

EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY
EDITED BY ERNEST RHYS

LEAVES OF GRASS (I) &
DEMOCRATIC VISTAS

LEAVES OF GRASS (I) &
DEMOCRATIC VISTAS
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
HORACE TRAUBEL

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INTRODUCTION

EVERY time a new Whitman book appears I go back to the talks I had with Walt about his editions in the last years of his life. He was never wholly sure of himself. He is supposed by people who know nothing about egotism to have been the master egotist. But he was in fact quite inclined to under-accentuate his victories. "I guess I've got a foothold." That's about the extremest thing he said at the end. He would playfully compare his gains and losses and ask whether he had after all made good. He did this in the most gracious spirit. Without petulance. Without censuring the world or blaming himself. He in effect stood aside from his own career and figured up its interior and outward intimations.

This was natural to a man who had to fight all his way up. To whom the world never willingly yielded an inch. He had been a rebel twice over. He was a rebel in his art. He was a rebel in his message. Though a conservative now and then accepts Whitman, Whitman as a rule does nothing for conservatism. Though radicals now and then reject Whitman, Whitman as a rule does everything for radicalism. I don't mean that he offers to substitute one creed for another. He in fact expressly avoids that. But he belongs to revolt. He makes people dissatisfied with the conditions of modern life. He said to me: "We have built up things on corrupt foundations. What are we going to do about it? Keep on building higher and higher with the foundations wrong? Or get our foundations right before we go any farther?" And he also said: "I want to see the whole thing challenged: I want us to start where we should: not with property but with man." He preached accordingly. He made up his mind to put a man into a book. A whole man. Himself. A democrat. In doing this he had first of all to run counter to the prejudice of scholarship. He had chosen a peculiar medium of expression. Then he had also to meet the antagonism of the traditions. He spoke of it himself as "two fights in one."

So, from 1855, when *Leaves of Grass* started on its stormy voyage, till 1892, when the old young man, still jubilant, sailed into port, Whitman was a war centre at which a few

stalwart supporters gathered and against which the many who looked upon him as a pretender directed their fire. Whitman was a new force let loose on the old earth. People had to get acquainted with it. This they did in the usual way. By trying to kill it they got used to it. By getting used to it they learned to tolerate it. Toleration became respect. Respect became love.

But the general feeling about Whitman? Where is it to-day? I am told that a whole native Whitman edition has recently been destroyed in Russia. In Toronto the authorities raided all the book stores and destroyed a great many of the objectionable classics, among them the Whitmans. Now you can't buy a copy of *Leaves of Grass* in Ontario. Such things are still happening. And with them the still timid average criticism of the periodical press. Whitman has now lasted so long even his enemies admit he is likely to last a while longer. They say he is bound to go out. He is after all only a candle dip. But he has disappointed their original prophecies. The fact remains that *Leaves of Grass* has been translated as a whole into the French and Italian, and piecemeal into the Spanish, the German and the Dutch. Whitman is quoted everywhere. He is mentioned everywhere. Every book of essays or addresses treating of modernism in literature is forced to reckon with Whitman. Every lecture syllabus which undertakes to deal with contemporary influences has to explain the Whitman diversion. The colleges, some of them, have Whitman courses. The magazines are ready to discuss Whitman and to print the memories of his friends.

When Whitman was alive and the little group of us were about him in Camden we were called crazy. Gilder wrote me after reading the manuscript of volume one of my *With Walt Whitman in Camden*: "The Camden crowd is vindicated." It makes no difference about the Camden crowd. Whitman is vindicated. That is the main thing. An Englishman lecturing in America said: "Continental European Bohemia knows only two places in America, and they are not New York and Chicago, no: they are Camden and Concord." I used to say to Whitman playfully: "I'll live to see you published at fifty dollars a volume." And he would ask: "Do you mean it?" Shaking his head and adding: "No: you can't: we're lucky to be printed at anything a volume." But I did live to see the fifty-dollar book.

