

JOHN BURROUGHS

WHITMAN: A
STUDY

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Whitman: A Study

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Содержание

WHITMAN	5
BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL	28
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	70

Whitman: A Study

"All original art is self-regulated, and no original art can be regulated from without; it carries its own counterpoise, and does not receive it from elsewhere." – Taine.

"If you want to tell good Gothic, see if it has the sort of roughness and largeness and nonchalance, mixed in places with the exquisite tenderness which seems always to be the sign manual of the broad vision and massy power of men who can see past the work they are doing, and betray here and there something like disdain for it." – Ruskin.

"Formerly, during the period termed classic, when literature was governed by recognized rules, he was considered the best poet who had composed the most perfect work, the most beautiful poem, the most intelligible, the most agreeable to read, the most complete in every respect, – the Æneid, the Gerusalemme, a fine tragedy. To-day something else is wanted. For us the greatest poet is he who in his works most stimulates the reader's imagination and reflection, who excites him the most himself to poetize. The greatest poet is not he who has done the best, it is he who suggests the most; he, not all of whose meaning is at first obvious, and who leaves you much to desire, to explain, to study, much to complete in your turn." – Sainte-Beuve.

WHITMAN PRELIMINARY

I

The writing of this preliminary chapter, and the final survey and revision of my Whitman essay, I am making at a rustic house I have built at a wild place a mile or more from my home upon the river. I call this place Whitman Land, because in many ways it is typical of my poet, – an amphitheatre of precipitous rock, slightly veiled with a delicate growth of verdure, enclosing a few acres of prairie-like land, once the site of an ancient lake, now a garden of unknown depth and fertility. Elemental ruggedness, savageness, and grandeur, combined with wonderful tenderness, modernness, and geniality. There rise the gray scarred cliffs, crowned here and there with a dead hemlock or pine, where, morning after morning, I have seen the bald-eagle perch, and here at their feet this level area of tender humus, with three perennial springs of delicious cold water flowing in its margin; a huge granite bowl filled with the elements and potencies of life. The scene has a strange fascination for me, and holds me here day after day. From the highest point of rocks I can overlook a long stretch of the river and of the farming country beyond; I can hear

owls hoot, hawks scream, and roosters crow. Birds of the garden and orchard meet birds of the forest upon the shaggy cedar posts that uphold my porch. At dusk the call of the whippoorwill mingles with the chorus of the pickerel frogs, and in the morning I hear through the robins' cheerful burst the sombre plaint of the mourning-dove. When I tire of my manuscript, I walk in the woods, or climb the rocks, or help the men clear up the ground, piling and burning the stumps and rubbish. This scene and situation, so primitive and secluded, yet so touched with and adapted to civilization, responding to the moods of both sides of the life and imagination of a modern man, seems, I repeat, typical in many ways of my poet, and is a veritable Whitman land. Whitman does not to me suggest the wild and unkempt as he seems to do to many; he suggests the cosmic and the elemental, and this is one of the dominant thoughts that run through my dissertation. Scenes of power and savagery in nature were more welcome to him, probably more stimulating to him, than the scenes of the pretty and placid, and he cherished the hope that he had put into his "Leaves" some of the tonic and fortifying quality of Nature in her more grand and primitive aspects.

His wildness is only the wildness of the great primary forces from which we draw our health and strength. Underneath all his unloosedness, or free launching forth of himself, is the sanity and repose of nature.

II

I first became acquainted with Whitman's poetry through the columns of the old "Saturday Press" when I was twenty or twenty-one years old (1858 or 1859). The first things I remember to have read were "There was a child went forth," "This Compost," "As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "Old Ireland," and maybe a few others. I was attracted by the new poet's work from the first. It seemed to let me into a larger, freer air than I found in the current poetry. Meeting Bayard Taylor about this time, I spoke to him about Whitman. "Yes," he said, "there is something in him, but he is a man of colossal egotism."

A few years later a friend sent me a copy of the Thayer & Eldridge edition of "Leaves of Grass" of 1860. It proved a fascinating but puzzling book to me. I grazed upon it like a colt upon a mountain, taking what tasted good to me, and avoiding what displeased me, but having little or no conception of the purport of the work as a whole. I found passages and whole poems here and there that I never tired of reading, and that gave a strange fillip to my moral and intellectual nature, but nearly as many passages and poems puzzled or repelled me. My absorption of Emerson had prepared me in a measure for Whitman's philosophy of life, but not for the ideals of character and conduct which he held up to me, nor for the standards in art to which the poet perpetually appealed. Whitman was Emerson

translated from the abstract into the concrete. There was no privacy with Whitman; he never sat me down in a corner with a cozy, comfortable shut-in feeling, but he set me upon a hill or started me upon an endless journey. Wordsworth had been my poet of nature, of the sequestered and the idyllic; but I saw that here was a poet of a larger, more fundamental nature, indeed of the Cosmos itself. Not a poet of dells and fells, but of the earth and the orbs. This much soon appeared to me, but I was troubled by the poet's apparent "colossal egotism," by his attitude towards evil, declaring himself "to be the poet of wickedness also;" by his seeming attraction toward the turbulent and the disorderly; and, at times, by what the critics had called his cataloguing style of treatment.

When I came to meet the poet himself, which was in the fall of 1863, I felt less concern about these features of his work; he was so sound and sweet and gentle and attractive as a man, and withal so wise and tolerant, that I soon came to feel the same confidence in the book that I at once placed in its author, even in the parts which I did not understand. I saw that the work and the man were one, and that the former must be good as the latter was good. There was something in the manner in which both the book and its author carried themselves under the sun, and in the way they confronted America and the present time, that convinced beyond the power of logic or criticism.

The more I saw of Whitman, and the more I studied his "Leaves," the more significance I found in both, and the clearer

it became to me that a new type of a man and a new departure in poetic literature were here foreshadowed. There was something forbidding, but there was something vital and grand back of it. I found to be true what the poet said of himself, —

"Bearded, sunburnt, gray-neck'd, forbidding, I have arrived,
To be wrestled with as I pass for the solid prizes of the
universe,
For such I afford whoever can persevere to win them," —

I have persevered in my study of the poet, though balked many times, and the effect upon my own mental and spiritual nature has been great; no such "solid prizes" in the way of a broader outlook upon life and nature, and, I may say, upon art, has any poet of my time afforded me. There are passages or whole poems in the "Leaves" which I do not yet understand ("Sleep-Chasings" is one of them), though the language is as clear as daylight; they are simply too subtle or elusive for me; but my confidence in the logical soundness of the book is so complete that I do not trouble myself at all about these things.

III

I would fain make these introductory remarks to my essay a sort of window through which the reader may get a fairly good view of what lies beyond. If he does not here get any glimpse or

suggestion of what pleases him, or of what he is looking for, it will hardly be worth while for him to trouble himself further.

A great many readers, perhaps three fourths of the readers of current poetry, and not a few of the writers thereof, cannot stand Whitman at all, or see any reason for his being. To such my essay, if it ever comes to their notice, will be a curiosity, may be an offense. But I trust it will meet with a different reception at the hands of the smaller but rapidly growing circle of those who are beginning to turn to Whitman as the most imposing and significant figure in our literary annals.

The rapidly growing Whitman literature attests the increasing interest to which I refer. Indeed, it seems likely that by the end of the century the literature which will have grown up around the name of this man will surpass in bulk and value that which has grown up around the name of any other man of letters born within the century.

When Mr. Stedman wrote his essay upon the poet early in the eighties, he referred to the mass of this literature. It has probably more than doubled in volume in the intervening years: since Whitman's death in the spring of '92, it has been added to by William Clark's book upon the poet, Professor Trigg's study of Browning and Whitman, and the work of that accomplished critic and scholar, so lately gone to his rest, John Addington Symonds. This last is undoubtedly the most notable contribution that has yet been made, or is likely very soon to be made, to the Whitman literature. Mr. Symonds declares that "Leaves of

Grass," which he first read at the age of twenty-five, influenced him more than any other book has done, except the Bible, – more than Plato, more than Goethe.

When we remember that the man who made this statement was eminently a man of books, deeply read in all literatures, his testimony may well offset that of a score of our home critics who find nothing worthy or helpful in Whitman's work. One positive witness in such a matter outweighs any number of negative ones.

IV

For making another addition to the growing Whitman literature, I have no apology to offer. I know well enough that "writing and talk" cannot "prove" a poet; that he must be his own proof or be forgotten; and my main purpose in writing about Whitman, as in writing about nature, is to tell readers what I have found there, with the hope of inducing them to look for themselves. At the same time, I may say that I think no modern poet so much needs to be surrounded by an atmosphere of comment and interpretation, through which readers may approach him, as does Whitman. His work sprang from a habit or attitude of mind quite foreign to that with which current literature makes us familiar, – so germinal is it, and so little is it beholden to the formal art we so assiduously cultivate. The poet says his work "connects lovingly with precedents," but it does not connect lovingly with any body of poetry of this century. "Leaves of

Grass" is bound to be a shock to the timid and pampered taste of the majority of current readers. I would fain lessen this shock by interposing my own pages of comment between the book and the public. The critic can say so many things the poet cannot. He can explain and qualify and analyze, whereas the creative artist can only hint or project. The poet must hasten on, he must infold and bind together, he must be direct and synthetic in every act. Reflection and qualification are not for him, but action, emotion, volition, the procreant blending and surrender. He works as Nature does, and gives us reality in every line.

