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Walt Whitman as a Critic of Literature

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Walt Whitman as a Critic of Literature

By MAURICE O. JOHNSON



LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

1938

PREFACE

For this study I have made use of the libraries of the University of Nebraska, the University of Chicago, and the private library of Dr. Louise Pound. It was Dr. Pound who suggested that I might enjoy working with Walt Whitman's criticism of literature; who read the manuscript; and who accepted the finished essay as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Master's degree.

There has been no full-length portrait of Whitman as a literary critic. The nearest approach is Norman Foerster's chapter on Whitman in his *American Criticism*, an argument for humanistic philosophy in literature. But Professor Foerster has made no attempt at exhausting the material, and he provides little documentation. The present study, tentative and incomplete as it is, at least makes accessible Whitman's most meaningful judgments on literature. My task has been one of organization, chiefly. In the main, Whitman has been allowed to speak for himself; and he does so in interesting and characteristic fashion.

M. O. J.

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I hate literature. I am not a literary West Pointer: I do not love a literary man as a literary man, as a minister of a pulpit loves other ministers because they are ministers: it is a means to an end, that is all there is to it: I never attribute any other significance to it.

—*Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel*

I am a hell of a critic.

—*Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel*

WALT WHITMAN AS A CRITIC OF LITERATURE

INTRODUCTION

In these pages the emphasis will be placed not upon Walt Whitman's literary theory, but upon the theory which underlay his criticism of other writers, both ancient and modern. Whitman made ample statement of his literary theory, and it has been expounded by almost everyone who has had anything to say of the poet himself, of his *Leaves of Grass*, or of his prose writings. To ascertain a theory upon which Whitman based his literary criticism one must examine his chaotic prose and scrappily recorded talk with an eye to selection and organization. One must with purpose arrange the materials at hand. In such an attempt it is necessary to venture into strange territories: to examine judgments originally written upon scraps of wallpaper or in the pages of books and magazines; to appraise almost illiterate, garbled passages; to come with delight upon bright and flashing phrases; to wander bewildered between sharp contradictions; to encounter wonderfully shrewd observations by the side of naïve speculations.

When the difficulties of organizing it have been overcome, Whitman's literary criticism stands as a body of work peculiarly revealing. It indicates much which is important for understanding Whitman and his *Leaves of Grass*; and it is in itself thoroughly interesting; sometimes amusing; sometimes profound. Whitman says that Agnes Repplier "tries for smartness at all hazards," that Henry James "is feathers to me," that Matthew Arnold "is porcelain, chinaware, hangings," that John Keats "is sweet—oh! very sweet—all sweetness," that John Milton soars "with an unwieldy motion," that Shakespeare "often falls down in his own wreckage." Whether accurate or not, Whitman's opinions on literature are seldom dull. And they are usually worth listening to. Whitman was a careful critic, in that he sought certain literary qualities in all he read, never hesitating to be stern in his disapproval if those qualities were found lacking. Moreover he sought democratic ideas in all he read, just as he sought to instill them into all he wrote. Thus, Whitman's criticism of literature was based upon a double standard: the search for artistic excellence and the search for democratic thought.

Walt Whitman's prose has evoked almost as much argument as did his poetry: it has been both enthusiastically praised and uncompromisingly disparaged. In 1884 Walker Kennedy wrote that "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" was vague, elusive, and incoherent. Whitman's plea for an original American literature was a praiseworthy one, he admitted,

but he denied that such a literature could ever come from the undisciplined pen of Walt Whitman.¹ On the other hand, John Macy has spoken superlatively of "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" as being of as great moment as "The Arte of English Poesie" or Wordsworth's prefaces.² Macy tells us of Whitman: "No reader can neglect his prose, for like all great poets he writes excellent prose."³ And yet again, Ernest Boyd insists that Walt Whitman's prose is in "graceless, banal English. . . , dog-eared from constant use."⁴ Boyd speaks harshly of the pedestrian quality of the prose, which in his estimation is mere "competent journalese" at its best, but which usually falls even below that level. In Whitman's own time, however, in 1887, the *Critic* magazine quoted from the *St. James Gazette* the opinion that Whitman's prose has none of the peculiarities of his poetry, and that the prose is in "vigorous, unaffected, picturesque English."⁵ Whitman does not belong among the masters of American prose, Louise Pound writes; and she continues: "His prose does not range widely enough, is not finished enough, and it has been overshadowed by his poetry. But it is characteristic, illuminating, and original, and, as time passes, it receives more, not less attention."⁶

Statements concerning Whitman's literary criticism are of course less frequent but no less diverse than those concerning his prose as a whole. Whitman is recorded as having referred to himself as "a hell of a critic."⁷ Other expressions of opinion have been kinder. Norman Foerster speaks of Whitman as one of the most important critics America has produced, "by virtue of a few pages of speculation on the nature of poetry."⁸ In their foreword to *Rivulets of Prose*, a volume of Whitman's critical pieces, Carolyn Wells and Alfred F. Goldsmith offer numerous apologies and deny that they are presenting the selections as prose masterpieces or with any emphasis on their literary value.⁹ Paul Elmer More has emphasized the predominance of bookish talk in Whitman's recorded conversations. This talk, says More, reveals Whitman as "a trenchant and just critic—as might be inferred from his essays on Carlyle and Burns."¹⁰ Edgar Lee

¹ "Walt Whitman," in the *North American Review*, CXXXVIII (June, 1884), pp. 591 ff.

² *The Spirit of American Literature*, New York, 1913, p. 218.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

⁴ "Walt Whitman," in *Literary Blasphemies*, New York and London, 1927, p. 190.

⁵ "Caviare to the General," in the *Critic*, VIII (Sept. 17, 1887), p. 144.

⁶ Introduction to Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days, Democratic Vistas, and Other Prose*, Garden City, 1935, p. xxix.

⁷ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 3 vols., New York, 1906-1914, Vol. I, p. 56. Hereafter, this work will be indicated by the name "Traubel."

⁸ "Walt Whitman," in *American Criticism*, Boston and New York, 1928, p. 157.

⁹ New York, 1928, p. xv.

¹⁰ "Walt Whitman," in *Shelburne Essays*, Fourth Series, Boston, 1906, p. 181.

