

Walt Whitman

(Incomplete manuscript)

Emma Goldman

Last summer I listened to the reading of a very fine paper on Walt Whitman, at the Public Library of the city.

I was struck by what seem[ed] to me a futile attempt on the part of some of the men who participated in the discussion to contrast Walt Whitman with some European poets. Not that Whitman was the greatest of all times or all nations. I even think some of his biographers have rendered the poet of *Leaves of Grass* scant services when they proclaimed him greater than Homer and Socrates.

The difference between Walt Whitman and the Europeans is the difference between youth and old age. Europe is old, firmly set in the groove of traditions, hemmed and hedged in by parchments, by learning derived in grey institutions, taught by grey decrepit gentlemen.

Walt Whitman is hewn from the rocks of gigantic mountains, of the depth of the Arizona canyons, the rush of the Niagara, the freshness of the open air. "*Leaves of Grass*" is a child of nature, carried sky-ward by its strong wings, giving forth out of its pure lungs the song of freedom, the song of the ecstasy of love, the delight of passion—the song of humanity which embraced all and understood all.

Unlike European poets with their roots in a decaying civilization, Walt Whitman was the singer of a new world—a culture in the making—America, a giant, savage, seeking expression. Whitman was therefore unlike other poets, a pioneer unique both in form of his art and in the ideas and feeling his poetry conveys.

One of the gentlemen at that lecture who, as I understand, is one of your Classicists, highly respectable and very much of the old order, repudiated Whitman as confused and vulgar and assured the audience that in England those who like Swinburne first gloried in Whitman, soon would have none of him because of his vulgarity.

Among other things, this critic of Whitman said "Fancy saying to the King of England: 'Hello George' and to the Prime Minister: 'Hello Stanley.'" Such familiarity is artificial, false, unreal."

The old gentleman showed utter lack of grasp of the breadth of Walt Whitman's outlook on life, his all-embracing kinship with his fellowman, his utter abhorrence of a civilization which separated the human race in kings and subjects, in rich and poor, in high and low.

Whitman saw in man not the artificial garment, not the trappings which alienates man from man and man from himself, but the name human soul stripped of all pretense, bombast, false-

hoods and hypocrisy. It is this quivering, yearning, feeling, suffering human soul which to Walt Whitman represented at once the highest majesty and the humblest child of nature. Whitman's familiarity was therefore as much part of his untrammelled being as the very air his lungs inhaled. There was no artifice about it. It was his boundless love for all living things which made Whitman so unconscious and nonchalant. It was the complete lack of understanding for Whitman as rebel and poet which decided me to speak on the subject.

Perhaps it is inevitable that so great a creative artist as Whitman should call forth violent attractions and repulsions. Certain it is that some of the friends of this poet as well as all of his enemies, have overdrawn their pictures. To call Walt Whitman a saint or to estimate him greater than Homer and Socrates seems as one-sided as to say that he is no poet at all—that he was the incarnation of the devil. To me the greatness and supremacy of Walt consists in the fact that he was human, all to human. It is the essentially human in him which makes his work "Leaves of Grass" the most human document in literature. For did he not himself tell us of "Leaves of Grass:" "He who touches this touches a man." There is certainly no other work which touches man as this extraordinary book. It is indeed not a book but a living human being with all its contradictory impulses, emotions, thoughts and aspirations.

Mr. Louis Untermeyer, in his anthology of the best American poetry is right when he calls Whitman the "Poet emancipator" of America. He closed the door on the "Brahmins" and the "gentlemen of Boston." The Civil War and Whitman together placed Longfellow, Bryant, Whittier, Lowell, Emerson and their like, farther back in time, as time is reckoned by the spirit of an age. "He led the way toward a wider aspect of democracy: he took his readers out of dusty, lamp-lit libraries into the coarse sunlight and the buoyant air.....The cosmic and the commonplace were synonymous to him.... he transmuted, by the intensity of his emotion, material which has been hitherto regarded as too unpoetic for poetry." He was the great figure of the age in which American literature suddenly become intensely American.

It seems almost incredible that at this late day there should still be people who have never heard of Walt Whitman. It is therefore necessary to give a very brief biographical outline of the man and his work.

Walt Whitman was born at Paumanok, Long Island, New York State, in May 1819. On both sides he came of substantial family. His father was descended from English settlers of the seventeenth century, sturdy independent farmers, who lived a hardy outdoor life; his mother had Dutch blood in her veins, though it was blended with a typical Quaker stock, with its noble traditions of simplicity, dignity, and spirituality. Whitman held firmly to the belief that he owed much to his ancestry, 'to the tenacity and central bones structure' as he calls it, 'of his English forebears; and still more to those qualities which came to him from his mother's side. "The best of every man" he said, "is his Mother", and the influences of his early life were both vital and permanent.