Whitman says: —

"I charge you forever reject those who would expound me,
for I cannot expound myself."

The type of mind of Whitman's, which seldom or never emerges as a mere mentality, an independent thinking and knowing faculty, but always as a personality, always as a complete human entity, never can expound itself, because its operations are synthetic and not analytic, its mainspring is love and not mere knowledge. In his prose essay called "A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads," appended to the final edition of his poems, Whitman has not so much sought to expound himself as to put his reader in possession of his point of view, and of the considerations that lie back of his work. This chapter might render much that I have written superfluous, were there

not always a distinct gain in seeing an author through another medium, or in getting the equivalents of him in the thoughts and ideals of a kindred and sympathetic mind. But I have not consciously sought to expound Whitman, any more than in my other books I have sought to expound the birds or wild nature. I have written out some things that he means to me, and the pleasure and profit I have found in his pages.

There is no end to what can be drawn out of him. It has been said and repeated that he was not a thinker, and yet I find more food for thought in him than in all other poets. It has been often said and repeated that he is not a poet, and yet the readers that respond to him the most fully appear to be those in whom the poetic temperament is paramount. I believe he supplies in fuller measure that pristine element, something akin to the unbreathed air of mountain and shore, which makes the arterial blood of poetry and literature, than any other modern writer.

V

We can make little of Whitman unless we allow him to be a law unto himself, and seek him through the clews which he himself brings. When we try him by current modes, current taste, and demand of him formal beauty, formal art, we are disappointed. But when we try him by what we may call the scientific standard, the standard of organic nature, and demand of him the vital and the characteristic, – demand of him that he

have a law of his own, and fulfill that law in the poetic sphere, – the result is quite different.

More than any other poet, Whitman is what we make him; more than any other poet, his greatest value is in what he suggests and implies, rather than in what he portrays; and more than any other poet must he wait to be understood by the growth of the taste of himself. "I make the only growth by which I can be appreciated," he truly says.

His words are like the manna that descended upon the Israelites, "in which were all manner of tastes; and every one found in it what his palate was chiefly pleased with. If he desired fat in it, he had it. In it the young men tasted bread; the old men honey; and the children oil." Many young men, – poets, artists, teachers, preachers, – have testified that they have found bread in Whitman, the veritable bread of life; others have found honey, sweet poetic morsels; and not a few report having found only gall.

VI

In considering an original work like "Leaves of Grass," the search is always for the grounds upon which it is to be justified and explained. These grounds in this work are not easy to find; they lie deeper than the grounds upon which the popular poets rest. Because they are not at once seen, many readers have denied that there are any such grounds. But to deny a basis of reality to a work with the history of "Leaves of Grass," and a basis well

grounded on æsthetic and artistic principles, is not to be thought of.

The more the poet eludes us, the more we know he has his hiding-place somewhere. The more he denies our standards, the more we know he has standards of his own which we must discover; the more he flouts at our literary conventions, the more we must press him for his own principles and methods. How does he justify himself to himself? Could any sane man have written the *Children of Adam* poems who was not sustained by deepest moral and æsthetic convictions? It is the business of the critic to search for these principles and convictions, and not shirk the task by ridicule and denial.

VII

If there was never any change in taste, if it always ran in the same channels, – indeed, if it did not at times run in precisely opposite channels, – there would be little hope that Walt Whitman's poetry would ever find any considerable number of readers. But one of the laws that dominate the progress of literature, as Edmond Shérer says, is incessant change, not only in thought and ideas, but in taste and the starting-points of art. A radical and almost violent change in these respects is indicated by Whitman, – a change which is in unison with many things in modern life and morals, but which fairly crosses the prevailing taste in poetry and in art. No such dose of realism and

individualism under the guise of poetry has been administered to the reading public in this century. No such break with literary traditions – no such audacious attempt to tally, in a printed page, the living concrete man, an actual human presence, instead of the conscious, made-up poet – is to be found in modern literary records.

VIII

The much that I have said in the following pages about Whitman's radical differences from other poets – his changed attitude towards the universe, his unwonted methods and aims, etc., – might seem to place him upon a ground so unique and individual as to contradict my claims for his breadth and universality. The great poets stand upon common ground; they excel along familiar lines, they touch us, and touch us deeply, at many points. What always saves Whitman is his enormous endowment of what is "commonest, nearest, easiest," – his atmosphere of the common day, the common life, and his fund of human sympathy and love. He is strange because he gives us the familiar in such a direct, unexpected manner. His "Leaves" are like some new fruit that we have never before tasted. It is the product of another clime, another hemisphere. The same old rains and dews, the same old sun and soil, nursed it, yet in so many ways how novel and strange! We certainly have to serve a certain apprenticeship to this poet, familiarize ourselves with

his point of view and with his democratic spirit, before we can make much of him. The spirit in which we come to him from the other poets – the poets of art and culture – is for the most part unfriendly to him. There is something rude, strange, and unpoetic about him at first sight that is sure to give most readers of poetry a shock. I think one might come to him from the Greek poets, or the old Hebrew or Oriental bards, with less shock than from our modern delicate and refined singers; because the old poets were more simple and elemental, and aimed less at the distilled dainties of poetry, than the modern. They were full of action, too, and volition, – of that which begets and sustains life. Whitman's poetry is almost entirely the expression of will and personality, and runs very little to intellectual subtleties and refinements. It fulfills itself in our wills and character, rather than in our taste.

IX

Whitman will always be a strange and unwonted figure among his country's poets, and among English poets generally, – a cropping out again, after so many centuries, of the old bardic prophetic strain. Had he dropped upon us from some other sphere, he could hardly have been a greater surprise and puzzle to the average reader or critic. Into a literature that was timid, imitative, conventional, he fell like leviathan into a duck-pond, and the commotion and consternation he created there have

not yet subsided. All the reigning poets in this country except Emerson denied him, and many of our minor poets still keep up a hostile sissing and cackling. He will probably always be more or less a stumbling-block to the minor poet, because of his indifference to the things which to the minor poet are all in all. He was a poet without what is called artistic form, and without technique, as that word is commonly understood. His method was analogous to the dynamic method of organic nature, rather than to the mechanical or constructive method of the popular poets.

X

Of course the first thing that strikes the reader in "Leaves of Grass" is its seeming oddity and strangeness. If a man were to come into a dress reception in shirt sleeves and with his hat on, the feature would strike us at once, and would be magnified in our eyes; we should quite forget that he was a man, and in essentials differed but little from the rest of us, after all. The exterior habiliments on such occasions count for nearly everything; and in the popular poetry rhyme, measure, and the language and manners of the poets are much more than anything else. If Whitman did not do anything so outré as to come into a dress reception with his coat off and his hat on, he did come into the circle of the poets without the usual poetic habiliments. He was not dressed up at all, and he was not at all abashed or apologetic.

His air was confident and self-satisfied, if it did not at times suggest the insolent and aggressive. It was the dress circle that was on trial, and not Walt Whitman.

We could forgive a man in real life for such an audacious proceeding only on the ground of his being something extraordinary as a person, with an extraordinary message to convey; and we can pardon the poet only on precisely like grounds. He must make us forget his unwonted garb by his unique and lovable personality, and the power and wisdom of his utterance. If he cannot do this we shall soon tire of him.

That Whitman was a personality the like of which the world has not often seen, and that his message to his country and to his race was of prime importance, are conclusions at which more and more thinking persons are surely arriving.

His want of art, of which we have heard so much, is, it seems to me, just this want of the usual trappings and dress uniform of the poets. In the essentials of art, the creative imagination, the plastic and quickening spirit, the power of identification with the thing contemplated, and the absolute use of words, he has few rivals.

XI

I make no claim that my essay is a dispassionate, disinterested view of Whitman. It will doubtless appear to many as a one-sided view, or as colored by my love for the man himself. And I shall

not be disturbed if such turns out to be the case. A dispassionate view of a man like Whitman is probably out of the question in our time, or in any near time. His appeal is so personal and direct that readers are apt to be either violently for him or violently against, and it will require the perspective of more than one generation to bring out his true significance. Still, for any partiality for its subject which my book may show, let me take shelter behind a dictum of Goethe.