I seem to have travelled a long way with Whitman. When

I first met him I was a small boy in Camden. Then nearly everybody discredited him. Everybody found some reason—it was not always the same reason—for dissent. They went to my mother and protested against my association with “the lecherous old man.” They wondered if it was safe to invite him into their houses. I grew up in that atmosphere of suspicion. I got accustomed to thinking of him as an outlaw. But I had no doubts of him. He would talk with me about his supporters. “They are very few,” he would say: “but they are devoted.” He one day gave me a bunch of letters to take to the post-office. They were all to Englishmen. I remember that one was to Symonds, that one was to William Michael Rossetti, that one was to Dowden, and that one was to Tennyson: they impressed me at that time: and there were three or four others—one, I think, going to Carpenter, and another to a man named Riley, who knew and wrote about Ruskin. I said to Walt: “You have distinguished friends even if they are few.” He laughed quietly over this. “Yes: as I said, they are devoted: and so many of them are in England: you noticed that, I guess. Did I ever tell you about my English friends? Well—I will do so sometime. I want you to know just how magnificently they behaved to me in seventy-three to seventy-six: it was truly splendid: it quite took me off my feet.” He did often tell me this story. It always warmed him up. He was amused over one incident related to him by a visitor who had called on Tennyson. The visitor asked Tennyson what he thought of Whitman. “Whitman? Whitman? you want to know what I think about Whitman? I don’t know that I think about him. I wonder if I ever really think about him? But I am aware of his existence: he is a vast monster of some sort—a monster, sir: I can’t make him out: but I hear the noise he makes and see the commotion of the waters as he dashes along: I suppose I do not think of him—think of him: but I acknowledge and respect him: he is a force that without explaining itself to me I still acquiesce in.”

It was true of Whitman in England as in America. That while he missed it with the second-rate men and the critics the first-rate men deferred to him at once. Whitman was convincing to Emerson, Thoreau, Alcott. He immediately justified himself with men and women of original insight. But the scholars insisted upon something which was in line with their inheritance. This intruder right out of the streets

brought in too much dirt with him. Whitman was conclusive as viewed by most of those who made the Victorian period in English literature illustrious. He succeeded with the discoverers. The young men came to him. Some even who in later days reversed their decisions. Even Swinburne and Gosse in their inspirational years. Such men. And men like our Americans Bayard Taylor and Sidney Lanier. When these men were fresh they realised the vivid quality of Whitman's intuitions. But as they cooled off their logic disproved him. Meanwhile Whitman was going into the crowd. He was invading continental Europe. Revolutionaries sung him. They utilise him in music. They like his short pieces and make them into songs. And they take the big things and convert them into tone poems. Sibelius has done this on your side and Converse has done it here. There is a Whitman symphony composed by an Englishman. They are hearing of him in Japan and China. I suppose I have been visited at one time or other by Whitman people from every country on the globe. New Zealand has its life of Whitman. He has been a bone of contention to the culture of Germany. Books have been written there taking sides on his philosophy of sex. This debate has been pursued almost with rancour. I cite these indications at random to illustrate the universality of Whitman's fame. It has gone everywhere. Everybody has listened. Everybody has something to say about it. Whitman is still largely negatived. But he has never been curbed. He is one of the inevitabilities.

Whitman for years took his Sunday dinners at Harned's house in Camden. I remember a Christmas when Ernest Rhys was there. Harned asked Whitman one day: "Walt, do you ever have any doubts about yourself?" "What do you mean, Tom?" "About the future of *Leaves of Grass*: whether it will arrive or not?" Walt was quiet for a minute and then said: "Tom—that's a poser: I'm not the one to answer it." Harned said: "I can answer it and answer it with yes: you will arrive. But that's not what I want. I want your answer." I put in: "He wants you to look at yourself as if you wasn't yourself and answer." Walt was again silent but finally said in his slow way, as if thinking it out as he talked: "I'll tell you how it looks to me, Tom: yes I will: how it looks to me. I can assure you that I have had moods in which the whole business seemed surely about to go to smash: *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman, everything before and after. Then

other moods intervene in which I have the feeling of something in me, in the *Leaves*, that is vital—that may live: something not exactly mine but spoken through me that must outlast me: something not owed to my ego but having a race quality, fitting in with the struggle of democracy in our time to free itself from the clutter of the past.” “Hurrah!” cried Harned. And the hurrah went round the table. Then Walt said quietly: “If I say amen when you are all so good to me you will not misunderstand, will you?” That fervent offhand utterance gave us the clue we wished. That is Whitman’s why and wherefore. That something or other which baffled yet persuaded Tennyson. That something or other which may for ever baffle but will finally persuade the popular will wherever Whitman is read. “I do not anticipate ever being received in lieu of any technical philosophy: I am something different: I don’t provide theories for people: I ask them about their own theories—I spur them on so they do their own speculation.” That’s the way he put it to me. Again I have heard him say: “The main thing is having people understand people—brothers brothers. I suppose that’s where I shine if at all: in bringing people together—in bringing people together: in insisting upon it that the differences shall not be accentuated. We are more alike than not alike: we are more noble than not noble: that I want to say and say again for ever and always.” I asked him: “Do you provide for progress? Is your feeling about all this likely to weaken the fibre of those who accept you?” He thought not. “But if it does then I stand condemned. Maybe the best answer to all that would be your own assertion—I have heard you make it often—that bourbons have very little interest in *Leaves of Grass*: that you find practically all intense *Leaves of Grassers* ardent advocates of the new humanities.”