"At the age of eleven he was errand boy to a lawyer, and two years later he had begun his long connection with journalism. Then in 1836, there was a brief phase of journalism in New York; but he soon returned to his native Long Island, where he spent four or five years as a teacher with at least one interval during which he ran a newspaper of his own. Reminiscences of him at this time speak of the force and charm of his personality as already conspicuous."

Mr. John Baily, one of Whitman's biographers, and by far not favorable to Walt, nevertheless admits that what made him the man and the poet he became was no following of any hero or master, but his own peculiar genius which enabled him to observe, absorb and even love all sorts and conditions of things and people, human, animal and vegetable, in that hurrying and already

crowded life of New York and its neighborhood. And not merely to absorb. There was in his genius resistance as well as adaptability, and in spite of his universal interests and sympathies he remained an individualist, a heretic, a rebel: in a word, himself.

It was in January 1848 that he resigned his editorship of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, and almost immediately he left the world and neighborhood in which he had been brought up, having accepted an engagement on a newspaper in New Orleans. He stayed at New Orleans only a few months, but during that time he appears to have had an experience which affected his whole life. As Walt Whitman has left not a scrap of paper to tell us anything about this affair, and as he went to his grave without having breathed a word even to his most devoted friend Horace Traubel, though he did on several occasions say he would tell him this great secret, no one can really say anything about this affair.

Mr. Bins, another of his biographers, will have it that Whitman "formed an intimate relationship with some woman of higher social rank than his own," and that she became the mother of a child who was his, and perhaps of others later on. There was no marriage: and the extreme reticence of Whitman, the least reticent of men, on the whole subject suggests that it was in her interest, or at her desire, or owing to the pressure of her family, that there was no marriage, and that the whole story was kept so secret. Near the end of his life he wrote a letter to John Addington Symonds about it and mentioned a grandson with whom he was in frequent communication. He said in this letter that he had had six children; and Traubel notes that in his later years he made frequent allusions to his fatherhood. When his grandson came to visit him in this last illness Traubel regretted that he had not been there and met the young man: "God forbid," said Whitman. Evidently there was some mystery which will probably never be penetrated now."

This experience was however very decisive in Whitman's life, for very soon after his return he began to write "Leaves of Grass." In 1855 appeared the first edition which brought the poet nothing in material results. Instead it marked the beginning of many years of calumny, vile attack, and bitter opposition. Also it brought him something which was balm to his aching souls, a letter from Emerson. This is the letter.

Page 118

Concord, Mass.

July 21st, 1855.

Dear Sir:—I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'Leaves of Grass.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seems the sterile and stingy Nature, as if too much handiwork or too much lymph in the temperament were making our Western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things, said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

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

I did not know, until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper, that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office.

I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks, and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. Emerson

Whitman published this letter in the second edition of "Leaves of Grass" and was roundly denounced by many people for what they called a breach of privacy and taste. These wisecracks could not grasp that the encouraging greeting from Emerson must have been like manna to the famished should of the poet who found himself so alone and misunderstood in his first sublime attempt. Besides, Whitman was too natural to care about silly etiquette. He probably thought that Emerson, being a public man and writing about a public work, did not intend the letter to remain unknown. The fact is Emerson minded it less than the barking dogs who fell on Walt Whitman.

In 1860, when Walt lived in Boston to supervise the third enlarged edition of "Leaves of Grass," he was a frequent visitor of Emerson. On one occasion Emerson spent two hours with Walt in a long walk, trying to convince him of the need of eliminating his poems on sex. Walt listened attentively and in the end refused. Twenty-eight years later he said to Traubel: "I never regretted my decision."

Then came an event which tried his spirit as well as his body, the Civil War in 1862. He went to the front not as a soldier but first in search for his brother George, who had been wounded. He remained as a nurse.

He was charged with cowardice because he did not enlist. As if it did not require greater courage to stand out against a popular war wave.

Walt said: "I had my temptations, but they were not strong enough to make me go. I could never think of myself as firing a gun or drawing a sword on another man."

Walt did greater work than killing his fellows. He nursed them back to life and health, or gave them love and cheer to the end.

The effect Walt Whitman had on the sick is vividly described by his valiant friend, O'Connor:

"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 lit by the presence of the Son 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 which no nurse or doctor could do, and he seemed to leave a benediction at every cot as he passed along. The lights [8] 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 voice of many a stricken hero calling, "Walt, Walt, Walt, come again! come again!"