Masters surely exaggerates when he says that as a critic of literature Whitman is not surpassed by any other American,¹¹ and his thirty pages of uninterrupted quotation from Whitman's criticism are perhaps out of proportion to the rest of his study; but the enthusiasm of Masters testifies to a growing modern interest in what Whitman said about books and authors. More stable, Emory Holloway finds that, although his early journalistic book reviews are too often hastily written or incomplete, Whitman's later literary judgments are "pleasantly stimulating."¹²

An examination of the more or less unconscious theory upon which Whitman built his literary criticism should also prove "pleasantly stimulating." It is with that theory, and its consistently employed double standard, that this paper is concerned.

¹¹ *Walt Whitman*, New York, 1937, p. 237.

¹² Introduction to *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, 2 vols., New York, 1921, I, p. lxxx.

I

BACKGROUND OF READING

Rhymes and rhymers pass away, poems distill'd from poems pass away,
 The swarms of reflectors and the polite pass, and leave ashes,
 Admirers, importers, obedient persons, make but the soil of literature,
 America justifies itself, give it time, no disguise can deceive it or conceal from
 it, it is impassive enough,
 Only toward the likes of itself will it advance to meet them,
 If its poets appear it will in due time advance to meet them, there is no fear
 of mistake,
 (The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as
 affectionately as he has absorbed it.)

—From "By Blue Ontario's Shore"

Almost all his critics and biographers express surprise that Walt Whitman's reading should have been so extensive and that his choice of books should have been so discerning. Perhaps the reason for this surprise is that Whitman, a man of little formal schooling, suggested many times that he would rather listen to the roar of the sea than listen to the most powerful epic; and he often spoke with scorn of writing which was not original, as he interpreted the word. It is a fallacy to conclude that Whitman was ignorant of the classics because he forbade any great American poet's making models of those works of literature. He wanted "no illustrations whatever from the ancients or classics, nor from the mythology, nor Egypt, Greece or Rome—nor from the royal and aristocratic institutions and forms of Europe."¹ And yet he was well acquainted with literature of many nations and many ages; and most of his reading was of a thoughtful sort.

Whitman's letters have been published; many of his notebook entries and pasted-in clippings have been preserved; we have many of his early journalistic book reviews and reports on plays; a considerable amount of his conversational comment on books and authors has been recorded; and in several autobiographical passages Whitman mentions books which pleased or offended him.

Of these various materials for study, the letters are least revealing. Whitman had correspondence with such personages as Lord Tennyson and Edward Dowden, but in his letters he remained non-committal for the most part concerning any other author than himself and any other book than his own. The bulk of his letters, written to his mother and to Peter Doyle, the horsecar conductor, are almost devoid of literary references:

¹ "Notes and Fragments," in *The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*: Camden Edition (ed. Richard M. Bucke, Thomas B. Harned, and Horace L. Traubel), 10 vols., New York and London, 1902, Vol. IX, p. 35. Hereafter, all references to Whitman's prose and poems, unless otherwise stated, are made to the *Complete Writings*.

doubtless this is because the mother and the horsecar conductor would not have been much interested in Whitman's opinions on Æschylus or Shakespeare. The letters appear to have been hastily written, with conciseness their chief object. Ernest Boyd has pointed with scorn at the choppy inconsecutive style, the ugly, unnecessary abbreviations, and the obscure syntax of the letters;² and these matters are indeed more memorable than the letters' substance.

Typical of Whitman's letters to his mother is this excerpt: "It is beautiful weather here to-day—I have got my new trousers—\$20!! only think of that!—it is lucky I wear my clothes a long time—WALT."³ When he did make mention of books, it was usually of this sort: "I sent Han a book *Lady Audley's Secret*—shall send her a letter to-day."⁴ Whitman went even so far as to profess little interest in bookish things when writing to his mother: "Heyde has just sent me a letter,—he seems to be in a very good humor—writes a lot of stuff—but *not* about domestic affairs this time—on 'poetry' & 'Criticism' &c. &c.—of no interest at all to me. . . ."⁵ This attitude is all the more surprising when one knows that the letter from which this excerpt was taken was written more than ten years after the first appearance of *Leaves of Grass*, and at a time when the notebooks showed deep concern with both "poetry" and "Criticism."

The notebooks give the lie to any affectation of disinterestedness which might please a mother who would not wish to think of her son as putting on airs. The whole concern in the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* had been with the nature of poetry, and this concern is to be found abundantly in the notes. There are entries such as: "The work of the poet is as deep as the astronomer's or engineer's, and his art is also as far-fetched."⁶ Others are more personal: "No, I do not choose to write a poem on a lady's sorrow, like Catullus—or on a parrot, like Ovid—nor love-songs like Anacreon. . . ."⁷ Then there are entries which speak for Whitman's interest in verse-forms. Such an entry is this: "Trochee —(from a Greek word signifying to run). A poetic foot consisting of two syllables, the first long, the second short (I suppose such as this): 'Would you/ gaze up/ on the/ waters/ of the/ lordly/ Missis/ sippi.'"⁸

GREEK AND ROMAN LITERATURE

It is just as invalid to assume that Whitman knew nothing of the classic forms of poetry as it is to assume that he knew nothing of metrics. Perhaps

² *Op. cit.*, p. 192.

³ "Letters Written by Walt Whitman to His Mother," VIII, p. 187.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 10-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, X, p. 6.

he never fully mastered either, but he knew more than a little about metrics, and he knew more than a little about classical literature. As a youth Whitman read much of the literature of ancient Greece. In "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads" he tells of reading translations of Homer, Æschylus, and Sophocles while on jaunts into the country.⁹ But Whitman did not exhaust his interest in these authors in his youthful days. Horace Traubel, who painstakingly recorded all that Whitman said in the last years of his life, wrote that the poet was "very familiar with the formal classics in a general way."¹⁰ In one day's conversation Whitman mentioned Aristophanes, Plato, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Euripides, Seneca, and the *Bhagavadgita*; he advised Traubel to read "in Buddhist and Confucian books," saying: "Tackle them anyhow, anyhow: they will reward you."¹¹

Homer was Whitman's favorite among the Greeks. "I envy Homer," Whitman rather naïvely told an interviewer. "I envy him that first strong impression of things. To him it was a new heaven and a new earth. Every poet since Homer has been at a disadvantage, has had to see and feel and describe what has all been seen and described before."¹² Whitman thought that the *Iliad* and its author were unmistakably of Asiatic genesis;¹³ and he thought that, no matter what its genesis might be, Homer's work embodied the ruthless military prowess and consecrated, "god-descended" dynastic houses of Greece.¹⁴ Homer, like Shakespeare, did his work "divinely" in Whitman's estimation. He sang of great men and their wars, "throwing together in perfect proportion a perfect poem, noisy, muscular, manly amative, an amusement and excitement, a sustenance and health."¹⁵ The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* seemed excellent to Whitman, in that they eulogized courage and dependence upon self; but they did not fit into his Utopian picture of an ideal democracy.¹⁶ After all, Homer had written of god-like kings in his epic poetry; and grand as the poetry might be, god-like kings were not acceptable in democratic America. This was the fault Whitman had to find with almost all works of literature and their authors. He found it necessary to praise them on the one hand and to decry them on the other.

