

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

WREATH THE LIVING BROWS.

AN ORATION

ON

WALT WHITMAN

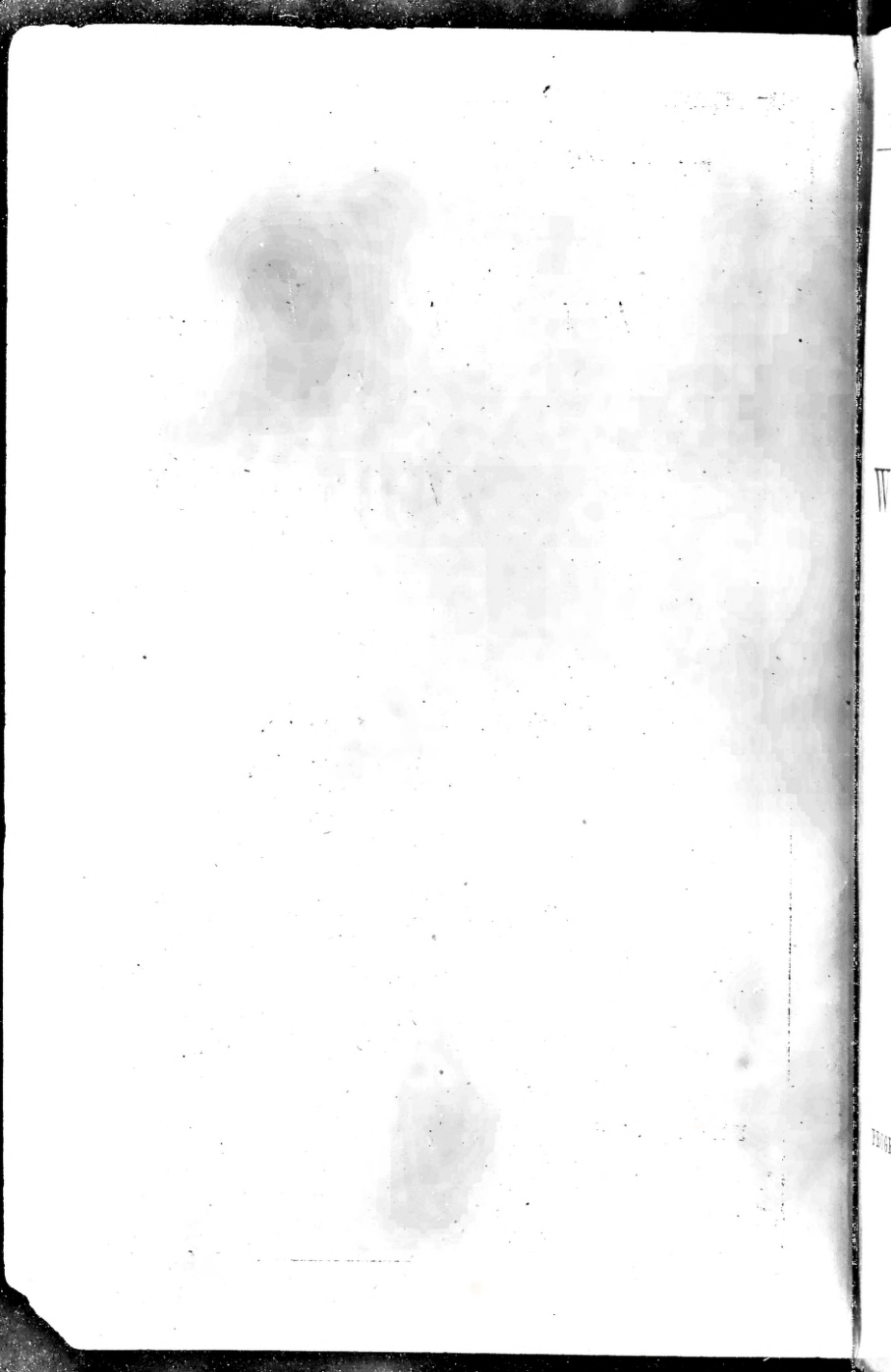
BY

COL. ROBERT G. INGERSOLL.

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London:
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28 STONECUTTER STREET, E.C.

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INTRODUCTION.

THE following oration by Colonel Ingersoll was delivered in the Horticultural Hall, New York, on October 21, 1890. Although the object of the meeting was to raise a testimonial for Walt Whitman in his old age, several halls had been refused, the proprietors and lessees being too bigoted to allow the greatest orator in the United States to enter their doors.

Walt Whitman sat in an easy wheeled chair on the platform. Before the crowded assembly broke up he spoke the following characteristic words :—

“ Only a word, my friends, only a word. After all, the main factor, my friends, is in meeting, being face to face and meeting like this. I thought I would like to come forward with my living voice and thank you for coming and thank Robert Ingersoll for speaking, and that is about all. With such brief thanks to you and him and showing myself to bear testimony—I think that is the Quaker term—face to face, I bid you all hail and farewell.”

AN ORATION ON WALT WHITMAN.

I.

IN the year 1855 the American people knew but little of books. Their ideals, their models, were English. Young and Pollok, Addison and Watts were regarded as great poets. Some of the more reckless read Thomson's *Seasons* and the poems and novels of Sir Walter Scott. A few, not quite orthodox, delighted in the mechanical monotony of Pope, and the really wicked—those lost to all religious shame—were worshippers of Shakespeare. The really orthodox Protestant, untroubled by doubts, considered Milton the greatest poet of them all. Byron and Shelley were hardly respectable—not to be read by young persons. It was admitted on all hands that Burns was a child of nature of whom his mother was ashamed and proud.

In the blessed year aforesaid, candor, free and sincere speech, were under the ban. Creeds at that time were entrenched behind statutes, prejudice, custom, ignorance, stupidity, Puritanism and slavery; that is to say, slavery of mind and body.

Of course it always has been, and for ever will be, impossible for slavery, or any kind or form of injustice, to produce a great poet. There are hundreds of verse makers and writers on the side of wrong—enemies of progress—but they are not poets, they are not men of genius.

At this time a young man—he to whom this testimonial is given—he upon whose head have fallen the snows of more than seventy winters—this man, born within the sound of the sea, gave to the world a book, *Leaves of Grass*. This book was, and is, the true transcript of a soul. The man is unmasked. No drapery of hypocrisy, no pretence, no fear. The book was as original in form as in thought. All customs

were forgotten or disregarded, all rules broken—nothing mechanical—no imitation—spontaneous, running and winding like a river, multitudinous in its thoughts as the waves of the sea—nothing mathematical or measured. In everything a touch of chaos—lacking what is called form as clouds lack form, but not lacking the splendor of sunrise or the glory of sunset. It was a marvellous collection and aggregation of fragments, hints, suggestions, memories and prophecies, weeds and flowers, clouds and clods, sights and sounds, emotions and passions, waves, shadows and constellations.

