

**GILCHRIST ANNE BURROWS,
WHITMAN WALT**

**THE LETTERS
OF ANNE
GILCHRIST AND
WALT WHITMAN**

УОЛТ УИТМЕН

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Gilchrist and Walt Whitman**

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Содержание

PREFACE	5
INTRODUCTION	7
A WOMAN'S ESTIMATE OF WALT WHITMAN 1	13
A CONFESSION OF FAITH 2	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	30

Anne Gilchrist

The Letters of Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman

PREFACE

Probably there are few who to-day question the propriety of publishing the love-letters of eminent persons a generation after the deaths of both parties to the correspondence. When one recalls the published love-letters of Abelard, of Dorothy Osborne, of Lady Hamilton, of Mary Wollstonecraft, of Margaret Fuller, of George Sand, Bismarck, Shelley, Victor Hugo, Edgar Allan Poe, and – to mention only one more illustrious example – of the Brownings, one must needs look upon this form of presenting biographical material as a well-established, if not a valuable, convention of letters.

As to the particular set of letters presented to the reader in this volume, a word of explanation and history may be required. Most of these letters are from Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman, a few are replies to her letters, and a few are letters from her children to Whitman. Mrs. Gilchrist died in 1885. When, two years later, her son, Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist, was collecting material for his interesting biography of his mother, Whitman was asked for the letters that she had written to him – or rather for extracts from them. In reply to this request the poet said, “I do not know that I can furnish any good reason, but I feel to keep these utterances exclusively to myself. But I cannot let your book go to press without at least saying – and wishing it put on record – that among the perfect women I have met (and it has been my unspeakably good fortune to have had the very best, for mother, sisters, and friends) I have known none more perfect in every relation, than my dear, dear friend, Anne Gilchrist.” But since Whitman carefully preserved them for twenty years, refusing to destroy them as he had destroyed such other written matter as he did not care to have preserved, it would appear that he intended that so beautiful a tribute to the poetry that he had written, no less than to the personality of the poet, should be included in that complete biography which is being slowly written, by many hands, of America’s most unique man of genius. In any case, when these letters came into my hands in the apportionment of Whitman’s literary legacy under the will which named me as one of his three literary executors, there were but three things which I could honourably do with them – rather, on closer analysis, there seemed to be but one. To leave them in *my* will or to place them in some public repository would have been to shift a responsibility which was evidently mine to the shoulders of others who, perhaps, would be in possession of fewer facts in the light of which to discharge that responsibility. To destroy them would be to do what Whitman should have done if it was to be done at all, and to erase forever one of the finest tributes that either the man or the poet ever received, one of the most touching self-revelations that a noble soul ever “poured out on paper.” The remaining alternative was to edit and publish them (after keeping them a proper length of time), for the benefit, not only of the general reader, but as an aid to the future biographer who from the proper perspective will write the life of America’s great poet and prophet. In this determination my judgment has been confirmed by that of the few sympathetic friends who, during the twenty-five years that the letters have been in my possession, have been allowed to read them.

It is a matter of regret that so few of Whitman’s letters to Mrs. Gilchrist are available. Those included in this volume, sometimes in fragmentary form, have been taken from loose copies found among his papers after his death, or, in a few instances, are reprinted from Herbert Harlakenden Gilchrist’s “Anne Gilchrist” or Horace Traubel’s “With Walt Whitman in Camden.” Acknowledgment of these latter is made in each instance. But though Whitman’s letters printed in this correspondence

will not compare with Mrs. Gilchrist's in point of number, enough are presented to suggest the tenor of them all.

As a matter of fact, the first love-letter from Anne Gilchrist to Walt Whitman was in the form of an essay written in his defense called "An Englishwoman's Estimate of Walt Whitman." For that reason this well-known essay is reprinted in this volume; and "A Confession of Faith," in reality an amplification of the "Estimate" written several years after the publication of the latter, is included. The reader who desires to follow the story of this friendship in a chronological order will do well to read at least the former of these tributes before beginning the letters. Indebtedness is acknowledged to Prof. Emory Holloway of Brooklyn, New York, for valuable suggestions.

T. B. H.

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly Mrs. Gilchrist's "Estimate of Walt Whitman," published in the (Boston) *Radical* in May, 1870, was the finest, as it was the first, public tribute ever paid to the poet by a woman. Whitman himself so considered it – "the proudest word that ever came to me from a woman – if not the proudest word of all from any source." But a finer tribute was to follow, in the sacred privacy of the love-letters which are now made public forty years and more after they were written. The purpose of this Introduction is not to interpret those letters, but to sketch the story in the light of which they are to be read. And since both Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman have had sympathetic and painstaking biographers, it will not be necessary here to mention at length the already known facts of their respective lives.

The story naturally begins with Whitman. He was born at West Hills, Long Island, New York, on May 31, 1819. His father was of English descent, and came of a family of sailors and farmers. His mother, to whom he himself attributed most of his personal qualities, was of excellent Hollandic stock. Moving to Brooklyn while still in frocks, he there passed his boyhood and youth, but took many summer trips to visit relatives in the country. He early left the public school for the printing offices of local newspapers, picking enough general knowledge to enable him, when about seventeen years of age, to teach schools in the rural districts of his native island. Very early in life he became a writer, chiefly of short prose tales and essays, which were accepted by the best New York magazines. His literary and journalistic work was not confined to the metropolis, but took him, for a few months in 1848, so far away from home as New Orleans. In 1851-54, besides writing for and editing newspapers, he was engaged in housebuilding, the trade of his father. Although this was, it is said, a profitable business, he gave it up to write poetry, and issued his first volume, "Leaves of Grass," in 1855. The book had been written with great pains, according to a preconceived plan of the author to be stated in the preface; and it was finally set up (by his own hands, for want of a publisher) only, as he tells us, after many "doings and undoings, leaving out the stock 'poetical' touches." Its publication was the occasion of probably the most voluminous controversy of American letters – mostly abuse, ridicule, and condemnation.

In 1862 Whitman's brother George, who had volunteered in the Union Army, was reported badly wounded in the Fredericksburg fight. Walt, going at once to the war front in Virginia, found that his brother's wound was not serious enough to require his ministrations, but gradually he became engaged in nursing other wounded soldiers, until this work, as a volunteer hospital missionary in Washington, engrossed the major part of his time. This continued until and for some years after the end of the war. Whitman's own needs were supplied by occasional literary work and from his earnings as a clerk first in the Interior and later in the Attorney General's Department. He had gone to Washington a man of strong and majestic physique, but his untiring devotion, fidelity, and vigilance in nursing the sick and wounded soldiers in the army hospitals in and about Washington was soon to shatter that constitution which was ever a marvel to its possessor, and to condemn him to pass the last two decades of his life in unaccustomed invalidism. The history of the Civil War in America presents no instance of nobler fulfilment of duty or of sublimer sacrifice.

Meanwhile his muse was not neglected. His book had gone through four editions, and, with the increment of the noble war poetry of "Drum Taps," had become a volume of size. At a very early period "Leaves of Grass" had been hailed as an important literary contribution by a few of the best thinkers in this country and in England but, generally speaking, nearly all literary persons received it with much criticism and many qualifications. In Washington devoted disciples like William Douglas O'Connor and John Burroughs never varied in their uncompromising adherence to the book and its author. This appreciation only by the few was likewise encountered in England. The book had made a stir among the literary classes, but its importance was not at all generally recognized. Men like

John Addington Symonds, Edward Dowden, and William Michael Rossetti were, however, almost unrestricted in their praise.

It was William Rossetti who planned, in 1867, to bring out in England a volume of selections from Whitman's poetry, in the belief that it was better to leave out the poems that had provoked such adverse criticism, in order to get Whitman a foothold among those who might prefer to have an expurgated edition. Whitman's attitude toward the plan at the time is given in a letter which he wrote to Rossetti on December 3, 1867: "I cannot and will not consent of my own volition to countenance an expurgated edition of my pieces. I have steadily refused to do so under seductive offers, here in my own country, and must not do so in another country." It appeared, however, that Rossetti had already advanced his project, and Whitman graciously added: "If, before the arrival of this letter, you have practically invested in, and accomplished, or partially accomplished, any plan, even contrary to this letter, I do not expect you to abandon it, at loss of outlay; but shall *bona fide* consider you blameless if you let it go on, and be carried out, as you may have arranged. It is the question of the authorization of an expurgated edition proceeding from me, that deepest engages me. The facts of the different ways, one way or another way, in which the book may appear in England, out of influences not under the shelter of my umbrage, are of much less importance to me. After making the foregoing explanation, I shall, I think, accept kindly whatever happens. For I feel, indeed know, that I am in the hands of a friend, and that my pieces will receive that truest, brightest of light and perception coming from love. In that, all other and lesser requisites become pale..." The Rossetti "Selections" duly appeared – with what momentous influence upon the two persons whose friendship we are tracing will presently be shown.