⁹ III, p. 55.

¹⁰ Traubel, II, p. 332.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Anonymous, "An Impression of Walt Whitman," in the Contributors' Club, *Atlantic Monthly*, LXIX (June, 1892), p. 852.

¹³ "The Bible as Poetry," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 104.

¹⁴ "A Thought on Shakspeare," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 124.

¹⁵ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 123.

¹⁶ "Robert Burns as Poet and Person," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 136.

Of all the dramas of the world, Whitman considered those of Æschylus the most moving; and he gave preference to Æschylus over Shakespeare on this score. He was exaggerating for the occasion when he said that such tragedies as the death of Lincoln in America seemed more fateful and heroic to him than the Trojan wars. He was being patriotic when he said that America afforded men "prouder than Agamemnon," as "hardy as Ulysses," who might expire with "deaths more pitiful than Priam's."¹⁷ At least he did feel that it was upon such "grand deaths" as Lincoln's that great tragedies were based. Among Whitman's notes there are certain paragraphs which differentiate Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. From his reading of their works, or from the suggestions of commentators, Whitman came to speak of Æschylus's characters as "shadowy, vast, majestic, dreamy—moving with haughty grandeur, strength and will," of Sophocles's "great poetic beauty," and of the "love and compassion" and "scientific refinement" of Euripides.¹⁸ The notes concerning Aristophanes are more succinct. Whitman mentions that a small proportion of the Greek comedian's plays remain, and that he lampooned his contemporary, Socrates, in *The Clouds*.¹⁹ And in the notes one reads of other Greeks: "Plato treated philosophy as an art—Aristotle as a science."²⁰

Whitman exhibits less enthusiasm for Roman writers than for Greek. In 1859 he commented on the Riley translation of Terence's comedies in the Brooklyn *Daily Times*.²¹ The volume is recommended to the public, but there is no mention of the reviewer's opinion of the quality of the plays. Virgil was of some interest to Whitman, and during October and November of 1857 he read the *Bucolics*, *Eclogues*, and the *Æneid*.²² He found great merit in the lesser poems, but he had a rather valid criticism to make of Virgil's longer work:

Of the *Æneid*, it seems to me well enough except for the fatal defect of being an imitation, a second-hand article—Homer's *Iliad* being the model. It is too plain an attempt to get up a case, by an expert hand, for Roman origin and for the divine participation in old Italian affairs just as much as in those of besieged Troy and mythical Greece. The death of Turnus, at the conclusion, seems to me a total failure as a piece of invention, description, etc.²³

"A very choice little Epictetus" was among the books, twine, jars of Cologne water, and yellow chrysanthemums Whitman late in life describes

¹⁷ "Death of Abraham Lincoln," in *Collect*, V. p. 255.

¹⁸ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, X, p. 16.

²¹ *I Sit and Look Out* (ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwarz), New York, 1932, pp. 68-69.

²² "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 100.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

as being in his study.²⁴ Whitman found the reading of Epictetus as pleasurable at seventy as he had at sixteen: "He belongs with the best—the best of great teachers—is a universe in himself. He sets me free in a flood of light—of life, of vista."²⁵ In addition to his comments on Terence, Virgil, and Epictetus, Whitman made several incidental mentions of Juvenal and Lucretius: all in his notes. But he found no Homer or Æschylus among the Romans.

BIBLICAL LITERATURE

An entire essay was devoted by Whitman to the subject of the Bible as poetry in *November Boughs*. In comparison with the great epics of the world, he finds the "spinal supports" of the Bible simple and meagre.²⁶ Yet he concludes that no poet will ever eclipse the power of the Bible: he feels certain that even in a time when the book will have no religious significance, it will still be just as much read for its beautiful poetry.²⁷ Whitman's attention was not limited by any means to the Christian or Hebrew religions, although there are about 160 Biblical references in his works.²⁸ A long entry in the notes is concerned with such various names as Zoroaster, Apollo, Confucius, Kneph, Zeus, Rhadamanthus, and Buddha. The entry begins: Religions—Gods. Supposed to be about one thousand religions. Names of Gods, sects and prophets: Phtah, Isis, Osiris, Kneph, Chiven (god of desolation and destruction), Mahomet with a green banner, a sabre, a bandage and a crescent, priests: imaums, mollahs, muftis, dervish, santon with dishevelled hair."²⁹ The effect, at length, is that of *Roget's Thesaurus*.

Anyone who has read in *Leaves of Grass* or *Democratic Vistas* of Whitman's demand for an American literature to supersede all literatures of the past is surprised to discover so much attention given to ancient works. It is surprising, too, to find pleas, in Whitman's writings, for the appreciation of "the tiny ships we call Old and New Testament, Homer, Eschylus, Plato, Juvenal, &c. Precious minims!"³⁰ Whitman was able to approve on one basis and condemn on another, when treating of a single work or of many.

ARABIAN NIGHTS

For a time during his early adolescence Whitman worked in a lawyer's office, and one of his employers gave him a subscription to a circulating

²⁴ *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VII, p. 61.

²⁵ Traubel, II, p. 71.

²⁶ "The Bible as Poetry," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 105.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁸ Gay W. Allen, "Biblical Echoes in Whitman's Work," in *American Literature*, VI (May, 1934), pp. 302-315.

²⁹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 211-214.

³⁰ "Democratic Vistas," in *Collect*, V, p. 117.

library. He calls this one of the signal events of his life up to that time; and the first book he chose to read was the *Arabian Nights*—"an amazing treat."³¹ Years later he wrote of those romantic tales in his newspaper book-column. The pages of a new edition of the *Arabian Nights*, he says,

bring up the loving and greedy eagerness with which boyhood read these tales—a love surpassing the love for puddings and confectionery!—What a gorgeous world to revel in withal!—the turbans and mirrors, the gemmed garments, the beautiful women, the slaves, the cutting off of heads, the magic changes, the dwarfs, the spiteful old sorcerers, the disguises, the dark caves, the cobblers transformed into princess—O, it was indeed gorgeous! Then that caliph, always a-going through the by streets of the city at night—what on earth could be more novel and interesting? . . . Certain moralists there are, of the vinegar complexion, who would forbid all works of fiction to the young. Yet such is always a foolish interdict. The minds of boys and girls warm and expand—become rich and generous—under the aspect of such florid pages as those of "Robinson Crusoe," "The Arabian Nights," "Marco Polo," and the like.³²

Here Whitman's enthusiasm is so wholly charming as to be infectious: his pleasure in the tales is of such intensity that he forgets to remind us that American literature must eclipse even the most glittering fables of the ancient world.