His book was received by many with disdain, with horror, with indignation and protest—by the few as a marvellous, almost miraculous, message to the world—full of thought, philosophy, poetry and music.

In the republic of mediocrity genius is dangerous. A great soul appears and fills the world with new and marvellous harmonies. In his words is the old Promethean flame. The heart of nature beats and throbs in his line. The respectable prudes and pedagogues sound the alarm, and cry, or rather screech : “ Is this a book for a young person ? ”

A poem true to life as a Greek statue—candid as nature—fills these barren souls with fear.

Drapery about the perfect was suggested by immodesty.

The provincial prudes, and others of like mould, pretend that love is a duty rather than a passion—a kind of self-denial—not an overmastering joy. They preach the gospel of pretence and pantalettes. In the presence of sincerity, of truth, they cast down their eyes and endeavor to feel immodest. To them the most beautiful thing is hypocrisy adorned with a blush.

They have no idea of an honest, pure passion, glorying in its strength—intense, intoxicated with the beautiful—giving even to inanimate things pulse and motion, and that transfigures, ennobles and idealises the object of its adoration.

They do not walk the streets of the city of life—they explore the sewers ; they stand in the gutters and cry “ Unclean ! ” They pretend that beauty is a snare ; that love is a Delilah ; that the highway of joy is the

broad road, lined with flowers and filled with perfume, leading to the city of eternal sorrow.

Since the year 1855 the American people have developed ; they are somewhat acquainted with the literature of the world. They have witnessed the most tremendous of revolutions, not only upon the fields of battle, but in the world of thought. The American citizen has concluded that it is hardly worth while being a sovereign unless he has the right to think for himself.

And now, from this height, with the vantage-ground of to-day, I propose to examine this book and to state, in a general way, what Walt Whitman has done, what he has accomplished, and the place he has won in the world of thought.

II.

THE RELIGION OF THE BODY.

Walt Whitman stood, when he published his book, where all stand to-night—on the perpetually moving line where history ends and prophecy begins. He was full of life to the very tips of his fingers—brave, eager, candid, joyous with health. He was acquainted with the past. He knew something of song and story, of philosophy and art—much of the heroic dead, of brave suffering, of the thoughts of men, the habits of the people—rich as well as poor—familiar with labor, a friend of wind and wave, touched by love and friendship—liking the open road, enjoying the fields and paths, the crags—friend of the forest—feeling that he was free—neither master nor slave—willing that all should know his thoughts—open as the sky, candid as nature—and he gave his thoughts, his dreams, his conclusions, his hopes, and his mental portrait to his fellow-men.

Walt Whitman announced the gospel of the body. He confronted the people. He denied the depravity of man. He insisted that love is not a crime ; that men and women should be proudly natural ; that they need not grovel on the earth and cover their faces for shame.

He taught the dignity and glory of the father and mother; the sacredness of maternity.

Maternity, tender and pure as the tear of pity, holy as suffering—the crown, the flower, the ecstasy of love.

People had been taught from Bibles and from creeds that maternity was a kind of crime; that the woman should be purified by some ceremony in some temple built in honor of some god. This barbarism was attacked in *Leaves of Grass*.

The glory of simple life was sung; a declaration of independence was made for each and all.

And yet this appeal to manhood and to womanhood was misunderstood. It was denounced simply because it was in harmony with the great trend of nature. To me, the most obscene word in our language is celibacy.

It was not the fashion for people to speak or write their thoughts. We were flooded with the literature of hypocrisy. The writers did not faithfully describe the worlds in which they lived. They endeavored to make a fashionable world. They pretended that the cottage or the hut in which they dwelt was a palace, and they called the little area in which they threw their slops their domain, their realm, their empire. They were ashamed of the real, of what their world actually was. They imitated; that is to say, they told lies, and these lies filled the literature of most lands.

Walt Whitman defended the sacredness of love, the purity of passion—the passion that builds every home and fills the world with art and song.

They cried out: "He is a defender of passion—he is a libertine! He lives in the mire. He lacks spirituality!"

Whoever differs with the multitude, especially with a led multitude—that is to say, with a multitude of taggers—will find out from their leaders that he has committed an unpardonable sin. It is a crime to travel a road of your own, especially if you put up guide-boards for the information of others.

Many centuries ago Epicurus, the greatest man of his century, and of many centuries before and after, said: "Happiness is the only good: happiness is the

supreme end." This man was temperate, frugal, generous, noble—and yet through all these years he has been denounced by the hypocrites of the world as a mere eater and drinker.

It was said that Whitman had exaggerated the importance of love—that he had made too much of this passion. Let me say that no poet—not excepting Shakespeare—has had imagination enough to exaggerate the importance of human love—a passion that contains all heights and all depths—ample as space, with a sky in which glitter all constellations, and that has within it all storms, all lightnings, all wrecks and ruins, all griefs, all sorrows, all shadows, and all the joy and sunshine of which the heart and brain are capable.

No writer must be measured by a word or line or paragraph. He is to be measured by his work—by the tendency, not of one line, but by the tendency of all.

Which way does the great stream tend? Is it for good or evil? Are the motives high and noble, or low and infamous?

We cannot measure Shakespeare by a few lines, neither can we measure the Bible by a few chapters, nor *Leaves of Grass* by a few paragraphs. In each there are many things that I neither approve nor believe—but in all books you will find a mingling of wisdom and foolishness, of prophecies and mistakes—in other words, among the excellencies there will be defects. The mine is not all gold, or all silver, or all diamonds—there are baser metals. The trees of the forest are not all of one size. On some of the highest there are dead and useless limbs, and and there may be growing beneath the bushes, weeds, and now and then a poisonous vine.

If I were to edit the great books of the world, I might leave out some lines and I might leave out the best. I have no right to make of my brain a sieve and say that only that which passes through belongs to the rest of the human race. I claim the right to choose. I give that right to all.

