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PETER THE GREAT AS RULER AND REFORMER. I.

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CHAPTER I.

THE JOURNEY OF PETER TO WESTERN EUROPE.

THE Tsar's feeling was so strong with regard to what might be learnt about ship-building in foreign countries that, after he had sent off many of his subjects to study the trade, he resolved to go himself. Without ascribing to this journey all the importance which Macaulay did when he said, "His journey is an epoch in the history, not only of his own country, but of ours, and of the world," we must admit that it was a remarkable event, and one fraught with much consequence. Since the exiled Izyasláv visited the court of the Emperor Henry IV., at Mayence, in 1075, no Russian ruler had ever been out of his dominions. Peter's journey marks the division between the old Russia, an exclusive, little known country, and the new Russia, an important factor in European politics. It was also one of the turning points in the development of his character, and was the continuation of the education begun in the German suburb. In one way, it may be said that Peter's appearance in the German suburb was really more startling, and of more importance, than his journey westward, for that journey was the natural consequence and culmination of his intercourse with foreigners at Moscow.

This sudden and mysterious journey of the Tsar abroad exercised the minds of Peter's contemporaries no less than it has those of moderns. Many were the reasons which were ascribed then, and have been given since, for this step. There was even

a dispute among the students of the University of Thorn as to the reasons which had induced the Tsar to travel. Pleyer, the secret Austrian agent, wrote to the Emperor Leopold that the whole embassy was "merely a cloak for the freedom sought by the Tsar, to get out of his own country and divert himself a little." Another document in the archives at Vienna finds the cause of the journey in a vow made by Peter, when in danger on the White Sea, to make a pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles St. Peter and St. Paul, at Rome. According to Voltaire, "He resolved to absent himself for some years from his dominions, in order to learn how better to govern them." Napoleon said: "He left his country to deliver himself for a while from the crown, so as to learn ordinary life, and to remount by degrees to greatness." But every authentic source gives us but one reason, and the same. Peter went abroad, not to fulfill a vow, not to amuse himself, not to become more civilized, not to learn the art of government, but simply to become a good shipwright. His mind was filled with the idea of creating a navy on the Black Sea for use against the Turks, and his tastes were still, as they had always been, purely mechanical. For this purpose, as he himself says, as his prolonged residence in Holland shows, he desired to have an opportunity of studying the art of ship-building in those places where it was carried to the highest perfection, that is, in Holland, England and Venice.

In order to give the Tsar greater freedom of action, and to save him from too much formality and ceremony, which he exceed-

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WALT WHITMAN.

"Are not all real works of art themselves paradoxical? And is not the world itself so? * * * As I understand him, the truest honor you can pay him is to try his own rules."—*Whitman, on Emerson.*

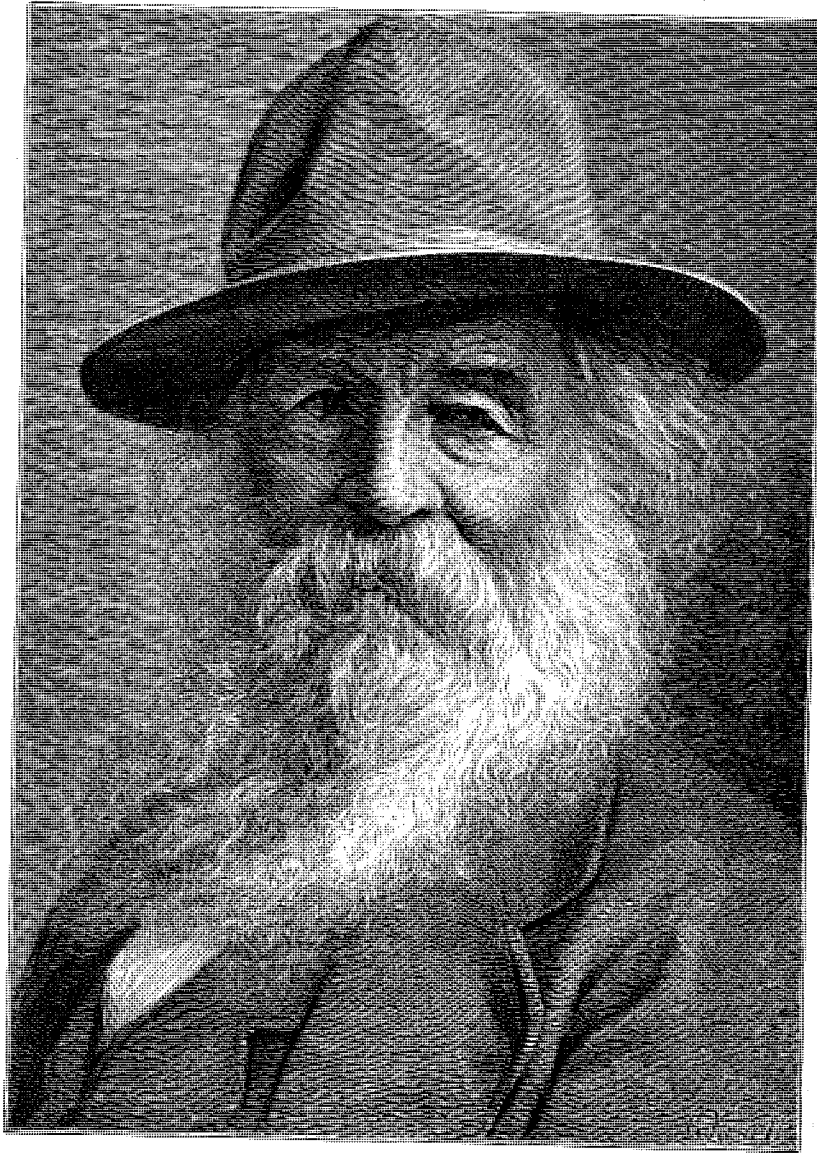
IN things counted dear to a minstrel's heart, and which can make him patiently endure the common ills of life, Mr. Whitman is fortunate among modern poets. No one more conspicuously shines by difference. Others are more widely read, but who else has been so widely talked of, and who has held even a few readers with so absolute a sway? Whatever we may think of his chantings, the time has gone by when it was possible to ignore him; whatever his ground may be, he has set his feet squarely and audaciously upon it, and is no light weight. Endeavor, then, to judge him on his merits, for he will and must be judged. / He stands in the roadway, with his *Salut au Monde* :

"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."

There are not wanting those who return his salutation. He is in very good society, and has been so this long while. At the outset he was favored with the hand of Emerson, and, once acknowledged at court, allies quickly flocked around him. Let us be candid: no writer holds, in some respects, a more enviable place than burly Walt Whitman. As for public opinion of the professional kind, no American poet, save Longfellow, has attracted so much notice as he in England, France, Germany, and I know not what other lands. Here and abroad there has been more printed concerning him than concerning any other, living or dead, Poe only excepted. Personal items of his doings, sayings and appearance constantly have found their way to the public. In a collection of sketches, articles, debates, which have appeared during the last ten years, relating to American poets, the Whitman and Poe packages are each much larger than all the rest combined. Curiously enough, three-fourths of the articles upon Mr. Whitman assert that he is totally neglected by the press. Not only in that publicity which is akin to fame, and stimulating to the poet, has he been thus fortunate; but also in the faculty of exciting and sustaining a discussion in which he has

been forced to take little part himself; in an aptitude for making disciples of men able to gain the general ear, and vying with one another to stay up his hands; in his unencumbered, easy way of life; finally, in a bodily and mental equipment, and a tact or artistic instinct to make the most of it, that have established a vigorous ideal of himself as a bard and seer. These incidental successes, which of course do not confirm nor conflict with an estimate of his genius, are brought to mind as the features of a singular career.

Such a poet must find a place in any review of the course of American song. Otherwise, however observant of his work from the beginning, I well might hesitate to write of him; not only distrusting my own judgment of thoughts and modes which, like questions in philology or medicine, seem to provoke contention in which men act very much like children, but also dreading to become a party to such contention, little to the advantage of all concerned. Doubtless I shall make errors, and write things subject to alteration. For these errors, not of the will but of the judgment, I might ask pardon in advance, were I not aware of the uselessness of such a prayer to either of two classes to which it should be addressed, and between which it is hardly possible that a criticism could be written upon Mr. Whitman, and the writer not be accused of both favoritism and injustice, or of trimming. / The disputants who arise when an innovator comes along never were divided more sharply,—not even in that classico-romantic conflict which would have made the fortune of a lesser poet than the author of "Hernani." Perhaps it would be found, upon examination, that the class which declines to regard Whitman as a hero and poet has been content with saying very little about him. If his disciples are in a minority, it is they who chiefly have written the contents of the package mentioned, who never lose a point, who have filled the air with his name. Our acceptance of their estimate almost has seemed the condition,—not, I trust, of their good-will, since among them are several of my long-time friends,—but of their intellectual respect. At times we are



WALT WHITMAN.

constrained to infer that this poet is to be eulogized, not criticised,—that he, they and others may say to Emerson, Lowell, Tennyson, “Thou ailest here, and here”; but woe unto them that lay hands on the Ark of the Covenant. More than one offender has been punished in an effective, if not in a just and generous way. I mention this only with a feeling that honest criticism should not be restricted by those who deprecate restriction. Two points belong to my own mode of inquiry: How far does the effort of a workman relate to what is fine and enduring? and, how far does he succeed in his effort? Nor can I pay Mr. Whitman any worthier tribute than to examine fairly his credentials, and to test his work by the canons, so far as we discover them, that underlie the best results of every progressive art. If his poetry is

founded in the simplicity and universality which are claimed for it, and which distinguish great works, the average man, who reads Shakspeare and the English Bible, ought to catch glimpses of its scope and meaning, and therefore I am guilty of no strange temerity, in my forming some opinion of these matters.