On June 22, 1869, Anne Gilchrist, writing to Rossetti, said: "I was calling on Madox Brown a fortnight ago, and he put into my hands your edition of Walt Whitman's poems. I shall not cease to thank him for that. Since I have had it, I can read no other book: it holds me entirely spellbound, and I go through it again and again with deepening delight and wonder. How can one refrain from expressing gratitude to you for what you have so admirably done?.." To this Rossetti promptly responded: "Your letter has given me keen pleasure this morning. That glorious man Whitman will one day be known as one of the greatest sons of Earth, a few steps below Shakespeare on the throne of immortality. What a tearing-away of the obscuring veil of use and wont from the visage of man and of life! I am doing myself the pleasure of at once ordering a copy of the "Selections" for you, which you will be so kind as to accept. Genuine – i. e., *enthusiastic*– appreciators are not so common, and must be cultivated when they appear... Anybody who values Whitman as you do ought to read the whole of him..." At a later date Rossetti gave Mrs. Gilchrist a copy of the complete "Leaves of Grass," in acknowledging which she said, "The gift of yours I have not any words to tell you how priceless it will be to me..." This lengthy letter was later, at Rossetti's solicitation, worked over for publication as the "Estimate of Walt Whitman" to which reference has already been made.

Anne Gilchrist was primarily a woman of letters. Though her natural bent was toward science and philosophy, her marriage threw her into association with artists and writers of *belles lettres*. She was born in London on February 25, 1828. She came of excellent ancestry, and received a good education, particularly in music. She had a profoundly religious nature, although it appears that she was never a believer in many of the orthodox Christian doctrines. Very early in life she recognized the greatness of such men as Emerson and Comte. In 1851, at the age of twenty-three, she married Alexander Gilchrist, two months her junior. Though of limited means, he possessed literary ability and was then preparing for the bar. His early writings secured for him the friendship of Carlyle, who for years lived next door to the Gilchrists in Cheyne Row. This friendship led to others, and the Gilchrists were soon introduced into that supreme literary circle which included Ruskin, Herbert Spencer, George Eliot, the Rossettis, Tennyson, and many another great mind of that illustrious age.

Within ten years of their marriage the Gilchrists had four children, in whom they were very happy. But in the year 1861, when Anne was thirty-three years of age, her husband died. It was a

terrible blow, but she faced the future unflinchingly, and reared her children, giving to each of them a profession. At the time of her husband's death his life of William Blake was nearing completion. With the assistance of William and Gabriel Rossetti Mrs. Gilchrist finished the work on this excellent biography, and it was published by Macmillan. Whitman has paid a fitting tribute to the pluck exhibited in this achievement: "Do you know much of Blake?" said Whitman to Horace Traubel, who records the conversation in his remarkable book "With Walt Whitman in Camden." "You know, this is Mrs. Gilchrist's book – the book she completed. They had made up their minds to do the work – her husband had it well under way: he caught a fever and was carried off. Mrs. Gilchrist was left with four young children, alone: her perplexities were great. Have you noticed that the time to look for the best things in best people is the moment of their greatest need? Look at Lincoln: he is our proudest example: he proved to be big as, bigger than, any emergency – his grasp was a giant's grasp – made dark things light, made hard things easy... (Mrs. Gilchrist) belonged to the same noble breed: seized the reins, was competent; her head was clear, her hand was firm."

The circumstances under which she first read Whitman's poetry have been narrated. When in 1869 Whitman became aware of the Rossetti correspondence, he felt greatly honoured, and through Rossetti he sent his portrait to the as yet anonymous lady. In acknowledging this communication his English friend has a grateful word from "the lady" to return: "I gave your letter, and the second copy of your portrait, to the lady you refer to, and need scarcely say how truly delighted she was. She has asked me to say that you could not have devised for her a more welcome pleasure, and that she feels grateful to me for having sent to America the extracts from what she had written, since they have been a satisfaction to you..." Early in 1870 the "Estimate" appeared in the *Radical*, still more than a year before Mrs. Gilchrist addressed her first letter to Whitman. He welcomed the essay, and its author as a new and peculiarly powerful champion of "Leaves of Grass." To Rossetti he wrote: "I am deeply touched by these sympathies and convictions, coming from a woman and from England, and am sure that if the lady knew how much comfort it has been to me to get them, she would not only pardon you for transmitting them but approve that action. I realize indeed of this smiling and emphatic *well done* from the heart and conscience of a true wife and mother, and one, too, whose sense of the poetic, as I glean from your letter, after flowing through the heart and conscience, must also move through and satisfy science as much as the esthetic, that I had hitherto received no eulogium so magnificent." Concerning this experience Whitman said to Horace Traubel, at a much later period: "You can imagine what such a thing as her 'Estimate' meant to me at that time. Almost everybody was against me – the papers, the preachers, the literary gentlemen – nearly everybody with only here and there a dissenting voice – when it looked on the surface as if my enterprise was bound to fail ... then this wonderful woman. Such things stagger a man ... I had got so used to being ignored or denounced that the appearance of a friend was always accompanied with a sort of shock... There are shocks that knock you up, shocks that knock you down. Mrs. Gilchrist never wavered from her first decision. I have that sort of feeling about her which cannot easily be spoken of – ...: love (strong personal love, too), reverence, respect – you see, it won't go into words: all the words are weak and formal." Speaking again of her first criticism of his work, he said: "I remember well how one of my noblest, best friends – one of my wisest, cutest, profoundest, most candid critics – how Mrs. Gilchrist, even to the last, insisted that "Leaves of Grass" was not the mouthpiece of parlours, refinements – no – but the language of strength, power, passion, intensity, absorption, sincerity..." He claimed a closer relationship to her than he allowed to Rossetti: "Rossetti mentions Mrs. Gilchrist. Well, he had a right to – almost as much right as I had: a sort of brother's right: she was his friend, she was more than my friend. I feel like Hamlet when he said forty thousand brothers could not feel what he felt for Ophelia. After all ... we were a family – a happy family: the few of us who got together, going with love the same way – we were a happy family. The crowd was on the other side but we were on our side – we: a few of us, just a few: and despite our paucity of numbers we made ourselves tell for the good cause."

From these expressions it is quite clear that Whitman's attitude toward Mrs. Gilchrist was at first that of the unpopular prophet who finds a worthy and welcome disciple in an unexpected place. And that he should have so felt was but natural, for she had been drawn to him, as she confided to him in one of her letters, by what he had written rather than and not by her knowledge of the man. There can be no doubt, however, that on Mrs. Gilchrist's part something more than the friendship of her new-found liberator was desired. When she read the "Leaves of Grass" she was forty-one years of age, in the full vigour of womanhood. To her the reading meant a new birth, causing her to pour out her soul to the prophet and poet across the seas with a freedom and abandon that were phenomenal. This was in the first letter printed in this volume, under date of September 3, 1871, and about the time that Whitman had sent to his new supporter a copy of his poems. Perhaps the strongest reason why Whitman did not reply to passion with passion lies in the fact that his heart was, so far as attachments of that sort were concerned, already bestowed elsewhere. I am indebted to Professor Holloway for the information that Whitman was, in 1864, the unfortunate lover of a certain lady whose previous marriage to another, while it did not dim their mutual devotion, did serve to keep them apart. To her Whitman wrote that heart-wrung lyric of separation, "Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd." This suggests that there was probably a double tragedy, so ironical is the fate of the affections, Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman both passionately yearning for personal love yet unable to quench the one desire in the other.

