing,  
With processions long and winding, and the flambeaus of the night,  
With the countless torches lit—with the silent sea of faces, and the unbared

heads,  
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,  
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn;  
With all the mournful voices of the dirges, pour'd around the coffin,  
The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—Where amid these you journey;  
With the tolling, tolling bell's perpetual clang;  
Here I coffin that slowly passes,  
I give you my sprig of lilac.

\* \* \* \* \*  
O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?  
And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?  
And what shall my perfume be, for the grave of him I love?"

Sea-winds, blown from east and west,  
Blown from the eastern sea, and blown from the western sea, till there on the  
prairies meeting:  
These, and with these, and the breath of my chant,  
I perfume the grave of him I love."

Near the close of this poem there is a wonderfully beautiful apostrophe to Death, which begins as follows:—

"Come, lovely and soothing Death,  
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,  
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,  
Sooner or later, delicate Death.

Praised be the fathomless universe,  
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious;  
And for love, sweet love—But praise I O praise and praise I  
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death!"

But our poet has nowhere risen higher than in his emphasis of the joys and uses of manly friendship. Not the happy Homer; not even the Christian poets,—have ever emphasized the one word which in his vocabulary is the first, the best, and last.—a word which belongs to him; namely, *comradeship*. This word, better than any other, gives the key both to his poetic and personal character, and contains the sum of his hopes and prophecies; his statesmanship, and his religion. The following song conveys the burden of his ambition with respect to America:—

“Come, I will make the continent indissoluble;  
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever yet shone upon;  
I will make divine magnetic lands,  
    With the love of comrades,  
    With the life-long love of comrades.

I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers of America, and along  
    the shores of the great lakes, and all over the prairies;  
I will make inseparable cities, with their arms about each other's necks;  
    By the love of comrades,  
    By the manly love of comrades.

For you these, from me, O Democracy, to serve you, ma femme!  
For you! for you, I am trilling these songs,  
    In the love of comrades,  
    In the high-towering love of comrades.”

And in one of his later volumes, written after the war, as if already he saw his prophecy fulfilling, he wrote:—

“It shall be customary in the houses and streets to see manly affection;  
The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly;  
The dependence of Liberty shall be lovers,  
The continuance of Equality shall be comrades.

These shall tie you and band you stronger than hoops of iron;  
I, extatic, O partners! O lands! with the love of lovers tie you.

(Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?  
Or by an agreement on a paper? or by arms?  
—Nay—nor the world, nor any living thing will so cohere.)”

## III.

There are two phases of Whitman's poetry we have barely alluded to: his treatment of sex, and his form of expression; his celebration of amativeness, and his art. They can be discussed but briefly here; a separate and full consideration being reserved for another time. It is these, chiefly, that have given offence.

As to the first—as to sexuality—there is an instinct of silence, which, it is said, Whitman, in his group of poems entitled “Children of Adam,” rudely ignores and overrides. But so does the physiologist and the true physician ignore this instinct and break the silence: and properly so. And this poet of democracy is a physician of both soul and body. He comes to diagnose the disease in the intellect, in the art, in the heart, of America to-day. And what does his discriminating eye discern? He sees that there is a false sense of shame attaching, in the modern mind, to the sexual relation. There is tacit admission among men and women everywhere, in our time, that there is inherent vileness in this relation, in sex itself, and in the body. We come honestly enough by this belief. The tradition is very old. It began with Judaism, and Christianity has maintained it. The Church chants it in her litanies; and Puritanism has emphasized it, and formulated it into an iron creed. The body's vileness is traced back in our traditions even to the beginning of the human race. Nor is there any concession of the possibility of purification on the earth. The ancient Greek, untutored in these traditions, ignorant of the reported fall of the ancestor of mankind, had no such consciousness of the impurity of sex. The Greek sculptors, free from any sense of shame, carved their statues nude; and their contemporaries furnished inspiring models, because, honoring the body, they cared for and exalted it. *Lycurgus*, trainer of the Spartans,—so celebrated for their physical perfection, and for many manly traits of character,—innocently ordered the virgins, says *Plutarch*, to exercise naked in running, wrestling, and dancing in the presence of the young men; and “as for this custom,” adds the historian, “it caused a simplicity of manners, and an emulation for the best habit of body: their ideas, too, were naturally enlarged, while they were not excluded from their share of bravery and honor.” And if

our history be true, we have had a people later and nearer home, who were all unconscious of any innate badness in body or in sex, yet who set needed examples of virtue to the Christian people by whom they were discovered. According to the account, certain natives of the West Indies, when first discovered by Columbus, though living freely together, men and women in a state of nakedness, were yet perfectly pure-minded in regard to sex, and withal displayed in a remarkable degree some of the nobler traits of human character; until, through contact with their sex-despising discoverers, they were corrupted and debased. But the American democrat is behind the Greek, and behind this aboriginal inhabitant of the forest, in fulness of self-respect.