On the other hand, if there be any so impatient of his assumptions, or so tired of the manifestoes of his friends, as to refuse him the consideration they would extend to any man alive, against such also I would protest, and deem them neither just nor wise. Their course would give weight to the charge that in America Whitman has been subjected to a kind of outlawry. And those most doubtful of his methods, beliefs, inspiration, should understand that here is an uncommon and

somewhat heroic figure, which they will do well to observe; one whose words have taken hold in various quarters, and whose works should be studied as a whole before they are condemned. Not only a poet, but a personage, of a bearing conformed to his ideal. Whether this bearing comes by nature only, or through skillful intent, its possessor certainly carries it bravely, and, as the phrase is, fills the bill,—a task in which some who have tried to emulate him have disastrously failed. Not only a poet and personage, but one whose views and declarations are also worth attention. True, our main business is not so much to test the soundness of his theories as to ask how poetically he has announced them. We are examining the poets, not the sages and heroes, except in so far as wisdom and heroism must belong to poetry, and as the philosopher and poet fulfill Wordsworth's prediction and have become one. But Whitman is the most subjective poet on record, and it would be folly to review him wholly in the mood of those whose watchword is Art for Art's sake. The many who look upon art solely as a means of expression justly will not be content unless the man is included in the problem. I, who believe that he who uses song as his means of expression is on one side an artist, wish to consider him both as an artist and a man.

What I desire to say, also, must be taken as a whole. Questions involving the nature of verse, of expression, of the poetic life, could not be adequately discussed in a single chapter; but a paragraph, at least, may be devoted to each point, and should be given its full weight of meaning. It is the fashion for many who reject Mr. Whitman's canticles to say: "His poetry is good for nothing; but we like him as a man," etc. To me, it seems that his song is more noteworthy than his life, in spite of his services in the hospitals during our civil war. His life, so noble at its best periods, was an emblem of the nobleness of a multitude of his countrymen and country-women; at other times, doubtless, and as his poem of "Brooklyn Ferry" fearlessly permits us to surmise, it has been no more self-forgetting than the lives of countless obscure toilers who do their best from day to day. If, then, I do not think his heroism so important as his art, nor admire him chiefly as an announcer, but as an imaginative poet, it is because I know more than one village where each workman is a philosopher in his way, and something of a priest, and because poets

are rarer among us than preachers and heroes,—and I wish to take him at his rarest. If this essay should pay just honor to his prophetic gift of song, those who minister to him should feel that I have given him, without reserve, such poor laurels as a mere reviewer can bestow. That there may be no doubt, from page to page (amid the seeming inconsistencies that must characterize a study of Whitman), as to my conclusion on this point, I may as well say now that both instinct and judgment, with our Greek choruses in mind, and Pindar, and the Hebrew bards, long since led me to count him, as a lyric and idyllic poet, and when at his best, among the first of his time. If any fail to perceive what I mean by this, let him take a single poem, composed in his finer mood,—"Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,"—and read it with some care. Had he not sung like this, the exorbitant world would hear little of his philosophy and consecration, and care for them still less.

II.

THE first edition of "Leaves of Grass," now so valued by collectors, is a long, thin volume, curious to behold, with wide pages that give the author's peculiar lines their full effect. Here was a man with measureless bounce and ambition, but with a co-equal range of demands for his country, and professedly for all mankind. At that time (1855) the sale of most books of poetry or abstract thought was small enough; critical authorities were few, and of little weight. "Putnam's Magazine" certainly had influence, and was the periodical to which our favorite writers contributed some of their choicest work. Its reviewer gave the strange book the best reception possible, by filling three columns with extracts from its pages. He could not have selected any passages more original than those beginning with the lines, "I play not a march for victors only," and "A child said, What is the grass?"—than the death-scene of the mashed fireman, for whose sake is the pervading hush among the kneeling crowd,—the ringing story of the old-fashioned frigate and the little captain who won by the light of the moon and stars,—the proud humility, the righteous irony and wrath of "A Slave at Auction" and "A Woman at Auction,"—the Hebraic picture of the Quakeress with face clearer and more beautiful than the sky, "the justified mother of men." These,

and a few masterly bits of description and apostrophe, were given in a manner just to the poet, while rude and coarser parts, that might displease even a progressive reader, were kindly overlooked. The study of Emerson and Carlyle had bred a tolerance of whatever was true to nature and opposed to sham. "Leaves of Grass" was a legitimate offspring of the new movement. However differing from the latter, or going beyond it, the book would not have found life had not the Concord school already made for it an atmosphere. Whitman—a man of the people—applied the down-east philosophy to the daily walks of life, and sang the blare and brawn that he found in the streets about him. In his opening lines:

"I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs
to you.

"I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease * * * observing a
spear of summer grass,"

he simply took Alcott and Emerson at their word. His radical demonstration, extended in later years even to rebuke of their own failure to go farther, has brought them, perchance, like Frankenstein, to regard with little complacence the strides of their prodigy. The difference between Emerson and Whitman illustrated that between certain modes of advanced thought in Massachusetts and New York. If the philosophy of the former professed to include the people, in its genesis and application it often was somewhat provincial and aristocratic; the other also was theoretically broad, professing to include the scholarly and refined, but in spirit was no less provincial,—suspicious of all save the masses. A true universalism yet may come from them both. It was in no unfriendly humor, but with perfect justice, that the "Putnam" critic declared the new poems to be a "mixture of Yankee transcendentalism and New York rowdism," which here were "seen to combine in harmony." For their author prophesied in New York with a selfhood that observed but kept aloof from the West side; insensibly the East-sider was set above the man of training or affairs whose teams he drove, whose fires he subdued, whose boats he piloted, and whose manhood perchance was as sturdy and virile as his own. Hence, there was a just reason in the pleasantry of the reviewer, who, after acknowledging that the poet was "one of the roughs," said:

"That he is a kosmos is a piece of news we were hardly prepared for. Precisely what a kosmos is, we trust Mr. Whitman will take an early occasion to inform the impatient world." Nothing worse than this sally befell our poet in the leading magazine, and it was added that there were to be found "an original perception of nature, a manly brawn, and an epic directness in the new poet, which belong to no other adept of the transcendental school." Here, at all events, the book was not treated after any Philistine mode.

Doubtless many young readers of those quotations felt as if they came with a fresh breeze from old Paumanok and the outer bay. I remember my own impression that here, whether his forms were old or new, was a real poet, one who stirred my pulses; and of whom—in spite of his conceit, familiarity, assumption that few could understand him and that all needed his ministrations—I wished to know more. I would not surrender that first impression of his genius for any later critical feeling. Nor since that time, having closely read him, have I found reason to disavow it. And I could fully sympathize with him, now that his old age really is nigh at hand, in the serene approval of his own work, read twenty years afterward, under some auspicious conjunction of Saturn and Mars:

"After an interval, reading, here in the midnight,
With the great stars looking on—all the stars of
Orion looking,
And the silent Pleiades—and the duo looking of
Saturn and ruddy Mars;
Pondering, reading my own songs, after a long
interval (sorrow and death familiar now),
Ere closing the book, what pride! what joy! to find
them
Standing so well the test of death and night,
And the duo of Saturn and Mars!"

The picture of Whitman in trowsers and open shirt, with slouched hat, hand in pocket, and a defiant cast of manner, resolute as it was, had an air not wholly of one who protests against authority, but rather of him who opposes the gonfalon of a "rough" conventionalism to the conventionalism of culture. Not that of the man "too proud to care from whence" he came, but of one very proud of whence he came and what he wore. Seeing him now, with his gracious and silvery beard, it is hardly possible that the sensual and unpromising mouth of the early portrait was at any time his own. But the picture has become historical, and properly is included with others in his recent collective edition.