Every time we brought out a new edition of the *Leaves* or brought out one of his subsidiary volumes, Walt would call it “the conquest of a new world.” When we finished *November Boughs* he said: “Now what shall we do? Like Alexander I sigh for other worlds to conquer.” It is still frequently said as it was in Walt’s own hearing: “Here is the poet of democracy and the democracy repudiates him.” But Walt was not worried by that charge. “I refer to a democracy that is yet unborn,” he said. “Which means that when your democracy comes it will know you?” He assented to this right off. “Exactly,” he said. “And it’s partly

your job to produce it?" "Exactly," he said again. Just as many people misconstrued him when he said "I," just so many people, some of them the same people, misunderstood him when he said "America." They supposed the "I, Walt Whitman, a cosmos," was Walt exclusively, and not just as surely John Smith, the same cosmos. And they supposed that his America was something geographical and not as surely his England or his anything provided the democratic spirit horizoned its idealism. I showed him a photograph of a group of Englishmen. "How American they look!" he exclaimed. If you want to misrepresent Whitman you will regard this as parochial. But if you want to know him according to his own size and shape you will see that it is intercontinental. Any Americanism that Whitman ever had in mind was all inclusive. When you are gone so far, when you are so big, when you are so beautiful, you are American. That is, you are a democrat among democrats. So he would talk of the Americanisation of the world. Not, of course, intending to imply that we, occupying the geographical America, were to evangelise the earth. His America came from within not from without. It is imperative that Europeans should get Whitman in this perspective. Otherwise he has moments which they might ascribe to simple bombast. Carlyle spoke of Whitman as one who thought he was a big man because he lived in a big country. But Carlyle missed the real slant. If he had been more patient he might have seen that Whitman thought America was a big country because it lived in him. For to Whitman the people inevitably are first. That's what *Leaves of Grass* all comes to. The declaration that the people are first. Not a portion of the people. Not the saving remnant. But the everyday people. The vast overflowing populations. They are first. Matthew Arnold, who couldn't see Whitman, couldn't see this. When he was asked by an American in Philadelphia what he thought of Whitman this same Matthew Arnold raised his eyebrows and answered his questioner with a question: "Ah! what does Longfellow think of Whitman?"

In one of our chats I said to Whitman: "I not only expect to live to see you sell at fifty dollars a volume. I expect to live to see you sell at ten cents a volume." Which pleased him. "That is, you expect me to be in demand superficially among collectors and profoundly in the crowd? Good!" I have seen both things happen. And now I am seeing another

thing happen. And even assisting it to happen. My small boy wonder is having my man's confirmations. That which I looked ahead towards as a boy I look back upon as a man. Huxley said he helped rock the cradle of evolution. I can't say literally that I helped rock the cradle of *Leaves of Grass*. I came along a little too late for that. But I was on the ground before the youngster was through crawling. I have had something to do with everything that has since occurred to *Leaves of Grass*. Towards the close Whitman wrote his noble self-survey: "A backward glance o'er travell'd roads." I have lived long enough and been intimately enough associated with the Whitman pilgrimage to bring that backward glance up to date. Way buried in the fifties, when he was misrepresented by almost everybody who didn't ignore him, Whitman wrote a review of his own book in which he said: "His is to prove either the most lamentable of failures, or the most glorious of triumphs, in the known history of literature." It looks to me as if it was the most glorious of triumphs.

HORACE TRAUBEL.

CAMDEN, NEW JERSEY, U.S.A.,

January 8, 1912.

The following is a list of works by Walt Whitman:—

WORKS.—Leaves of Grass, 1855; other editions, 1856, 1860-1861, 1867, 1872, 1881, 1889, 1892, 1897; Drum-Taps, and Sequel to Drum-Taps, 1865; Poems, selected and ed. by W. M. Rossetti, 1868; new edition, 1886; selected and ed. by E. Rhys, 1886; Democratic Vistas, 1871; Passage to India, 1871; As a Strong Bird on Pinions Free, 1872; Two Rivulets, 1873; Memoranda of the War, 1875; Complete Works, 2 vols., 1876; other editions, 1882, 1888-1889, 1892; Specimen Days and Collect, 1883; November Boughs, 1888; Good-Bye My Fancy, 1891; Complete Prose Works, 1898; Notes and Fragments, ed. by R. M. Bucke, 1899; Complete Writings, ed. by R. M. Bucke, 10 vols., 1902.