Was it not time, then, that one came who should break the long silence about sexuality; who should show that what men have been dumb about, and ashamed of, through all these years is not foul, but holy.—holy as love; holy as Earth, and fatherhood, and motherhood, to which it all pertains? And who, better than the poet, was entitled and qualified to perform this service? For, to him, the real is visible always in its ideal relations.

"His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things."

And did not the achievement of this high task and service devolve naturally and especially upon the poet of democracy; upon him who is distinctively the attestor and celebrator of the greatness and the divineness in men and women; who is the interpreting, rapt Lucretius of *human* nature? Before Whitman came, there had been plenty of half-praise of human nature, and no end of the demagogue's vulgar flattery. But at last comes one who reveres mankind; by whom all, *all* of man is honored; and in whose eyes sexuality, the body, the soul, are equally pure and sacred.

"None but have found you imperfect, I only find no imperfection in you."

Again, was it not fitting that he who has celebrated death as has no other poet, should likewise celebrate birth: and not only birth, but the prelude of birth,—procreation and begetting?

And now at length, the task achieved, this service to humanity

performed, let the instinct of silence, if you will, again prevail. The purpose for which the spell was broken is accomplished. The flesh is freed from its false repute. The "fall" is finished. Henceforth humanity ascends. Democracy now for the first time interpreted and understood, man may begin to achieve his destiny intelligently, and in fulness of self-respect.

But even if this spiritual necessity and emergency had not existed, it may easily be shown that Whitman is justified, from a literary and artistic point of view, in all that he has written of the amative passion. In his large celebration of humanity, one of the incidental undertakings, subservient to his larger purpose, was the cataloguing of mankind's myriad belongings and relations. He would write the inventory of man's illimitable possessions. He would assure him of his own riches; and, by these means, impressing him with some approximate sense of his own importance, he might hope to arouse within him the self-assurance and the lofty pride which are the basis of individuality and true democracy. And, read in the rapt spirit of joy and adoration in which they were written, these mere lists and schedules become sublimest poems. But what kind of an inventory of the attributes and endowments of mankind would that be which omitted sexuality; the amative act: procreation? Not thus did antique genius record the natural history of man. The men of the Bible, and of the Iliad, and of Shakspeare's dramas, were lusty, and loved, and wived, and begot children. Has all this changed in our time? Is ours the age of the neuter gender? It would seem so from our popular literature. Our Bryant has dared to translate the Iliad and the Odyssey; to render the story of Juno's amorous conquest of her lord upon the flowery summit of Ida: and to re-sing Demodocus's song of the amour of Mars and Venus: but turn to the original compositions of the translator, or to the rhymes of Longfellow, and Whittier, and Lowell, and what line out of them all reveals any amativeness in the present? That is always, with them, a quality of the man of the past. Or, if its existence in the present is admitted, it is only to make occasion for a discourse of morals.

But Walt Whitman has saved the nineteenth century from the reputation which such literature as this was fast fixing upon it. Through him, what we are is at last revealed. Through

His faithful realism, happily, the world learns that Puritanism has not wholly cooled the passions of this race; that men do still yearn for women, and women for men; that the old red blood still courses in human veins.

A critic of our popular literary school avers that there is not an impure word in Shakspeare, but that Whitman is obscene. Such a declaration as this is the result of a literary glamour which renders moral discrimination simply impossible. Every line of Shakspeare is justified by the standard of supreme art; but whether the critic means to say that the great dramatist's writings are free from textual impurities, or from moral licentiousness, his assertion is equally untrue and absurd. There is not a play of Shakspeare in which the text is not altered upon the stage to suit the prudery of our time; and this critic himself could hardly be persuaded, notwithstanding his assertion, to read "Venus and Adonis" to a miscellaneous company. But Walt Whitman, though he is gross and rude, is always pure. His grossness is the grossness of Nature, of rude health. Shakspeare's treatment of the amorous passion is often that of the gallant and the voluptuary. Whitman's is never satisfactory to these; for, though he celebrates the sensuous, he never writes in the interest of sensuality, but of fatherhood and maternity.

I shall demand perfect men and women out of my love-spendings."

He avows and rejoices in the deliciousness of sex; but, like Plato in the "Republic," he demands sanity and health in it all, and as the result of it all. He is the one poet, in all time, who has celebrated sex in the interest of human progress; in the service of health,—physical and moral,—of equality, democracy, religion. They who think they find him obscene, in truth find Nature obscene,—find themselves obscene.

As to Whitman's style, the form of his poetry,—which is his other principal offence against popular taste,—the objections to it are analogous to those urged against his freedom in the treatment of sex. As of the ideal hero in modern popular literature, so of the modern popular poet; he never seems to be thoroughly masculine. He is a sort of *castrato*: a false soprano. His am-

bition is always sweetness rather than strength; expression rather than the thing to be expressed. According to the popular standard, a poem *must* jingle; it *may* express the ideal. Twain's humorous account of the effect upon his mind of the horse-car rhymes contains even more satire than humor. The subjection of the modern intellect to the tyranny of rhyme is something fearful. Everywhere, among the literary coteries, people are forever discussing style. Sentimentalisms are dressed up in liquid syllables,—in pretty words that have been "laid away in lavender,"—and pass current for the best poetry. The critic makes a feint at analysis of the substance of the composition, but ends with inferring its merit from its form. If the sentences are not elaborated with particular regard to the sound of the syllables employed, the composition is condemned. And, on the other hand, if the alliteration and rhyme are perfect, they captivate all ears.