The "Leaves of Grass" contained the gist of his opinions, and some of its episodes equal in beauty anything he has ever written. He was in his thirty-sixth year,—close upon the age at which more than one famous poet has ended his mission. His book was eminently one with a purpose, or purposes, to which he has been consistent. First, and chiefly, to assert the "Religion of Humanity,"—the mystery and development of man, of woman; the sufficiency of the general plan; the inherent and equal nobility of our organs, instincts, desires; the absolute equality of men, irrespective of birth and training. Secondly, to predict a superb illustration of this development in "These States," the great republic of the present, the pure democracy of the future. Thirdly, to portray an archetypal microcosm, a man embracing in his passionate and ideal sympathy all the joys, sorrows, appetites, virtues, sins, of all men, women and children,—himself being, doing and suffering with them,—and that man Walt Whitman. Finally, and to lay the groundwork for a new era in literature (in his view the most essential stimulant of progress), the "Leaves" were written in contempt of established measures, formal rhymes, stock imagery and diction,—and in a most irregular kind of dithyramb, which left the hack reviewer sorely in doubt whether it was verse broken off at hap-hazard, or prose run mad. Whatever motives led to these results, we must admire the courage of a poet who thus burned his ships behind him, and plunged into a wilderness thenceforth all his own. Various passages of the book were resolutely coarse in their "naturalism," and were thought by some, who perhaps knew little of the author, to reveal his tendencies. It seemed as if certain passions appeared to him more natural, certain sins more venial, than others, and that these were those which he felt to be most obstreperous in his own system,—that his creed was adjusted to his personal aptitudes. But many also found in him strength, color, love and knowledge of nature, and a capacity for lyrical outbursts,—the utterance of a genuine poet. Such was the "Leaves of Grass," although the book is hard to formulate in few and scientific terms; such, at least, it was, so far as I understand its higher meaning. This analysis is made with due humility, as by one in doubt lest he also may be subject to the scornful objurgation:

"What to such as you, anyhow, such a poet as I?
—therefore leave my works,

And go lull yourself with what you can understand
—and with piano-tunes;
For I lull nobody,—and you will never understand me."

If the successive editions of "Leaves of Grass" had the quiet sale accorded to books of verse, it did not lack admirers among radicals on the lookout for something new. Emerson, with one of his cheery impulses, wrote a glowing welcome, which soon was given to the public, and directed all eyes to the rising bard. No poet, as a person, ever came more speedily within range of view. His age, origin and habits were made known; he himself, in fastidiously wholesome and picturesque costume, was to be observed strolling up Broadway, crossing the ferries, mounting the omnibuses, wherever he could see and be seen, make studies and be studied. It was learned that he had been by turns printer, school-master, builder, editor; had written articles and poems of a harmless, customary nature, until, finding that he could not express himself to any purpose in that wise, he underwent conviction, experienced a change of thought and style, and professed a new departure in verse, dress, and way of life. Henceforward he occupied himself with loafing, thinking, writing, and making disciples and camerados. Among the young wits and writers who enjoyed his fellowship, his slow, large mold and rathe-grizzled hair procured for him the hearty title of "Old Walt." In the second year of the war his blood grew warm, and he went to Washington, whither all roads then led. His heart yearned toward the soldiery, and in the hospitals and camps he became the tenderest of nurses and the almoner of funds supplied to him by generous hands. After three years of this service, and after a sickness brought on by its exertions, he was given a place in the Interior Department. Then came that senseless act of a benighted official, who dismissed him for the immorality of the "Leaves of Grass." To Whitman it was a piece of good luck. It brought to a climax the discussion of his merits and demerits. It called out from the fervent and learned pen of O'Connor a surging, characteristic vindication, "The Good Gray Poet," in which the offending Secretary was consigned to ignominy, and by which the poet's talents, services and appearance were so fastened upon public attention that he took his place as a hoar and reverend minstrel. He then, with Lowell, Parsons, Holland, Brownell, and Mrs. Howe, had reached the

patriarchal age of forty-six. Another Cabinet officer, a man of taste and feeling, gave him a new position—which he held for nine years, and until somewhat disabled by a paralytic affliction. Meanwhile, influential writers, on both sides of the ocean, skillful in polemic criticism, had avowed allegiance to himself and his works. In England, W. M. Rossetti edited a selection of his poems, and Swinburne, Dowden, Clifford, Symonds, Buchanan, Clive, have joined in recognizing them. In America,—besides O'Connor,—Linton, Conway, Sanborn, the Swintons, Benton, Marvin, the sure-eyed and poetic Burroughs, and others, in turn have guarded his rights or ministered to him, some of them with a loyalty unprecedented in our literary annals. Like Fourier, he may be said to have his propagandists in many lands.* Making allowance for the tendency to invest with our own attributes some object of hero-worship, a man must be of unusual stuff to breed this enthusiasm in such men; and under any privations the life is a success which has created and sustained such an ideal.

The appearance of Whitman's "Centennial edition," and his needs at the time, gave occasion for an outcry concerning American neglect and persecution of the poet, and for a debate in which both London and New York took part. After some diligence, I find little evidence of unfriendliness to him among the magazine-editors, to whom our writers offer their wares. Several of them aver that they would rather accept than decline his contributions, and have declined them only when unsuited to their necessities. What magazine-writer has a smoother experience? In a democracy the right most freely allotted is that of every man to secure his own income. Nor am I aware that, with two exceptions, any American has been able to derive a substantial revenue from poetry alone. A man ahead of his time, or different from his time, usually gathers little of this world's goods. Whitman's fellow-countrymen regard him kindly and with pride. An English poet has declared that it is not America, but the literary class in America, that "persecutes" him. Who constitute such a class I know

* Dr. R. M. Bucke, superintendent of the lunatic asylum in London, Ontario, whom Whitman visited last summer, is preparing a book upon the poet's life and works. In his printed circular, requesting information, he says: "I am myself fully satisfied that Walt Whitman is one of the greatest men, if not the very greatest man, that the world has so far produced."

not: the present writer is not one of them, nor has he ever been. For the moment, I am what he himself would call his "diagnoser,"—nor with the intellect only, but with the heart as well as the head. What opposition the poet really has incurred has done him no harm. The outcry led to plain-speaking, and the press gave the fullest hearing to Whitman's friends. I hope it was of benefit, in showing that our writers were misunderstood, in stimulating his friends to new offices in his behalf, and especially in promoting the sale of the unique centennial or "author's" edition of his collected poems. Never was a collection more aptly named. The two volumes bear the material as well as the spiritual impress of their author. Of the many portraits for which he has sat, they give, besides the earliest, a bold photograph of his present self, and the striking wood-cut by his friend Linton—that master of the engraver's craft. Here and there are interpolated recent poems, printed on slips, and pasted in by the poet's own hand. The edition has an indescribable air; one who owns it feels that he has a portion of the author's self. It is Whitman, His Book, and should he print nothing more, his work is well rounded.*

The collection embraces the revised series of "Leaves of Grass," preceded by "Inscriptions," and divided by a group of poems, "Children of Adam," on the sexual conditions of life; by another group, "Calamus," on the love of comrades, and by certain pieces, of which "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a good specimen, in which the aspect and occupations of the people at large, the glory of the American race, and of the dwellers in Mannahatta, are specifically chanted by this bard of New York. Then follow the "Drum-Taps," so full of lyrical fervor that Whitman may be called the chief singer of that great conflict to which the burning songs of other poets had been an overture. There also are "Marches Now the War is Over," with a few pieces that celebrate the Republican uprisings in Europe, and the first volume closes with "Songs of Parting." The second, after a general preface, opens with "Two Rivulets," parallel streams of prose

* Mr. Whitman's address is Camden, New Jersey. The two volumes are sold by him for ten dollars. If book-collectors understood the quality of this limited edition, and how valuable it must become, the poet's heart would be cheered with so many orders that not a copy would be left on his shelves.

and verse, followed by a prose essay of a Carlylese type, possibly suggested by Carlyle's strictures on America. Much of all this portion, prose and verse, is the least satisfactory of Whitman's writings, although greatly in earnest and of most import to the author. "The Centennial Songs" (1876) and the poems of 1872 (including that fine burst, "The Mystic Trumpeter") come next. Reverting to his prose "Rivulet" and the "Democratic Vistas," I do not find in these contradictory views of the present, notices of weak joints in our armor, and dreams of the future, much that doubtless has not been considered by many who have helped to guide our republic thus far, much that has not occurred to the poet's fellow-thinkers, or is not, at least, within their power to understand and amend. Neither are they expressed in that terse and sufficient language common to rare minds,—nor in a way at all comparable to the writer's surer way of expressing himself in his chosen verse. Well-written articles like his recantation of Emerson lead one to suspect that his every-day prose is distorted intentionally, otherwise I should say that, if he is a poet of high rank, he is an exception to the conceit that the truest poets write also the most genuine and noble prose; for certainly his usual style is no nearer that of healthy, self-sustained English, than his verse is to ordinary rhythm. A poet's genius may reconcile us to that which Cosmo Monkhouse terms poetry in solution, but prose in dissolution is undesirable. A continuous passage of good prose, not broken up with dashes and parentheses, and other elements of weakness, nor marred by incoherent and spasmodic expressions, is hard to find in his "Rivulets" and "Vistas." Both his prose and verse have one fault in common, that he virtually underrates the intelligence of readers. This is visible in constant repetition of his thoughts, often in forms that grow weaker, and in his intimation that we are even unwilling to comprehend ideas which are familiar to all radical thinkers in modern times.