"I am more and more convinced," says the great critic, "that whenever one has to vent an opinion on the actions or on the writings of others, unless this be done from a certain one-sided enthusiasm, or from a loving interest in the person and the work, the result is hardly worth gathering up. Sympathy and enjoyment in what we see is in fact the only reality, and, from such reality, reality as a natural product follows. All else is vanity."

To a loving interest in Whitman and his work, which may indeed amount to one-sided enthusiasm, I plead guilty. This at least is real with me, and not affected; and, if the reality which Goethe predicts in such cases only follows, I shall be more than content.

XII

In the world of literature, as in the world of physical forces, things adjust themselves after a while, and no impetus can be given to any man's name or fame that will finally carry it beyond

the limit of his real worth. However "one-sided" my enthusiasm for Whitman may be, or that of any of his friends may be, there is no danger but that in time he will find exactly his proper place and level. My opinion, or any man's opinion, of the works of another, is like a wind that blows for a moment across the water, heaping it up a little on the shore or else beating it down, but not in any way permanently affecting its proper level.

The adverse winds that have blown over Whitman's work have been many and persistent, and yet the tide has surely risen, his fame has slowly increased.

It will soon be forty years since he issued the first thin quarto edition of "Leaves of Grass," and, though the opposition to him has been the most fierce and determined ever recorded in our literary history, often degenerating into persecution and willful misrepresentation, yet his fame has steadily grown both at home and abroad. The impression he early made upon such men as Emerson, Thoreau, William O'Connor, Mr. Stedman, Colonel Ingersoll, and others in this country, and upon Professors Dowden and Clifford, upon Symonds, Ruskin, Tennyson, Rossetti, Lord Lytton, Mrs. Gilchrist, George Eliot, in England, has been followed by an equally deep or deeper impression upon many of the younger and bolder spirits of both hemispheres. In fact Whitman saw his battle essentially won in his own lifetime, though his complete triumph is of course a matter of the distant future.

XIII

But let me give without further delay a fuller hint of the attitude these pages assume and hold towards the subject they discuss.

There are always, or nearly always, a few men born to each generation who embody the best thought and culture of that generation, and express it in approved literary forms. From Petrarch down to Lowell, the lives and works of these men fill the literary annals; they uphold the literary and scholarly traditions; they are the true men of letters; they are justly honored and beloved in their day and land. We in this country have recently, in the death of Dr. Holmes, mourned the loss of the last of the New England band of such men. We are all indebted to them for solace, and for moral and intellectual stimulus.

Then, much more rarely, there is born to a race or people men who are like an irruption of life from another world, who belong to another order, who bring other standards, and sow the seed of new and larger types; who are not the organs of the culture or modes of their time, and whom their times for the most part decry and disown, – the primal, original, elemental men. It is here, in my opinion, that we must place Whitman; not among the minstrels and edifiers of his age, but among its prophets and saviors. He is nearer the sources of things than the popular poets, – nearer the founders and discoverers, closer akin to the

large, fervent, prophetic, patriarchal men who figure in the early heroic ages. His work ranks with the great primitive books. He is of the type of the skald, the bard, the seer, the prophet. The specialization and differentiation of our latter ages of science and culture is less marked in him than in other poets. Poetry, philosophy, religion, are all inseparably blended in his pages. He is in many ways a reversion to an earlier type. Dr. Brinton has remarked that his attitude toward the principle of sex and his use of sexual imagery in his poems, are the same as in the more primitive religions. Whitman was not a poet by elaboration, but by suggestion; not an artist by formal presentation, but by spirit and conception; not a philosopher by system and afterthought, but by vision and temper.

In his "Leaves," we again hear the note of destiny, – again see the universal laws and forces exemplified in the human personality, and turned upon life with love and triumph.

XIV

The world always has trouble with its primary men, or with the men who have any primary gifts, like Emerson, Wordsworth, Browning, Tolstoi, Ibsen. The idols of an age are nearly always secondary men: they break no new ground; they make no extraordinary demands; our tastes and wants are already adjusted to their type; we understand and approve of them at once. The primary men disturb us; they are a summons and a challenge;

they break up the old order; they open up new territory which we are to subdue and occupy; the next age and the next make more of them. In my opinion, the next age and the next will make more of Whitman, and the next still more, because he is in the great world-current, in the line of the evolutionary movement of our time. Is it at all probable that Tennyson can ever be to any other age what he has been to this? Tennyson marks an expiring age, the sunset of the feudal world. He did not share the spirit to which the future belongs. There was not one drop of democratic blood in his veins. To him, the people were an hundred-headed beast.

XV

If my essay seems like one continual strain to attain the unattainable, to compass and define Whitman, who will not be compassed and defined, I can only say that I regret it, but could not well help it. Talking about Whitman, Symonds said, was like talking about the universe, and it is so. There is somewhat incommensurable in his works. One may not hope to speak the final word about him, to sum him up in a sentence. He is so palpable, so real, so near at hand, that the critic or expounder of him promises himself an easy victory; but before one can close with him he is gone. He is, after all, as subtle and baffling as air or light.

... "I will certainly elude you,

Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!

Already you see I have escaped from you."

It is probably this characteristic which makes Whitman an irrepressible figure in literature; he will not down for friend or foe. He escapes from all classification, and is larger than any definition of him that has yet been given. How many times has he been exploded by British and American critics; how many times has he been labeled and put upon the shelf, only to reappear again as vigorous and untranslatable as ever!

XVI

So far as Whitman stands merely for the spirit of revolt, or of reaction against current modes in life and literature, I have little interest in him. As the "apostle of the rough, the uncouth," to use Mr. Howells's words, the world would long ago have tired of him. The irruption into letters of the wild and lawless, or of the strained and eccentric, can amuse and interest us only for a moment. It is because these are only momentary phases of him, as it were, and because underneath all he embraces the whole of life and ministers to it, that his fame and influence are still growing in the world. One hesitates even to call Whitman the poet of "democracy," or of "personality," or of "the modern," because such terms only half define him. He quickly escapes

into that large and universal air which all great art breathes. We cannot sum him up in a phrase. He flows out on all sides, and his sympathies embrace all types and conditions of men. He is a great democrat, but, first and last and over all, he is a great man, a great nature, and deep world-currents course through him. He is distinctively an American poet, but his Americanism is only the door through which he enters upon the universal.

XVII

Call his work poetry or prose, or what you will: that it is an inspired utterance of some sort, any competent person ought to be able to see. And what else do we finally demand of any work than that it be inspired? How all questions of form and art, and all other questions, sink into insignificance beside that! The exaltation of mind and spirit shown in the main body of Whitman's work, the genuine, prophetic fervor, the intensification and amplification of the simple ego, and the resultant raising of all human values, seem to me as plain as daylight.

Whitman is to be classed among the great names by the breadth and all-inclusiveness of his theme and by his irrepressible personality. I think it highly probable that future scholars and critics will find his work fully as significant and era-marking as that of any of the few supreme names of the past. It is the culmination of an age of individualism, and, as opposites meet,

it is also the best lesson in nationalism and universal charity that this century has seen.

BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL

I

Walt Whitman was born at West Hills, Long Island, May 30, 1819, and died at Camden, N. J., March 26, 1892. Though born in the country, most of his life was passed in cities; first in Brooklyn and New York, then in New Orleans, then in Washington, and lastly in Camden, where his body is buried. It was a poet's life from first to last, – free, unhampered, unworldly, unconventional, picturesque, simple, untouched by the craze of money-getting, unselfish, devoted to others, and was, on the whole, joyfully and contentedly lived. It was a pleased and interested saunter through the world, – no hurry, no fever, no strife; hence no bitterness, no depletion, no wasted energies. A farm boy, then a school-teacher, then a printer, editor, writer, traveler, mechanic, nurse in the army hospitals, and lastly government clerk; large and picturesque of figure, slow of movement; tolerant, passive, receptive, and democratic, – of the people; in all his tastes and attractions, always aiming to walk abreast with the great laws and forces, and to live thoroughly in the free, nonchalant spirit of his own day and land. His strain was mingled Dutch and English, with a decided Quaker tinge, which

came from his mother's side, and which had a marked influence upon his work.

The spirit that led him to devote his time and substance to the sick and wounded soldiers during the war may be seen in that earlier incident in his life when he drove a Broadway stage all one winter, that a disabled driver might lie by without starving his family. It is from this episode that the tradition of his having been a New York stage-driver comes. He seems always to have had a special liking for this class of workmen. One of the house surgeons of the old New York Hospital relates that in the latter part of the fifties Whitman was a frequent visitor to that institution, looking after and ministering to disabled stage-drivers. "These drivers," says the doctor, "like those of the omnibuses in London, were a set of men by themselves. A good deal of strength, intelligence, and skillful management of horses was required of a Broadway stage-driver. He seems to have been decidedly a higher order of man than the driver of the present horse-cars. He usually had his primary education in the country, and graduated as a thorough expert in managing a very difficult machine, in an exceptionally busy thoroughfare.