Walt Whitman had the courage to express his

thought—the candor to tell the truth. And here let me say it gives me joy—a kind of perfect satisfaction—to look above the bigoted bats, the satisfied owls and wrens and chickadees, and see the great eagle poised, circling higher and higher, unconscious of their existence. And it gives me joy, a kind of perfect satisfaction, to look above the petty passions and jealousies of small and respectable people—above the considerations of place and power and reputation, and see a brave, intrepid man.

It must be remembered that the American people had separated from the Old World—that we had declared not only the independence of colonies, but the independence of the individual. We had done more—we had declared that the State could no longer be ruled by the Church, and that the Church could not be ruled by the State, and that the individual could not be ruled by the Church. These declarations were in danger of being forgotten. We needed a new voice, sonorous, loud, and clear, a new poet for America for the new epoch, somebody to chant the morning song of the new day.

The great man who gives a true transcript of his mind, fascinates and instructs. Most writers suppress individuality. They wish to please the public. They flatter the stupid and pander to the prejudice of their readers. They write for the market—making books as other mechanics make shoes. They have no message—they bear no torch—they are simply the slaves of customers. The books they manufacture are handled by “the trade”; they are regarded as harmless. The pulpit does not object; the young person can read the monotonous pages without a blush—or a thought. On the title-pages of these books you will find the imprint of the great publishers—on the rest of the pages, nothing. These books might be prescribed for insomnia.

III.

Men of talent, men of business, touch life upon few sides. They travel but the beaten path. The creative spirit is not in them. They regard with suspicion a poet who touches life on every side. They have little

confidence in that divine thing called sympathy, and they do not and cannot understand the man who enters into the hopes, the aims, and the feelings of all others.

In all genius there is the touch of chaos—a little of the vagabond ; and the successful tradesman, the man who buys and sells, or manages a bank, does not care to deal with a person who has only poems for collaterals—they have a little fear of such people, and regard them as the awkward country man does a sleight-of-hand performer.

In every age in which books have been produced the governing class, the respectable, have been opposed to the works of real genius. If what are known as the best people could have their way, if the pulpit had been consulted—the provincial moralists—the works of Shakespeare would have been suppressed. Not a line would have reached our time. And the same may be said of every dramatist of his age.

If the Scotch Kirk could have decided, nothing would have been known of Robert Burns. If the good people, the orthodox, could have had their say, not one line of Voltaire would now be known. All the plates of the French Encyclopedia would have been destroyed with the thousands that were destroyed. Nothing would have been known of D'Alembert, Grimm, Diderot, or any of the Titans who warred against the thrones and altars and laid the foundation of modern literature not only, but what is of far greater moment, universal education.

It is not too much to say that every book now held in high esteem would have been destroyed, if those in authority could have had their will. Every book of modern times, that has a real value, that has enlarged the intellectual horizon of mankind, that has developed the brain, that has furnished real food for thought, can be found in the Index Expurgatorius of the Papacy, and nearly every one has been commended to the free minds of men by the denunciations of Protestants.

If the guardians of society, the protectors of "young persons," could have had their way, we should have known nothing of Byron or Shelley. The voices that

thrill the world would now be silent. If authority could have had its way, the world would have been as ignorant now as it was when our ancestors lived in holes or hung from dead limbs by their prehensile tails.

But we are not forced to go very far back. If Shakespeare had been published for the first time now, those divine plays, greater than continents and seas, greater even than the constellations of the midnight sky—would be excluded from the mails by the decision of the present enlightened postmaster-general.

The poets have always lived in an ideal world, and that ideal world has always been far better than the real world. As a consequence, they have forever roused, not simply the imagination, but the energies—the enthusiasm of the human race.

The great poets have been on the side of the oppressed—of the downtrodden. They have suffered with the imprisoned and the enslaved, and whenever and wherever man has suffered for the right, wherever the hero has been stricken down—whether on field or scaffold—some man of genius has walked by his side, and some poet has given form and expression, not simply to his deeds, but to his aspirations.

From the Greek and Roman world we still hear the voices of a few. The poets, the philosophers, the artists, and the orators still speak. Countless millions have been covered by the waves of oblivion, but the few who uttered the elemental truths, who had sympathy for the whole human race, and who were great enough to prophesy a grander day, are as alive to-night as when they roused, by their bodily presence, by their living voices, by their works of art, the enthusiasm of their fellow men.

Think of the respectable people, of the men of wealth and position, those who dwelt in mansions, children of success, who went down to the grave voiceless, and whose names we do not know. Think of the vast multitudes, the endless processions, that entered the caverns of eternal light—leaving no thought—no truth as a legacy to mankind!

The great poets have sympathised with the people.

They have uttered in all ages the human cry. Unbought by gold, unawed by power, they have lifted high the torch that illuminates the world.

IV.

Walt Whitman is in the highest sense a believer in democracy. He knows that there is but one excuse for government—the preservation of liberty; to the end that man may be happy. He knows that there is but one excuse for any institution, secular and religious—the preservation of liberty; and there is but one excuse for schools, for universal education, for the ascertainment of facts, namely, the preservation of liberty. He resents the arrogance and cruelty of power. He has sworn never to be tyrant or slave. He has solemnly declared :

I speak the password primeval—I give the sign of democracy.
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.

This one declaration covers the entire ground. It is a declaration of independence, and it is also a declaration of justice, that is to say, a declaration of the independence of the individual, and a declaration that all shall be free. The man who has this spirit can truthfully say :

I have taken off my hat to nothing known or unknown,
I swear I am for those that have never been mastered.

There is in Whitman what he calls "The boundless impatience of restraint"—together with that sense of justice which compelled him to say "Neither a servant nor a master, am I."

He was wise enough to know that giving others the same rights that he claims for himself could not harm him, and he was great enough to say: "As if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess the same."

He felt as all should feel, that the liberty of no man is safe unless the liberty of each is safe.

There is in our country a little of the old servile spirit a little of the bowing and cringing to others. Many

Americans do not understand that the officers of the government are simply the servants of the people. Nothing is so demoralising as the worship of place. Whitman has reminded the people of this country that they are supreme, and he has said to them :

The President is there in the White House for you—it is not you who are here for him.

The Secretaries act in their bureaus for you—not you here for them.

All doctrines, all politics and civilisation exurge from you.

All sculpture and monuments and anything inscribed anywhere are tallied in you.

He describes the ideal American citizen—the one

Who says, indifferently and alike, “How are you friend?” to the President at his levee.

And he says, “Good day, my brother,” to the slave that hoes in the sugar field.

Long ago, when the politicians were wrong, when the judges were subservient, when the pulpit was coward, Walt Whitman shouted :

Man shall not hold property in man.