Whitman spent ten years in Washington. He went there early in 1863. In January 1873 he had a paralytic stroke which, with his mother's death occurring soon after, brought his life and work at Washington to an end, and sent him to spend elsewhere his remaining nineteen years, a broken man who only enjoyed intervals of health, a martyr also in his turn to the cause for which he had seen so many young men die. But, dearly as he paid for them, he would never for a moment have said that those years at Washington had not been a thousand times worth while.

While in Washington he was first given a clerkship in the Indian Bureau of the Department of the Interior. But not for long. Somebody called the attention of his official chief, the Secretary of the Interior, one Harlan, to the fact that Whitman was the author of "Leaves of Grass." Mr. Harlan was a strict Methodist; and the result of a perusal of a copy of that work which Whitman had in his desk and was using in the preparation of a new edition was a note that "the service of Walter Whitman will be dispensed with from and after this date." The dismissal did him no particular harm, as O'Connor persuaded the Attorney-General to transfer him to his own department. It led O'Connor to write *The Good Gray Poet*, an impassioned defense of Whitman.

Unlike most other interpreters of Whitman, O'Connor took "Leaves of Grass," as Walt told Traubel many years later, "not as an isolated fact but as a fact related to all other facts; he looked upon it as a new dispensation, an avatar, an incarnation." Leaves of Grass "was not a literary but a historic, a human, fact." O'Connor took the largest view. "Shakespeare was to him an era—only to be studied in that light." "The meanings of Leaves of Grass could only be read in the meanings of its age."

In 1871 Walt brought out a fifth edition of "Leaves of Grass" containing his new poems, among them his stirring poem of Lincoln.

After his mother's death Walt lived with his brother George in Camden for a while. The stroke kept him confined for a considerable time, but his spirit soared on. "Prayer to Columbus," "The Song of the Redwood Tree," and "The Song of the Universal" were created during that period.

In 1876 "Leaves of Grass" was published in England by his devoted friends, Rosetti and others. Long before this, his poems gained for himself the passionate championship and devotion of an outstanding woman in England, Anne Gilchrist.

In the same year appeared "Two Rivulets," which included "Passage to India" and some new pieces both of prose and verse, and a later edition was assailed by the Boston District Attorney soon after it appeared, and therefore abandoned by the publishers.

In 1882 he issued the final edition of the Leaves, now separated from the prose; at the same time he published the prose volume, *Specimen Days*. In 1886 he had another paralytic attack, and lay for some days apparently dying. But he once more partially recovered, and before the year was out was able to enjoy the publication of *November Boughs*, which again included both prose and verse. This was the last volume but one, the last of all being *Good-bye, My Fancy*, which appeared late in 1891, a few months before his death. All the poems are not incorporated in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman died March 27th, 1892.

"In 1880 he paid a visit to Canada as the guest of his friend and biographer Dr. Bucke. There he showed all his old eager interest both in nature and in men, and he was equally full of that intensity of life which is the hall-mark of genius, whether he was listening to birds, learning the names of [...]"

[pages 10–11 are missing]

[...] drive us into an inevitable resentment, then revolt, of some sort. The prospect of it all would make me shudder if I didn't know that something must happen—that we can't push on much farther in this direction.”

“I want the people: most of all the people: the crowd, the mass, the whole body of the people: men, women, and children: I want them to have what belongs to them: not a part of it, not most of it, but all of it: I want anything done that will give the people their proper opportunities—their full life: anything, anything: whether by one means or another, I want the people to be given their due.”

“My general position is plain: the people: all the people: not forgetting the bad with the good: they are to-day swindled, robbed, outraged, discredited, despised: I say they must assert their priority—that they come first: not the swells, the parlors, the superiors, the elect, the polished: no, not them: the people, the fraternal eternal people: evil and righteous, no matter: the people.”

“I want the arrogant money powers disciplined, called to time: I think I shall rejoice in anything the people do to demonstrate their contempt for the conditions under which they are despoiled.”

Walt said: “We need most of all to be saved from ourselves: our own hells, hates, jealousies, thieveries: we need most to be saved from our own priests—the priests of the churches, the priests of the arts: we need that salvation the worst way.” Traubel replied: We still have the priests of commerce to contend with.” “So we have: doubly so: the priests of commerce augmented by the priests of churches, who are everywhere the parasites, the apologists, of systems as they exist.”

And in his prose works Walt Whitman summarizes the condition of his time in these words:

“The best class we show, is but a mob of fashionably dressed speculators and vulgarians. True, indeed, behind this fantastic farce, enacted on the visible stage of society, solid things and stupendous labors are to be discovered, existing crudely and going on in the background, to advance and tell themselves in time. Yet the truths are none the less terrible. I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and aesthetic results.”