"It was this kind of a man that so attracted Walt Whitman that he was constantly to be seen perched on the box alongside one of them going up and down Broadway. I often watched the poet and driver, as probably did many another New Yorker in those days.

"I do not wonder as much now as I did in 1860 that a man like Walt Whitman became interested in these drivers. He was

not interested in the news of every-day life – the murders and accidents and political convulsions – but he was interested in strong types of human character. We young men had not had experience enough to understand this kind of a man. It seems to me now that we looked at Whitman simply as a kind of crank, if the word had then been invented. His talk to us was chiefly of books, and the men who wrote them: especially of poetry, and what he considered poetry. He never said much of the class whom he visited in our wards, after he had satisfied himself of the nature of the injury and of the prospect of recovery.

"Whitman appeared to be about forty years of age at that time. He was always dressed in a blue flannel coat and vest, with gray and baggy trousers. He wore a woolen shirt, with a Byronic collar, low in the neck, without a cravat, as I remember, and a large felt hat. His hair was iron gray, and he had a full beard and mustache of the same color. His face and neck were bronzed by exposure to the sun and air. He was large, and gave the impression of being a vigorous man. He was scrupulously careful of his simple attire, and his hands were soft and hairy."

During the early inception of "Leaves of Grass" he was a carpenter in Brooklyn, building and selling small frame-houses to working people. He frequently knocked off work to write his poems. In his life Whitman was never one of the restless, striving sort. In this respect he was not typical of his countrymen. All his urgency and strenuousness he reserved for his book. He seems always to have been a sort of visitor in life, noting, observing,

absorbing, keeping aloof from all ties that would hold him, and making the most of the hour and the place in which he happened to be. He was in no sense a typical literary man. During his life in New York and Brooklyn, we see him moving entirely outside the fashionable circles, the learned circles, the literary circles, the money-getting circles. He belongs to no set or club. He is seen more with the laboring classes, – drivers, boatmen, mechanics, printers, – and I suspect may often be found with publicans and sinners. He is fond of the ferries and of the omnibuses. He is a frequenter of the theatre and of the Italian opera. Alboni makes a deep and lasting impression upon him. It is probably to her that he writes these lines: —

"Here take this gift,
I was reserving it for some hero, speaker, general,
One who should serve the good old cause, the great idea, the
progress and freedom of the race,
Some brave confronter of despots, some daring rebel;
But I see that what I was reserving belongs to you just as
much as to any."

Elsewhere he refers to Alboni by name and speaks of her as

"The lustrous orb, Venus contralto, the blooming mother,
Sister of loftiest gods."

Some of his poems were written at the opera. The great singers

evidently gave him clews and suggestions that were applicable to his own art.

His study was out of doors. He wrote on the street, on the ferry, at the seaside, in the fields, at the opera, – always from living impulses arising at the moment, and always with his eye upon the fact. He says he has read his "Leaves" to himself in the open air, and tried them by the realities of life and nature about him. Were they as real and alive as they? – this was the only question with him.

At home in his father's family in Brooklyn we see him gentle, patient, conciliatory, much looked up to by all. Neighbors seek his advice. He is cool, deliberate, impartial. A marked trait is his indifference to money matters; his people are often troubled because he lets opportunities to make money pass by. When his "Leaves" appear, his family are puzzled, do not know what to make of it. His mother thinks that, if "Hiawatha" is poetry, may be Walt's book is, too. He never counsels with any one, and is utterly indifferent as to what people may say or think. He is not a stirring and punctual man, is always a little late; not an early riser, not prompt at dinner; always has ample time, and will not be hurried; the business gods do not receive his homage. He is gray at thirty, and is said to have had a look of age in youth, as he had a look of youth in age. He has few books, cares little for sport, never uses a gun; has no bad habits; has no entanglements with women, and apparently never contemplates marriage. It is said that during his earliest years of manhood he kept quite aloof

from the "girls."

At the age of nineteen he edited "The Long Islander," published at Huntington. A recent visitor to these early haunts of Whitman gathered some reminiscences of him at this date: —

"Amid the deep revery of nature, on that mild October afternoon, we returned to the village of Huntington, there to meet the few, the very few, survivors who recall Walt's first appearance in the literary world as the editor of 'The Long Islander,' nigh sixty years ago (1838). Two of these forefathers of the hamlet clearly remembered his powerful personality, brimful of life, reveling in strength, careless of time and the world, of money and of toil; a lover of books and of jokes; delighting to gather round him the youth of the village in his printing-room of evenings, and tell them stories and read them poetry, his own and others'. That of his own he called his 'Yawps,' a word which he afterwards made famous. Both remembered him as a delightful companion, generous to a fault, glorying in youth, negligent of his affairs, issuing 'The Long Islander' at random intervals, — once a week, once in two weeks, once in three, — until its financial backers lost faith and hope and turned him out, and with him the whole office corps; for Walt himself was editor, publisher, compositor, pressman, and printer's devil, all in one."

II

Few men were so deeply impressed by our Civil War as was

Whitman. It aroused all his patriotism, all his sympathies, and, as a poet, tested his power to deal with great contemporary events and scenes. He was first drawn to the seat of war on behalf of his brother, Lieutenant-Colonel George W. Whitman, 51st New York Volunteers, who was wounded by the fragment of a shell at Fredericksburg. This was in the fall of 1862. This brought him in contact with the sick and wounded soldiers, and henceforth, as long as the war lasts and longer, he devoted his time and substance to ministering to them. The first two or three years of his life in Washington he supported himself by correspondence with Northern newspapers, mainly with the "New York Times." These letters, as well as the weekly letters to his mother during the same period, form an intensely pathetic and interesting record.

They contain such revelations of himself, and such pictures of the scenes he moved among, that I shall here quote freely from them. The following extract is from a letter written from Fredericksburg the third or fourth day after the battle of December, 1862: —

"Spent a good part of the day in a large brick mansion on the banks of the Rappahannock, immediately opposite Fredericksburg. It is used as a hospital since the battle, and seems to have received only the worst cases. Out of doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, etc., about a load for a one-horse cart. Several dead bodies lie near, each covered

with its brown woolen blanket. In the door-yard, toward the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves, or broken board, stuck in the dirt. (Most of these bodies were subsequently taken up and transported North to their friends.)

"The house is quite crowded, everything impromptu, no system, all bad enough, but I have no doubt the best that can be done; all the wounds pretty bad, some frightful, the men in their old clothes, unclean and bloody. Some of the wounded are rebel officers, prisoners. One, a Mississippian, – a captain, – hit badly in leg, I talked with some time; he asked me for papers, which I gave him. (I saw him three months afterward in Washington, with leg amputated, doing well.)

"I went through the rooms, down stairs and up. Some of the men were dying. I had nothing to give at that visit, but wrote a few letters to folks home, mothers, etc. Also talked to three or four who seemed most susceptible to it, and needing it."

"December 22 to 31. – Am among the regimental, brigade, and division hospitals somewhat. Few at home realize that these are merely tents, and sometimes very poor ones, the wounded lying on the ground, lucky if their blanket is spread on a layer of pine or hemlock twigs, or some leaves. No cots; seldom even a mattress on the ground. It is pretty cold. I go around from one case to another. I do not see that I can do any good, but I cannot leave them. Once in a while some youngster holds on to me convulsively, and I do what I can for him; at any rate, stop

with him and sit near him for hours, if he wishes it.

"Besides the hospitals, I also go occasionally on long tours through the camps, talking with the men, etc.; sometimes at night among the groups around the fires, in their shebang enclosures of bushes. I soon get acquainted anywhere in camp, with officers or men, and am always well used. Sometimes I go down on picket with the regiments I know best."

After continuing in front through the winter, he returns to Washington, where the wounded and sick have mainly been concentrated. The Capital city, truly, is now one huge hospital; and there Whitman establishes himself, and thenceforward, for several years, has but one daily and nightly avocation.

He alludes to writing letters by the bedside, and says: —

"I do a good deal of this, of course, writing all kinds, including love-letters. Many sick and wounded soldiers have not written home to parents, brothers, sisters, and even wives, for one reason or another, for a long, long time. Some are poor writers, some cannot get paper and envelopes; many have an aversion to writing, because they dread to worry the folks at home, — the facts about them are so sad to tell. I always encourage the men to write, and promptly write for them."

A glimpse of the scenes after Chancellorsville: —

"As I write this, in May, 1863, the wounded have begun to arrive from Hooker's command from bloody Chancellorsville. I was down among the first arrivals. The men in charge of them told me the bad cases were yet to come. If that is so, I pity

them, for these are bad enough. You ought to see the scene of the wounded arriving at the landing here foot of Sixth Street at night. Two boat-loads came about half past seven last night. A little after eight, it rained a long and violent shower. The poor, pale, helpless soldiers had been debarked, and lay around on the wharf and neighborhood anywhere. The rain was, probably, grateful to them; at any rate they were exposed to it.