More impressive in their vivid realism, and as evidence not to be gainsaid of Mr. Whitman's personal qualities, are the "Memoranda during the War," homely and fragmentary records of his labors among the soldiers. Three years and more were covered by these acts of self-offering, and it is well they should be commemorated. Their records constitute a picture of his life at its highest moment; they are heroic interludes

between his poems of life and those upon death. The latter, under the title, "Passage to India," express the maturest yearning of his soul. Chastened by illness and wise through experience, the singer whose pulses have beaten with life's full tide now muses upon Death,—the universal blessing. With lofty faith and imagining he confronts the unknown. To one so watchful of his own individuality, any creed that involves a merger of it is monstrous and impossible. He bids his soul voyage through death's portals, sure to find

"The untold want, by life and land ne'er granted."

He is at the farthest remove from our modish Buddhism, nor can any *nirvāna* satisfy his demands. In this section his song is on a high key, and less reduced than elsewhere by untimely commonplace. Here are the pieces inspired by the tragic death of Lincoln. The burial hymn, "When Lilacs last," etc., is entitled to the repute in which it is affectionately held. The theme is handled in an indirect, melodious, pathetic manner, and I think this poem and Lowell's "Commemoration Ode," each in its own way, the most notable elegies resulting from the war and its episodes. Whitman's is exquisitely idyllic, Lowell's the more heroic and intellectual. Even the "Genius of These States" might stoop for an instant to hear the Cambridge scholar, and I can yield the "Burial Hymn" no truer homage than to associate it with his Ode.

A "Poem of Joys" makes an artistic contrast with these death-carols, and a group of "Sea-shore Memories," with their types and music of the infinite, add to the climacteric effect of this division. Unable here to cite passages from Whitman, I can at least direct the reader how to get at his real capabilities. For his original mood, and something of his color, imagination, hold upon nature, lyric power, turn then to the broad harmonies of the "Sea-shore Memories"; to "Lincoln's Burial Hymn," and the shorter poems beyond it; to "The Mystic Trumpeter," and "The Wound-Dresser"; and then, after reading the sixth section of the poem, "Walt Whitman,"

"A child said, 'What is the grass?'"

find the two hundred and sixth paragraph,

"I understand the large hearts of heroes,"

and read to the end of the frigate-fight. These passages are a fair introduction to the

poet, and you will go with him farther, until checked by some repulsive exhibition, or wearied by pages cheap in wisdom and inductive or—intolerably dull. Often where he utters truths, it is with an effort to give offense, or with expressions of contempt for their recipient that well might make even the truth offensive. A man does not care to be driven with blows and hard names, even to a feast, nor to have the host brag too much of the entertainment.

III.

HERE we may as well consider a trait of Mr. Whitman's early work that most of all has brought it under censure. I refer to the blunt and open manner in which the consummate processes of nature, the acts of procreation and reproduction, with all that appertain to them, are made the theme or illustration of various poems, notably of those with the title "Children of Adam." Landor says of a poet that, "on the remark of a learned man that irregularity is no indication of genius, he began to lose ground rapidly, when on a sudden he cried out in the Haymarket, 'There is no God.' It was then rumored more generally and more gravely that he had something in him. * * * 'Say what you will,' once whispered a friend of mine, 'there are things in him strong as poison, and original as sin.'" But those who looked upon Whitman's sexuality as a shrewd advertisement, justly might be advised to let him reap the full benefit of it, since, if he had no more sincere basis, it would receive the earlier judgment—and ere long be "outlawed of art." This has not been its fate, and therefore it must have had something of conviction to sustain it. Nevertheless, it made the public distrustful of this poet, and did much to confine his volumes to the libraries of the select few. Prurient modesty often is a sign that people are conscious of personal defects; but Whitman's physical excursions are of a kind which even Thoreau, refreshed as he was by the new poet, found it hard to keep pace with. The fault was not that he discussed matters which others timidly evade, but that he did not do it in a clean way,—that he was too anatomical and malodorous withal; furthermore, that in this department he showed excessive interest, and applied its imagery to other departments, as if with a special purpose to lug it in. His pictures sometimes were so realistic, his speech so free, as to excite the hue and cry of indecent

exposure; the display of things natural, indeed, but which we think it unnatural to exhibit on the highway, or in the sitting-room, or anywhere except their wonted places of consignment.

On the poet's side it is urged that the ground of this exposure was, that thus only could his reform be consistent; that it was necessary to celebrate the body with special unction, since, with respect to the physical basis of life, our social weakness and hypocrisy are most extreme. Not only should the generative functions be proclaimed, but, also,—to show that "there is in nature nothing mean or base,"—the side of our life which is hidden, because it is of the earth, earthy, should be plainly recognized in these poems; and thus, out of rankness and coarseness, a new virility be bred, an impotent and squeamish race at last be made whole.

Entering upon this field of dispute, what I have to say—in declaring that Whitman mistakes the aim of the radical artist or poet—is perhaps different from the criticism to which he has been subjected. Let us test him solely by his own rules. Doing this, we presuppose his honesty of purpose, otherwise his objectionable phrases and imagery would be outlawed, not only of art but of criticism. Assume, then, first, that they were composed as a fearless avowal of the instincts and conditions which pertain to him in common with the race which he typifies; secondly, that he deems such a presentation essential to his revolt against the artifice of current life and sentiment, and makes it in loyal *reliance upon the excellence, the truth of nature*. To judge him in conformity with these ideas lessens our estimate of his genius. Genius is greatly consistent when most audacious. Its instinct will not violate nature's logic, even by chance, and it is something like obtuseness that does so upon a theory.

In Mr. Whitman's sight, that alone is to be condemned which is against nature, yet, in his mode of allegiance, he violates her canons. For, if there is nothing in her which is mean or base, there is much that is ugly and disagreeable. If not so in itself (and on the question of absolute beauty I accept his own ruling, "that whatever tastes sweet to the most perfect person, that is finally right"), if not ugly in itself, it seems so to the conscious spirit of our intelligence. Even Mother Earth takes note of this, and resolves, or disguises and beautifies, what is repulsive upon her surface. It is well said that an artist shows inferiority by placing

the true, the beautiful, or the good above its associates. Nature is strong and rank, but not externally so. She, too, has her sweet and sacred sophistries, and the delight of Art is to heighten her beguilement, and, far from making her ranker than she is, to portray what she might be in ideal combinations. Nature, I say, covers her slime, her muck, her ruins, with garments that to us are beautiful. She conceals the skeleton, the frame-work, the intestinal thick of life, and makes fair the outside of things. Her servitors swiftly hide or transform the fermenting, the excrementitious, and the higher animals possess her instinct. Whitman fails to perceive that she respects certain decencies, that what we call decency is grounded in her law. An artist should not elect to paint the part of her to which Churchill rashly avowed that Hogarth's pencil was devoted. There is a book—"L'Affaire Clémenceau"—in which a Frenchman's regard for the lamp of beauty, and his indifference to that of goodness, are curiously illustrated. But Dumas points out, in the rebuke given by a sculptor to a pupil who mistakenly elevates the arm of his first model, a beautiful girl, that the Underside of things should be avoided in art,—since Nature, not meaning it to be shown, often deprives it of beauty. Finally, Mr. Whitman sins against his mistress in questioning the instinct we derive from her, one which of all is most elevating to poetry, and which is the basis of sensations that lead childhood on, that fill youth with rapture, impress with longing all human kind, and make up, impalpable as they are, half the preciousness of life. He draws away the final veil. It is not squeamishness that leaves something to the imagination, that hints at guerdons still unknown. The law of suggestion, of half-concealment, determines the choicest effects, and is the surest road to truth. Grecian as Mr. Whitman may be, the Greeks better understood this matter, as scores of illustrations, like that of the attitude of the Hermaphroditus in the Louvre, show. A poet violates nature's charm of feeling in robbing love, and even intrigue, of their esoteric quality. No human appetites need be pruriently ignored, but coarsely analyzed they fall below humanity. He even takes away the sweetness and pleasantness of stolen waters and secret bread. *Furto cuncta magis bella.* Recalling the term "over-soul," the reader insensibly accuses our poet of an over-bodiness. The mock-modesty and effeminacy of our falser tendencies in art

should be chastised, but he misses the true corrective. Delicacy is not impotence, nor rankness the sure mark of virility. The model workman is both fine and strong. Where Mr. Whitman sees nothing but the law of procreation, poetry dwells upon the union of souls, devotion unto death, joys greater for their privacy, things of more worth because whispered between the twilight. It is absolutely true that the design of sexuality is the propagation of species. But the delight of lovers who now inherit the earth is no less a natural right, and those children often are the finest that were begot without thought of offspring. There are other lights in which a dear one may be regarded than as the future mother of men, and these—with their present hour of joy—are unjustly subordinated in the "Leaves of Grass." Marked as the failure of this pseudo-naturalism has been hitherto, even thus will it continue,—so long as savages have instincts of modesty,—so long as we draw and dream of the forms and faces, not the internal substance and mechanism, of those we hold most dear,—so long as the ivy trails over the ruin, the southern jessamine covers the blasted pine, the moss hides the festering swamp,—so long as our spirits seek the spirit of all things; and thus long shall art and poesy, while calling every truth of science to their aid, rely on something else than the processes of science for the attainment of their exquisite results.