Walt Whitman's penetrating eye saw fifty years ago what the mass of his countrymen still do not see. Certainly his poem song of democracy is more than ever a dream in America and in the rest of the world democracy is a delusion and a snare, cast out on the dust-heap. In its stead dictatorship, black and red-shirted, stalks about as the new deity worshipped by the “mob of respectably dress'd speculators and vulgarians.”

Yet it is none the less true that Walt Whitman was among the few of his time to see clearly and to cry out against the evils with all the intensity of his poetic soul. He was indeed the Prophet.

The political and economic conditions facing Walt Whitman were not the only evils against which he thundered. There was Puritanism, polluting the very main-springs of life—sex. Not that

we are already free from the purists scourge. But seventy-five years ago when Walt Whitman's song of sex was given to the world Puritanism reigned supreme, besmirching, degrading and outraging all that makes for health and beauty and naturalness. Walt's was a voice in dense wilderness, the first to cry out for the liberation of sex; the first to tear off the Puritanic rags which disfigured the bodies of men and women. Especially woman, who even more than man, was bound to the block of Puritanism. No song of sex was ever written that can compare with the purity, wholesomeness, elemental sweep as the song contained in "The Children of Adam." If Walt Whitman had written nothing else but "A Woman Waits for Me," or "One Hour to Madness and Joy," he would have gained for himself a niche among the immortals, not only as poet but as the great liberator of the human body—the fearless innovator of what has come to be recognized by all modern scientists as the very basis of all life—the most impelling force of our thoughts and actions.

A WOMAN WAITS FOR ME.

A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking.
Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth,
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justifications of itself.
Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.

And in his prose, Walt writes:

"I look at the girls—at the childless women—at the old maids, as you speak of them: they lack something: they are not completed: something yet remains undone. They are not quite full—not quite entire: the woman who has denied the best of herself—the woman who has discredited the animal want, the eager physical hunger, the wish of that which though we will not [15] allow it to be freely spoken of is still the basis of all that makes life worth while and advances the horizon of discovery. Sex: sex: sex: whether you sing or make a machine, or go to the North Pole, or love your mother, or build a house, or black shoes, or anything—anything at all—it's sex, sex, sex: sex is the root of it all: sex—the coming together of men and women; sex; sex."

Now there is not a Biologist, and sex psychologist who does not take the view of the man who seventy-five years ago, was hounded from pillar to post. What he was made to suffer we have from his own mouth and recorded by Horace Traubel in his talks with Whitman in Camden.

“It is the thing in my work which has been most misunderstood — that has excited the roundest opposition, the sharpest venom, the unintermitted slander, of the people who regard themselves as the custodians of the morals of the world. Horace, you are too young to know the fierceness, the bitterness, the vile quality, of this antagonism — how it threw aside all reserves and simply tore me to pieces metaphorically without giving me half a chance to make my meanings clear. You have only heard the echoes of that uproar: it’s bad enough, still, to be sure — bad enough even in its echoes: but we have to some extent worn the enemy out — have in some part won our contention.”

Perhaps this mad onslaught on Walt Whitman may explain his reticence as regards the nature of his Calamus poems. That they are homo-sexual only prejudice will deny. Fact is that nearly all biographers of Whitman have either ignored the nature of these poems or have apologized for them. Prof. Hallaway does so in a very recent work. This merely goes to prove how slowly people develop from their inhibitions.

Walt Whitman believed in the equality of the sexes—he wanted woman to be as free and equal as the man. He saw woman take her place in literature, art, political and social life to “show what are her inner potencies, powers, attributes.” He is supposed to have had a violent love affair in New Orleans, and according to his own admission to Addington Synmond, he was the father of six children. Finally he has been reported by Dr. Bucke as saying that he never married because he wanted to retain his independence. All that no doubt, is true, but does not disprove the fact that Walt Whitman was strongly intermediate in his sexual feelings. Proof for that are his poems and even more so his letters to Peter Doyle, the car conductor, he met when the latter was a boy of eighteen—a friendship which lasted for years and which was imbued with much fervor and passion.

No letters written to women, not even to Anne Gilchrist, his English admirer, contain anything like the ardor Whitman’s letters to Doyle contain.

Fact is, Whitman wrote very few letters to women or if he did, he has destroyed them for very few could be found.