DANTE AND CERVANTES

In *Democratic Vistas* Whitman speaks of Dante, "stalking with lion form, nothing but fibre, not a grain of superfluous flesh."³³ This striking description of Dante's style speaks for Whitman's admiration for the Italian poet and his work. Although Whitman's poetry is frequently tangled and florid, he sought after simplicity, and he respected that quality in the writing of others. He read Dante's *Inferno* in the spring of 1859, and his first impression was that the work was wonderfully free from unnecessary elaboration.³⁴ Dante, Whitman wrote in his notes, presents his narrative in the manner of a New England "blue light" minister, bent upon telling a story as pointedly and as convincingly as possible. It seemed no wonder to Whitman that the people of the Middle Ages thought Dante might actually have descended into the depths of Hell to see what he so vividly described.³⁵ In the virtue of economy of words Whitman thought it possible that Dante might never be equaled.³⁶ Of an Italian poet three centuries later than Dante, Whitman made voluminous notes concerning his career and peculiar appearance; but there is no evidence of Whitman's personal

³¹ *Specimen Days*, IV, pp. 17-18.

³² *The Gathering of the Forces* (ed. Cleveland Rodgers and John Black), 2 vols., New York and London, 1920, Vol. II, pp. 306-307.

³³ V, p. 118.

³⁴ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 91-92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 92-93.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

acquaintance with any of the works of Tasso which he enumerates.³⁷ By the time Whitman wrote "British Literature" he was willing to accept for America certain ancient works which he thought adjusted themselves to the New World through their compliance with some of the democratic requirements. Almost no British work was in this category. Whitman mentioned the Bible, Homer's works, the *Cid*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, as being among the acceptable relics.³⁸ Like the notes on Tasso, however, the numerous paragraphs concerning the Spanish Cervantes are almost entirely biographical. Some of the notes on Cervantes are quoted by Whitman from commentators' books, but perhaps he was expressing his own opinion when he described the Don as a "crazed, gaunt, dignified knight" and Sancho Panza as a "round, selfish, amusing squire."³⁹

GERMAN LITERATURE

Whitman's interest in the literature of Germany was possibly influenced by Carlyle; and Norman Foerster has suggested that it might have been influenced also by the attraction New Englanders, like Emerson, felt for German philosophy and *belles-lettres*.⁴⁰ Among Whitman's notes, and among his articles meant for publication, there are comments on the ancient German myths, the *Nibelungenlied*, Goethe, Hegel, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Lessing, Schlegel, Richter, Schiller, Niebuhr, and Heine. He calls the *Nibelungenlied* objective, like the *Iliad*; and he characterizes Siegfried as heroic, Chriemhild as beautiful, Brunhilde as relentless, Hagen as brave.⁴¹ In the notes he cites and seems to accept the opinions of critics who hold that the *Nibelungenlied* was the work of numerous persons, being a collection, merely, of ballads belonging to several ages.⁴²

One of the most mature of Whitman's journalistic book reviews is that concerning the translation of Goethe's autobiography. He quotes four long extracts from the book and comments on it at length, saying: "This Life of Goethe—this famous *Wahrheit und Dichtung*—seems shaped with the intention of rendering a history of soul and body's growth. . . . It goes right on, stating what it has to say, exuberant in its seeds of reflection and inference—though it doesn't reflect or draw the inference."⁴³ Whitman wanted to find, in a prose autobiography, the same qualities he was seeking to put into his own poetical autobiography; and Goethe's book pleased him as far as it went. Ten years after his review appeared in the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-166.

³⁸ "British Literature," in *Collect*, V, p. 276.

³⁹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 64-69.

⁴⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 163-164.

⁴¹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 83.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁴³ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 140.

Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, Whitman wrote down some of his reflections on Goethe in his notebook. There he gives Carlyle credit for most of his critical impressions of the German poet, and when he begins to express his personal views he inserts a parenthetical "Had I not better read more of Goethe before giving an opinion?"⁴⁴ He told Horace Traubel some decades later that Goethe's purpose in writing seemed to him to be that of centering all life in himself, of making the universal personified in a single life. "I have read *Faust*," he told Traubel; "looked into it—not with care, not studiously, yet intelligently, in my own way. . . . Goethe was for beauty, erudition, knowledge—first of all for culture."⁴⁵ Goethe seemed to him a profound reviewer of all experience, the first great critic who stood aside from all men to judge them. But is Goethe entirely suited to American needs? No, Whitman says; he is not: and he points to the undemocratic Goethean philosophy which places the artist or poet in a world removed from that of common life. Goethe has deserved the acclaim which followed him to the petty, beribboned court of Weimer; but America glances upon him and his kind with indifference, for "our road is our own."⁴⁶

Whitman made page after page of notes on the German metaphysicians, in preparation for speeches he never gave. He had obviously weighed the German philosophy carefully in his mind. To Whitman, Kant's writings seemed in their final analysis to be an attempt to state the philosophy of the understanding—an attempt of undescrivable value, "but which after all is said, paradoxically 'decides little or nothing.'"⁴⁷ Fichte's philosophy, growing from Kant's, took subjectiveness as its all-explaining principle, Whitman wrote; and Schelling's philosophy differed from Fichte's in that it was more emphatically objective; Leibnitz's favorite themes were natural theology and the moral government of the world.⁴⁸ Only Hegel proved "fit for America," however; he alone was sufficiently all-embracing. Whitman exalted Hegel to the place of "Humanity's chief teacher and the chiefest teacher of my mind and soul."⁴⁹ This is extravagant indeed. And the two-line poem "Roaming in Thought" is subtitled "After reading HEGEL":

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily
hastening toward immortality,
And the vast all that is call'd Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become
lost and dead.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 110-111.

⁴⁵ Traubel, III, p. 159.

⁴⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 114.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-184.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-172.

⁵⁰ In *Leaves of Grass*, II, p. 35.