"The few torches light up the spectacle. All around on the wharf, on the ground, out on side places, etc., the men are lying on blankets and old quilts, with the bloody rags bound round heads, arms, legs, etc. The attendants are few, and at night few outsiders also, – only a few hard-worked transportation men and drivers. (The wounded are getting to be common, and people grow callous.) The men, whatever their condition, lie there, and patiently wait till their turn comes to be taken up. Near by the ambulances are now arriving in clusters, and one after another is called to back up and take its load. Extreme cases are sent off on stretchers. The men generally make little or no ado, whatever their sufferings, – a few groans that cannot be repressed, and occasionally a scream of pain, as they lift a man into the ambulance.

"To-day, as I write, hundreds more are expected, and tomorrow and the next day more, and so on for many days.

"The soldiers are nearly all young men, and far more American than is generally supposed, – I should say nine tenths are native-born. Among the arrivals from Chancellorsville I find

a large proportion of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois men. As usual, there are all sorts of wounds. Some of the men are fearfully burnt from the explosion of artillery caissons. One ward has a long row of officers, some with ugly hurts. Yesterday was, perhaps, worse than usual. Amputations are going on, – the attendants are dressing wounds. As you pass by, you must be on your guard where you look. I saw, the other day, a gentleman – a visitor, apparently, from curiosity – in one of the wards stop and turn a moment to look at an awful wound they were probing, etc. He turned pale, and in a moment more he had fainted away and fallen on the floor."

An episode, – the death of a New York soldier: —

"This afternoon, July 22, 1863, I spent a long time with a young man I have been with a good deal from time to time, named Oscar F. Wilber, company G, 154th New York, low with chronic diarrhœa, and a bad wound also. He asked me to read him a chapter in the New Testament. I complied, and asked him what I should read. He said: 'Make your own choice.' I opened at the close of one of the first books of the Evangelists, and read the chapters describing the latter hours of Christ and the scenes at the crucifixion. The poor, wasted young man asked me to read the following chapter also, how Christ rose again. I read very slowly, as Oscar was feeble. It pleased him very much, yet the tears were in his eyes. He asked me if I enjoyed religion. I said: 'Perhaps not, my dear, in the way you mean, and yet, maybe, it is the same thing.' He said: 'It is my chief

reliance.' He talked of death, and said he did not fear it. I said: 'Why, Oscar, don't you think you will get well?' He said: 'I may, but it is not probable.' He spoke calmly of his condition. The wound was very bad; it discharged much. Then the diarrhœa had prostrated him, and I felt that he was even then the same as dying. He behaved very manly and affectionate. The kiss I gave him as I was about leaving he returned fourfold. He gave me his mother's address, Mrs. Sally D. Wilber, Alleghany post-office, Cattaraugus County, New York. I had several such interviews with him. He died a few days after the one just described."

And here, also, a characteristic scene in another of those long barracks: —

"It is Sunday afternoon (middle of summer, 1864), hot and oppressive, and very silent through the ward. I am taking care of a critical case, now lying in a half lethargy. Near where I sit is a suffering rebel, from the 8th Louisiana; his name is Irving. He has been here a long time, badly wounded, and has lately had his leg amputated. It is not doing very well. Right opposite me is a sick soldier boy, laid down with his clothes on, sleeping, looking much wasted, his pallid face on his arm. I see by the yellow trimming on his jacket that he is a cavalry boy. He looks so handsome as he sleeps, one must needs go nearer to him. I step softly over to him, and find by his card that he is named William Cone, of the 1st Maine Cavalry, and his folks live in Skowhegan."

In a letter to his mother in 1863 he says, in reference to his

hospital services: "I have got in the way, after going lightly, as it were, all through the wards of a hospital, and trying to give a word of cheer, if nothing else, to every one, then confining my special attention to the few where the investment seems to tell best, and who want it most. . . . Mother, I have real pride in telling you that I have the consciousness of saving quite a number of lives by keeping the men from giving up, and being a good deal with them. The men say it is so, and the doctors say it is so; and I will candidly confess I can see it is true, though I say it myself. I know you will like to hear it, mother, so I tell you."

Again he says: "I go among the worst fevers and wounds with impunity; I go among the smallpox, etc., just the same. I feel to go without apprehension, and so I go: nobody else goes; but, as the darkey said there at Charleston when the boat ran on a flat and the rebel sharpshooters were peppering them, '*somebody* must jump in de water and shove de boat off.'"

In another letter to his mother he thus accounts for his effect upon the wounded soldiers: "I fancy the reason I am able to do some good in the hospitals among the poor, languishing, and wounded boys, is that I am so large and well, – indeed, like a great wild buffalo with much hair. Many of the soldiers are from the West and far North, and they like a man that has not the bleached, shiny, and shaved cut of the cities and the East."

As to Whitman's appearance about this time, we get an inkling from another letter to his mother, giving an account of an interview he had with Senator Preston King, to whom Whitman

applied for assistance in procuring a clerkship in one of the departments. King said to him, "Why, how can I do this thing, or anything for you? How do I know but you are a secessionist? You look for all the world like an old Southern planter, – a regular Carolina or Virginia planter."

The great suffering of the soldiers and their heroic fortitude move him deeply. He says to his mother: "Nothing of ordinary misfortune seems as it used to, and death itself has lost all its terrors; I have seen so many cases in which it was so welcome and such a relief." Again: "I go to the hospitals every day or night. I believe no men ever loved each other as I and some of these poor wounded, sick, and dying men love each other."

Whitman's services in the hospitals began to tell seriously upon his health in June, 1864, when he had "spells of deathly faintness, and had trouble in the head." The doctors told him he must keep away for a while, but he could not. Under date of June 7, 1864, he writes to his mother: —

"There is a very horrible collection in Armory Building (in Armory Square Hospital), – about two hundred of the worst cases you ever saw, and I have probably been too much with them. It is enough to melt the heart of a stone. Over one third of them are amputation cases. Well, mother, poor Oscar Cunningham is gone at last: (he is the 82d Ohio boy, wounded May 3, '63). I have written so much of him I suppose you feel as if you almost knew him. I was with him Saturday forenoon, and also evening. He was more composed than usual; could not

articulate very well. He died about two o'clock Sunday morning, very easy, they told me. I was not there. It was a blessed relief. His life has been misery for months. I believe I told you, last letter, I was quite blue from the deaths of several of the poor young men I knew well, especially two of whom I had strong hopes of their getting up. Things are going pretty badly with the wounded. They are crowded here in Washington in immense numbers, and all those that came up from the Wilderness and that region arrived here so neglected and in such plight it was awful (those that were at Fredericksburg, and also from Belle Plain). The papers are full of puffs, etc., but the truth is the largest proportion of worst cases get little or no attention.

"We receive them here with their wounds full of worms, – some all swelled and inflamed. Many of the amputations have to be done over again. One new feature is, that many of the poor, afflicted young men are crazy; every ward has some in it that are wandering. They have suffered too much, and it is perhaps a privilege that they are out of their senses. Mother, it is most too much for a fellow, and I sometimes wish I was out of it; but I suppose it is because I have not felt first-rate myself."

Of the Ohio soldier above referred to, Whitman had written a few days before: "You remember I told you of him a year ago, when he was first brought in. I thought him the noblest specimen of a young Western man I had seen. A real giant in size, and always with a smile on his face. Oh, what a change! He has long been very irritable to every one but me, and his frame is all

wasted away."

To his brother Jeff he wrote: "Of the many I have seen die, or known of the past year, I have not seen or known of one who met death with any terror. Yesterday I spent a good part of the afternoon with a young man of seventeen named Charles Cutter, of Lawrence City, 1st Massachusetts Heavy Artillery, Battery M. He was brought into one of the hospitals mortally wounded in abdomen. Well, I thought to myself as I sat looking at him, it ought to be a relief to his folks, after all, if they could see how little he suffered. He lay very placid, in a half lethargy, with his eyes closed; it was very warm, and I sat a long while fanning him and wiping the sweat. At length he opened his eyes quite wide and clear, and looked inquiringly around. I said, "What is it, my dear? do you want anything?" He said quietly, with a good-natured smile, "Oh, nothing; I was only looking around to see who was with me." His mind was somewhat wandering, yet he lay so peaceful in his dying condition. He seemed to be a real New England country boy, so good-natured, with a pleasant, homely way, and quite fine-looking. Without any doubt, he died in course of the night."