But if there could not be between them the love which leads to marriage, there could be a noble and tender and life-long friendship. Over this Whitman's loss of his magnificent health, to be followed by an invalidism of twenty years, had no power. In 1873 Whitman was stricken with paralysis, which rendered him so helpless that he had to give up his work and finally his position, and to go to live for the rest of his life in Camden, New Jersey. Mrs. Gilchrist's affection for him did not waver when this trial was made of it. Indeed, his illness had the effect, as these letters show, of quickening the desire which she had had for several years (since 1869) of coming to live in America, that she might be near him to lighten his burdens, and, if she could not hope to cherish him as a wife, that she might at least care for him as a mother. Whitman, it will be noted, strongly advised against this plan. Just why he wished to keep her away from America is unclear, possibly because he dared not put so idealistic a friendship and discipleship to the test of personal acquaintance with a prematurely broken old man. Nevertheless, on August 30, 1876, Mrs. Gilchrist set sail, with three of her children, for Philadelphia. They arrived in September. From that date until the spring of 1878 the Gilchrists kept house at 1929 North Twenty-second street, Philadelphia, where Whitman was a frequent and regular visitor.

It is interesting to note that Mrs. Gilchrist's appreciation of Whitman did not lessen after she had met and known him in the intimacy of that tea-table circle which at her house discussed the same great variety of topics – literature, religion, science, politics – that had enlivened the O'Connor breakfast table in Washington. She shall describe it and him herself. In a letter to Rossetti, under date of December 22, 1876, she writes: "But I need not tell you that our greatest pleasure is the society of Mr. Whitman, who fully realizes the ideal I had formed from his poems, and brings such an atmosphere of cordiality and geniality with him as is indescribable. He is really making slow but, I trust, steady progress toward recovery, having been much cheered (and no doubt that acted favourably upon his health) by the sympathy manifested toward him in England and the pleasure of finding so many buyers of his poems there. It must be a deep satisfaction to you to have been the channel through which this help and comfort flowed..." And a year later she writes to the same correspondent: "We are having delightful evenings this winter; how often do I wish you could make one in the circle around our tea table where sits on my right hand every evening but Sunday Walt Whitman. He has made great progress in health and recovered powers of getting about during the year we have been here: nevertheless the lameness – the dragging instead of lifting the left leg continues; and this together with his white hair and beard give him a look of age curiously contradicted by his face, which has not only the ruddy freshness but the full, rounded contours of youth, nowhere drawn or wrinkled or

sunk; it is a face as indicative of serenity and goodness and of mental and bodily health as the brow is of intellectual power. But I notice he occasionally speaks of himself as having a ‘wounded brain,’ and of being still quite altered from his former self.”

Whitman, on his part, thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon sunshine of such friendly hospitality, for he considered Mrs. Gilchrist even more gifted as a conversationalist than as a writer. For hints of the sort of talk that flowed with Mrs. Gilchrist’s tea I must refer the reader to her son’s realistic biography.

After two years of residence in Philadelphia, the Gilchrists went to dwell in Boston and later in New York City, and met the leaders in the two literary capitals. From these addresses the letters begin again, after the natural interruption of two years. It is at this time that the first letters from Herbert and Beatrice Gilchrist were written. These are given in this volume to complete the chain and to show how completely they were in sympathy with their mother in their love and appreciation of Whitman. From New York they all sailed for their old home in England on June 7, 1879. Whitman came the day before to wish them good voyage. The chief reason for the return to England seems to have been the desire to send Beatrice to Berne to complete her medical education. After the return to England, or rather while they are still en route at Glasgow, the letters begin again.

Several years of literary work yet remained to Mrs. Gilchrist. The chief writings of these years were a new edition of the Blake, a life of Mary Lamb for the Eminent Women Series, an article on Blake for the Dictionary of National Biography, several essays including “Three Glimpses of a New England Village,” and the “Confession of Faith.” She was beginning a careful study of the life and writings of Carlyle, with the intention of writing a life of her old friend to reply to the aspersions of Freude. This last work was, however, never completed, for early in 1882 some malady which rendered her breathing difficult had already begun to cast the shadow of death upon her. But her faith, long schooled in the optimism of “Leaves of Grass,” looked upon the steadily approaching end with calmness. On November 29, 1885, she died.

When Whitman was informed of her death by Herbert Gilchrist, he could find words for only the following brief reply:

*15th December 1885.
Camden, United States, America.*

Dear Herbert:

I have received your letter. Nothing now remains but a sweet and rich memory – none more beautiful all time, all life all the earth – I cannot write anything of a letter to-day. I must sit alone and think.

Walt Whitman.

Later, in conversations with Horace Traubel which the latter has preserved in his minute biography of Whitman, he was able to express his regard for Mrs. Gilchrist more fully – “a supreme character of whom the world knows too little for its own good ... If her sayings had been recorded – I do not say she would pale, but I do say she would equal the best of the women of our century – add something as great as any to the testimony on the side of her sex.” And at another time: “Oh! she was strangely different from the average; entirely herself; as simple as nature; true, honest; beautiful as a tree is tall, leafy, rich, full,[Pg xxxvii] free —*is* a tree. Yet, free as she was by nature, bound by no conventionalisms, she was the most courageous of women; more than queenly; of high aspect in the best sense. She was not cold; she had her passions; I have known her to warm up – to resent something that was said; some impeachment of good things – great things; of a person sometimes; she had the largest charity, the sweetest fondest optimism... She was a radical of radicals; enjoyed all sorts of high enthusiasms: was exquisitely sensitized; belonged to the times yet to come; her vision went on and on.”

This searching interpretation of her character wants only her artist son's description of her personal appearance to make the final picture complete: "A little above the average height, she walked with an even, light step. Brown hair concealed a full and finely chiselled brow, and her hazel eyes bent upon you a bright and penetrating gaze. Whilst conversing her face became radiant as with an experience of golden years; humour was present in her conversation – flecks of sunshine, such as sometimes play about the minds of deeply religious natures. Her animated manner seldom flagged, and charmed the taciturn to talking in his or her best humour." Once, when speaking to Walt Whitman of the beauty of the human speaking voice, he replied: "The voice indicates the soul. Hers, with its varied modulations and blended tones, was the tenderest, most musical voice ever to bless our ears."

Her death was a long-lasting shock to Whitman. "She was a wonderful woman – a sort of human miracle to me... Her taking off ... was a great[Pg xxxviii] shock to me: I have never quite got over it: she was near to me: she was subtle: her grasp on my work was tremendous – so sure, so all around, so adequate." If this sounds a trifle self-centred in its criticism, not so was the poem which, in memory of her, he wrote as a fitting epitaph from the poet she had loved.

“GOING SOMEWHERE”

My science-friend, my noblest woman-friend (Now buried in an English grave
– and this a memory-leaf for her dear sake),
Ended our talk – “The sum, concluding all we know of old or modern learning,
intuitions deep,
Of all Geologies – Histories – of all Astronomy – of Evolution, Metaphysics
all,
Is, that we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering,
Life, life an endless march, an endless army (no halt, but, it is duly over),
The world, the race, the soul – in space and time the universes,
All bound as is befitting each – all surely going somewhere.”

A WOMAN'S ESTIMATE OF WALT WHITMAN ¹ [FROM LETTERS BY ANNE GILCHRIST TO W. M. ROSSETTI.]

June 23, 1869.— I am very sure you are right in your estimate of Walt Whitman. There is nothing in him that I shall ever let go my hold of. For me the reading of his poems is truly a new birth of the soul.

I shall quite fearlessly accept your kind offer of the loan of a complete edition, certain that great and divinely beautiful nature has not, could not infuse any poison into the wine he has poured out for us. And as for what you specially allude to, who so well able to bear it – I will say, to judge wisely of it – as one who, having been a happy wife and mother, has learned to accept all things with tenderness, to feel a sacredness in all? Perhaps Walt Whitman has forgotten – or, through some theory in his head, has overridden – the truth that our instincts are beautiful facts of nature, as well as our bodies; and that we have a strong instinct of silence about some things.

July 11.— I think it was very manly and kind of you to put the whole of Walt Whitman's poems into my hands; and that I have no other friend who would have judged them and me so wisely and generously.