The least developed person on earth is just as important and to himself or herself as the most developed person is to himself or herself.

This is the very soul of true democracy.

Beauty is not all there is of poetry. It must contain the truth. It is not simply an oak, rude and grand, neither is it simply a vine. It is both. Around the oak of truth runs the vine of beauty.

Walt Whitman utters the elemental truths and is the poet of democracy. He is also the poet of individuality.

V.

INDIVIDUALITY.

In order to protect the liberties of a nation, we must protect the individual. A democracy is a nation of free individuals. The individuals are not to be sacrificed to the nation. The nation exists only for the pur-

pose of guarding and protecting the individuality of men and women. Walt Whitman has told us that : "The whole theory of the universe is directed to one single individual—namely to you."

And he has also told us that the greatest city—the greatest nation—is "where the citizen is the head and the ideal."

And that

The greatest city is that which has the greatest man or woman.

If it be but a few ragged huts, it is still the greatest city in the whole world.

By this test, maybe the greatest city on the continent to-night is Camden.

This poet has asked of us this question :

What do you suppose will satisfy the soul, except to walk free and own no superior ?

The man who asks this question has left no impress of his lips in the dust, and has no dirt upon his knees.

He carries the idea of individuality to its utmost height :

What do you suppose I have intimated to you in a hundred ways

But that man or woman is as good as God ?

And that there is no God any more divine than yourself ?

Glorying in individuality, in the freedom of the soul, he cries out :

Oh, the joy of suffering !

To struggle against great odds ;

To meet enemies undaunted ;

To be entirely alone with them—to find out how much I can stand ;

To look strife, torture, prison, popular odium, death, face to face ;

To mount the scaffold—to advance to the muzzle of guns with perfect nonchalance—

To be indeed a god.

Walt Whitman is willing to stand alone. He is sufficient unto himself, and he says :

Henceforth I ask not good fortune—I am good fortune.
 Strong and content I travel the open road.
 I am one of those who look carelessly into faces of
 Presidents and Governors as to say, "Who are you?"

And not only this, but he has the courage to say,
 "Nothing—not God—is greater to one than oneself."
 Walt Whitman is the poet of Individuality, the defender
 of the rights of each for the sake of all—and his
 sympathies are as wide as the world. He is the
 defender of the whole race.

VI.

HUMANITY.

The great poet is intensely human—ininitely sym-
 pathetic—entering into the joys and griefs of others,
 bearing their burdens, knowing their sorrows. Brain
 without heart is not much; they must act together.
 When the respectable people of the North, the rich, the
 successful, were willing to carry out the Fugitive
 Slave Law, Walt Whitman said :

I am the wounded slave—I wince at the bite of the dogs.
 Hell and despair are upon me—"Crack," and again "crack,"
 the marksmen;

I clutch the rails of the fence—my blood drips, thinned with
 the ooze of my skin;

I fall on the weeds and stones;

The riders spur their unwilling horses—haul close;

Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me with the butts of their
 whips.

Agonies are one of my changes of garment.

I do not ask the wounded person how he feels. I, myself,
 become the wounded person.

I see myself in prison shaped like another man;

And feel the dull unintermitted pain.

For me the keepers of convicts shoulder their carbines and
 keep watch.

It is I, let out in the morning and barred at night.

Not a prisoner walks handcuffed to the jail but I am hand-
 cuffed to him and walk by his side.

Judge not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling upon
 a helpless thing.

Of the very worst he had the infinite tenderness to say : " Not until the sun excludes you will I exclude you."

In this age of greed, when houses and lands, and stocks and bonds, outrank human life ; when gold is more of value than blood, these words should be read by all :

When the psalm sings, instead of the singer ;
 When the script preaches, instead of the preacher ;
 When the pulpit descends and goes, instead of the carver
 that carved the supporting desk ;
 When I can touch the body of books, by night or by day, and
 when they touch my body back again ;
 When the holy vessels, or the bits of Eucharist, or lath and
 plast procreate as effectually as the young silversmiths
 or bakers or the masons in their overalls ;
 When the university convinces like a slumbering woman and
 child convince ;
 When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the night
 watchman's daughter ;
 When warranty deeds loaf in chairs opposite, and are my
 friendly companions ;
 I intend to reach them my hand and make as much of them
 as I do of men and women like you !

VII.

The poet is also a painter, a sculptor—he, too, deals in form and color. The great poet is of necessity a great artist. With a few words he creates pictures, filling his canvas with living men and women—with those who feel and speak. Have you ever read the account of the stage driver's funeral ? Let me read it :

Cold dash of waves at the ferry wharf—posh of ice in the river—half-frozen mud in the street—a gray discouraged sky overhead—short-lasting daylight of twelfth month.

A hearse and stages—other vehicles give place—the funeral of an old Broadway stage-driver—the cortege mostly drivers.

Steady the trot to the cemetery—duly rattles the death-bell—the gate is passed—the new-dug grave is hollowed out—the living alight—the hearse uncloses.

The coffin is passed out—lowered and settled—the whip is laid on the coffin—the earth is softly shoveled in.

The mound above is flattened with the spades.

Silence: and among them no one moves or speaks.

It is done. He is decently laid away.

Is there anything more?

He was a good fellow—free mouthed—quick tempered—not bad looking—able to take his own part—witty—sensitive to a slight—ready with life or death for a friend—fond of women—gambled—ate hearty—drank hearty—had known what it was to be flush—grew low spirited toward the last—sickened—was helped by a contribution—died aged forty-one years—and that was his funeral.

Let me read you another description—one of a woman:

Behold a woman!

She looks out from her Quaker cap, her face is clear and more beautiful than the sky.

She sits in an arm-chair under the shaded porch of the farm-house.

The sun just shines on her old, white head.

Her ample gown is of cream-hued linen.

Her grandsons raised the flax and her granddaughters spun it with the distaff and the wheel.

The melodious character of the earth.

The finished—beyond which philosophy cannot go and does not wish to go.

The justified mother of men.

Would you hear of an old-time sea fight?

Would you learn who won by the light of the moon and stars?
List to the yarn as my grandmother's father, the sailor, told it to me:

Our foe was no skulk in his ship, I tell you, said he.

His was the surly English pluck, and there is no tougher or truer, and never was and never will be.

Long the lower eve he came, horribly raking us.

We closed with him; the yards entangled, the cannon touched.

My captain lashed fast with his own hands.

We had received some eighteen pound shots under the water, and on our lower gun deck two large pieces had burst at the first fire, killing all around and blowing up overhead.