From the tenor of Mr. Whitman's later works, I sometimes have thought him half-inclined to see in what respect his effort toward a perfect naturalism was misdirected. In any case, there would be no inconsistency in a further modification of his early pieces,—in the rejection of certain passages and words, which, by the law of strangeness, are more conspicuous than ten times their amount of common phraseology, and grow upon the reader until they seem to pervade the whole volume. The examples of Lucretius, Rabelais, and other masters, who wrote in other ages and conditions, and for their own purposes, have little analogy. It well may be that our poet has more claim to a wide reading in England than here, since his English editor, without asking consent, omitted entirely every poem "which could with tolerable fairness be deemed offensive." Without going so far, and with no falseness to himself, Mr. Whitman might re-edit his home-editions in such wise that they would not be counted wholly among those books which are meat for strong men, but would

have a chance among those greater books that are the treasures of the simple and the learned, the young and the old.

IV.

THE entire body of his work has a sign-metrical by which it is recognized—a peculiar and uncompromising style, conveyed in a still more peculiar unrhymed verse, irregular, yet capable of impressive rhythmical and lyrical effects.

The faults of his method, glaring enough in ruder passages, are quite his own; its merits often are original, but in his chosen form there is little original and new. It is an old fashion, always selected for dithyrambic oracular outpourings,—that of the Hebrew lyrists and prophets, and their inspired English translators,—of the Gaelic minstrels,—of various Oriental and Shemitic peoples,—and in recent times put to use by Blake, in the “Prophetic Visions,” and by other and weaker men. There are symptoms in Whitman’s earlier poems, and definite proof in the later, that his studies have included Blake,—between whose traits and his own there is a superficial, not a genuine, likeness. Not as an invention, then, but as a striking and persistent renaissance, the form that has become his trademark, and his extreme claims for it, should have fair consideration. An honest effort to enlarge the poet’s equipment, too long unaided, by something rich and strange, deserves praise, even though a failure; for there are failures worthier than triumphs. Our chapter can bear with dignity the provincial laughter of those to whom all is distasteful that is uncommon, and regard it as no unfavorable omen. From us the very strangeness of his chant shall gain for it a welcome, and the chance to benefit us as it may. /Thereby we may escape the error pointed out by Mr. Benjamin, who says that people in approaching a work, instead of learning from it, try to estimate it from their preconceived notions. Hence, original artists at first endure neglect, because they express their own discoveries in nature of what others have not yet seen,—a truth well to bear in mind whenever a singer arrives with a new method.

Probably the method under review has had a candid hearing in more quarters than the author himself is aware of. If some men of independent thought and feeling

have failed to accept his claims and his estimate of the claims of others, it possibly has not been through exclusiveness or malice, but upon their own impression of what has value in song.

Mr. Whitman never has swerved from his primal indictment of the wonted forms, rhymed and unrhymed, dependent upon accentual, balanced and stanzaic effects of sound and shape,—and until recently has expressed his disdain not only of our poets who care for them, but of form itself. So far as this cry was raised against the technique of poetry, I not merely think it absurd, but that when he first made it he had not clearly thought out his own problem. Technique, *of some kind*, is an essential, though it is equally true that it cannot atone for poverty of thought and imagination. I hope to show that he never was more mistaken than when he supposed he was throwing off form and technique. But first it may be said that no “form” ever has sprung to life, and been handed from poet to poet, that was not engendered by instinct and natural law, and each will be accepted in a sound generalization. Whitman avers that the time has come to break down the barriers between prose and verse, and that only thus can the American bard utter anything commensurate with the liberty and splendor of his themes. Now, the mark of a poet is that he is at ease everywhere,—that nothing can hamper his gifts, his exultant freedom. He is a master of expression. There are certain points—note this—where expression takes on rhythm, and certain other points where it ceases to be rhythmical,—places where prose becomes poetical, and where verse grows prosaic; and throughout Whitman’s productions these points are more frequent and unmistakable than in the work of any other writer of our time. However bald or formal a poet’s own method, it is useless for him to decry forms that recognize the pulses of time and accent, and the linked sweetness of harmonic sound. Some may be tinkling, others majestic, but each is suited to its purpose, and has a spell to charm alike the philosopher and the child that knows not why. The human sense acknowledges them; they are the earliest utterance of divers peoples, and in their later excellence still hold their sway. Goethe discussed all this with Eckermann, and rightly said there were “great and mysterious agencies” in the various poetic forms. He even added that if a sort of poetic prose should be introduced, it would only show

that the distinction between prose and poetry had been lost sight of completely. Rhyme, the most conventional feature of ballad verse, has its due place, and will keep it; it is an artifice, but a natural artifice, and pleases accordingly. Milton gave reasons for discarding it when he perfected an unrhymed measure for the stateliest English poem; but what an instrument rhyme was in his hands that made the sonnets and minor poems! How it has sustained the whole carnival of our heroic and lyric song, from the sweet pipings of Lodge and Chapman and Shakspeare, to the under-tones of Swinburne and Poe. There are endless combinations yet in the gamut. The report is that Mr. Whitman's prejudice is specially strong against our noblest unrhymed form, "blank-verse." Its variety and freedom, within a range of accents, breaks, cæsural effects,—its rolling organ-harmonies,—he appreciates not at all. Rhythmical as his own verse often can be, our future poets scarcely will discard blank-verse in its behalf—not if they shall recall "The Tempest," "Hail, Holy Light," "Tintern Abbey," "Hyperion," the "Hellenics," "Ulysses," and "Thanatopsis." Mr. Parke Godwin, in a recent private letter, terms it "the grandest and most flexible of English measures," and adds, with quick enthusiasm: "Oh, what a glory there is in it, when we think of what Shakspeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Landor made of it, to say nothing of Tennyson and Bryant!" I doubt not that new handlings of this measure will produce new results, unsurpassed in any tongue. It is quite as fit as Mr. Whitman's own, if he knows the use of it, for "the expression of American democracy and manhood." Seeing how dull and prolix he often becomes, it may be that even for him his measure has been too facile, and that the curb of a more regular unrhymed form would have spared us many tedious curvetings and greswome downfalls.

Strenuous as he may be in his belief that the old methods will be useless to poets of the future, I am sure that he has learned the value of technique through his long practice. He well knows that whatever claims to be the poetry of the future speedily will be forgotten in the past, unless consonant with the laws of expression in the language to which it belongs; that verse composed upon a theory, if too artificial in its contempt of art, may be taken up for a while, but, as a false fashion, anon will pass

away. Not that his verse is of this class; but it justly has been declared that, in writing with a purpose to introduce a new mode or revolutionize thought, and not because an irresistible impulse seizes him, a poet is so much the less a poet. Our question, then, involves the spontaneity of his work, and the results attained by him.

His present theory, like most theories which have reason, seems to be derived from experience: he has learned to discern the good and bad in his work, and has arrived at a rationale of it. He sees that he has been feeling after the irregular, various harmonies of nature, the anthem of the winds, the roll of the surges, the countless laughter of the ocean waves. He tries to catch this "under-melody and rhythm." Here is an artistic motive, distinguishing his chainless dithyrambs from ordinary verse, somewhat as the new German music is distinguished from folk-melody, and from the products of an early, especially the Italian, school. Here is not only reason, but a theoretical advance to a grade of art demanding extreme resources, because it affords the widest range of combination and effect.