I had not dreamed that words could cease to be words, and become electric streams like these. I do assure you that, strong as I am, I feel sometimes as if I had not bodily strength to read many of these poems. In the series headed "Calamus," for instance, in some of the "Songs of Parting," the "Voice out of the Sea," the poem beginning "Tears, Tears," &c., there is such a weight of emotion, such a tension of the heart, that mine refuses to beat under it, – stands quite still, – and I am obliged to lay the book down for a while. Or again, in the piece called "Walt Whitman," and one or two others of that type, I am as one hurried through stormy seas, over high mountains, dazed with sunlight, stunned with a crowd and tumult of faces and voices, till I am breathless, bewildered, half dead. Then come parts and whole poems in which there is such calm wisdom and strength of thought, such a cheerful breadth of sunshine, that the soul bathes in them renewed and strengthened. Living impulses flow out of these that make me exult in life, yet look longingly towards "the superb vistas of Death." Those who admire this poem, and don't care for that, and talk of formlessness, absence of metre, &c., are quite as far from any genuine recognition of Walt Whitman as his bitter detractors. Not, of course, that all the pieces are equal in power and beauty, but that all are vital; they grew – they were not made. We criticise a palace or a cathedral; but what is the good of criticising a forest? Are not the hitherto-accepted masterpieces of literature akin rather to noble architecture; built up of material rendered precious by elaboration; planned with subtle art that makes beauty go hand in hand with rule and measure, and knows where the last stone will come, before the first is laid; the result stately, fixed, yet such as might, in every particular, have been different from what it is (therefore inviting criticism), contrasting proudly with the careless freedom of nature, opposing its own rigid adherence to symmetry to her willful dallying with it? But not such is this book. Seeds brought by the winds from north, south, east, and west, lying long in the earth, not resting on it like the stately building, but hid in and assimilating it, shooting upwards to be nourished by the air and the sunshine and the rain which beat idly against that, – each bough and twig and leaf growing in strength and beauty its own way, a law to itself, yet, with all this freedom of spontaneous growth, the result inevitable, unalterable (therefore setting criticism at naught), above all things, vital, – that is, a source of ever-generating vitality: such are these poems.

¹ Reprinted from the *Radical* for May, 1870.

“Roots and leaves themselves alone are these,
Scents brought to men and women from the wild woods and from the
pondside,
Breast sorrel and pinks of love, fingers that wind around tighter than
vines,
Gushes from the throats of birds hid in the foliage of trees as the sun
is risen,
Breezes of land and love, breezes set from living shores out to you on
the living sea, – to you, O sailors!
Frost-mellowed berries and Third-month twigs, offered fresh to young
persons wandering out in the fields when the winter breaks up,
Love-buds put before you and within you, whoever you are,
Buds to be unfolded on the old terms.
If you bring the warmth of the sun to them, they will open, and bring
form, colour, perfume, to you:
If you become the aliment and the wet, they will become flowers, fruits,
tall branches and trees.”

And the music takes good care of itself, too. As if it *could* be otherwise! As if those “large, melodious thoughts,” those emotions, now so stormy and wild, now of unfathomed tenderness and gentleness, could fail to vibrate through the words in strong, sweeping, long-sustained chords, with lovely melodies winding in and out fitfully amongst them! Listen, for instance, to the penetrating sweetness, set in the midst of rugged grandeur, of the passage beginning, —

“I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;
I call to the earth and sea half held by the night.”

I see that no counting of syllables will reveal the mechanism of the music; and that this rushing spontaneity could not stay to bind itself with the fetters of metre. But I know that the music is there, and that I would not for something change ears with those who cannot hear it. And I know that poetry must do one of two things, – either own this man as equal with her highest completest manifestors, or stand aside, and admit that there is something come into the world nobler, diviner than herself, one that is free of the universe, and can tell its secrets as none before.

I do not think or believe this; but see it with the same unmistakable definiteness of perception and full consciousness that I see the sun at this moment in the noonday sky, and feel his rays glowing down upon me as I write in the open air. What more can you ask of the works of a man’s mouth than that they should “absorb into you as food and air, to appear again in your strength, gait, face,” – that they should be “fibre and filter to your blood,” joy and gladness to your whole nature?

I am persuaded that one great source of this kindling, vitalizing power – I suppose *the* great source – is the grasp laid upon the present, the fearless and comprehensive dealing with reality. Hitherto the leaders of thought have (except in science) been men with their faces resolutely turned backwards; men who have made of the past a tyrant that beggars and scorns the present, hardly seeing any greatness but what is shrouded away in the twilight, underground past; naming the present only for disparaging comparisons, humiliating distrust that tends to create the very barrenness it complains of; bidding me warm myself at fires that went out to mortal eyes centuries ago; insisting, in religion above all, that I must either “look through dead men’s eyes,” or shut my own in helpless darkness. Poets fancying themselves so happy over the chill and faded beauty of the past, but not making me happy at all, – rebellious always at being dragged down out of the free air and sunshine of to-day.

But this poet, this “athlete, full of rich words, full of joy,” takes you by the hand, and turns you with your face straight forwards. The present is great enough for him, because he is great enough for it. It flows through him as a “vast oceanic tide,” lifting up a mighty voice. Earth, “the eloquent, dumb, great mother,” is not old, has lost none of her fresh charms, none of her divine meanings; still bears great sons and daughters, if only they would possess themselves and accept their birthright, – a richer, not a poorer, heritage than was ever provided before, – richer by all the toil and suffering of the generations that have preceded, and by the further unfolding of the eternal purposes. Here is one come at last who can show them how; whose songs are the breath of a glad, strong, beautiful life, nourished sufficingly, kindled to unsurpassed intensity and greatness by the gifts of the present.

“Each moment and whatever happens thrills me with joy.”

“O the joy of my soul leaning poised on itself, – receiving identity through materials, and loving them, – observing characters, and absorbing them!

O my soul vibrated back to me from them!

“O the gleesome saunter over fields and hillsides!

The leaves and flowers of the commonest weeds, the moist, fresh stillness of the woods,

The exquisite smell of the earth at daybreak, and all through the forenoon.

“O to realize space!

The plenteousness of all – that there are no bounds;

To emerge, and be of the sky – of the sun and moon and the flying clouds, as one with them.

“O the joy of suffering, —

To struggle against great odds, to meet enemies undaunted,

To be entirely alone with them – to find how much one can stand!”

I used to think it was great to disregard happiness, to press on to a high goal, careless, disdainful of it. But now I see that there is nothing so great as to be capable of happiness; to pluck it out of “each moment and whatever happens”; to find that one can ride as gay and buoyant on the angry, menacing, tumultuous waves of life as on those that glide and glitter under a clear sky; that it is not defeat and wretchedness which come out of the storm of adversity, but strength and calmness.

See, again, in the pieces gathered together under the title “Calamus,” and elsewhere, what it means for a man to love his fellow-man. Did you dream it before? These “evangel-poems of comrades and of love” speak, with the abiding, penetrating power of prophecy, of a “new and superb friendship”; speak not as beautiful dreams, unrealizable aspirations to be laid aside in sober moods, because they breathe out what now glows within the poet’s own breast, and flows out in action toward the men around him. Had ever any land before her poet, not only to concentrate within himself her life, and, when she kindled with anger against her children who were treacherous to the cause her life is bound up with, to announce and justify her terrible purpose in words of unsurpassable grandeur (as in the poem beginning, “Rise, O days, from your fathomless deeps”), but also to go and with his own hands dress the wounds, with his powerful presence soothe and sustain and nourish her suffering soldiers, – hundreds of them, thousands, tens of thousands, – by day and by night, for weeks, months, years?

“I sit by the restless all the dark night; some are so young,
Some suffer so much: I recall the experience sweet and sad.
Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck have crossed and rested,
Many a soldier’s kiss dwells on these bearded lips: – ”

Kisses, that touched with the fire of a strange, new, undying eloquence the lips that received them! The most transcendent genius could not, untaught by that “experience sweet and sad,” have breathed out hymns for her dead soldiers of such ineffably tender, sorrowful, yet triumphant beauty.