Another extract from a letter to his mother in April, 1864: —

"Mother, you don't know what a feeling a man gets after being in the active sights and influences of the camp, the army, the wounded, etc. He gets to have a deep feeling he never experienced before, — the flag, the tune of Yankee Doodle, and similar things, produce an effect on a fellow never felt before. I

have seen tears on the men's cheeks, and others turn pale under such circumstances. I have a little flag, – it belonged to one of our cavalry regiments, – presented to me by one of the wounded. It was taken by the rebs in a cavalry fight, and rescued by our men in a bloody little skirmish. It cost three men's lives just to get one little flag four by three. Our men rescued it, and tore it from the breast of a dead rebel. All that just for the name of getting their little banner back again. The man that got it was very badly wounded, and they let him keep it. I was with him a good deal. He wanted to give me something, he said; he did not expect to live; so he gave me the little banner as a keepsake. I mention this, mother, to show you a specimen of the feeling. There isn't a regiment of cavalry or infantry that wouldn't do the same on occasion."

[An army surgeon, who at the time watched with curiosity Mr. Whitman's movements among the soldiers in the hospitals, has since told me that his principles of operation, effective as they were, seemed strangely few, simple, and on a low key, – to act upon the appetite, to cheer by a healthy and fitly bracing appearance and demeanor; and to fill and satisfy in certain cases the affectional longings of the patients, was about all. He carried among them no sentimentalism nor moralizing; spoke not to any man of his "sins," but gave something good to eat, a buoying word, or a trifling gift and a look. He appeared with ruddy face, clean dress, with a flower or a green sprig in the lapel of his coat. Crossing the fields in summer, he would gather a great bunch

of dandelion blossoms, and red and white clover, to bring and scatter on the cots, as reminders of out-door air and sunshine.

When practicable, he came to the long and crowded wards of the maimed, the feeble, and the dying, only after preparations as for a festival, — strengthened by a good meal, rest, the bath, and fresh underclothes. He entered with a huge haversack slung over his shoulder, full of appropriate articles, with parcels under his arms, and protuberant pockets. He would sometimes come in summer with a good-sized basket filled with oranges, and would go round for hours paring and dividing them among the feverish and thirsty.]

Of his devotion to the wounded soldiers there are many witnesses. A well-known correspondent of the "New York Herald" writes thus about him in April, 1876: —

"I first heard of him among the sufferers on the Peninsula after a battle there. Subsequently I saw him, time and again, in the Washington hospitals, or wending his way there, with basket or haversack on his arm, and the strength of beneficence suffusing his face. His devotion surpassed the devotion of woman. It would take a volume to tell of his kindness, tenderness, and thoughtfulness.

"Never shall I forget one night when I accompanied him on his rounds through a hospital filled with those wounded young Americans whose heroism he has sung in deathless numbers. There were three rows of cots, and each cot bore its man. When he appeared, in passing along, there was a smile of affection and

welcome on every face, however wan, and his presence seemed to light up the place as it might be lighted by the presence of the God of Love. From cot to cot they called him, often in tremulous tones or in whispers; they embraced him; they touched his hand; they gazed at him. To one he gave a few words of cheer; for another he wrote a letter home; to others he gave an orange, a few comfits, a cigar, a pipe and tobacco, a sheet of paper or a postage-stamp, all of which and many other things were in his capacious haversack. From another he would receive a dying message for mother, wife, or sweetheart; for another he would promise to go an errand; to another, some special friend very low, he would give a manly farewell kiss. He did the things for them no nurse or doctor could do, and he seemed to leave a benediction at every cot as he passed along. The lights had gleamed for hours in the hospital that night before he left it, and, as he took his way towards the door, you could hear the voices of many a stricken hero calling, 'Walt, Walt, Walt! come again! come again!'"

III

Out of that experience in camp and hospital the pieces called "Drum-Taps," first published in 1865, – since merged in his "Leaves," – were produced. Their descriptions and pictures, therefore, come from life. The vivid incidents of "The Dresser" are but daguerreotypes of the poet's own actual movements among the bad cases of the wounded after a battle. The same

personal knowledge runs through "A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Gray and Dim," "Come up from the Fields, Father," etc., etc.

The reader of this section of Whitman's work soon discovers that it is not the purpose of the poet to portray battles and campaigns, or to celebrate special leaders or military prowess, but rather to chant the human aspects of anguish that follow in the train of war. He perhaps feels that the permanent condition of modern society is that of peace; that war as a business, as a means of growth, has served its time; and that, notwithstanding the vast difference between ancient and modern warfare, both in the spirit and in the means, Homer's pictures are essentially true yet, and no additions to them can be made. War can never be to us what it has been to the nations of all ages down to the present; never the main fact, the paramount condition, tyrannizing over all the affairs of national and individual life, but only an episode, a passing interruption; and the poet, who in our day would be as true to his nation and times as Homer was to his, must treat of it from the standpoint of peace and progress, and even benevolence. Vast armies rise up in a night and disappear in a day; a million of men, inured to battle and to blood, go back to the avocations of peace without a moment's confusion or delay, — indicating clearly the tendency that prevails.

Apostrophizing the genius of America in the supreme hour of victory, he says: —

"No poem proud, I, chanting, bring to thee – nor mastery's rapturous verse: —

But a little book containing night's darkness and blood-dripping wounds,
And psalms of the dead."

The collection is also remarkable for the absence of all sectional or partisan feeling. Under the head of "Reconciliation" are these lines: —

"Word over all, beautiful as the sky!

Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost!

That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly, softly wash again, and ever again, this soil'd world;

... For my enemy is dead – a man divine as myself is dead;
I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin – I draw near;

I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin."

Perhaps the most noteworthy of Whitman's war poems is the one called "When Lilacs last in the Door-yard bloomed," written in commemoration of President Lincoln.

The main effect of this poem is of strong, solemn, and varied music; and it involves in its construction a principle after which perhaps the great composers most work, – namely, spiritual auricular analogy. At first it would seem to defy analysis, so rapt

is it, and so indirect. No reference whatever is made to the mere fact of Lincoln's death; the poet does not even dwell upon its unprovoked atrocity, and only occasionally is the tone that of lamentation; but, with the intuitions of the grand art, which is the most complex when it seems most simple, he seizes upon three beautiful facts of nature, which he weaves into a wreath for the dead President's tomb. The central thought is of death, but around this he curiously twines, first, the early-blooming lilacs which the poet may have plucked the day the dark shadow came; next the song of the hermit thrush, the most sweet and solemn of all our songsters, heard at twilight in the dusky cedars; and with these the evening star, which, as many may remember, night after night in the early part of that eventful spring, hung low in the west with unusual and tender brightness. These are the premises whence he starts his solemn chant.

The attitude, therefore, is not that of being bowed down and weeping hopeless tears, but of singing a commemorative hymn, in which the voices of nature join, and fits that exalted condition of the soul which serious events and the presence of death induce. There are no words of mere eulogy, no statistics, and no story or narrative; but there are pictures, processions, and a strange mingling of darkness and light, of grief and triumph: now the voice of the bird, or the drooping lustrous star, or the sombre thought of death; then a recurrence to the open scenery of the land as it lay in the April light, "the summer approaching with richness and the fields all busy with labor," presently dashed

in upon by a spectral vision of armies with torn and bloody battle-flags, and, again, of the white skeletons of young men long afterward strewing the ground. Hence the piece has little or nothing of the character of the usual productions on such occasions. It is dramatic; yet there is no development of plot, but a constant interplay, a turning and returning of images and sentiments.

The poet breaks a sprig of lilac from the bush in the doorway, – the dark cloud falls on the land, – the long funeral sets out, – and then the apostrophe: —

"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-veiled
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,

To dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs – Where amid
these you journey,
With the tolling, tolling bells' perpetual clang;
Here! coffin that slowly passes,
I give you my sprig of lilac.

"(Nor for you, for one alone;
Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring;
For fresh as the morning – thus would I chant a song for you,
O sane and sacred death.

"All over bouquets of roses,
O death! I cover you over with roses and early lilies;
But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
Copious, I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes;
With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
For you and the coffins all of you, O death.)"

Then the strain goes on: —

"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."

The poem reaches, perhaps, its height in the matchless invocation to Death: —

"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.

"Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious;
And for love, sweet love – but praise! O praise and praise,
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding Death.

"Dark Mother, always gliding near, with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee – I glorify thee above all;
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come
unfalteringly.

"Approach, encompassing Death – strong Deliveress!
When it is so – when thou hast taken them, I joyously sing
the dead,
Lost in the loving, floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O Death.

"From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose, saluting thee – adornments and

feastings for thee;
And the sights of the open landscape, and the high-spread
sky are fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.
The night, in silence, under many a star;
The ocean shore, and the husky whispering wave, whose
voice I know;
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veil'd Death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee."

IV

Whitman despised riches, and all mere worldly success, as heartily as ever did any of the old Christians. All outward show and finery were intensely distasteful to him. He probably would not have accepted the finest house in New York on condition that he live in it. During his hospital experiences he cherished the purpose, as soon as the war was over, of returning to Brooklyn, buying an acre or two of land in some by-place on Long Island, and building for himself and his family a cheap house. When his brother Jeff contemplated building, he advised him to build merely an Irish shanty. After what he had seen the soldiers put up with, he thought anything was good enough for him or his people. In one of his letters to his mother, he comments upon the un-American and inappropriate ornamentation of the rooms in the Capitol building, "without grandeur and without simplicity,"

he says. In the state the country was in, and with the hospital scenes before him, the "poppy-show goddesses" and the Italian style of decoration, etc., sickened him, and he got away from it all as quickly as he could.