But this comprehension of his own aim is an after-thought, the result of long groping. The genesis of the early "Leaves" was in motives less artistic and penetrating. Finding that he could not think and work to advantage in the current mode, he concluded that the mode itself was at fault; especially, that the poet of a young, gigantic nation, the prophet of a new era, should have a new vehicle of song. Without looking farther, he spewed out the old forms, and avowed his contempt for American poets who use them. His off-hand course does not bring us to the conclusion of the whole matter. So far as the crudeness of the *juventus mundi* is assumed by him, it must be temporal and passing, like the work of some painters, who, for the sake of startling effects, use ephemeral pigments. A poet does not, perforce, restore the lost foundations of his art by copying the manner natural to an aboriginal time and people. He is merely exchanging masters, and certainly is not founding a new school. Only as he discovers the inherent tendencies of song does he belong to the future. Still, it is plain that Whitman found a style suited to his purposes, and was fortunate both as a poet and a diplomatist. He was sure to attract notice, and to seem original, by so pronounced a method. Quoth the monk to Gargantua, "A mass, a matin, or vesper,

well rung, is half said." It was suited to him as a poet, because he has that somewhat wandering sense of form, and of melody, which often makes one's conceptions seem the more glorious to himself, as if invested with a halo or blended with concurrent sound, and prevents him from lessening or enlarging them by the decisive master-hand, or at once perfecting them by sure control.

A man who finds that his gloves cripple him does right in drawing them off. At first, Whitman certainly meant to escape all technique. But genius, in spite of itself, makes works that stand the test of scientific laws. And thus he now sees that he was groping toward a broader technique. Unrhymed verse, the easiest to write, is the hardest to excel in, and no measure for a bardling. And Mr. Whitman never more nearly displayed the feeling of a true artist than when he expressed a doubt as to his present handling of his own verse, but hoped that, in breaking loose from ultramarine forms, he had sounded, at least, the key for a new pæan. I have referred to his gradual advances in the finish of his song. Whether he has revived a form which others will carry to a still higher excellence, is doubtful. Blank-verse, limitless in its capacities, forces a poet to stand without disguise, and reveals all his defects. Whitman's verse, it is true, does not subject him to so severe a test. He can so twist and turn himself, and run and jump, that we are puzzled to inspect him at all, or make out his contour. Yet the few who have ventured to follow him have produced little that has not seemed like parody, or unpleasantly grotesque. It may be that his mode is suited to himself alone, and not to the future poets of These States,—that the next original genius will have to sing "as Martin Luther sang," and the glorious army of poetic worthies. I suspect that the old forms, in endless combinations, will return as long as new poets arise with the old abiding sense of time and sound.

The greatest poet is many-sided, and will hold himself slavishly to no one thing for the sake of difference. He is a poet, too, in spite of measure and material, while, as to manner, the style is the man. Genius does not need a special language; it newly uses whatever tongue it finds. Thought, fire, passion, will overtop everything,—will show, like the limbs of Teverino, through the clothes of a prince or a beggar. A cheap and common instrument, odious in foolish hands, becomes the slave of music under the touch

of a master. I attach less importance, therefore, to Mr. Whitman's experiment in verse than he and his critics have, and inquire of his mannerism simply how far it represents the man. To show how little there is in itself, we only have to think of Tupper; to see how rich it may be, when the utterance of genius, listen to Whitman's teacher, William Blake. It does not prove much, but still is interesting, to note that the pieces whose quality never fails with any class of hearers—of which "My Captain" is an example—are those in which our poet has approached most nearly, and in a lyrical, melodious manner, to the ordinary forms.

He is far more original in his style proper than in his metrical inventions. His diction, on its good behavior, is copious and strong, full of surprises, utilizing the brave, homely words of the people, and assigning new duties to common verbs and nouns. He has a use of his own for Spanish and French catch-words, picked up, it may be, on his trip to Louisiana or in Mexican war times. Among all this is much slang that now has lived its life, and is not understood by a new generation with a slang of its own. This does not offend so much as the mouth-ing verbiage, the "ostent evanescent" phrases, wherein he seems profoundest to himself, and really is at his worst. The titles of his books and poems are varied and sonorous. Those of the latter often are taken from the opening lines, and are key-notes. What can be fresher than "Leaves of Grass" and "Calamus"? What richer than "The Mystic Trumpeter," "O Star of France!" "Proud Music of the Storm," or simpler than "Drum-Taps," "The Wound-Dresser," "The Ox-Tamer"? or more characteristic than "Give me the Splendid Silent Sun," "Mannahatta," "As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free," "Joy, Shipmate, Joy"? Some are obscure and grandiose—"Eidolons," "Chanting the Square Deific," but usually his titles arrest the eye and haunt the ear; it is an artist that invents them, and the best pieces have the finest names. He has the art of "saying things"; his epithets, also, are racier than those of other poets; there is something of the Greek in Whitman, and his lovers call him Homeric, but to me he shall be our old American Hesiod, teaching us works and days.

v.

His surest hold, then, is as an American poet, gifted with language, feeling, imagina-

tion, and inspired by a determined purpose. Some estimate, as I have said, may be made of his excellence and short-comings, without waiting for that national absorption which he himself declares to be the test.

As an assimilating poet of nature he has positive genius, and seems to me to present his strongest claims. Who else, in fact, has so true a hand or eye for the details, the sweep and color, of American landscape? Like others, he confronts those superb physical aspects of the New World which have controlled our poetry and painting, and deferred the growth of a figure-school, but in this conflict with nature he is not overcome; if not the master, he is the joyous brother-in-arms. He has heard the message of the pushing, wind-swept sea, along Pausanias's shore; he knows the yellow, waning moon and the rising stars,—the sunset, with its cloud-bar of gold above the horizon,—the birds that sing by night or day, bush and brier, and every shining or swooning flower, the peaks, the prairie, the mighty, conscious river, the dear common grass that children fetch with full hands. Little escapes him, not even "the mossy scabs of the worm fence, and heap'd stones, mullen and poke-weed"; but his details are massed, blended,—the wind saturates and the light of the American skies transfigures them. Not that to me, recalling the penetrative glance of Emerson, the wood and way-side craft that Lowell carried lightly as a sprig of fir, and recalling other things of others, does Whitman seem our "only" poet of nature; but that here he is on his own ground, and with no man his leader.

Furthermore, his intimacy with nature is always subjective,—she furnishes the background for his self-portraiture and his images of men. None so apt as he to observe the panorama of life, to see the human figure,—the hay-maker, wagoner, boatman, soldier, woman and babe and maiden, and brown, lusty boy,—to hear not only "the bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals," but also "the sound I love, the sound of the human voice." His town and country scenes, in peace or in war, are idyllic. Above the *genre*, for utter want of sympathy, he can only name and designate—he does not depict. A single sketch, done in some original way, often makes a poem; such is that reminiscence (in rhyme) of the old Southern negress, "Ethiopia Saluting the Colors," and such the touching conceit of Old Ireland—no fair

and green-robed Hibernia of the harp, but an ancient, sorrowful mother, white-haired, lean and tattered, seated on the ground, mourning for her children. He tells her that they are not dead, but risen again, with rosy and new blood, in another country. This is admirable, I say, and the true way to escape tradition; this is imaginative,—and there is imagination, too, in his apostrophe to "The Man-of-War-Bird" (carried beyond discretion by this highest mood, he finds it hard to avoid blank-verse):

"Thou who hast slept all night upon the storm,
Waking renewed on thy prodigious pinions!"

Thou, born to match the gale (thou art all wings)!
To cope with heaven and earth and sea and hurricane;

Thou ship of air that never furl'st thy sails,
Days, even weeks, untried and onward, through spaces—realms gyrating.

At dark that look'st on Senegal, at morn, America;
That sport'st amid the lightning-flash and thunder-cloud!

In these—in thy experiences—hadst thou my soul,
What joys! What joys were thine!"

Imagination is the essential thing; without it poetry is as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. Whitman shows it in his sudden and novel imagery, and in the subjective rapture of verse like this, but quite as often his vision is crowded and inconsistent. The editor of a New York magazine writes to me: "In so far as imagination is thinking through types (*eidullia*), Whitman has no equal," adding that he does not use the term as if applied to Coleridge, but as limited to the use of types, and that "in this sense it is really more applicable to a master of science than to a poet. In the poet the type is lodged in his own heart, and when the occasion comes * * * he is mastered by it, and he must sing. In Whitman the type is not so much in his heart as in his thought. * * * While he is moved by thought, often grand and elementary, he does not give the intellectual satisfaction warranted by the thought, but a moving panorama of objects. He not only puts aside his 'singing robes,' but his 'thinking-cap,' and resorts to the stereopticon." How acute, how true! There is, however, a peculiar quality in these long catalogues of types,—such as those in the "Song of the Broad-Axe" and "Salut au Monde," or, more poetically treated, in "Longings for Home." The poet appeals to our synthetic vision. Look through a window; you see not only the framed landscape, but each tree and stone and living thing. His

page must be seized with the eye, as a journalist reads a column at a glance, until successive "types" and pages blend in the mind like the diverse colors of a swift-turning wheel. Whitman's most inartistic fault is that he overdoes this method, as if usually unable to compose in any other way.