But the present spreads before us other things besides those of which it is easy to see the greatness and beauty; and the poet would leave us to learn the hardest part of our lesson unhelped if he took no heed of these; and would be unfaithful to his calling, as interpreter of man to himself and of the scheme of things in relation to him, if he did not accept all – if he did not teach “the great lesson of reception, neither preference nor denial.” If he feared to stretch out the hand, not of condescending pity, but of fellowship, to the degraded, criminal, foolish, despised, knowing that they are only laggards in “the great procession winding along the roads of the universe,” “the far-behind to come on in their turn,” knowing the “amplitude of Time,” how could he roll the stone of contempt off the heart as he does, and cut the strangling knot of the problem of inherited viciousness and degradation? And, if he were not bold and true to the utmost, and did not own in himself the threads of darkness mixed in with the threads of light, and own it with the same strength and directness that he tells of the light, and not in those vague generalities that everybody uses, and nobody means, in speaking on this head, – in the worst, germs of all that is in the best; in the best, germs of all that is in the worst, – the *brotherhood* of the human race would be a mere flourish of rhetoric. And brotherhood is naught if it does not bring brother’s love along with it. If the poet’s heart were not “a measureless ocean of love” that seeks the lips and would quench the thirst of all, he were not the one we have waited for so long. Who but he could put at last the right meaning into that word “democracy,” which has been made to bear such a burthen of incongruous notions?

“By God! I will have nothing that all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms!”

flashing it forth like a banner, making it draw the instant allegiance of every man and woman who loves justice. All occupations, however homely, all developments of the activities of man, need the poet’s recognition, because every man needs the assurance that for him also the materials out of which to build up a great and satisfying life lie to hand, the sole magic in the use of them, all of the right stuff in the right hands. Hence those patient enumerations of every conceivable kind of industry: —

“In them far more than you estimated – in them far less also.”

Far more as a means, next to nothing as an end: whereas we are wont to take it the other way, and think the result something, but the means a weariness. Out of all come strength, and the cheerfulness of strength. I murmured not a little, to say the truth, under these enumerations, at first. But now I think that not only is their purpose a justification, but that the musical ear and vividness of perception of the poet have enabled him to perform this task also with strength and grace, and that they are harmonious as well as necessary parts of the great whole.

Nor do I sympathize with those who grumble at the unexpected words that turn up now and then. A quarrel with words is always, more or less, a quarrel with meanings; and here we are to be as genial and as wide as nature, and quarrel with nothing. If the thing a word stands for exists by divine appointment (and what does not so exist?), the word need never be ashamed of itself; the shorter and more direct, the better. It is a gain to make friends with it, and see it in good company. Here at all events, “poetic diction” would not serve, – not pretty, soft, colourless words, laid by in lavender for the special uses of poetry, that have had none of the wear and tear of daily life; but such as have stood

most, as tell of human heart-beats, as fit closest to the sense, and have taken deep hues of association from the varied experiences of life – those are the words wanted here. We only ask to seize and be seized swiftly, over-masteringly, by the great meanings. We see with the eyes of the soul, listen with the ears of the soul; the poor old words that have served so many generations for purposes, good, bad, and indifferent, and become warped and blurred in the process, grow young again, regenerate, translucent. It is not mere delight they give us, —*that* the “sweet singers,” with their subtly wrought gifts, their mellifluous speech, can give too in their degree; it is such life and health as enable us to pluck delights for ourselves out of every hour of the day, and taste the sunshine that ripened the corn in the crust we eat (I often seem to myself to do that).

Out of the scorn of the present came skepticism; and out of the large, loving acceptance of it comes faith. If *now* is so great and beautiful, I need no arguments to make me believe that the *nows* of the past and of the future were and will be great and beautiful, too.

“I know I am deathless.
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by the carpenter’s compass.
I know I shall not pass, like a child’s carlacue cut with a burnt stick
at night.
I know I am august.
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood.

“My foothold is tenoned and mortised in granite:
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of Time.”

“No array of terms can say how much I am at peace about God and
Death.”

You argued rightly that my confidence would not be betrayed by any of the poems in this book. None of them troubled me even for a moment; because I saw at a glance that it was not, as men had supposed, the heights brought down to the depths, but the depths lifted up level with the sunlit heights, that they might become clear and sunlit, too. Always, for a woman, a veil woven out of her own soul – never touched upon even, with a rough hand, by this poet. But, for a man, a daring, fearless pride in himself, not a mock-modesty woven out of delusions – a very poor imitation of a woman’s. Do they not see that this fearless pride, this complete acceptance of themselves, is needful for her pride, her justification? What! is it all so ignoble, so base, that it will not bear the honest light of speech from lips so gifted with “the divine power to use words?” Then what hateful, bitter humiliation for her, to have to give herself up to the reality! Do you think there is ever a bride who does not taste more or less this bitterness in her cup? But who put it there? It must surely be man’s fault, not God’s, that she has to say to herself, “Soul, look another way – you have no part in this. Motherhood is beautiful, fatherhood is beautiful; but the dawn of fatherhood and motherhood is not beautiful.” Do they really think that God is ashamed of what he has made and appointed? And, if not, surely it is somewhat superfluous that they should undertake to be so for him.

“The full-spread pride of man is calming and excellent to the soul,”

Of a woman above all. It is true that instinct of silence I spoke of is a beautiful, imperishable part of nature, too. But it is not beautiful when it means an ignominious shame brooding darkly. Shame is like a very flexible veil, that follows faithfully the shape of what it covers, – beautiful when it hides a beautiful thing, ugly when it hides an ugly one. It has not covered what was beautiful here; it has covered a mean distrust of a man’s self and of his Creator. It was needed that this silence, this

evil spell, should for once be broken, and the daylight let in, that the dark cloud lying under might be scattered to the winds. It was needed that one who could here indicate for us “the path between reality and the soul” should speak. That is what these beautiful, despised poems, the “Children of Adam,” do, read by the light that glows out of the rest of the volume: light of a clear, strong faith in God, of an unfathomably deep and tender love for humanity, – light shed out of a soul that is “possessed of itself.”

“Natural life of me faithfully praising things,
Corroborating for ever the triumph of things.”

Now silence may brood again; but lovingly, happily, as protecting what is beautiful, not as hiding what is unbeautiful; consciously enfolding a sweet and sacred mystery – august even as the mystery of Death, the dawn as the setting: kindred grandeurs, which to eyes that are opened shed a hallowing beauty on all that surrounds and preludes them.

“O vast and well-veiled Death!

“O the beautiful touch of Death, soothing and benumbing a few moments, for reasons!”

He who can thus look with fearlessness at the beauty of Death may well dare to teach us to look with fearless, untroubled eyes at the perfect beauty of Love in all its appointed realizations. Now none need turn away their thoughts with pain or shame; though only lovers and poets may say what they will, – the lover to his own, the poet to all, because all are in a sense his own. None need fear that this will be harmful to the woman. How should there be such a flaw in the scheme of creation that, for the two with whom there is no complete life, save in closest sympathy, perfect union, what is natural and happy for the one should be baneful to the other? The utmost faithful freedom of speech, such as there is in these poems, creates in her no thought or feeling that shuns the light of heaven, none that are not as innocent and serenely fair as the flowers that grow; would lead, not to harm, but to such deep and tender affection as makes harm or the thought of harm simply impossible. Far more beautiful care than man is aware of has been taken in the making of her, to fit her to be his mate. God has taken such care that *he* need take none; none, that is, which consists in disguisement, insincerity, painful hushing-up of his true, grand, initiating nature. And, as regards the poet’s utterances, which, it might be thought, however harmless in themselves, would prove harmful by falling into the hands of those for whom they are manifestly unsuitable, I believe that even here fear is needless. For her innocence is folded round with such thick folds of ignorance, till the right way and time for it to accept knowledge, that what is unsuitable is also unintelligible to her; and, if no dark shadow from without be cast on the white page by misconstruction or by foolish mystery and hiding away of it, no hurt will ensue from its passing freely through her hands.

This is so, though it is little understood or realized by men. Wives and mothers will learn through the poet that there is rejoicing grandeur and beauty there wherein their hearts have so longed to find it; where foolish men, traitors to themselves, poorly comprehending the grandeur of their own or the beauty of a woman’s nature, have taken such pains to make her believe there was none, – nothing but miserable discrepancy.

One of the hardest things to make a child understand is, that down underneath your feet, if you go far enough, you come to blue sky and stars again; that there really is no “down” for the world, but only in every direction an “up.” And that this is an all-embracing truth, including within its scope every created thing, and, with deepest significance, every part, faculty, attribute, healthful impulse, mind, and body of a man (each and all facing towards and related to the Infinite on every side), is

what we grown children find it hardest to realize, too. Novalis said, “We touch heaven when we lay our hand on the human body”; which, if it mean anything, must mean an ample justification of the poet who has dared to be the poet of the body as well as of the soul, – to treat it with the freedom and grandeur of an ancient sculptor.

“Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy of the muse: – I say the form complete is worthier far.

“These are not parts and poems of the body only, but of the soul.

“O, I say now these are soul.”

But while Novalis – who gazed at the truth a long way off, up in the air, in a safe, comfortable, German fashion – has been admiringly quoted by high authorities, the great American who has dared to rise up and wrestle with it, and bring it alive and full of power in the midst of us, has been greeted with a very different kind of reception, as has happened a few times before in the world in similar cases. Yet I feel deeply persuaded that a perfectly fearless, candid, ennobling treatment of the life of the body (so inextricably intertwined with, so potent in its influence on the life of the soul) will prove of inestimable value to all earnest and aspiring natures, impatient of the folly of the long-prevalent belief that it is because of the greatness of the spirit that it has learned to despise the body, and to ignore its influences; knowing well that it is, on the contrary, just because the spirit is not great enough, not healthy and vigorous enough, to transfuse itself into the life of the body, elevating that and making it holy by its own triumphant intensity; knowing, too, how the body avenges this by dragging the soul down to the level assigned itself. Whereas the spirit must lovingly embrace the body, as the roots of a tree embrace the ground, drawing thence rich nourishment, warmth, impulse. Or, rather, the body is itself the root of the soul – that whereby it grows and feeds. The great tide of healthful life that carries all before it must surge through the whole man, not beat to and fro in one corner of his brain.

“O the life of my senses and flesh, transcending my senses and flesh!”

For the sake of all that is highest, a truthful recognition of this life, and especially of that of it which underlies the fundamental ties of humanity – the love of husband and wife, fatherhood, motherhood – is needed. Religion needs it, now at last alive to the fact that the basis of all true worship is comprised in “the great lesson of reception, neither preference nor denial,” interpreting, loving, rejoicing in all that is created, fearing and despising nothing.

“I accept reality, and dare not question it.”

The dignity of a man, the pride and affection of a woman, need it too. And so does the intellect. For science has opened up such elevating views of the mystery of material existence that, if poetry had not bestirred herself to handle this theme in her own way, she would have been left behind by her plodding sister. Science knows that matter is not, as we fancied, certain stolid atoms which the forces of nature vibrate through and push and pull about; but that the forces and the atoms are one mysterious, imperishable identity, neither conceivable without the other. She knows, as well as the poet, that destructibility is not one of nature’s words; that it is only the relationship of things – tangibility, visibility – that are transitory. She knows that body and soul are one, and proclaims it undauntedly, regardless, and rightly regardless, of inferences. Timid onlookers, aghast, think it means that soul is body – means death for the soul. But the poet knows it means body is soul – the great whole imperishable; in life and in death continually changing substance, always retaining identity. For, if the man of science is happy about the atoms, if he is not baulked or baffled by apparent decay or destruction, but can see far enough into the dimness to know that not only is each

atom imperishable, but that its endowments, characteristics, affinities, electric and other attractions and repulsions – however suspended, hid, dormant, masked, when it enters into new combinations – remain unchanged, be it for thousands of years, and, when it is again set free, manifest themselves in the old way, shall not the poet be happy about the vital whole? shall the highest force, the vital, that controls and compels into complete subservience for its own purposes the rest, be the only one that is destructible? and the love and thought that endow the whole be less enduring than the gravitating, chemical, electric powers that endow its atoms? But identity is the essence of love and thought – I still I, you still you. Certainly no man need ever again be scared by the “dark hush” and the little handful of refuse.

“You are not scattered to the winds – you gather certainly and safely around yourself.”

“Sure as Life holds all parts together, Death holds all parts together.”

“All goes onward and outward: nothing collapses.”

“What I am, I am of my body; and what I shall be, I shall be of my body.”

“The body parts away at last for the journeys of the soul.”

Science knows that whenever a thing passes from a solid to a subtle air, power is set free to a wider scope of action. The poet knows it too, and is dazzled as he turns his eyes toward “the superb vistas of death.” He knows that “the perpetual transfers and promotions” and “the amplitude of time” are for a man as well as for the earth. The man of science, with unwearied, self-denying toil, finds the letters and joins them into words. But the poet alone can make complete sentences. The man of science furnishes the premises; but it is the poet who draws the final conclusion. Both together are “swiftly and surely preparing a future greater than all the past.” But, while the man of science bequeaths to it the fruits of his toil, the poet, this mighty poet, bequeaths himself – “Death making him really undying.” He will “stand as high as the highest” to these men and women. For he taught them, in words which breathe out his very heart and soul into theirs, that “love of comrades” which, like the “soft-born measureless light,” makes wholesome and fertile every spot it penetrates to, lighting up dark social and political problems, and kindling into a genial glow that great heart of justice which is the life-source of Democracy. He, the beloved friend of all, initiated for them a “new and superb friendship”; whispered that secret of a godlike pride in a man’s self, and a perfect trust in woman, whereby their love for each other, no longer poisoned and stifled, but basking in the light of God’s smile, and sending up to him a perfume of gratitude, attains at last a divine and tender completeness. He gave a faith-compelling utterance to that “wisdom which is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and of the excellence of things.” Happy America, that he should be her son! One sees, indeed, that only a young giant of a nation could produce this kind of greatness, so full of the ardour, the elasticity, the inexhaustible vigour and freshness, the joyousness, the audacity of youth. But I, for one, cannot grudge anything to America. For, after all, the young giant is the old English giant – the great English race renewing its youth in that magnificent land, “Mexican-breathed, Arctic-braced,” and girding up its loins to start on a new career that shall match with the greatness of the new home.

A CONFESSION OF FAITH ²

“Of genius in the Fine Arts,” wrote Wordsworth, “the only infallible sign is the widening the sphere of human sensibility for the delight, honour, and benefit of human nature. Genius is the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe, or, if that be not allowed, it is the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown. What is all this but an advance or conquest made by the soul of the poet? Is it to be supposed that the reader can make progress of this kind like an Indian prince or general stretched on his palanquin and borne by slaves? No; he is invigorated and inspirited by his leader in order that he may exert himself, for he cannot proceed in quiescence, he cannot be carried like a dead weight. Therefore to create taste is to call forth and bestow power.”

A great poet, then, is “a challenge and summons”; and the question first of all is not whether we like or dislike him, but whether we are capable of meeting that challenge, of stepping out of our habitual selves to answer that summons. He works on Nature’s plan: Nature, who teaches nothing but supplies infinite material to learn from; who never preaches but drives home her meanings by the resistless eloquence of effects. Therefore the poet makes greater demands upon his reader than any other man. For it is not a question of swallowing his ideas or admiring his handiwork merely, but of seeing, feeling, enjoying, as he sees, feels, enjoys. “The messages of great poems to each man and woman are,” says Walt Whitman, “come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us. We are no better than you; what we enclose you enclose, what we enjoy you may enjoy” – no better than you potentially, that is; but if you would understand us the potential must become the actual, the dormant sympathies must awaken and broaden, the dulled perceptions clear themselves and let in undreamed of delights, the wonder-working imagination must respond, the ear attune itself, the languid soul inhale large draughts of love and hope and courage, those “empyrean airs” that vitalize the poet’s world. No wonder the poet is long in finding his audience; no wonder he has to abide the “inexorable tests of Time,” which, if indeed he be great, slowly turns the handful into hundreds, the hundreds into thousands, and at last having done its worst, grudgingly passes him on into the ranks of the Immortals.

Meanwhile let not the handful who believe that such a destiny awaits a man of our time cease to give a reason for the faith that is in them.