Of the Jewish Lessing, Whitman wrote in his notes that he was the Emerson of Voltaire's time, and that he had prepared the way for Goethe and Schiller.⁵¹ Concerning Schiller, Whitman seems to have been most impressed by the fact that his last years were spent in pain.⁵² Schlegel was a man of prejudices in Whitman's opinion: he undemocratically set off the great masters from the crowds of common persons. But Schlegel's prejudices were those of "a zealous, newly converted Roman Catholic."⁵³ Richter is characterized by Whitman as "a thoroughly irregular genius," a man whose work seems "unnatural and lurid, judged by the calm and wholesome models." Whitman made Richter responsible for introducing the soft and sentimental tales which were popular in England and America in the period that the virile *Leaves of Grass* was shouting to be heard. Niebuhr is mentioned in the notes with merely biographical information. Shortly after Heine's death, in 1856, Whitman wrote of his poems, attributing to them a strange assortment of qualities: they were "fanciful and vivacious, rather ironical and melancholy with a dash of poetical craziness."⁵⁴ An then, more than three decades later, Whitman cried out to his friend Traubel: "Heine! Oh, how great! The more you stop to look, to examine, the deeper seem the roots, the broader and higher the umbrage."⁵⁵

Whitman's interest in German literature was surely not a superficial one. He wanted to get at the essential meaning of each of the German writers' thought and to accept or reject what he found there as being suitable or unsuitable for America. Whitman read and talked about the Continental writers of his day; in his notes is this entry which illustrates his curiosity about the Germans: "Conversation with Mr. Held about German poets—his talk—as follows—: Freiligrath a democrat—impulsive when he meets any one, or as he walks the road, or at a meal etc. etc. he composes—he improvises easily. Ruckert, Uhland, Kinkel, Hoffman, Heine, Xavier."⁵⁶

RUSSIAN LITERATURE

There is only incidental reference to Russian writers in Whitman's criticism which has been preserved. He knew of Ivan Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy. "O that the United States, especially the West," he wrote, "could have had a good long visit and explorative jaunt, from the noble

⁵¹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 155.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ Traubel, I, p. 461.

⁵⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 117.

and melancholy Tourguéneff, before he died. . . ." ⁵⁷ When he had attempted to read books by Tolstoy, Whitman said in conversation that he was offended by the asceticism, the introspection, in the works. ⁵⁸ "Tolstoy's questionings: how shall we save men? sin, worry, self-examination—all that: I have never had them. . . ." ⁵⁹

FRENCH LITERATURE

Norman Foerster states that Whitman's knowledge of French literature was mostly derived from hearsay, and that he had no more profound judgment to pronounce on modern French literature than that it had the virtue of not being Puritanical. ⁶⁰ Whitman was, it is true, concerned with defending the subject matter of Émile Zola's books rather than with commenting on their literary worth. But there is evidence that Whitman had read with care the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau, George Sand, and Victor Hugo, at least. If Whitman knew of French writing only by hearsay he could hardly have ranted on in so convincing a fashion for the pleasure of friends in his sick-room:

The French have a wonderful knack in certain directions—for extreme finesse, often—why, it is so good sometimes it seems almost natural. Here is a thing from Joubert: "Where there is no delicacy there is no literature." How much there is in that! Don't you think so? Oh! how subtle! You feel it—it gets into you and spreads about. . . . The French writer [Joubert] contradicts himself on several points. Here is another of his magnificent phrases: "Virility is a fine thing, but the ideal is finer." I have long thought of literature by just such light as this man throws on it. The easy touch of French writers does not necessarily come from frivolity, insincerity: Arnold was wrong if he ever thought that. There are incomparable things in Hugo—in some others of the French literature: immense, immortal things: things that belong to every day of all time. ⁶¹

And in the notes there is even mention of the old troubadours, "fit for lords and ladies in saloons [sic]," and there is mention of the more democratic trouvères; ⁶² but Whitman had probably never read any of the French poetry of the Middle Ages. His opinion of the plays of Racine and Corneille was that they moved on stilts, so faithfully did they follow the old Greek models. All the talk in these plays, he pointed out, was in heroics. The French classical works were to be differentiated from the Greek in that one was a native and normal growth, while the other was mere emulation of spontaneous art. In November of 1855, the year *Leaves*

⁵⁷ "Our Eminent Visitors," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 103.

⁵⁸ Traubel, I, p. 58.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, III, p. 494.

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁶¹ Traubel, I, p. 465.

⁶² "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 90.

of *Grass* was first published, Whitman saw Racine's Biblical *Athalie* at the Academy of Music.⁶³

The note on La Fontaine speaks of the Frenchman's good family, of the property he inherited, and of his Aesop-like fables in verse; but the note does not testify to Whitman's even having seen the fables.⁶⁴ Although Whitman quotes from Voltaire's criticism of Shakespeare, and although he mentions the *Philosophical Dictionary*,⁶⁵ the evidence of acquaintance with the works of the author of *Candide* is scant. "Now, there was a great man, too," Whitman said of Voltaire; "an emancipator—a shining spiritual light: a miraculous man whose ridicule did more for justice than the battles of armies."⁶⁶ Much more complete is the treatment of Rousseau. Bliss Perry places great stress upon the theory that Rousseau's shadow is to be seen in all Whitman's work. Indeed, Whitman's lecture to the Brooklyn Art Union in 1851 dwelt upon Rousseau as one of the most genuine of artists, and as one who made the mistake of subordinating art to Nature.⁶⁷ "Whitman read Rousseau early," Perry says, "and planned a poem about him, although he never wrote it."⁶⁸ And Perry proceeds to draw several interesting parallels: both Whitman and Rousseau were sentimentalists, both were rhapsodists, each had a mystic's mind which could on occasion arrive at vital truths, both were earnest, both were self-conscious and suspicious of the civilized world. These may be honest parallels, and Whitman obviously did resemble Rousseau in many ways; but Whitman wrote in his notes that an American poet may read Rousseau but never imitate him.⁶⁹ Rousseau did not pass the test of the double standard in Whitman's estimation. Admiration of Rousseau is evident; but, surprisingly enough, Whitman found the *Confessions* distasteful. He called it "this frivolous, chattering, repulsive book," admitting, however, that there is a "great lesson in its pages."⁷⁰ Whitman reviewed the poet Lamartine's *History of the Girondists* as being so excessively dramatic that it defeated the purposes of history.⁷¹ The criticism of Michelet's *History of France* accords the author with credit for taking pains to make his the most complete and understandable history of France.⁷²

A number of the book reviews Whitman wrote for the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* were based upon the works of Dumas. In 1846 he wrote concerning

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁶⁶ Traubel, II, p. 16.