How much of our literature, and our art, falls within Goethe's definition of dilettanteism! "They [dilettantes] are curious in artifice, manner, modes of working, arcana, because in general they cannot raise themselves beyond the idea of mechanical dexterity." "The peculiar want of the dilettante, is the *Architectonic* in the highest sense,—that practical power which creates, forms, constitutes. Of this he has only a sort of misgiving, and submits himself to his material, instead of commanding it." "It will be found that the dilettante runs particularly to *neatness*, which is the completion of the thing in hand; wherefrom a sort of illusion arises, as if the thing itself were worthy of existing." "The impudence of the later dilettanteism originated, and is maintained, through reminiscences of a richly cultivated poetic dialect, and the facility of a good mechanical exterior."

And this is the standard by which Whitman's poems have been judged. People complain of the absence of rhyme and ornament from his lines, and critics taught in the schools object that his verses cannot be described by any metres known. It might suffice to reply to these, that there are those who, with Emerson in 1855, find in "Leaves of Grass" "incomparable things said incomparably well, as they *must* be." Or, we may recall what Emerson has written of poetry in general,—that "it is not metres that make a poem; but a thought so passionate and alive

that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns Nature with a new thing." Whitman has certainly made himself understood to some persons; and from such,—from those who, through his influence, have come to prefer life out of doors to life in parlors, and manly friendship to coxcombry, and absolute and catholic democracy to any limited and timid experimenting in that direction,—from *them* there comes no complaint of Whitman's art. To those of his readers who understand his thought, and catch the spirit of his writings, his lines are melodious as the winds, and rhythmic as the waves upon the shore. His verses never jingle; yet they have a long-drawn cadence, which the sensuous ear alone may not detect, but which, on the listener's ear of both mind and body, falls clear and musical, satisfying a high and healthy æsthetic sense. Only the voices of the manliest and the womanliest can rightly accentuate the words of "Leaves of Grass;" only the mind can unlock its melody; only the true democrat,—the large-souled lover of humanity,—can hear all the tones of its subtle cadence.

And these objectors to the construction of these verses may be reminded that their complaints apply as well to the poetry of the Hebrew and Indian bibles, and to much of the poetry of the Greeks. All of these are wanting in metrical system, and in rhyme, although they are not—nor are Whitman's verses—wanting in certain verbal qualities which afford pleasure to the ear. There is also in his poetry,—as in the English version of the poems of the Bible, and more conspicuously in Greek poetry,—a certain rhythm within the lines, which the careful ear detects, though it is not sufficiently defined to show conscious purpose on the poet's part of securing the verbal, musical effect.

Walt Whitman is the first of a new class of poets. He is the first in America who has given literary expression to its national character; its noble pride; its enthusiasm, and its deep and serious emotions: and, as ever with the first bards of a nation, he is prophet as well, and the prophetic inspiration always hastens to expression in rugged and impassioned utterance. After the poet-prophet succeeds the poet-artist; who, less passionate, but with thought no less clear, attains the perfect form. In the third period, the poet degenerates into the mere student of

expression, and elegance is studied as an end. All America's singers, except Whitman, belong to this third order. We have all along been in great danger, in America,—and are not yet out of it,—of a surfeit of the finesse and luxury of words; of our poetry becoming a copious supply of pensive sugar-candy and sickening sweet-cake. Where is the verse born of our national blood? In many things we have been original, self-poised, and natural; but, until Whitman appeared, where was our original poet? Some of our rhyme-writers have done service by their careful versions of the elder bards; but they have broken no new ground, expressed no new emotion.

Thus the merely literary service of "Leaves of Grass," as it takes its place in literature, will be the dissipation of the plaintive and the pretty, the select and artificial, theory of verse, and the establishment of truly naturalistic and realistic models.

But the highest value of Walt Whitman, and of his inevitable absorption into the future of these United States, will be that his singing fully expresses the concrete, the wonder of forms, the material fibre of visible things, and a personality in which all human qualities are honored equally with the spiritual and ideal. His poems open wider the door into that new time,—which all along a few in America have faintly discerned,—when men shall not strain their eyes so much towards the past and towards the future, but shall find always supreme joy and enchanting beauty in the passing hour. Michael Angelo said that, when he read the Iliad, he looked at himself to see if he were not twenty feet in height; and the reader of "Leaves of Grass," if he enter into the spirit of the poems, is likewise filled with a sense of largeness. He derives therefrom a new conception of freedom, a higher esteem for himself. Henceforth the words liberty, religion, man, have sublimer meanings, and life a nobler significance.

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