Anne Gilchrist, from the first time she read “Leaves of Grass” became Whitman’s most fiery defender and champion. Gradually her admiration for the poet ripened into an elemental, passionate love as often happens in the dangerous age of women. Anne Gilchrist poured her very soul into her letters to Walt. But they elicited no response. He admired her, considered her one of the finest women of her age, was deeply grateful to her for her championship. When Mrs. Gilchrist came to America, settled in Philadelphia, Walt Whitman spent much time with her and her children in a delightful companionship. But his love was not for her, nor for any woman. His love was for Peter Doyle and other men who had been in his life. All Whitman’s companions, from earliest boyhood to his death, were men—even his nurses were men, although he often said that women, and not men, make the best nurses.

Why enlightened people should still find it necessary to deny and cover up a dominant trait which was part of the greatest art period of the world, namely, Greek civilization, or which was inherent in such immortal souls as Plato, Socrates, Sappho, Michelangelo, Shakespeare, if his sonnets are indication, or Wagner, Oscar Wilde, Addington Symond, Edward Carpenter, I cannot understand. Sex variation is still very much of a mystery. All we know about it is that in certain periods of life—the adolescent stage—nearly everything is intermediate. The love of girls

for girls, or girls for their favorite woman-teachers, and that of boys for boys and their favorite male teacher, are a common occurrence.

To be sure in some cases this trait remains all through life. But while the intermediate sex stream like all sex is of physical origin, it does not always express itself physically. It may turn into a very ardent friendship, often more lasting and endure in than the love for woman.

I am not concerned in that so much as I am concerned in the cause of the universal, all-embracing capacity for love in the man and poet, Walt Whitman. The more I read his works and the more I have studied what has been written about him, the clearer it is to me that it was his sex differentiation which enriched his nature, hence enriched his knowledge of and his understanding for human complexities. Walt Whitman's idea of universal comradeship was conditioned in his magnetic response to his own sex. So was his extraordinary sensitiveness to the nature of woman conditioned in the fact that he had considerable femininity in him. All combined went to make up his greatness as poet and rebel and needs no apology or defense.

How truly universal was Whitman's love can be adduced from his beautiful attitude to the outcast—the criminal, the prostitute—to every derelict made by man's inhumanity to man.

He sang:

YOU FELONS ON TRIAL IN COURTS

You felons on trial in courts,

You convicts in prison-cells, you sentenced assassins chain'd and handcuff'd with iron,

Who am I too that I am not on trial or in prison?

Me ruthless and devilish as any, that my wrists are not chain'd with iron, or my ankles with iron?

You prostitutes flaunting over the trottoirs or obscene in your rooms,

Who am I that I should call you more obscene than myself?

O culpable! I acknowledge—I expose!

(O admirers, praise not me—compliment not me—you make me wince,

I see what you do not—I know what you do not.)

Inside these breast-bones I lie smutch'd and choked,

Beneath this face that appears so impassive hell's tides continually run,

Lusts and wickedness are acceptable to me,

I walk with delinquents with passionate love,

I feel I am of them – I belong to those convicts and prostitutes myself,

And henceforth I will not deny them—for how can I deny myself?

TO A COMMON PROSTITUTE

Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman, liberal and lusty as Nature,

Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you,

Not till the waters refuse to glisten for you and the leaves to rustle for you, do my words refuse to glisten and rustle for you.

THE CITY DEAD-HOUSE

By the city dead-house by the gate,
As idly sauntering wending my way from the clangor,
I curious pause, for lo, an outcast form, a poor dead prostitute brought,
Her corpse they deposit unclaim'd, it lies on the damp brick pavement,
The divine woman, her body, I see the body, I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty, all else I notice not,
Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbidic impress me,
But the house alone—that wondrous house—that delicate fair house—that ruin!
That immortal house more than all the rows of dwellings ever built!
Or white-domed capitol with majestic figure surmounted, or all the old high-spired
cathedrals,
That little house alone more than them all-poor, desperate house!
Fair, fearful wreck – tenement of a soul – itself a soul,
Unclaim'd, avoided house-take one breath from my tremulous lips,
Take one tear dropt aside as I go for thought of you,
Dead house of love-house of madness and sin, crumbled, crush'd,
House of life, erewhile talking and laughing-but ah, poor house, dead even then,
Months, years, an echoing, garnish'd house—but dead, dead, dead.

Where are the Christians, Puritans, humanitarians, who can equal this in humanity, kinship, understanding? There are none, none. Today man is more blood-thirsty and venomous than at any time. More lashes, more prisons, more punishment, torture, outrage is the daily cry in press, pulpit and the platform.