Fighting at sundown; fighting at dark.

Ten o'clock at night; the full moon well up; our leaks on the gain; five feet of water reported.

The master-at-arms loosing the prisoners confined in the hold to give them a chance for themselves.

The transit to and from the magazine is now stopped by the sentinels.

They see so many strange faces they do not know whom to trust.
Our frigate takes fire.

The other asks if we demand quarter,

If our colors are struck and the fighting done.

Now I laugh content, for I hear the voice of my little Captain,
"We have not struck," he composedly cries, "we have just begun our part of the fighting."

Only three guns in use.

One is directed by the Captain himself against the enemy's mainmast.

Two, well served with grape and canister, silences his musketry and clears his decks.

The taps alone second the fire of his little battery, especially the maintop.

They hold out bravely during the whole of the action,

Not a moment's cease.

The leaks gain fast on the pumps, the fire eats toward the powder magazine; one of the pumps has been shot away; it is thought we are sinking.

Serene stands the little Captain,

He is not hurried; his voice neither high nor low.

His eyes give more light to us than our battle lanterns.

Toward twelve, there in the beams of the moon, they surrender to us.

Stretched and still lies the midnight,

Two great hulks motionless on the breast of the darkness,
Our vessel riddled and slowly sinking, preparations to pass to the one we have conquered.

The captain on the quarter-deck coolly giving his orders through a countenance white as a sheet;

Near by, the corpse of the child that served in the cabin;

The dead face of an old salt, with long white hair and carefully curled whiskers.

The flames, spite of all that can be done, flecked aloft and below,
The husky voices of the two officers yet fit for duty.

Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves, dabs of flesh upon the masts and spars;

Cut of cordage, tangle of rigging, slight shock of the sooth of waves;

Black and impassive guns, litter of powder parcels, strong scent.

A few large stars overhead, silent and mournful, shining;
delicate sniffs of sea breeze, smells of sedge grass and fields by the shore; death messages given in charge to survivors.

The hiss of the surgeon's knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw, Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short, wild scream, long, dull, tapering groan.

Some people say that this is not poetry—that it lacks measure and rhyme.

VIII.

WHAT IS POETRY ?

The whole world is engaged in the invisible commerce of thought. That is to say, in the exchange of thoughts by words, symbols, sounds, colors and forms. The motions of the silent, invisible world, where feeling glows and thought flames—that contains all seeds of action—are made known only by sounds and colors, forms, objects, relations, uses and qualities—so that the visible universe is a dictionary, an aggregation of symbols, by which and through which is carried on the invisible commerce of thought. Each object is capable of many meanings, or of being used in many ways to convey ideas or states of feeling or of facts that take place in the world of the brain.

The greatest poet is the one who selects the best, the most appropriate symbols to convey the best, the highest, the sublimest thoughts. Each man occupies a world of his own. He is the only citizen of his world. He is subject and sovereign, and the best he can do is to give the facts concerning the world in which he lives to the citizens of other worlds. No two of these worlds are alike. They are of all kinds, from the flat, barren and uninteresting—from the small and shrivelled and worthless—to those whose rivers and mountains and seas and constellations belittle and cheapen the visible world. The inhabitants of these marvellous worlds have been the singers of songs, utterers of great speech—the creators of art.

And here lies the difference between creators and imitators : the creator tells what passes in his own world—the imitator does not. The imitator abdicates, and by the fact of imitation falls upon his knees. He is like one who, hearing a traveller talk, pretends to others that he has travelled.

In nearly all lands, the poet has been privileged—for the sake of beauty, they have allowed him to speak, and for that reason he has told the story of the oppressed, and has excited the indignation of honest men and even the pity of tyrants. He, above all others, has added to the intellectual beauty of the world. He has been the true creator of language, and has left his impress on mankind.

What I have said is not only true of poetry—it is true of all speech. All are compelled to use the visible world as a dictionary. Words have been invented and are being invented—for the reason that new powers are found in the old symbols, new qualities, relations, uses, and meanings. The growth of language is necessary on account of the development of the human mind. The savage needs but few symbols—the civilised many—the poet most of all.

The old idea was, however, that the poet must be a rhymers. Before printing was known, it was said: the rhyme assists the memory. That excuse no longer exists.

Is rhyme a necessary part of poetry? In my judgment, rhyme is a hindrance to expression. The rhymers is compelled to wander from his subject—to say more or less than he means—to introduce irrelevant matter that interferes continually with the dramatic action and is a perpetual obstruction to sincere utterance.

All poems, of necessity, must be short. The highly and purely poetic is the sudden bursting into blossom of a great and tender thought. The planting of the seed, the growth, the bud and flower must be rapid. The spring must be quick and warm—the soil perfect, the sunshine and rain enough—everything should tend to hasten, nothing to delay. In poetry, as in wit, the crystallisation must be sudden.

The greatest poems are rhythmical. While rhyme is a hindrance, rhythm seems to be the comrade of the poetic. Rhythm has a natural foundation. Under emotion, the blood rises and falls, the muscles contract and relax, and this action of the blood is as rhythmical as the rise and fall of the sea. In the highest form of expression, the thought should be in harmony with this natural ebb and flow.

The highest poetic truth is expressed in rhythmical form. I have sometimes thought that an idea selects its own words, chooses its own garments, and that when the thought has possession, absolutely, of the speaker or writer, he unconsciously allows the thought to clothe itself.

The great poetry of the world keeps time with the winds and the waves.

I do not mean by rhythm a recurring accent at accurately measured intervals. Perfect time is the death of music. There should always be room for eager haste and delicious delay, and whatever change there may be in the rhythm or time, the action itself should suggest perfect freedom.

A word more about rhythm. I believe that certain feelings and passions—joy, grief, emulation, revenge, produce certain molecular movements in the brain—that every thought is accompanied by certain physical phenomena. Now it may be that certain sounds, colors, and forms produce the same molecular action in the brain that accompanies certain feelings, and that these sounds, colors, and forms produce first, the molecular movements, and these in their turn reproduce the feelings in motions and states of mind capable of producing the same or like molecular movements. So that what we call heroic music, produces the same molecular action in the brain—the same physical changes—that are produced by the real feeling of heroism; that the sounds we call plaintive produce the same molecular movement in the brain that grief, or the twilight of grief, actually produces. There may be a rhythmical molecular movement belonging to each state of mind, that accompanies each thought or passion, and it may be that music, or painting, or sculpture, produces the same state of mind or feeling that produces the music or painting or sculpture, by producing the same molecular movements.