⁶⁷ *Walt Whitman: His Life and Work*, Boston, 1906, American Men of Letters Series, p. 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁶⁹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 80.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷¹ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 133.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

the *Count of Monte Cristo*, which he admitted not having read, although he spoke of "a pleasant gracefulness and vivacity" in the earlier works of Dumas with which he was more familiar.⁷³ The next year he reviewed at least three novels by Dumas: *Diana of Meridor*, *Sylvandire*, and *Memoirs of a Physician*. He speaks of each as being of great interest. *Memoirs of a Physician* is called "a wild, hurrying, exciting affair."⁷⁴ Whitman was not carried away by Dumas' swashbuckling cloak-and-sword romances; more to his liking were the novels of George Sand. In "Good-bye, My Fancy," Whitman speaks of having George Sand's *Consuelo* near him in his study;⁷⁵ and in his notes there is a quotation from that work which evidently pleased him. The quotation ends with the sentence: "It was the soul of the whole humanity that spoke to you through mine";⁷⁶ this is of course the sentiment which is omnipresent in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman reviewed George Sand's *The Journeyman* for his newspaper when he was still in his twenties. He spoke of her talent with praise, and he nominated her as "one of a class much needed in the world—needed lest the world stagnate in wrongs merely from precedent."⁷⁷ Whitman felt that Victor Hugo, despite his democratic humanitarianism, was not friendly toward America;⁷⁸ and he also felt that Hugo lacked certain qualities necessary in a good artist. In an interview, Whitman said of Hugo that it was a pity he was "not truer and less bombastic."⁷⁹ The author of *Leaves of Grass* took Hugo again to task for his lack of restraint when he wrote that Hugo "runs off into the craziest, and sometimes (in his novels) most ridiculous and flatulent, literary botches and excesses, and by almost entire want to prudence allows them to stand."⁸⁰ Even against such faults, Whitman felt that the fine passion of Hugo's poetry saved it from the plight of the novels.⁸¹ George Sand's works, again, were much more to Whitman's liking. Her simple, yet profound, stories were refreshing to him, and were a healthy stimulus: she did not seek after Hugo's excesses.

SCANDINAVIAN LITERATURE

Whitman seems to have been much impressed by the work of Frederika Bremer, a Swedish novelist called by John Macy "as honest as George Sand but much less interesting." Her novels were composed of tempered senti-

⁷³ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, pp. 299-300.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300, and *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 132.

⁷⁵ "Good-Bye, My Fancy," VII, p. 61.

⁷⁶ Quoted in "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 19.

⁷⁷ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 135.

⁷⁸ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 211.

⁷⁹ Anonymous, "An Impression of Walt Whitman," in the Contributors' Club, *Atlantic Monthly*, LXIX (June, 1892), p. 853.

⁸⁰ "A Christmas Garland," in *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, II, p. 53.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

mentality, and Whitman speaks of them as both profitable and charming—especially when contrasted with the “affected sentimentality of Bulwer and the verbose weakness of [G. P. R.] James.”⁸² Whitman excused Miss Bremer’s tendency toward transcendentalism, for indeed that tendency was his own as well. The first book to place in children’s hands, after the New Testament, Whitman wrote in a lamentable moment, should be Frederika Bremer’s collected novels: they would be sure to “melt and refine the human character.”⁸³ Of another Scandinavian woman novelist, Emelie Flygare-Carlen, Whitman wrote that her work was much like that of Miss Bremer, wholly suited to reading aloud to one’s mother; and her *Temptation of Wealth* and *The Rose of the Island*, now long forgotten, impressed him satisfactorily as being of the charming class of novels which diffuse sweetness and render no taste morbid.⁸⁴ In commenting on Whitman’s interest in Swedish writers, Adolph B. Benson has pointed out that Miss Flygare-Carlen’s style and technique are by no means like Miss Bremer’s, and that her work is far from free from the sensationalism which Whitman could not, or did not wish to, see there.⁸⁵ Whitman wrote that Swedenborg, the Scandinavian philosopher and theologian of the eighteenth century, was an innovator who escaped the usual fate of innovators.⁸⁶ Consistently and almost pitifully stumbling in his judgments on Scandinavian writers, praising that which was mediocre, Whitman went on to deny praise to that which was excellent. He had little good to say of Ibsen. After reading *Pillars of Society*, Whitman remarked that it seemed to be “too prettily done”;⁸⁷ and he offered the book to Traubel:

“Take it—take it for a long while, take it for a long while. . . . Take it for good if you can make good out of it.”

“You don’t seem to take any great shine to Ibsen,” Traubel said.

“No—it seems that way: and yet I realize him to be an immense power: he is dynamic, vital: I do not seem to find the exact place for him.”

“But you think he has a place?” Traubel asked.

“Do you?”

“Sure—don’t you?”

“Sure—sure—but where is it?”⁸⁸

⁸² *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 268.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁸⁴ “Whitman’s Interest in Swedish Writers,” in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XXXI (July, 1932), p. 334.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ “Notes and Fragments,” IX, p. 80.

⁸⁷ Traubel, II, p. 371.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Twenty-two pages of Whitman's "Notes and Fragments," in the Camden Edition of his works, are given over to his series of notes on English history up to 647 A.D.⁸⁹ These notes were written shortly after *Leaves of Grass* was first published, and cover the unused fly-title pages of the book. Among these notes is mention of Ossian,⁹⁰ whom Whitman seems to regard as an authentic ancient third-century poet, son of Fingal. Whitman had declaimed Macpherson's *Poems of Ossian* by the seashore as a youth, and he read the poems throughout his life.⁹¹ Among Whitman's notes concerning the Ossianic poetry are these sentences: "Ossian must not be despised. . . . How misty, how windy, how full of diffused, only half-meaning words! How curious a study! (Don't fall into the Ossianic, *by any chance*)."⁹² It is difficult not to apply Whitman's description to his own poetry, for it was often Ossianic. But he told Traubel: "I don't think Ossian would satisfy the modern young man—the radical—the new man with the new spirit."⁹³ And it was precisely this new young man to whom Whitman himself did appeal.