The tenderness of a strong and robust nature is a winning feature of his song. There is no love-making, no yearning for some idol of the heart. In the lack of so refining a contrast to his realism, we have gentle thoughts of children, images of grand old men, and of women clothed with sanctity and years. This tenderness, a kind of natural piety, marks also his poems relating to the oppressed, the suffering, the wounded and dying soldiers. It is the soul of the pathetic, melodious threne for Lincoln, and of the epilogue—"My Captain!" These pieces remind us that he has gained some command of his own music, and in the matter of tone has displayed strength from the first. In revising his early poems he has improved their effect as a whole. It must be owned that his wheat often is more welcome for the chaff in which it is scattered; there is none of the persistent luxury which compels much of Swinburne's unstinted wealth to go unreckoned. Finally, let us note that Whitman, long ago, was not unread in the few great books of the world, nor inapt to digest their wisdom. He was among the first to perceive the grandeur of the scientific truths which are to give impulse to a new and loftier poetic imagination. Those are significant passages in the poem "Walt Whitman," written by one who had read the xxxviiith chapter of Job, and beginning, "Long I was hugg'd close—long and long."

The "Leaves of Grass," in thought and method, avowedly are a protest against a hackney breed of singers, singing the same old song. More poets than one are born in each generation, yet Whitman has derided his compeers, scouted the sincerity of their passion, and has borne on his mouth Heine's sneer at the eunuchs singing of love. In two things he fairly did take the initiative, and might, like a wise advocate, rest his case upon them. He essayed, without reserve or sophistry, the full presentment of the natural man. He devoted his song to the future of his own country, accepting and outvying the loudest peak-and-prairie brag, and pledging These States to work out a perfect democracy and the salvation of the world. Striking words and venture-

some deeds, for which he must have full credit. But in our studies of the ideal and its votaries, the failings of the latter cannot be lightly passed over. There is an inconsistency, despite the gloss, between his fearful arraignment, going beyond Carlyle's, of the outgrowth of our democracy, thus far, and his promise for the future. In his prose, he sees neither physical nor moral health among us: all is disease, impotency, fraud, decline. In his verse, the average American is lauded as no type ever was before. These matters renew questions which, to say the least, are still open. Are the lines of caste less sharply divided every year, or are the high growing higher, and the low lower, under our democracy? Is not the social law of more import than the form of government, and has not the quality of race much to do with both? Does Americanism in speech and literature depend upon the form and letter, or upon the spirit? Can the spirit of literature do much more than express the national spirit as far as it has gone, and has it not, in fact, varied with the atmosphere? Is a nation changed by literature, or the latter by the former, in times when journalism so swiftly represents the thought and fashion of each day? As to distinctions in form and spirit between the Old-World literature and our own, I have always looked for this to enlarge with time. But with the recent increase of travel and communication, each side of the Atlantic now more than ever seems to affect the other. Our "native flavor" still is distinct in proportion to the youth of a section, and inversely to the development. It is an intellectual narrowness that fails to meditate upon these things.

Thus we come to a defect in Mr. Whitman's theories, reasoning and general attitude. He professes universality, absolute sympathy, breadth in morals, thought, workmanship,—exemption from prejudice and formalism. Under all the high poetic excellences which I carefully have pointed out, I half suspect that his faults lie in the region where, to use his own word, he is most complacent: in brief, that a certain *narrowness* holds him within well-defined bounds. In many ways he does not conform to his creed. Others have faith in the future of America, with her arts and letters, yet hesitate to lay down rules for her adoption. These must come of themselves, or not at all. Again, in this poet's specification of the objects of his sympathy, the members of every class, the lofty and the lowly, are duly named; yet there always is an implica-

tion that the employer is inferior to the employed,—that the man of training, the civilizee, is less manly than the rough, the pioneer. He suspects those who, by chance or ability, rise above the crowd. What attention he does pay them is felt to be in the nature of patronage, and insufferable. Other things being equal, a scholar is as good as an ignoramus, a rich man as a poor man, a civilizee as a boor. Great champions of democracy—poets like Byron, Shelley, Landor, Swinburne, Hugo—often have come from the ranks of long descent. It would be easy to cite verses from Whitman that apparently refute this statement of his feeling, but the spirit of his whole work confirms it. Meanwhile, though various editions of his poems have found a sale, he is little read by our common people, who know him so well, and of whose democracy he is the self-avowed herald. In numberless homes of working-men—and all Americans are workers—the books of other poets are treasured. Some mental grip and culture are required, of course, to get hold of the poetry of the future. / But Whittier, in this land, is a truer type of the people's poet,—the word "people" here meaning a vast body of freemen, having a common-school education, homes, an honest living, and a general comprehension far above that of the masses in Europe. These folk have an instinct that Whittier, for example, has seized his day with as much alertness and self-devotion as this other bard of Quaker lineage, and has sung songs "fit for the New World" as he found it. Whitman is more truly the voice and product of the culture of which he bids us beware. At least, he utters the cry of culture for escape from over-culture, from the weariness, the finical precision, of its own satiety. His warmest admirers are of several classes: those who have carried the art of verse to super-refined limits, and seeing nothing farther in that direction, break up the mold for a change; those radical enthusiasts who, like myself, are interested in whatever hopes to bring us more speedily to the golden year; lastly, those who, radically inclined, do not think closely, and make no distinction between his strength and weakness. Thus he is, in a sense, the poet of the over-refined and the doctrinaires. Such men, too, as Thoreau and Burroughs have a welcome that scarcely would have been given them in an earlier time. From the discord and artifice of our social life we go with them to the woods, learn to name the birds, note the beauty

of form and flower; and love these healthy comrades who know each spring that bubbles beneath the lichened crag and trailing hemlock. Theocritus learns his notes upon the mountain, but sings in courts of Alexandria and Syracuse. Whitman, through propagandists who care for his teachings from metaphysical and personal causes, and compose their own ideals of the man, may yet reach the people, in spite of the fact that lasting works usually have pleased all classes in their own time.

Reflecting upon his metrical theory, we also find narrowness instead of breadth. I have shown that the bent of a liberal artist may lead him to adopt a special form, but not to reject all others; he will see the uses of each, demanding only that it shall be good in its kind. Swinburne, with his cordial liking for Whitman, is too acute to overlook his formalism. Some of his eulogists, those whom I greatly respect, fail in their special analysis. One of them rightly says that Shakspeare's sonnets are artificial, and that three lines which he selects from "Measure for Measure" are of a higher grade of verse. But these are the reverse of "unmeasured" lines,—they are in Shakspeare's free and artistic, yet most measured, vein. Here comes in the distinction between art and artifice; the blank-verse is conceived in the broad spirit of the former, the finish and pedantry of the sonnet make it an artificial form. A master enjoys the task of making its artifice artistic, but does not employ it exclusively. Whitman's irregular, manneristic chant is *at the other extreme of artificiality*, and equally monotonous. A poet can use it with feeling and majesty; but to use it invariably, to laud it as the one mode of future expression, to decry all others, is formalism of a pronounced kind. I have intimated that Whitman has carefully studied and improved it. Even Mr. Burroughs does him injustice in admitting that he is not a poet and artist in the current acceptation of those terms, and another writer simply is just in declaring that when he undertakes to give us poetry he can do it. True, the long prose sentences thrown within his ruder pieces resemble nothing so much as the comic recitatives in the buffo-songs of the concert-cells. This is not art, nor wisdom, but sensationalism. There is narrowness in his failure to recast and modify these and other depressing portions of various poems, and it is sheer Philistinism for one to coddle all the weaknesses of his experimental period, because they have been a product of himself.

One effect of the constant reading of his poetry is that, like the use of certain refectations, it mars our taste for the proper enjoyment of other kinds. Not, of course, because it is wholly superior, since the subtlest landscape by Corot or Rousseau might be utterly put to nought by a melodramatic neighbor, full of positive color and extravagance. Nor is it always, either, to our bard's advantage that he should be read with other poets. Consider Wordsworth's exquisite lyric upon the education which Nature gives the child whom to herself she takes, and of whom she declares:

"The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place,
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
And beauty born of murmuring sound
Shall pass into her face."

It happens that Whitman has a poem on the same theme, describing the process of growth by sympathy and absorption, which thus begins and ends:

"There was a child went forth every day;
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he
became;
And that object became part of him for the day,
or a certain part of the day, or for many years,
or stretching cycles of years.
* * * * *
The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the
fragrance of salt-marsh and shore-mud;
These became part of that child who went forth
every day, and who now goes, and will always go
forth every day."

Plainly there are some comparative advantages in Wordsworth's treatment of this idea. It would be just as easy to reverse this showing by quoting other passages from each poet: the purpose of my digression is to declare that by means of comparative criticism any poet may be judged unfairly, and without regard to his general claims.