All arts are born of the same spirit, and express like thoughts in different ways—that is to say, they produce like states of mind and feeling. The sculptor, the painter, the composer, the poet, the orator, work to the same end, with different materials. The painter

expresses through form and color and relation ; the sculptor through form and relation. The poet also paints and chisels—his words give form, relation, and color. His statues and his paintings do not crumble, neither do they fade, nor will they as long as language endures. The composer touches the passions, produces the very states of feeling produced by the painter and sculptor, and poet and orator. In all these there must be rhythm—that is to say, proportion—that is to say, harmony, melody.

So that the greatest poet is the one who idealizes the common, who gives new meanings to old symbols, who transfigures the ordinary things of life. He must deal with the hopes and fears, and with the experiences of the people.

The poetic is not the exceptional. A perfect poem is like a perfect day. It has the undefinable charm of naturalness and ease. It must not appear to be the result of great labor. We feel, in spite of ourselves, that man does best that which he does easiest.

The great poet is the instrumentality, not always of his time, but of the best of his time, and he must be in unison and accord with the ideals of his race. The sublimer he is the simpler he is. The thoughts of the people must be clad in the garments of feeling—the words must be known, apt, familiar. The height must be in the thought, in the sympathy.

In the olden time they used to have May day parties, and the prettiest child was crowned Queen of May. Imagine an old blacksmith and his wife looking at their little daughter clad in white and crowned with roses. They would wonder while they looked at her, how they ever came to have so beautiful a child. It is thus that the poet clothes the intellectual children or ideals of the people. They must not be gemmed and garlanded beyond the recognition of their parents. Out from all the flowers and beauty must look the eyes of the child they know.

We have grown tired of gods and goddesses in art. Milton's heavenly militia excites our laughter. Light-houses have driven sirens from the dangerous coasts. We have found that we do not depend on the imagina-

tion for wonders—there are millions of miracles under our feet.

Nothing can be more marvellous than the common and every day facts of life. The phantoms have been cast aside. Men and women are enough for men and women. In their lives is all the tragedy and all the comedy that they can comprehend.

The painter no longer crowds his canvas with the winged and impossible—he paints life as he sees it, people as he knows them, and in whom he is interested. "The Angelus," the perfection of pathos, is nothing but two peasants bending their heads in thankfulness as they hear the solemn sound of the distant bell—two peasants, who have nothing to be thankful for—nothing but weariness and want, nothing but the crusts that they soften with their tears—nothing. And yet as you look at that picture you feel that they have something besides to be thankful for—that they have life, love and hope—and so the distant bell makes music in their simple hearts.

IX.

The attitude of Whitman toward religion has not been understood. Towards all forms of worship, towards all creeds, he has maintained the attitude of absolute fairness. He does not believe that nature has given her last message to man. He does not believe that all has been ascertained. He denies that any sect has written down the entire truth. He believes in progress, and, so believing, he says :

We can consider bibles and religions divine. I do not say they are not divine. I say they have all grown out of us and may grow out of us still. It is not they who give the life. It is you who give the life.

My thoughts are hymns of the praise of things ;
In the dispute on God and eternity I am silent.

Have you thought there could be but a single Supreme? There can be any number of Supremes. One does not countervail another any more than one eyesight countervails another.

Upon the great questions, as to the great problems, he feels only the serenity of a great and well-poised soul.

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

I hear and behold God in every object, not understanding
God, not in the least.

Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than
myself.

In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my face in
the glass.

I find letters from God dropped in the street and every one is
signed by God's name.

The whole visible world is regarded by him as a revelation, and so is the invisible world, and with this feeling he writes :

Not objecting to special revelations—considering a curl of
smoke or a hair on the back of my hand just as curious
as any revelation.

The creeds do not satisfy, the old mythologies are not enough ; they are too narrow at best, giving only hints and suggestions ; and feeling this lack in that which has been written and preached, Whitman says :

Magnifying and applying come I ;
Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters ;
Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah ;
Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son and Herkules his grand-
son ;
Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahm, and Buddha ;
In my portfolio placing Manito alone—Alah on a leaf—the
crucifix engraved
With Odin and the hideous face of Mexitli and every idol
and image—
Taking them all for what they are worth, and not a cent more.

Whitman keeps open house. He is intellectually hospitable. He extends his hand to a new idea. He does not accept a creed because it is wrinkled and old and has a long white beard. He knows that hypocrisy has a venerable look, and that it relies on looks and masks—on stupidity—and fear. Neither does he reject

or accept the new because it is new. He wants the truth, and so he welcomes all until he knows just who and what they are.

X.

PHILOSOPHY.

Walt Whitman is a philosopher.

The more a man has thought, the more he has studied, the more he has travelled intellectually, the less certain he is. Only the very ignorant are perfectly satisfied that they know. To the common man the great problems are easy. He has no trouble in accounting for the universe. He can tell you the origin and destiny of man and the why and the wherefore of things. As a rule, he is a believer in special providence, and is egoistic enough to suppose that everything that happens in the universe happens in reference to him.

A colony of red ants lived at the foot of the Alps. It happened one day, that an avalanche destroyed the hill; and one of the ants was heard to remark: "Who could have taken so much trouble to destroy our home?"

Walt Whitman walked by the side of the sea "where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways," and endeavoured to think out, to fathom the mystery of being? and he says:

I too, but signify, at the utmost, a little washed up drift,
 A few sands and dead leaves gathered together—merging
 myself as part of the sands and drift.
 Aware, now, that amid all the blab whose echoes recoil upon
 me, I have not once had the least idea of who or what I
 am.
 But that for all my insolent poems, the real me still stands
 untouched, untold, altogether unreachd,
 Withdrawn afar, mocking me with mock congratulatory signs
 and voices,
 With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have
 written or shall write,
 Striking me with insults as I fall helpless on the sand.
 I perceive I have not understood anything, not a single
 object; and that no man ever can.

There is in our language no profounder poem than the one entitled "Elemental Drifts."

The effort to find the origin of things has ever been, and will forever be, fruitless. Those who endeavour to find the secret of life resemble a man looking in the mirror, who thinks that if he only could be quick enough he could grasp the image that he sees behind the glass.

The latest word of this poet upon this subject is as follows :

"To me this life with all its realities and functions is finally a mystery, the real something yet to be evolved, and the stamp and shape and life here somehow given an important, perhaps the main, outline to something further. Somehow this hangs over everything else, and stands behind it, is inside of all facts, and the concrete and material and the worldly affairs of life and sense. That is the purport and meaning behind all the other meanings, of *Leaves of Grass*."