V

During the war and after, I used to see a good deal of Whitman in Washington. Summer and winter he was a conspicuous figure on Pennsylvania Avenue, where he was wont to walk for exercise and to feed his hunger for faces. One would see him afar off, in the crowd but not of it, – a large, slow-moving figure, clad in gray, with broad-brimmed hat and gray beard, – or, quite as frequently, on the front platform of the street horse-cars with the driver. My eye used to single him out many blocks away.

There were times during this period when his aspect was rather forbidding, – the physical man was too pronounced on first glance; the other man was hidden beneath the broad-brimmed hat. One needed to see the superbly domed head and classic brow crowning the rank physical man.

In his middle manhood, judging from the photos, he had a hirsute, kindly look, but very far removed from the finely cut traditional poet's face.

VI

I have often heard Whitman say that he inherited most excellent blood from his mother, – the old Dutch Van Velsler strain, – Long Island blood filtered and vitalized through generations by the breath of the sea. He was his mother's child unmistakably. With all his rank masculinity, there was a curious feminine undertone in him which revealed itself in the quality of his voice, the delicate texture of his skin, the gentleness of his touch and ways, the attraction he had for children and the common people. A lady in the West, writing to me about him, spoke of his "great mother-nature." He was receptive, sympathetic, tender, and met you, not in a positive, aggressive manner, but more or less in a passive or neutral mood. He did not give his friends merely his mind, he gave them himself. It is not merely his mind or intellect that he has put into his poems, it is himself. Indeed, this feminine mood or attitude might be dwelt upon at much length in considering his poems, – their solvent, absorbing power, and the way they yield themselves to diverse interpretations.

The sea, too, had laid its hand upon him, as I have already suggested. He never appeared so striking and impressive as when seen upon the beach. His large and tall gray figure looked at home, and was at home, upon the shore. The simple, strong, flowing lines of his face, his always clean fresh air, his blue

absorbing eye, his commanding presence, and something pristine and elemental in his whole expression, seemed at once to put him *en rapport* with the sea. No phase of nature seems to have impressed him so deeply as the sea, or recurs so often in his poems.

VII

Whitman was preëminently manly, – richly endowed with the universal, healthy human qualities and attributes. Mr. Conway relates that when Emerson handed him the first thin quarto edition of "Leaves of Grass," while he was calling at his house in Concord, soon after the book appeared, he said, "Americans abroad may now come home: unto us a man is born."

President Lincoln, standing one day during the war before a window in the White House, saw Whitman slowly saunter by. He followed him with his eyes, and, turning, said to those about him, "Well, *he* looks like a *man*."

"Meeter of savage and gentleman on equal terms."

During Whitman's Western tour in 1879 or '80, at some point in Kansas, in company with several well-known politicians and government officials, he visited a lot of Indians who were being held as prisoners. The sheriff told the Indians who the distinguished men were who were about to see them, but the

Indians paid little attention to them as, one after the other, the officials and editors passed by them. Behind all came Whitman. The old chief looked at him steadily, then extended his hand and said, "How!" All the other Indians followed, surrounding Whitman, shaking his hand and making the air melodious with their "Hows." The incident evidently pleased the old poet a good deal.

VIII

Whitman was of large mould in every way, and of bold, far-reaching schemes, and is very sure to fare better at the hands of large men than of small. The first and last impression which his personal presence always made upon one was of a nature wonderfully gentle, tender, and benignant. His culture, his intellect, was completely suffused and dominated by his humanity, so that the impression you got from him was not that of a learned or a literary person, but of fresh, strong, sympathetic human nature, – such an impression, I fancy, only fuller, as one might have got from Walter Scott. This was perhaps the secret of the attraction he had, for the common, unlettered people and for children. I think that even his literary friends often sought his presence less for conversation than to bask in his physical or psychical sunshine, and to rest upon his boundless charity. The great service he rendered to the wounded and homesick soldiers in the hospitals during the war came from his copious endowment

of this broad, sweet, tender democratic nature. He brought father and mother to them, and the tonic and cheering atmosphere of simple, affectionate home life.

In person Whitman was large and tall, above six feet, with a breezy, open-air look. His temperament was sanguine; his voice was a tender baritone. The dominant impression he made was that of something fresh and clean. I remember the first time I met him, which was in Washington, in the fall of 1863. I was impressed by the fine grain and clean, fresh quality of the man. Some passages in his poems had led me to expect something different. He always had the look of a man who had just taken a bath. The skin was light and clear, and the blood well to the surface. His body, as I once noticed when we were bathing in the surf, had a peculiar fresh bloom and fineness and delicacy of texture. His physiology was undoubtedly remarkable, unique. The full beauty of his face and head did not appear till he was past sixty. After that, I have little doubt, it was the finest head this age or country has seen. Every artist who saw him was instantly filled with a keen desire to sketch him. The lines were so simple, so free, and so strong. High, arching brows; straight, clear-cut nose; heavy-lidded blue-gray eyes; forehead not thrust out and emphasized, but a vital part of a symmetrical, dome-shaped head; ear large, and the most delicately carved I have ever seen; the mouth and chin hidden by a soft, long, white beard. It seems to me his face steadily refined and strengthened with age. Time depleted him in just the right way, – softened his beard

and took away the too florid look; subdued the carnal man, and brought out more fully the spiritual man. When I last saw him (December 26, 1891), though he had been very near death for many days, I am sure I had never seen his face so beautiful. There was no breaking-down of the features, or the least sign of decrepitude, such as we usually note in old men. The expression was full of pathos, but it was as grand as that of a god. I could not think of him as near death, he looked so unconquered.

In Washington I knew Whitman intimately from the fall of 1863 to the time he left in 1873. In Camden I visited him yearly after that date, usually in the late summer or fall. I will give one glimpse of him from my diary, under date of August 18, 1887. I reached his house in the morning, before he was up. Presently he came slowly down stairs and greeted me. "Find him pretty well, – looking better than last year. With his light-gray suit, and white hair, and fresh pink face, he made a fine picture. Among other things, we talked of the Swinburne attack (then recently published). W. did not show the least feeling on the subject, and, I clearly saw, was absolutely undisturbed by the article. I told him I had always been more disturbed by S.'s admiration for him than I was now by his condemnation. By and by W. had his horse hitched up, and we started for Glendale, ten miles distant, to see young Gilchrist, the artist. A fine drive through a level farming and truck-gardening country; warm, but breezy. W. drives briskly, and salutes every person we meet, little and big, black and white, male and female. Nearly all return his

salute cordially. He said he knew but few of those he spoke to, but that, as he grew older, the old Long Island custom of his people, to speak to every one on the road, was strong upon him. One tipsy man in a buggy responded, 'Why, pap, how d' ye do, pap?' etc. We talked of many things. I recall this remark of W., as something I had not before thought of, that it was difficult to see what the old feudal world would have come to without Christianity: it would have been like a body acted upon by the centrifugal force without the centripetal. Those haughty lords and chieftains needed the force of Christianity to check and curb them, etc. W. knew the history of many prominent houses on the road: here a crazy man lived, with two colored men to look after him; there, in that fine house among the trees, an old maid, who had spent a large fortune on her house and lands, and was now destitute, yet she was a woman of remarkable good sense, etc. We returned to Camden before dark, W. apparently not fatigued by the drive of twenty miles."

In death what struck me most about the face was its perfect symmetry. It was such a face, said Mr. Conway, as Rembrandt would have selected from a million. "It is the face of an aged loving child. As I looked, it was with the reflection that, during an acquaintance of thirty-six years, I never heard from those lips a word of irritation, or depreciation of any being. I do not believe that Buddha, of whom he appeared an avatar, was more gentle to all men, women, children, and living things."

IX

For one of the best pen-sketches of Whitman in his old age we are indebted to Dr. J. Johnston, a young Scotch physician of Bolton, England, who visited Whitman in the summer of 1890. I quote from a little pamphlet which the doctor printed on his return home: —

"The first thing about himself that struck me was the physical immensity and magnificent proportions of the man, and, next, the picturesque majesty of his presence as a whole.