LIFE AND LETTERS.—Notes on Walt Whitman, as Poet and Person, by John Burroughs, 1866, 1871; The Good Gray Poet: A Vindication, by W. D. O'Connor, 1866; by R. M. Bucke, 1883; Autobiographia, 1892; by J. Addington Symonds, 1893; In re Walt Whitman, ed. by H. L. Traubel, R. M. Bucke, and T. B. Harned, 1893; Reminiscences, by W. S. Kennedy, 1896; Calamus; Letters written during the Years 1868-1880, ed. by R. M. Bucke, 1897; The Wound Dresser: Letters written from the Hospitals in Washington, ed. by R. M. Bucke, 1898; Walt Whitman's Diary in Canada, ed. by W. S. Kennedy, 1904; With Walt Whitman in Camden, by H. L. Traubel, 1906; Life, by H. B. Binns, 1906; Life and Work, by Bliss Perry, 1906.

N.B.—*The present Copyright Edition is published by special consent of Walt Whitman's surviving executors, T. B. Harned and Horace Traubel; and it follows the text recommended by him in 1871-1873. A second volume will complete the work.*

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LEAVES OF GRASS

INSCRIPTIONS

ONE'S-SELF I SING

ONE'S-SELF I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse,
I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

AS I PONDER'D IN SILENCE

As I ponder'd in silence,
Returning upon my poems, considering, lingering long,
A Phantom arose before me with distrustful aspect,
Terrible in beauty, age, and power,
The genius of poets of old lands,
As to me directing like flame its eyes,
With finger pointing to many immortal songs,
And menacing voice, *What singest thou ?* it said,
Know'st thou not there is but one theme for ever-enduring bards ?
And that is the theme of War, the fortune of battles,
The making of perfect soldiers.

Be it so, then I answer'd,
I too haughty Shade also sing war, and a longer and greater one
than any,

*Waged in my book with varying fortune, with flight, advance and
retreat, victory deferr'd and wavering,
(Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain, at the last), the field
the world,
For life and death, for the Body and for the eternal Soul,
Lo, I too am come, chanting the chant of battles,
I above all promote brave soldiers.*

IN CABIN'D SHIPS AT SEA

In cabin'd ships at sea,
The boundless blue on every side expanding,
With whistling winds and music of the waves, the large imperious
waves,
Or some lone bark buoy'd on the dense marine,
Where joyous, full of faith, spreading white sails,
She cleaves the ether mid the sparkle and the foam of day, or
under many a star at night,
By sailors young and old haply will I, a reminiscence of the land,
be read,
In full rapport at last.

*Here are our thoughts, voyagers' thoughts,
Here not the land, firm land, alone appears, may then by them be
said,
The sky o'erarches here, we feel the undulating deck beneath our feet,
We feel the long pulsation, ebb and flow of endless motion,
The tones of unseen mystery, the vague and vast suggestions of the
briny world, the liquid-flowing syllables,
The perfume, the faint creaking of the cordage, the melancholy
rhythm,
The boundless vista and the horizon far and dim are all here,
And this is ocean's poem.*

Then falter not, O book, fulfil your destiny,
You not a reminiscence of the land alone,
You too as a lone bark cleaving the ether, purpos'd I know not
whither, yet ever full of faith,
Consort to every ship that sails, sail you!
Bear forth to them folded my love (dear mariners, for you I fold
it here in every leaf);
Speed on my book! spread your white sails, my little bark,
athwart the imperious waves,

Inscriptions

3

Chant on, sail on, bear o'er the boundless blue from me to every
sea,
This song for mariners and all their ships.

TO FOREIGN LANDS

I HEARD that you ask'd for something to prove this puzzle the
New World,
And to define America, her athletic Democracy,
Therefore I send you my poems that you behold in them what
you wanted.

✓ TO A HISTORIAN

You who celebrate bygoness,
Who have explored the outward, the surfaces of the races, the
life that has exhibited itself,
Who have treated of man as the creature of politics, aggregates,
rulers, and priests,
I, habitan of the Alleghanies, treating of him as he is in himself
in his own rights,
Pressing the pulse of the life that has seldom exhibited itself
(the great pride of man in himself),
✓ Chanter of Personality, outlining what is yet to be,
I project the history of the future.

TO THEE, OLD CAUSE

To thee, old cause!
Thou peerless, passionate, good cause,
Thou stern, remorseless, sweet idea,
Deathless throughout the ages, races, lands,
After a strange sad war, great war for thee,
(I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be
really fought, for thee),
These chants for thee, the eternal march of thee.

(A war, O soldiers, not for itself alone,
Far, far more stood silently waiting behind, now to advance in
this book.)