As a matter of fact the questions of origin and destiny are beyond the grasp of the human mind. We can see a certain distance; beyond that everything is only indistinct; and beyond the indistinct is the unseen. In the presence of these mysteries—and everything is a mystery so far as origin, destiny, and nature are concerned—the intelligent, honest man is compelled to say, "I do not know."

In the great midnight a few truths like stars shine on forever—and from the brain of man come a few struggling gleams of light—a few momentary sparks.

Some have contended that everything is spirit; others that everything is matter; and again, others who maintained that a part is matter and a part is spirit; some that spirit was first and matter after; others that matter was first and spirit after; and others that matter and spirit have existed together.

But none of these people can by any possibility tell what matter is, or what spirit is, or what the difference is between spirit and matter.

The materialists look upon the spiritualists as substantially crazy; and the spiritualists regard the materialists as low and groveling. These spiritualistic

people hold matter in contempt ; but, after all, matter is quite a mystery. You take in your hand a little earth—a little dust. Do you know what it is? In this dust you put a seed ; the rain falls upon it ; the light strikes it ; the seed grows ; it bursts into blossom ; it produces fruit.

What is this dust—this womb? Do you understand it? Is there anything in the wide universe more wonderful than this?

Take a grain of sand, reduce it to powder, take the smallest possible particle, look at it with a microscope, contemplate its every part for days, and it remains the citadel of a secret—an impregnable fortress. Bring all the theologians, philosophers, and scientists in serried ranks against it ; let them attack on every side with all the arts and arms of thought and force. The citadel does not fall. Over the battlements floats the flag and the victorious secret smiles at the baffled hosts.

Walt Whitman did not and does not imagine that he has reached the limit—the end of the road travelled by the human race. He knows that every victory over nature is but the preparation for another battle. This truth was in his mind when he said : “Understand me well ; it is provided in the essence of things, that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.”

This is the generalisation of all history.

XI.

THE TWO POEMS.

There are two of these poems to which I have time to call special attention. The first is entitled, “A Word Out of the Sea.”

The boy, coming out of the rocked cradle, wandering over the sands and fields, up from the mystic play of shadows, out of the patches of briars and blackberries—from the memories of birds—from the thousand responses of his heart—goes back to the sea and his childhood, and sings a reminiscence.

Two guests from Alabama—two birds—build their nest, and there were four light green eggs, spotted with brown, and the two birds sang for joy :

Shine, shine,
 Pour down your warmth together, great sun!
 While we bask, we two together.
 Two together—
 Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
 Day come white, or night come black,
 Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
 Singing all time, minding no time,
 If we two but keep together.

In a little while one of the birds is missed and never appeared again, and all through the summer the mate, the solitary guest, was singing of the lost :

Blow, blow,
 Blow up, sea winds, along Paumanok's shore;
 I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.

And the boy that night, blending himself with the shadows, with bare feet, went down to the sea, where the white arms out in the breakers were tirelessly tossing; listening to the songs and translating the notes.

And the singing bird called loud and high for the mate, wondering what the dusky spot was in the brown and yellow, seeing the mate whichever way he looked, piercing the woods and the earth with his song, hoping that the mate might hear his cry; stopping that he might not lose her answer; waiting and then crying again: "Here I am!" And this gentle call is for you. Do not be deceived by the whistle of the wind; those are the shadows; and at last crying:

O past, O joy!
 In the air, in the woods, over fields,
 Loved! loved! loved!
 Loved—but no loved with me—
 We two together no more.

And then the boy, understanding the song that had awakened in his breast a thousand songs clearer and louder and more sorrowful than the bird's, knowing

that the cry of unsatisfied love would never again be absent from him; thinking then of the destiny of all, and asking of the sea the final word, and the sea answering, delaying not and hurrying not, spoke the low delicious word "Death!" "ever Death!"

The next poem, one that will live as long as our language, entitled, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed," is on the death of Lincoln.

The sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands.

One who reads this will never forget the odor of the lilac, "lustrous western star" and "the grey-brown bird singing in the pines and cedars."

In this poem the dramatic unities are perfectly preserved, the atmosphere and climate in harmony with every event.

Never will he forget the solemn journey of the coffin through day and night, with the great cloud darkening the land, nor the pomp of inlooped flags, the procession long and winding, the flambeaus of night, the torches' flames, the silent sea of faces, the unbared heads, the thousand voices, rising strong and solemn, the dirges, the shuddering organs, the tolling bells—and the sprig of lilac.

And then for a moment they will hear the grey-brown bird singing in the cedars, bashful and tender, while the lustrous star lingers in the West, and they will remember the pictures hung on the chamber walls to adorn the burial house—pictures of spring and farms and homes and the grey smoke, lucid and bright, and the floods of yellow gold—of the gorgeous indolent sinking sun—the sweet herbage under foot—the green leaves of the trees prolific—the breast of the river with the wind-dapple here and there, and the varied and ample land—and the most excellent sun so calm and haughty—the violet and purple morn with just felt breezes. The gentle, soft-born measureless light—the miracle spreading, bathing all—the fulfilled noon—the coming eve delicious and the welcome night and the stars.

And then again they will hear the song of the grey-brown bird in the limitless dusk amid the cedars and pines. Again they will remember the star and again the odor of the lilac.

But most of all, the song of the bird translated and becoming the chant for death :

THE CHANT FOR DEATH.

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

Praised be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure enwinding arms of cool enfolding death.

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

Approach, strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing
the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss, O death.

From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and
feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread
sky are flitting.
And life and the fields, and the bright and thoughtful sight.

The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice
I know,
And the soul turning to thee, O vast and well-veiled death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.

Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and
the prairies wide,
Over the dense-packed cities all—and the teeming wharves
and waves,
I float this carol to thee, with joy to thee, O death.

This poem, in memory of "the sweetest, wisest soul of all our days and lands," and for whose sake lilac and star and bird were entwined, will last as long as the memory of Lincoln.

XII.

OLD AGE.

Walt Whitman is not only the poet of childhood, of youth, of manhood, but, above all, of old age. He has not been soured by slander or petrified by prejudice; neither calumny nor flattery has made him revengeful or arrogant. Now sitting by the fireside, in the winter of life,

His jocund heart still beating in his breast,
he is just as brave and calm and kind as in his manhood's proudest days, when roses blossomed in his cheeks. He has taken life's seven steps. Now, as the gamester might say, "on velvet." He is enjoying "old age expanded, broad, with the haughty breadth of the universe; old age, flowing free, with the delicious, near-by freedom of death; old age, superbly rising, welcoming the ineffable aggregation of dying days."