In "A Thought on Shakspeare," Whitman speaks of the poems of Chaucer as being among the most distinctive ever written, as being among those poems "most permanently rooted and with heartiest reason for being."⁹⁴ On the page-margins of a magazine article on Chaucer, Whitman wrote biographical notes which seem to have been meant for lecture use.⁹⁵ Chaucer was to Whitman "a strong wholesome man with large perceptive organs," and with almost as much humor as Shakespeare. But Whitman denies that Chaucer might be as great a poet as Shakespeare: he was easily as great as Spenser and Milton in Whitman's estimation, and he was on a plane with Dante—"but wait awhile before putting him with Homer or Shakespeare."⁹⁶ Gower is mentioned simply as Chaucer's friend.⁹⁷ Whitman does not display much evidence of offense at Spenser's adulation of a Queen, in all the un-democratic stanzas of a flattering poem; throughout the length of the *Faerie Queene* the single object of the author, in Whitman's opinion, was to present a gentleman "of noble person in virtuous, brave and gentle discipline."⁹⁸ Whitman speaks of Spenser as a highly

⁸⁹ "Notes and Fragments," X, pp. 39-60.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁹¹ Bliss Perry, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

⁹² "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 95.

⁹³ Traubel, II, p. 18.

⁹⁴ In *November Boughs*, VI, p. 124.

⁹⁵ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 227 (note).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, X, p. 15.

contemplative person, a lover of princely themes, "haunted by a morbid refinement of beauty—beauty three times washed and strained."⁹⁹ The implication is that such delicate beauty would become sickly and die in the wilds of Whitman's America.

To a certain point Whitman praised Shakespeare almost unreservedly. He called the Shakespearean adaptations the "translation of much beef and bread into vital human body and soul." Whitman's references to the works of Shakespeare are second in number only to Biblical ones. Indeed, some twenty-three of the plays are quoted from by Whitman, and, in all, 155 informal quotations are readily identifiable.¹⁰⁰ But Whitman's hopeful attempt to make Shakespeare fit into American democratic molds proved unsuccessful, albeit interesting. Whitman's criticism of Shakespeare and his works is dealt with in detail in a separate chapter of the present study.

It is unlikely that Whitman had read anything by Ben Jonson. He mentions him only in connection with Shakespeare, speaks of the "wit combats" Fuller records, and is pleased to note that the classical-minded Elizabethan was a "working bricklayer."¹⁰¹ Bunyan's allegorical tale of Christian was probably enjoyed by Whitman, and he was familiar with Macaulay's essay on Bunyan.¹⁰² An English seventeenth-century writer of prose, Isaac Walton, is praised by Whitman for his "charming simplicity, ingrained with natural elegance";¹⁰³ and a seventeenth-century writer of poetry, Edmund Waller, is damned as a "time-server, fawner, place-hunter."¹⁰⁴

Milton provided little pleasure for the author of *Leaves of Grass*. A new edition of Milton's poems afforded him with occasion to write a trenchant newspaper article, in which he professed liking neither the gilt morocco edition nor the poems in the edition: both, he pointed out, vulgarly *commanded* attention.¹⁰⁵ John Milton's poems were too often of gilt morocco to please Whitman's taste. Basing his poems upon themes "heaven high and profoundly deep," Milton was much too conscious of the gigantic proportions of his work.¹⁰⁶ On the page-margins of a magazine Whitman wrote in 1848 that *Paradise Lost* was merely nonsense to him.¹⁰⁷ He did

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, IX, p. 79.

¹⁰⁰ Richard Clarence Harrison, "Walt Whitman and Shakespeare," in *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, XLIV, (Dec., 1929), p. 1213. This uncompleted dissertation does not treat of Whitman's criticism of Shakespeare as such, but proposes to show how Whitman carried a great body of Shakespeare's poetry over into his work and how his conception of Shakespeare was a motivating force in all he wrote.

¹⁰¹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 89.

¹⁰² Norman Foerster, *op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹⁰³ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 137.

¹⁰⁴ "Notes and Fragments," X, p. 12.

¹⁰⁵ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 287.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁰⁷ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 97.

not make this bold statement without glossing it: the harsh judgment was based upon the fact that *Paradise Lost* "takes themes entirely out of human cognizance and treats them as Homer treats his siege and opposing armies and their disputes. The Iliad stands perfectly well and very beautiful for what it is, an appropriate blooming of the poet and what he had received and what he believed and what to him was so in a certain sense." The *Iliad* had purpose, Whitman thinks, in that it gathered floating myths and shaped them beautifully together; there was no such need for Milton's poem. Then, too, Whitman adds that there is too much sectarian theology in *Paradise Lost*. What, he pointedly asks, would that poem mean to Asians or Africans who did not understand Biblical traditions and their intricacies?¹⁰⁸ The truly democratic poet, the poet for America, would of course write of common experiences for all mankind. Even in 1888 Whitman said to Traubel: "[Milton] seems to me like a bird—soaring yet over-weighted: dragged down, as if burdened—too greatly burdened: a lamb in its beak: its flight not graceful, powerful, beautiful, satisfying, like the gulls we see over the Delaware in mid-winter." And he said: "I could never go Milton: he is turgid, heavy, over-stately. . . . It is true, Milton soars, but with a dull unwieldy motion."¹⁰⁹

In Whitman's notes Dryden is properly mentioned as a satirist, the founder of the school of poetry which was celebrated by Pope.¹¹⁰ Whitman deplores that Dryden should have sung at such great length in the "inflated, distressingly classical style of those times."¹¹¹ The chief work of James Thomson, *The Seasons*, served as subject for one of Whitman's newspaper literary articles. He speaks of it perhaps too superlatively, as being the best descriptive poetry within his knowledge.¹¹²

Among the books reviewed by Whitman for the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* was Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson. In that work, Whitman wrote, there are the "fiery-breathed" Burke, the "poverty-pressed" Goldsmith, the "massive abstracted" Gibbon, and Sheridan with his "dazzling wild genius." But for Whitman the picture was dominated by a "sour, malicious, egotistical man"—Doctor Johnson himself.¹¹³ Above all else, Whitman disliked the anti-democratic spirit which he felt was in everything Johnson did or said. Whitman piled his defamation high, calling Johnson a sycophant, a fawner, a tyrant, a didactic, an eccentric with "vile low nature" and a bad soul.¹¹⁴ In the notes of Whitman one finds another

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁹ Traubel, III, p. 185.