"He sat quite erect in a great cane-runged chair, cross-legged, and clad in rough gray clothes, with slippers on his feet, and a shirt of pure white linen, with a great wide collar edged with white lace, the shirt buttoned about midway down his breast, the big lapels of the collar thrown open, the points touching his shoulders, and exposing the upper portion of his hirsute chest. He wore a vest of gray homespun, but it was unbuttoned almost to the bottom. He had no coat on, and his shirt sleeves were turned up above the elbows, exposing most beautifully shaped arms, and flesh of the most delicate whiteness. Although it was so hot, he did not perspire visibly, while I had to keep mopping my face. His hands are large and massive, but in perfect proportion to the arms; the fingers long, strong, white, and tapering to a blunt end. His nails are square, showing about an eighth of an inch separate from the flesh, and I noticed that

there was not a particle of impurity beneath any of them. But his majesty is concentrated in his head, which is set with leonine grace and dignity upon his broad, square shoulders; and it is almost entirely covered with long, fine, straggling hair, silvery and glistening, pure and white as sunlit snow, rather thin on the top of his high, rounded crown, streaming over and around his large but delicately-shaped ears, down the back of his big neck; and, from his pinky-white cheeks and top lip, over the lower part of his face, right down to the middle of his chest, like a cataract of materialized, white, glistening vapor, giving him a most venerable and patriarchal appearance. His high, massive forehead is seamed with wrinkles. His nose is large, strong, broad, and prominent, but beautifully chiseled and proportioned, almost straight, very slightly depressed at the tip, and with deep furrows on each side, running down to the angles of the mouth. The eyebrows are thick and shaggy, with strong, white hair, very highly arched and standing a long way above the eyes, which are of a light blue with a tinge of gray, small, rather deeply set, calm, clear, penetrating, and revealing unfathomable depths of tenderness, kindness, and sympathy. The upper eyelids droop considerably over the eyeballs. The lips, which are partly hidden by the thick, white mustache, are full. The whole face impresses one with a sense of resoluteness, strength, and intellectual power, and yet withal a winning sweetness, unconquerable radiance, and hopeful joyousness. His voice is highly pitched and musical, with a timbre which is astonishing in an old man. There is none of the

tremor, quaver, or shrillness usually observed in them, but his utterance is clear, ringing, and most sweetly musical. But it was not in any one of these features that his charm lay so much as in his *tout ensemble*, and the irresistible magnetism of his sweet, aromatic presence, which seemed to exhale sanity, purity, and naturalness, and exercised over me an attraction which positively astonished me, producing an exaltation of mind and soul which no man's presence ever did before. I felt that I was here face to face with the living embodiment of all that was good, noble, and lovable in humanity."

X

British critics have spoken of Whitman's athleticism, his athletic temperament, etc., but he was in no sense a muscular man, an athlete. His body, though superb, was curiously the body of a child; one saw this in its form, in its pink color, and in the delicate texture of the skin. He took little interest in feats of strength, or in athletic sports. He walked with a slow, rolling gait, indeed, moved slowly in all ways; he always had an air of infinite leisure. For several years, while a clerk in the Attorney-General's Office in Washington, his exercise for an hour each day consisted in tossing a few feet into the air, as he walked, a round, smooth stone, of about one pound weight, and catching it as it fell. Later in life, and after his first paralytic stroke, when in the woods, he liked to bend down the young saplings, and exercise his arms

and chest in that way. In his poems much emphasis is laid upon health, and upon purity and sweetness of body, but none upon mere brute strength. This is what he says "To a Pupil: " —

1. Is reform needed? Is it through you?

The greater the reform needed, the greater the Personality you need to accomplish it.

2. You! do you not see how it would serve to have eyes, blood, complexion, clean and sweet?

Do you not see how it would serve to have such a body and Soul, that when you enter the crowd, an atmosphere of desire and command enters with you, and every one is impressed with your personality?

3. O the magnet! the flesh over and over!

Go, mon cher! if need be, give up all else, and commence to-day to inure yourself to pluck, reality, self-esteem, definiteness, elevatedness, Rest not, till you rivet and publish yourself of your own personality.

It is worthy of note that Whitman's Washington physician said he had one of the most thoroughly natural physical systems he had ever known, — the freest, probably, from extremes or any disproportion; which answers to the perfect sanity which all his friends must have felt with regard to his mind.

A few years ago a young English artist stopping in this country made several studies of him. In one of them which he showed me, he had left the face blank, but had drawn the figure from the head down with much care. It was so expressive, so unmistakably Whitman, conveyed so surely a certain majesty and impressiveness that pertained to the poet physically, that I looked upon it with no ordinary interest. Every wrinkle in the garments seemed to proclaim the man. Probably a similar painting of any of one's friends would be more or less a recognizable portrait, but I doubt if it would speak so emphatically as did this incomplete sketch. I thought it all the more significant in this case because Whitman laid such stress upon the human body in his poems, built so extensively upon it, curiously identifying it with the soul, and declaring his belief that if he made the poems of his body and of mortality he would thus supply himself with the poems of the soul and of immortality. "Behold," he says, "the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern, and includes and is the soul; whoever you are, how superb and how divine is your body, or any part of it!" He runs this physiological thread all through his book, and strings upon it many valuable lessons and many noble sentiments. Those who knew him well, I think, will agree with me that his bodily presence was singularly magnetic, restful, and positive, and that it furnished a curious and suggestive commentary upon much there is in his poetry.

The Greeks, who made so much more of the human body than we do, seem not to have carried so much meaning, so much

history, in their faces as does the modern man; the soul was not concentrated here, but was more evenly distributed over the whole body. Their faces expressed repose, harmony, power of command. I think Whitman was like the Greeks in this respect. His face had none of the eagerness, sharpness, nervousness, of the modern face. It had but few lines, and these were Greek. From the mouth up, the face was expressive of Greek purity, simplicity, strength, and repose. The mouth was large and loose, and expressive of another side of his nature. It was a mouth that required the check and curb of that classic brow.

And the influence of his poems is always on the side of physiological cleanliness and strength, and severance from all that corrupts and makes morbid and mean. He says the "expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face: it is in his limbs and joints also; it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists; it is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees; dress does not hide him; the strong, sweet, supple quality he has strikes through the cotton and flannel; to see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more. You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side." He says he has perceived that to be with those he likes is enough: "To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough, – I do not ask any more delight; I swim in it, as in a sea. There is something in staying close to men and women and looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them, that pleases the soul well. All things please the soul,

but these please the soul well." Emerson once asked Whitman what it was he found in the society of the common people that satisfied him so; for his part, he could not find anything. The subordination by Whitman of the purely intellectual to the human and physical, which runs all through his poems and is one source of their power, Emerson, who was deficient in the sensuous, probably could not appreciate.

XI

The atmosphere of Whitman personally was that of a large, tolerant, tender, sympathetic, restful man, easy of approach, indifferent to any special social or other distinctions and accomplishments that might be yours, and regarding you from the start for yourself alone.

Children were very fond of him; and women, unless they had been prejudiced against him, were strongly drawn toward him. His personal magnetism was very great, and was warming and cheering. He was rich in temperament, probably beyond any other man of his generation, – rich in all the purely human and emotional endowments and basic qualities. Then there was a look about him hard to describe, and which I have seen in no other face, – a gray, brooding, elemental look, like the granite rock, something primitive and Adamic that might have belonged to the first man; or was it a suggestion of the gray, eternal sea that he so loved, near which he was born, and that had surely set its seal

upon him? I know not, but I feel the man with that look is not of the day merely, but of the centuries. His eye was not piercing, but absorbing, – "draining" is the word happily used by William O'Connor; the soul back of it drew things to himself, and entered and possessed them through sympathy and personal force and magnetism, rather than through mere intellectual force.

XII

Walt Whitman was of the people, the common people, and always gave out their quality and atmosphere. His commonness, his nearness, as of the things you have always known, – the day, the sky, the soil, your own parents, – were in no way veiled, or kept in abeyance, by his culture or poetic gifts. He was redolent of the human and the familiar. Though capable, on occasions, of great pride and hauteur, yet his habitual mood and presence was that of simple, average, healthful humanity, – the virtue and flavor of sailors, soldiers, laborers, travelers, or people who live with real things in the open air. His commonness rose into the uncommon, the extraordinary, but without any hint of the exclusive or specially favored. He was indeed "no sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them."

The spirit that animates every page of his book, and that it always effuses, is the spirit of common, universal humanity, – humanity apart from creeds, schools, conventions, from all special privileges and refinements, as it is in and of itself in its

relations to the whole system of things, in contradistinction to the literature of culture which effuses the spirit of the select and exclusive.

His life was the same. Walt Whitman never stood apart from or above any human being. The common people – workingmen, the poor, the illiterate, the outcast – saw themselves in him, and he saw himself in them: the attraction was mutual. He was always content with common, unadorned humanity. Specially intellectual people rather repelled him; the wit, the scholar, the poet, must have a rich endowment of the common, universal, human attributes and qualities to pass current with him. He sought the society of boatmen, railroad men, farmers, mechanics, printers, teamsters, mothers of families, etc., rather than the society of professional men or scholars. Men who had the quality of things in the open air – the virtue of rocks, trees, hills – drew him most; and it is these qualities and virtues that he has aimed above all others to put into his poetry, and to put them there in such a way that he who reads must feel and imbibe them.

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