Democracy as conceived and sung by Walt Whitman, is still far from come. Whatever some of her admirers have once thought of democracy, they have recanted, sacrificed to the rule of dictatorship. Mr. George Bernard Shaw and many others have now become the pall-bearers of democracy, slain by the Tcheka and Fascism.

What Walt Whitman wrote to a European Revolutionair[e], holds good for the revolutionair[e] of the whole world today.

The battle rages with many a loud alarm and frequent advance and retreat,
The infidel triumphs, or supposes he triumphs,
The prison, scaffold, garrote, handcuffs, iron necklace and leadballs do their work,
The named and unnamed heroes pass to other spheres,
The great speakers and writers are exiled, they lie sick in distant lands,
The cause is asleep, the strongest throats are choked with their own blood,
The young men droop their eyelashes toward the ground when they meet;

But for all this Liberty has not gone out of the place, nor the infidel enter'd into full possession.

When liberty goes out of a place it is not the first to go, nor the second or third to go,

It waits for all the rest to go, it is the last.

When there are no more memories of heroes and martyrs,

And when all life and all the souls of men and women are discharged from any part of the earth,

Then only shall liberty or the idea of liberty be discharged from that part of the earth,

We need Walt Whitman now more than ever. We need his indomitable courage, his beautiful comradeship, his stirring song, that we may not falter in our efforts to build the new life out of the ruins of the old, for the new city stands

Where no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and deeds,

Where thrift is in its place, and prudence is in its place,

Where the men and women think lightly of the laws,

Where the slave ceases, and the master of slaves ceases,

Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons,

Where fierce men and women pour forth as the sea to the whistle of death pours its sweeping and unript waves,

Where outside authority enters always after the precedence of inside authority,

Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and President, Mayor, Governor and what not, are agents for pay,

Where children are taught to be laws to themselves, and to depend on themselves,

Where equanimity is illustrated in affairs,

Where speculations on the soul are encouraged,

Where women walk in public processions in the streets the same as the men,

Where they enter the public assembly and take places the same as the men;

The poet of *Leaves of Grass* is a true son of American soil and yet very un-American. So long as he sings the song of the wonders of nature, the beauties of the unlimited resources, old Walt feels part and parcel of the strength of Mother Earth, but our great poet becomes un-American when he arraigns the Puritanic interference which has paralyzed life to such an extent as to make it barren. In fact, Walt Whitman may be called the iconoclast of Puritanism. No other writer or poet in America has so thoroughly exposed the hideous slimy god as he. Just hear these wonderful words from "Specimen Days."

“Sweet, sane, still Nakedness in Nature !—ah if poor, sick, prurient humanity in cities might really know you once more! Is not nakedness then indecent? No, not inherently. It is your thought, your sophistication, your fear, your respectability, that is indecent.”

Our poet is also un-American because he was so free from the deadening tendency of commercialism. His brother, George W. Whitman, tells us that Walt “was a man who had chances to make money, but he would never make any concession for money. He refused to do anything except at his own notion.” His mission then was not to acquire possession but to carry the message of liberty and beauty to people everywhere.

The education of Walt Whitman was that of most children of the people; he never saw the inside of a college or university, which was fortunate because it helped him to retain originality and independence of thought. He was a prolific reader, however, and in his “loafing” he leaned more of people, conditions and nature than most men who received the so called highest education. Walt was jack of many trades, school teacher, compositor, editor (he edited the Brooklyn Eagle from 1874 to 78) carpenter, builder and clerk in the various departments in Washington, and last but not least, nurse, correspondent and advisor to the sick soldiers during the civil war.

He travelled all through the west and south supporting himself as a free lance for various newspapers. When the war broke out he enlisted voluntarily as nurse, for which he was eminently fitted because of his great humanity and his deep kinship for all suffering and sorrow. In 1870, at the age of 61, Walt Whitman had a stroke which paralyzed him physically but not mentally. He remained young, alert and full of the spirit of life to the end of his days.

When *Leaves of Grass* was published it fell into the hands of one of Whitman’s superiors in the department. He promptly declared the work immoral which cost Walt his position. The Society for the Suppression of Vice with Anthony Comstock as its patron saint had [at] that time begun its evil operations. For the sake of the American spirit be it said that that Society is still on the job, even though the Saintly Anthony is now keeping company with his Heavenly Father. What greater chance for notoriety than the suppression of the great work of a great poet. Comstock went after the publisher, Osgood and Company. The District Attorney took *Leaves of Grass* under consideration. He marked the objectionable parts and sent word to Whitman that we would allow it to go through the mail if these parts will be expurgated.

Of course Walt would have none of such impudence. As a result the volume was withdrawn from circulation. Later however, the ban was lifted, that it ever should have been censored proves the stupidity of puritanism, or as Whitman said “the never ending audacity of elected persons.”