So far as Mr. Whitman's formalism is natural to him, no matter how eccentric, we must bear with it; whenever it partakes of affectation, it is not to be desired. The charge of attitudinizing, so often brought against his writings and personal career, may be the result of a popular impression that the border-line is indistinct between his self-assertion as a type of Man, and the ordinary self-esteem and self-advancement displayed by men of common mold. Pretensions have this advantage, that they challenge analysis, and make a vast noise even as we are forced to examine them. In the early preface to the "Leaves" there is a passage modeled, in my opinion, upon the style

of Emerson, concerning simplicity,—with which I heartily agree, having constantly insisted upon the test of simplicity in my discussion of the English poets. Yet this quality is the last to be discerned in many portions of the "Leaves of Grass." In its stead we often find boldness, and the "pride that apes humility,"—until the reader is tempted to quote from the "Poet of Feudalism" those words of Cornwall upon the roughness which brought good Kent to the stocks. Our bard's self-assertion, when the expression of his real manhood, is bracing, is an element of poetic strength. When it even seems to be "posing," it is a weakness, or a shrewdness, and 'tis a weakness in a poet to be unduly shrewd. Of course a distinction must be carefully made between the fine extravagance of genius, the joy in its own conceptions, and self-conscious vanity or affectation,—between, also, occasional weaknesses of the great, of men like Browning, and like the greatest of living masters, Hugo, and the afflatus of small men, who only thus far succeed in copying them. And it would be unjust to reckon Whitman among the latter class.

Doubtless his intolerant strictures upon the poets of his own land and time have made them hesitate to venture upon the first advances in brotherhood, or to intrude on him with their recognition of his birth-right. As late as his latest edition, his opinion of their uselessness has been expressed in withering terms. It may be that this is merely consistent, an absolute corollary of his new propositions. There is no consistency, however, in a complaint of the silence in which they have submitted to his judgments. They listen to epithets which Heine spared Platen and his clique, and surely Heine would have disdained to permit a cry to go up in his behalf concerning a want of recognition and encouragement from the luckless victims of his irony. There is ground enough for his scorn of the time-serving, unsubstantial quality of much of our literature. But I should not be writing this series of papers, did I not well know that there are other poets than himself who hear the roll of the ages, who look before and after, above and below. The culture which he deprecates may have done them an ill turn in lessening their worldly tact. I am aware that Mr. Whitman's poems are the drama of his own life and passions. His subjectivity is so great that he not only absorbs all others into himself, but insists upon being absorbed by whomsoever he ad-

dresses. In his conception of the world's equality, the singer himself appears as the one Messianic personage, the answerer and sustainer, the universal solvent,—in all these respects holding even “Him that was crucified” to be not one whit his superior. It is his kiss, his consolation, that all must receive,—whoever you are, these are given especially to you. But men are egotists, and not all tolerant of one man's selfhood; they do not always deem the affinities elective. Whitman's personality is too strong and individual to be universal, and even to him it is not given to be all things to all men.

VI.

BUT there is that in venerableness which compels veneration, and it is an instinct of human nature to seek the blessing and revere the wisdom of the poet or peasant transfigured by hoary hairs :

“Old age superbly rising! O welcome, ineffable
grace of dying days!”

A year or more ago I was one of a small but sympathetic audience gathered in New York to hear Mr. Whitman, at the cordial request of many authors, journalists and artists, deliver a lecture upon Abraham Lincoln. As he entered, haltingly, and took the seat placed for him, his appearance satisfied the eye. His manly figure, clothed in a drab suit that loosely and well became him, his head crowned with flowing silvery hair, his bearded, ruddy and wholesome face, upon which sat a look of friendliness, the wise benignity that comes with ripened years, all these gave him the aspect of a poet and sage. His reminiscences of the martyr President were slight, but he had read the hero's heart, had sung his dirge, and no theme could have been dearer to him or more fitly chosen. The lecture was written in panoramic, somewhat disjointed, prose, but its brokenness was the counterpart of his vocal manner, with its frequent pauses, interphrases, illustrations. His delivery was persuasive, natural, by turns tender and strong, and he held us with him from the outset. Something of Lincoln himself seemed to pass into this man who had loved and studied him. A patriot of the honest school spoke to us, yet with a new voice—a man who took the future into his patriotism, and the world no less than his own land.

I wished that the youths of America

could hear him, and that he might go through the land reading, as he did that night, from town to town. I saw that he was, by nature, a rhapsodist, like them of old, and should be, more than other poets, a reciter of the verse that so aptly reflects himself. He had the round forehead and head which often mark the orator, rather than the logician. He surely feels with Ben Jonson, as to a language, that “the writing of it is but an accident,” and this is a good thing to feel and know. His view of the dramatic value of Lincoln's death to the future artist and poet was significant. It was the culminating act of the civil war, he said: “Ring down the curtain, with its muses of History and Tragedy on either side.” Elsewhere his claim to be an American of the Americans was strengthened by a peculiarly national mistake, that of confounding quantity with quality, of setting mere size and vastness above dramatic essence. When the brief discourse was ended, he was induced to read the shorter dirge, “O Captain! My Captain!”* It is, of his poems, among those nearest to a wanted lyrical form, as if the genuine sorrow of his theme had given him new pinions. He read it simply and well, and as I listened to its strange, pathetic melodies, my eyes filled with tears, and I felt that here, indeed, was a minstrel of whom it would be said, if he could reach the ears of the multitude and stand in their presence, that not only the cultured, but “the common people heard him gladly.”

Although no order of talent or temperament, in this age, can wholly defy classification, there nevertheless is a limbo of poets, artists, thinkers, men of genius, some of

* We reprint, from the “Centennial Edition,” the text of this favorite poem.—ED. SCRIBNER.

O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!

O CAPTAIN! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we
sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all
exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim
and daring:
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle
trills;
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you
the shores a-crowding;

whose creations are so expressive, and others so feeble and ill-conceived, that any discussion of their quality must consist alternately of praise and adverse criticism. Reviewing what has been written, I see that the career and output of the poet under notice are provocative of each in some extreme, and unite to render him a striking figure in that disputed estate.

Walt Whitman, then, has seemed to me a man who should think well of Nature, since he has received much at her hands; and well of Fortune, since his birth, training, localities, have individualized the character of his natural gifts; and well of Humanity, for his good works to men have come back to him in the devotion of the most loyal and efficient band of adherents that ever buoyed the purpose and advanced the interests of a reformer or poet. He has lived his life, and warmed both hands before its fire, and in middle-age honored it with widely praised and not ignoble deeds. Experience and years have brought his virile, too lusty nature to a wiser harmony and repose. He has combined a sincere enthusiasm with the tact of a man of the world, and, with undoubted love for his kind, never has lost sight of his own aim and reputation. No follower, no critic, could measure him with a higher estimate than that which from the first he has set upon himself. As a poet, a word-builder, he is equipped with touch, voice, vision, zest,—all trained and freshened, in boyhood and manhood, by genuine intercourse with Nature in her broadest and minutest forms. From her, indeed, he is true-born,—no bastard child nor impostor. He is at home with certain classes of men;

For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager
faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head;
It is some dream that on the deck
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and
still;

My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse
nor will:

The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage
closed and done;

From fearful trip the victor ship, comes in with
object won:

Exult, O shores, and ring, O bells!

But I, with mournful tread,

Walk the deck my Captain lies,

Fallen cold and dead.

but here his limitations begin, for he is not great enough, unconscious enough, to do more than assume to include *all* classes in his sympathy and brotherhood. The merits of his works are lyrical passion and frequent originality,—a copious, native, surprising range of diction,—strong feeling, softened by consummate tenderness and pity,—a method lowered by hoarseness, coarseness, and much that is very pointless and dull, yet at its best charged with melody and meaning, or so near perfection that we are irked to have him miss the one touch needful,—a skill that often is art but very seldom mastery. As a man of convictions, he has reflected upon the idea of a true democracy, and sought to represent it by a true Americanism; yet, in searching for it and for the archetypal manhood, chiefly in his own personality, it is not strange that he has frequently gratified his self-consciousness, while failing to present to others a satisfactory and well-proportioned type of either. His disposition and manner of growth always have led him to overrate the significance of his views, and inclined him to narrow theories of art, life and song. He utters a sensible protest against the imitativeness and complacency that are the bane of literature, yet is more formal than others in his non-conformity, and haughtier in his plainness than many in their pride. Finally, and in no invidious sense, it is true that he is the poet of a refined period, impossible in any other, and appeals most to those who long for a reaction, a new beginning; not a poet of the people, but eminently one who might be, could he in these days avail himself of their hearing as of their sight. Is he, therefore, not to be read in the future? Of our living poets, I should think him most sure of an intermittent remembrance hereafter, if not of a general reading. Of all, he is the one most sure—waiving the question of his popular fame—to be now and then examined; for, in any event, his verse will be revived from time to time by dilettants on the hunt for curious treasures in the literature of the past, by men who will reprint and elucidate him, to join their names with his, or to do for this distinctive singer what their prototypes in our day have done for François Villon, for the author of "Joseph and his Brethren," and for William Blake.