So far as the suffrages of his own generation go Walt Whitman may, like Wordsworth, tell of the “love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt” with which his poems have been received; but the love and admiration are from even a smaller number, the aversion, the contempt more vehement, more universal and persistent than Wordsworth ever encountered. For the American is a more daring innovator; he cuts loose from precedent, is a very Columbus who has sailed forth alone on perilous seas to seek new shores, to seek a new world for the soul, a world that shall give scope and elevation and beauty to the changed and changing events, aspirations, conditions of modern life. To new aims, new methods; therefore let not the reader approach these poems as a judge, comparing, testing, measuring by what has gone before, but as a willing learner, an unprejudiced seeker for whatever may delight and nourish and exalt the soul. Neither let him be abashed nor daunted by the weight of adverse opinion, the contempt and denial which have been heaped upon the great American even though it be the contempt and denial of the capable, the cultivated, the recognized authorities; for such is the usual lot of the pioneer in whatever field. In religion it is above all to the earnest and conscientious believer that the Reformer has appeared a blasphemer, and in the world of literature it is equally natural that the most careful student, that

² Reprinted from “Anne Gilchrist, Her Life and Writings,” by her son Herbert H. Gilchrist – London, 1887.

the warmest lover of the accepted masterpieces, should be the most hostile to one who forsakes the methods by which, or at any rate, in company with which, those triumphs have been achieved. “But,” said the wise Goethe, “I will listen to any man’s convictions; you may keep your doubts, your negations to yourself, I have plenty of my own.” For heartfelt convictions are rare things. Therefore I make bold to indicate the scope and source of power in Walt Whitman’s writings, starting from no wider ground than their effect upon an individual mind. It is not criticism I have to offer; least of all any discussion of the question of form or formlessness in these poems, deeply convinced as I am that when great meanings and great emotions are expressed with corresponding power, literature has done its best, call it what you please. But my aim is rather to suggest such trains of thought, such experience of life as having served to put me *en rapport* with this poet may haply find here and there a reader who is thereby helped to the same end. Hence I quote just as freely from the prose (especially from “Democratic Vistas” and the preface to the first issue of “Leaves of Grass,” 1855) as from his poems, and more freely, perhaps, from those parts that have proved a stumbling-block than from those whose conspicuous beauty assures them acceptance.

Fifteen years ago, with feelings partly of indifference, partly of antagonism – for I had heard none but ill words of them – I first opened Walt Whitman’s poems. But as I read I became conscious of receiving the most powerful influence that had ever come to me from any source. What was the spell? It was that in them humanity has, in a new sense, found itself; for the first time has dared to accept itself without disparagement, without reservation. For the first time an unrestricted faith in all that is and in the issues of all that happens has burst forth triumphantly into song.

“... The rapture of the hallelujah sent
From all that breathes and is ...”

rings through these poems. They carry up into the region of Imagination and Passion those vaster and more profound conceptions of the universe and of man reached by centuries of that indomitably patient organized search for knowledge, that “skilful cross-questioning of things” called science.

“O truth of the earth I am determined to press my way toward you.
Sound your voice! I scale the mountains, I dive in the sea after you,”

cried science; and the earth and the sky have answered, and continue inexhaustibly to answer her appeal. And now at last the day dawns which Wordsworth prophesied of: “The man of science,” he wrote, “seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude. The Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science, it is the first and last of all knowledge; it is immortal as the heart of man. If the labours of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will then sleep no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself. If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to man, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the being thus produced as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.” That time approaches: a new heaven and a new earth await us when the knowledge grasped by science is realized, conceived as a whole, related to the world within us by the shaping spirit of imagination. Not in vain, already, for this Poet have they pierced the darkness of the past, and read here and there a word of the earth’s history before

human eyes beheld it; each word of infinite significance, because involving in it secrets of the whole.
A new anthem of the slow, vast, mystic dawn of life he sings in the name of humanity.

“I am an acme of things accomplish’d, and I am an encloser of things
to be.

“My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs;
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps;
All below duly travell’d and still I mount and mount.

“Rise after rise bow the phantoms behind me:
Afar down I see the huge first Nothing – I know
I was even there;
I waited unseen and always, and slept through the lethargic mist,
And took my time, and took no hurt from the fetid carbon.

“Long I was hugg’d close – long and long.

“Immense have been the preparations for me,
Faithful and friendly the arms that have help’d me.
Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like cheerful boatmen;
For room to me stars kept aside in their own rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to hold me.

“Before I was born out of my mother, generations guided me;
My embryo has never been torpid – nothing could overlay it.

“For it the nebula cohered to an orb,
The long slow strata piled to rest it on,
Vast vegetables gave it sustenance,
Monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths and deposited it with
care.

“All forces have been steadily employ’d to complete and delight me;
Now on this spot I stand with my robust Soul.”

Not in vain have they pierced space as well as time and found “a vast similitude interlocking all.”

“I open my scuttle at night and see the far-sprinkled systems,
And all I see, multiplied as high as I can cypher, edge but the rim of
the farther systems.

“Wider and wider they spread, expanding, always expanding,
Outward, and outward, and for ever outward.

“My sun has his sun, and round him obediently wheels,
He joins with his partners a group of superior circuit,
And greater sets follow, making specks of the greatest inside them.

“There is no stoppage, and never can be stoppage;
If I, you, and the worlds, and all beneath or upon their surfaces, were
this moment reduced back to a pallid float, it would not avail in the
long run;
We should surely bring up again where we now stand,
And as surely go as much farther – and then farther and farther.”

Not in vain for him have they penetrated into the substances of things to find that what we thought poor, dead, inert matter is (in Clerk Maxwell’s words) “a very sanctuary of minuteness and power where molecules obey the laws of their existence, and clash together in fierce collision, or grapple in yet more fierce embrace, building up in secret the forms of visible things”; each stock and stone a busy group of Ariels plying obediently their hidden tasks.

“Why! who makes much of a miracle?
As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles,

.....

“To me, every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the same, ...
Every spear of grass – the frames, limbs, organs, of men and women,
and all that concerns them,
All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.”

The natural *is* the supernatural, says Carlyle. It is the message that comes to our time from all quarters alike; from poetry, from science, from the deep brooding of the student of human history. Science materialistic? Rather it is the current theology that is materialistic in comparison. Science may truly be said to have annihilated our gross and brutish conceptions of matter, and to have revealed it to us as subtle, spiritual, energetic beyond our powers of realization. It is for the Poet to increase these powers of realization. He it is who must awaken us to the perception of a new heaven and a new earth here where we stand on this old earth. He it is who must, in Walt Whitman’s words, indicate the path between reality and the soul.

Above all is every thought and feeling in these poems touched by the light of the great revolutionary truth that man, unfolded through vast stretches of time out of lowly antecedents, is a rising, not a fallen creature; emerging slowly from purely animal life; as slowly as the strata are piled and the ocean beds hollowed; whole races still barely emerged, countless individuals in the foremost races barely emerged: “the wolf, the snake, the hog” yet lingering in the best; but new ideals achieved, and others come in sight, so that what once seemed fit is fit no longer, is adhered to uneasily and with shame; the conflicts and antagonisms between what we call good and evil, at once the sign and the means of emergence, and needing to account for them no supposed primeval disaster, no outside power thwarting and marring the Divine handiwork, the perfect fitness to its time and place of all that has proceeded from the Great Source. In a word that Evil is relative; is that which the slowly developing reason and conscience bid us leave behind. The prowess of the lion, the subtlety of the fox, are cruelty and duplicity in man.

“Silent and amazed, when a little boy,

I remember I heard the preacher every Sunday put God in his
statements,
As contending against some being or influence.”

says the poet. And elsewhere, “Faith, very old now, scared away by science” – by the daylight science lets in upon our miserable, inadequate, idolatrous conceptions of God and of His works, and on the sophistications, subterfuges, moral impossibilities, by which we have endeavoured to reconcile the irreconcilable – the coexistence of omnipotent Goodness and an absolute Power of Evil – “Faith must be brought back by the same power that caused her departure: restored with new sway, deeper, wider, higher than ever.” And what else, indeed, at bottom, is science so busy at? For what is Faith? “Faith,” to borrow venerable and unsurpassed words, “is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” And how obtain evidence of things not seen but by a knowledge of things seen? And how know what we may hope for, but by knowing the truth of what is, here and now? For seen and unseen are parts of the Great Whole: all the parts interdependent, closely related; all alike have proceeded from and are manifestations of the Divine Source. Nature is not the barrier between us and the unseen but the link, the communication; she, too, has something behind appearances, has an unseen soul; she, too, is made of “innumerable energies.” Knowledge is not faith, but it is faith’s indispensable preliminary and starting ground. Faith runs ahead to fetch glad tidings for us; but if she start from a basis of ignorance and illusion, how can she but run in the wrong direction? “Suppose,” said that impetuous lover and seeker of truth, Clifford, “Suppose all moving things to be suddenly stopped at some instant, and that we could be brought fresh, without any previous knowledge, to look at the petrified scene. The spectacle would be immensely absurd. Crowds of people would be senselessly standing on one leg in the street looking at one another’s backs; others would be wasting their time by sitting in a train in a place difficult to get at, nearly all with their mouths open, and their bodies in some contorted, unrestful posture. Clocks would stand with their pendulums on one side. Everything would be disorderly, conflicting, in its wrong place. But once remember that the world is in motion, is going somewhere, and everything will be accounted for and found just as it should be. Just so great a change of view, just so complete an explanation is given to us when we recognize that the nature of man and beast and of all the world is *going somewhere*. The maladaptions in organic nature are seen to be steps toward the improvement or discarding of imperfect organs. The *baneful strife which lurketh inborn in us, and goeth on the way with us to hurt us*, is found to be the relic of a time of savage or even lower condition.” “Going somewhere!” That is the meaning then of all our perplexities! That changes a mystery which stultified and contradicted the best we knew into a mystery which teaches, allures, elevates; which harmonizes what we know with what we hope. By it we begin to

“... see by the glad light,
And breathe the sweet air of futurity.”