His experience with both the Society for the Suppression of Vice and the government had one good effect: it helped to advertise the book and author widely. Old Walt lived to see himself proclaimed as the greatest poet of his time, not only in his own country, but nearly everywhere in Europe. In England, J. Addington Symonds and Edward Carpenter fell under the sway of the powerful originality of Whitman. In Germany it was the poet Freiligrath, a rebel to the very tips of his fingers, who rendered such a marvelous translation of *Leaves of Grass* that even the best critics, proclaimed it as great as the original. And of course France and Russia became enthused with the vigor, the beauty, of the clarion voice of Walt.

Much in the poetry of Whitman easily proves him to be the most universal, cosmopolitan, and human of the American writers. He is considered the glorifier of democracy, but it will take long,

or better still it will never happen, that what is commonly called democracy will even remotely represent the spirit of Walt Whitman.

In a material sense Walt Whitman's life represented an endless struggle, great hardships and economic vicissitudes. But that was the least of his concerns. He has too deeply engrossed in his inner wealth to notice his outer poverty. He was too busily engaged in his creative work to have inclination or time for material achievements. *Leaves of Grass, Drum Taps, Passage to India, Democratic Vistas, Memoranda during the War, Specimen Days, Autobiography, or, The story of a Life* are the children of Walt Whitman's brain and heart. What matter all else to him?

One of the most worm-eaten fruits of Puritanism which degrades life is the notion that public men and women who have a message for humanity must measure up to the yardstick of morality. Like sinners they are tied to the block of public stupidity and are expected to defend their position and justify their acts. In other words, they are expected to become public property, to have every emotion and thought watched over by the keepers of public morals.

Walt Whitman had much to suffer from these Puritanic detectives and snoopers. Because *Leaves of Grass* sings the beauty and wholesomeness of sex, of the human body freed from the rags and tatters of hypocrisy, the literary critics and editors, the professors, Uncles and Aunts demanded to know if the author was not really a dangerous immoral character. In Camden, N.J., the Purists warned the mother of Horace Traubel, who has since become the biographer of Whitman, against the association of her son with the old "Sorcerer,"—the man who so brazenly sang the glory of the "Children of Adam."

Many friends of Whitman go out of their way to prove that he was not immoral and had no hidden vices, that he was pure and innocent, a big child. I will grant that they told only the truth, but one should not throw pearls of truth before the swine of Puritanic falsehood. They know not what to do with it except to drag it into their mire.

The innermost experience of the human heart are the most sacredly private affairs, and no one should concede to the mob—be it even the literary mob—the right and opportunity to pry into them. If these Torquemadas must engage in the job of inquisition, let them find their victims, but one should never play into their hands and thus become their accomplice.

It was the vigorous poetic personality of Walt Whitman, his boundless refreshing enthusiasm which broke the age-long barriers of conventionality and sham which created so much consternation among the respectable, hence their cries: "Shameless!" "Unheard of!" Walt was interested in the whole of man, not merely in the bloodless wreckage of Christian and Puritanic training; he sings his human song, the song of the earth, of flesh and blood, of the senses, and not the cold song of the living corpses who reflect the graveyard in the home, the discipline in the school, the curtailment of law.

Walt liberates the whole of man and brings him into harmonious blending with nature, in oneness with the liberating factors of life. Walt refuses to chop man up in a mortal unclean body, and the pure immortal soul. He repudiates the line of demarcation between good and evil, virtue and vice. He takes man as he is and brings him exultantly close to the Universe.

Just as man appears to the great old Walt, so does he appear in anarchism, all equally related to life, all interwoven with society, yet each unto himself a personality. When artificial barriers are no more, and man is no longer domesticated for the State, capitalism, the Church, and Morality, when Mother Earth becomes the common heritage of the race, a means for well-being and joy, then the differentiation between society and the individual, the aggregate and the unity will be no more.

For that we need an intellectual and material rebirth. Walt realized this, therefore he pleaded in "Democratic Vistas" for a great and profound literature for America. He speaks powerfully of the material things of life, of labor, food, houses, the fields. But he was the last to see in the present conditions a democratic ideal, conditions which drive, triumph upon and degrade man into the very dust.

The poet who was nothing less than the interpreter of the Cosmos, with all its wildness, its storm and stress, its instincts and dominant urge, could certainly not pass by the psychology of sex. He exposed the human body to the glowing light of the day, he liberated our senses from hypocrisy and sham, hence he created pale terror all about him. Naturally, what are these moral spies who have grown gray with virtue to make of these passages from "Children of Adam"?