He is taking the "loftiest look at last," and before he goes he utters thanks "for health, the midday sun, the impalpable air—for life, mere life; for precious ever lingering memories of mother, father, brothers, sisters, friends; for all his days, for gentle words, carresses, gifts from foreign lands, for shelter, wine and meat, for sweet appreciation, for beings, groups, love, deeds, words, books; for colors, forms; for all the brave, strong men who forward sprung in freedom's help—all years—in all lands; the cannoneers of song and thought—the great artillerists, the foremost leaders, captains of the soul."

It is a great thing to preach philosophy—far greater to live it. The highest philosophy accepts the inevitable with a smile, and greets it as though it were desired.

To be satisfied: This is wealth—success.

The real philosopher knows that everything has happened that could have happened—consequently he accepts. He is glad that he has lived—glad that he has had his moment on the stage. In this spirit Whitman has accepted life.

I shall go forth ;
I shall traverse these states, but I cannot tell whither or how long.

Perhaps soon, some day or night, while I am singing, my voice will suddenly cease,

O soul !

Then all may arrive but to this :

The glances of my eyes that swept the daylight,

The unspeakable love I interchanged with women,

My joys in the open air,

My walks in the Mannahatta,

The continual good will I have met,

The curious attachments of young men to me,

My reflections alone—the absorption into me from the landscape, stars, animals, thunder, rain, and snow in my interviews alone ;

The words of my mouth—rude, ignorant—my many faults and derelictions ;

The light touches on my lips of the lips of my comrades at parting,

The tracks which I leave on the sidewalks and fields—

May all arrive at but this beginning of me ;

This beginning of me—and yet it is enough, O, soul !

O, soul, we have positively appeared ; that is enough.

Yes, Walt Whitman has appeared. He has his place upon the stage. The drama is not ended. His voice is still heard. He is the Poet of Democracy—of all people. He is the poet of the body and soul. He has sounded the note of Individuality. He has given the pass-word primeval. He is the Poet of Humanity—of Intellectual Hospitality. He has voiced the aspirations of America—and, above all, he is the poet of Love and Death.

How grandly, how bravely he has given his thought, and how superb is his farewell—his leave-taking :

After the supper and talk ; after the day is done.
As a friend from friends his final withdrawal prolonging.
Good-bye and good-bye with emotional lips repeating.

So hard for his hand to release those hands—no more will they meet—
 No more for communion of sorrow and joy of old and young,
 A far-stretching journey awaits him to return no more.
 Shunning postponing severance, seeking to ward off the last word ever so little,
 Even at the exit door turning—charges superfluous calling back—even as he descends the steps,
 Something to eke out a minute additional—shadows of night-fall deepening,
 Farewell messages lessening, dimmer the forthgoer's visage and form,
 Soon to be lost for aye in the darkness; loth, oh, so loth to depart!

And is this all? Will the forthgoer be lost, and for ever? Is death the end? Over the grave bends Love sobbing, and by her side stands Hope and whispers:

We shall meet again. Before all life is death, and after all death is life. The falling leaf, touched with the hectic flush, that testifies of autumn's death, is, in a subtler sense, a prophecy of spring.

Walt Whitman has dreamed great dreams, told great truths and uttered sublime thoughts. He has held aloft the torch and bravely led the way.

As you read the marvellous book, or the person, called *Leaves of Grass*, you feel the freedom of the antique world; you hear the voices of the morning, of the first great singers—voices elemental as those of sea and storm. The horizon enlarges, the heavens grow ample, limitations are forgotten—the realisation of the will, the accomplishment of the ideal, seem to be within your power. Obstructions become petty and disappear. The chains and bars are broken, and the distinctions of caste are lost.

The soul is in the open air, under the blue and stars—the flag of Nature. Creeds, theories, and philosophies ask to be examined, contradicted, reconstructed. Prejudices disappear, superstitions vanish, and custom abdicates. The sacred places become highways, duties and desires clasp hands and become comrades and friends. Authority drops the sceptre, the priest the mitre, and the purple falls from kings. The inanimate

becomes articulate, the meanest and humblest things utter speech, and the dumb and voiceless burst into song. A feeling of independence takes possession of the soul, the body expands, the blood flows full and free, superiors vanish, flattery is a lost art, and life becomes rich, royal and superb. The world becomes a personal possession, and the oceans, the continents and constellations belong to you. You are in the centre, everything radiates from you, and in your veins beats and throbs the pulse of all life. You become a rover, careless and free. You wander by the shores of all seas and hear the eternal psalm. You feel the silence of the wide forest, and stand beneath the intertwined and over-arching boughs, entranced with symphonies of winds and woods. You are borne on the tides of eager and swift rivers, hear the rush and roar of cataracts as they fall beneath the seven-hued arch, and watch the eagles as they circling soar. You traverse gorges dark and dim, and climb the scarred and threatening cliffs. You stand in orchards where the blossoms fall like snow, where the birds nest and sing, and painted moths make aimless journeys through the happy air. You live the lives of those who till the earth, and walk amid the perfumed fields, hear the reapers' song, and feel the breadth and scope of earth and sky. You are in the great cities, in the midst of multitudes, of the endless processions. You are on the wide plains—the prairies—with hunter and trapper, with savage and pioneer, and you feel the soft grass yielding under your feet. You sail in many ships, and breathe the free air of the sea. You travel many roads, and countless paths. You visit palaces and prisons, hospitals and courts; you pity kings and convicts, and your sympathy goes out to all the suffering and insane, the oppressed and enslaved, and even to the infamous. You hear the din of labor, all sounds of factory, field, and forest, of all tools, instruments, and machines. You become familiar with men and women of all employments, trades, and professions—with birth and burial, with wedding feast and funeral chant. You see the cloud and flame of war, and you enjoy the ineffable perfect days of peace.

In this one book, in these wondrous *Leaves of Grass*, you find hints and suggestions, touches and fragments, of all there is of life, that lies between the babe, whose rounded cheeks dimple beneath his mother's laughing, loving eyes, and the old man, snow-crowned, who, with a smile, extends his hand to death. And we have met to-night to honor ourselves by honoring the author of *Leaves of Grass*.

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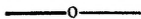
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