The scornful laughter of Carlyle as he points with one hand to the baseness, ignorance, folly, cruelty around us, and with the other to the still unsurpassed poets, sages, heroes, saints of antiquity, whilst he utters the words “progress of the species!” touches us no longer when we have begun to realize “the amplitude of time”; when we know something of the scale by which Nature measures out the years to accomplish her smallest essential modification or development; know that to call a few thousands or tens of thousands of years antiquity, is to speak as a child, and that in her chronology the great days of Egypt and Syria, of Greece and Rome are affairs of yesterday.

“Each of us inevitable;
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the earth;

Each of us allow'd the eternal purports of the earth;
Each of us here as divinely as any are here.

“You Hottentot with clicking palate! You woolly hair'd hordes!
You own'd persons, dropping sweat-drops or blood-drops!
You human forms with the fathomless ever-impressive countenances
of brutes!
I dare not refuse you – the scope of the world, and of time and space
are upon me.

.....

“I do not prefer others so very much before you either;
I do not say one word against you, away back there, where you stand;
(You will come forward in due time to my side.)
My spirit has pass'd in compassion and determination around the whole
earth;
I have look'd for equals and lovers, and found them ready for me in
all lands;
I think some divine rapport has equalized me with them.

“O vapours! I think I have risen with you, and moved away to distant
continents and fallen down there, for reasons;
I think I have blown with you, O winds;
O waters, I have finger'd every shore with you.

“I have run through what any river or strait of the globe has run through;
I have taken my stand on the bases of peninsulas, and on the high
embedded rocks, to cry thence.

“*Salut au monde!*
What cities the light or warmth penetrates, I penetrate those cities
myself;
All islands to which birds wing their way I wing my way myself.

“Toward all,
I raise high the perpendicular hand – I make the signal,
To remain after me in sight forever,
For all the haunts and homes of men.”

But “Hold!” says the reader, especially if he be one who loves science, who loves to feel the firm ground under his feet, “That the species has a great future before it we may well believe; already we see the indications. But that the individual has is quite another matter. We can but balance probabilities here, and the probabilities are very heavy on the wrong side; the poets must throw in weighty matter indeed to turn the scale the other way!” Be it so: but ponder a moment what science herself has to say bearing on this theme; what are the widest, deepest facts she has reached down to. Indestructibility: Amidst ceaseless change and seeming decay all the elements, all the forces (if indeed they be not one

and the same) which operate and substantiate those changes, imperishable; neither matter nor force capable of annihilation. Endless transformations, disappearances, new combinations, but diminution of the total amount never; missing in one place or shape to be found in another, disguised ever so long, ready always to re-emerge. “A particle of oxygen,” wrote Faraday, “is ever a particle of oxygen; nothing can in the least wear it. If it enters into combination and disappears as oxygen, if it pass through a thousand combinations, animal, vegetable, mineral – if it lie hid for a thousand years and then be evolved, it is oxygen with its first qualities neither more nor less.” So then out of the universe is no door. Continuity again is one of Nature’s irrevocable words; everything the result and outcome of what went before; no gaps, no jumps; always a connecting principle which carries forward the great scheme of things as a related whole, which subtly links past and present, like and unlike. Nothing breaks with its past. “It is not,” says Helmholtz, “the definite mass of substance which now constitutes the body to which the continuance of the individual is attached. Just as the flame remains the same in appearance and continues to exist with the same form and structure although it draws every moment fresh combustible vapour and fresh oxygen from the air into the vortex of its ascending current; and just as the wave goes on in unaltered form and is yet being reconstructed every moment from fresh particles of water, so is it also in the living being. For the material of the body like that of flame is subject to continuous and comparatively rapid change – a change the more rapid the livelier the activity of the organs in question. Some constituents are renewed from day to day, some from month to month, and others only after years. That which continues to exist as a particular individual is, like the wave and the flame, only the *form of motion* which continually attracts fresh matter into its vortex and expels the old. The observer with a deaf ear recognizes the vibration of sound as long as it is visible and can be felt, bound up with other heavy matter. Are our senses in reference to life like the deaf ear in this respect?”

“You are not thrown to the winds – you gather certainly and safely
around yourself;

.....

It is not to diffuse you that you were born of your mother and father
– it is to identify you;
It is not that you should be undecided, but that you should be decided;
Something long preparing and formless is arrived and form’d in you,
You are henceforth secure, whatever comes or goes.

“O Death! the voyage of Death!
The beautiful touch of Death, soothing and benumbing a few moments
for reasons;
Myself discharging my excrementitious body to be burn’d or reduced
to powder or buried.
My real body doubtless left me for other spheres,
My voided body, nothing more to me, returning to the purifications,
farther offices, eternal uses of the earth.”

Yes, they go their way, those dismissed atoms with all their energies and affinities unimpaired. But they are not all; the will, the affections, the intellect are just as real as those affinities and energies, and there is strict account of all; nothing slips through; there is no door out of the universe. But they

are qualities of a personality, of a self, not of an atom but of what uses and dismisses those atoms. If the qualities are indestructible so must the self be. The little heap of ashes, the puff of gas, do you pretend that is all that was Shakespeare? The rest of him lives in his works, you say? But he lived and was just the same man after those works were produced. The world gained, but he lost nothing of himself, rather grew and strengthened in the production of them.

Still farther, those faculties with which we seek for knowledge are only a part of us, there is something behind which wields them, something that those faculties cannot turn themselves in upon and comprehend; for the part cannot compass the whole. Yet there it is with the irrefragable proof of consciousness. Who should be the mouthpiece of this whole? Who but the poet, the man most fully “possessed of his own soul,” the man of the largest consciousness; fullest of love and sympathy which gather into his own life the experiences of others, fullest of imagination; that quality whereof Wordsworth says that it

“... in truth
Is but another name for absolute power,
And clearest insight, amplitude of mind
And reason in her most exalted mood.”

Let Walt Whitman speak for us:

“And I know I am solid and sound;
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow:
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.

“I know I am deathless;
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by the carpenter’s compass;
I know I shall not pass like a child’s carlacue cut with a burnt stick at night.

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

“I exist as I am – that is enough;
If no other in the world be aware I sit content;
And if each one and all be aware, I sit content.

“One world is aware, and by far the largest to me, and that is myself;
And whether I come to my own to-day, or in ten thousand or ten million years,
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.

“My foothold is tenon’d and mortis’d in granite;
I laugh at what you call dissolution;
And I know the amplitude of time.”

What lies through the portal of death is hidden from us; but the laws that govern that unknown land are not all hidden from us, for they govern here and now; they are immutable, eternal.

“Of and in all these things
I have dream’d that we are not to be changed so much, nor the law of
us changed,
I have dream’d that heroes and good doers shall be under the present
and past law,
And that murderers, drunkards, liars, shall be under the present and
past law,
For I have dream’d that the law they are under now is enough.”

And the law not to be eluded is the law of consequences, the law of silent teaching. That is the meaning of disease, pain, remorse. Slow to learn are we; but success is assured with limitless Beneficence as our teacher, with limitless time as our opportunity. Already we begin —

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