This is the female form,
A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot,
It attracts with fierce undeniable attraction,
I am drawn by its breath as if I were no more than a helpless vapor, all falls aside but myself and it,
Books, art, religion, time, the visible and solid earth, and what was expected of heaven or fear'd of hell, are now consumed,
Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response likewise ungovernable,
Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all diffused, mine too diffused,

Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh swelling and deliciously aching,
Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,
Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate dawn,
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

Or

A woman waits for me, she contains all, nothing is lacking,
Yet all were lacking if sex were lacking, or if the moisture of the right man were lacking.
Sex contains all, bodies, souls,
Meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery, the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals, all the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth,
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,
These are contain'd in sex as parts of itself and justifications of itself.
Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,
Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers.

Now I will dismiss myself from impassive women,
I will go stay with her who waits for me, and with those women that are warm-
blooded sufficient for me,
I see that they understand me and do not deny me,
I see that they are worthy of me, I will be the robust husband of those women.

Is that not more awful than the [] free love? The latter is mostly theoretical, “terrible enough” but Walt glorifies the sexual senses without any limitation whatever. The Puritans argue, the sexual embrace is unfortunately indispensable for the procreation of the race, but tho if that motive does not exist, sex must be tabooed and the poet should keep in bounds. Indeed, dear old Walt expected too much of his country, which for nearly half a century maintained and paid a centralized censorship, when he gave her his glorious song of sex. Even Lowell who belongs to the free poets of America seems to have found “Leaves of Grass” too strong. Not so Thoreau. He said, “It is not Walt Whitman who is indecent, but decency and respectability are truly indecent and immoral.”

The works of Whitman are an inexhaustible force of spontaneity. Whitman considered himself an irrepressible outlaw compared with the academically trained, literary men. He completely throws overboard the paraphernalia of the estheticism, he assures us his art is not only art, but “a cause,” a world in itself.

First the human, then the literary. “Camerado, this is no book, Who touches this touches a man.” It is entirely misleading to call Whitman the poet of democracy, neither is it enough to speak of him as America’s poet in the sense that he was born in the American atmosphere: His wishes and aims were higher. It is easily understood that such a poet should be inspired by the wild ruggedness and the great possibilities of America. He hoped from this country, so young and so rich in elemental resources, that it would become intellectually a giant. He called for conscious endeavor in that direction, but he experienced many disappointments.

Horace Traubel is right when he says [that] Walt Whitman, as far as American is concerned, is very universal. He saw in America the free earth upon which a free strong humanity should dwell. But even America was to him only a part of the universe which he aimed to penetrate so passionately and poetically. One would do Whitman, the poet, a great injustice to see in him the apologist and sponsor of the democratic institutions. His art had absolutely nothing in common with the “national” art which reiterates the stale slogan of “My country tis of thee” or “Star Spangled Banner.” He was as unlike the average democrat as the anarchist is unlike the typical bourgeois.

On closer examination of Whitman’s democracy, of his ideal of the people, we will discover that it does not exist at all. Whitman did neither approve nor glorify the kind of democracy whose function consists in mustering up majorities for electional slaughter. Walt Whitman had a social and human [.] ideal. He saw in politics nothing but a cunning game, a pastime of a shrewd clique for their own benefit.

Let us see what Walt Whitman had to say of his ideal city.

Where the men and women think lightly of the laws,
Where the slave ceases, and the master of slaves ceases,
Where the populace rise at once against the never-ending audacity of elected persons...

Just ask the democratic president, mayor, judge or politician what they think of Walt Whitman's democracy. Their answer would probably be that it is rank anarchy inciting to riot and disorder.

In Democratic Vistas Walt Whitman demands as the basis of democracy full play for human nature to expand itself in numberless and even conflicting directions. A more rigid criticism he gave of American is hardly possible. He said this:

Know you not, dear earnest reader, that the people of our land may all read and write and may all possess the right to vote—yet the main things be entirely lacking? ...

For, I say, the true nationality of the States, the genuine union, when we come to a mortal crisis, is, and is to be, after all, neither the written law, nor, (as is generally supposed,) either self-interest, or common pecuniary or material objects—but the fervid and tremendous IDEA, melting everything else with resistless heat, and solving all lesser and definite distinctions in vast, indefinite, spiritual, emotional power.

Or if we consider Walt Whitman's attitude towards the American spirit we will find it contains more truth now than at the time it was written.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Emma Goldman
Walt Whitman
(Incomplete manuscript)

Retrieved on 25th April 2021 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org and
www.libertarian-labyrinth.org

theanarchistlibrary.org