¹¹⁰ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 86.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹¹² *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 301.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-282.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 282-283.

categorizing of Johnson's unpleasant qualities: there he is called "physically queer, scrofulous, purblind, crotchety, alimotive."¹¹⁵ The Doctor might be most thoroughly disposed of with the title of "burly aristocrat," indicating his enmity for all humanitarian democracy which Whitman loved.¹¹⁶ After reading of all this abuse one is not a little startled to know that on a Sunday in April, 1888, Whitman borrowed Boswell's *Johnson* from Thomas Harned, saying: "I have never so far read it."¹¹⁷ When he had read the book, however, his opinion did not waver; and he said loftily to Traubel:

Dr. Johnson, it is plain, is not our man: he belongs to a past age: comes to us with the odor, the sound, the taste, the appearance, of great libraries, musty books, old manuscripts. My chief complaint against Johnson is that he lacks veracity: lacks the veracity which we have the right to exact from any man—most of all from the writer, the recorder, the poet. Johnson never cared as much to meet men—learn from men—as to drive them down roughshod—to prod them out—to crush them against the wall. He is a type of the smart man—a ponderous type: of the man who says the first thing that comes—who does anything to score a point—who is not concerned for truth but to make an impression.¹¹⁸

Goldsmith, casually mentioned in the early review of Boswell's book, is the subject of numerous lines of informal biographical notes;¹¹⁹ and Whitman once said late in life that he had read *The Vicar of Wakefield* more times than he could count.¹²⁰ The poet Cowper's whole career was succinctly dealt with when Whitman wrote at the head of a newspaper article concerning him: "Cowper 1731-1800—an enuycied poet."¹²¹ He was un-American to extreme in his teaching blind loyalty to the "divine right of kings."¹²² Blake was an important poet but not one to be imitated.¹²³ On a review of the *Prelude*, Whitman's marginal note reads: "So it seems Wordsworth made a 'good thing' from the start out of his poetry. Legacies! a fat office! pensions from the crown!"¹²⁴ Whitman felt that there was a most un-American aloofness in Wordsworth,¹²⁵ and it was not to his credit, certainly, that he had moved with Southey and Coleridge from youthful rebelliousness and subscription to the rights of man, to a quiet obedience and dependence upon kingcraft.

¹¹⁵ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 124.

¹¹⁶ " 'Home' Literature," in *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 243.

¹¹⁷ Traubel, I, p. 38.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹¹⁹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 118-119.

¹²⁰ Traubel, I, p. 64.

¹²¹ "Notes and Fragments," X, p. 64.

¹²² " 'Home' Literature," in *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 243.

¹²³ Traubel, II, p. 99.

¹²⁴ "Notes and Fragments," X, p. 66.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, IX, p. 98.

Coleridge was by no means to be so greatly frowned upon as Wordsworth, however. In *Specimen Days* Whitman quotes admiringly from Coleridge's "Work Without Hope,"¹²⁶ and Whitman was pleased that Coleridge had been among the several English writers, including Arnold, Dickens, Thackeray, Froude, and Wilde, who had come to visit the United States.¹²⁷ In his newspaper book-column he praised Coleridge as "that legitimate child of imagery, and true poet."¹²⁸ Later in the same year, when he was near the end of his twenties, Whitman reviewed the two-volume edition of *Biographia Literaria*, that rich book which sums up a whole movement of poetry and philosophy. "*Biographia Literaria*," Whitman wrote, "will reach the deepest thoughts of the 'choice few' among readers who can appreciate the fascinating subtleties of Coleridge. . . . In some respects we think this man stands above all poets: he was passionate without being morbid—he was like Adam in Paradise, and almost as free from artificiality."¹²⁹ Coleridge's painstaking versification is so far removed from the freedom of expression in Whitman's poetry that it is difficult to think that the two might have been compatible; and yet Whitman's criticism of Coleridge's chief prose work is appreciative beyond expectation.

Charles Lamb is mentioned by Whitman as merely pleasant and delicate-humored.¹³⁰ Among the book reviews is an over-long paragraph dealing enthusiastically with the *Napoleon* of Lamb's contemporary, William Hazlitt. In calling the adjectives which might describe the work, Whitman includes "noble," "grand," "democratic," and "wholesome."¹³¹ In Hazlitt, Whitman found a soul sympathetic with the democratic idea and hostile to "the fangs of kingcraft." The first American edition of Ruskin's *Modern Painters* was reviewed by Whitman as a book scorning the "flip-pant tricks and petty arts of small writers"—a book distinguished by its "intellectual chivalry, enthusiasm, and a hightoned sincerity."¹³²

Bliss Perry writes that Whitman knew Matthew Arnold as a critic only, and despised him as such.¹³³ Traubel records Whitman's saying that he had tried to give Arnold a chance to make an impression, and had attempted to read his books again and again, but that he found he was not interested: Arnold simply made him weary.¹³⁴ When Arnold

¹²⁶ In *Collect*, V, p. 4.

¹²⁷ "Our Eminent Visitors," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 97.

¹²⁸ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 131.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹³¹ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 285.

¹³² *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 135.

¹³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

¹³⁴ Quoted by John Howard Birss, "Whitman on Arnold," in *Modern Language Notes*, XLVII (May, 1932), p. 317.

died, in 1888, Whitman was asked to write some comment for the New York *Herald*. He allowed, in the article he wrote, for the possible significance and influence Arnold might have had in literature; but he found that Arnold had failed in that he had nothing new to say. He had been a gentleman and a scholar; but gentlemen and scholars, especially when they were purists like Arnold, did not seem much needed in Whitman's world. "I doubt," Whitman wrote, "whether America will miss Arnold at all."¹³⁵ In the years near Whitman's own death he spoke to Horace Traubel at least eight or nine times concerning Arnold. Once he commented: "Arnold always gives you the notion that he hates to touch the dirt—the dirt is so dirty! But everything comes out of the people, the everyday people, the people as you find them and leave them. . . ." ¹³⁶ Later he said: "I can never realize Arnold—like him: we are constitutionally antipathetic: Arnold is porcelain, chinaware, hangings."¹³⁷ Still later, in the same vein, Whitman said that Arnold "brings into the world what the world already has a surfeit of: is rich hefted, lousy, reeking, with delicacy, refinement, elegance, prettiness, propriety, criticism, analysis: all of them things which threaten to overwhelm us."¹³⁸ Whitman's final and kindest criticism was that Arnold was "weak on the democratic side."¹³⁹

Reverting from comment on nineteenth-century essayists to comment on poets of the same century, Whitman spoke of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. He once said in conversation that Byron had fire enough to burn forever;¹⁴⁰ and he admired Byron's "vehement dash"; he admired, too, the suggestion of democratic thought in his works. But on the whole, Byron's was a poetry much too lurid for the "free, sunny race" of Americans.¹⁴¹ Shelley is mentioned in Whitman's notes as a delicate young poet who liked bread and raisins and was expelled from college.¹⁴² Concern with Keats, however, is much more searching; and Whitman's inconsistent judgment of Keats is one of the most interesting of all his criticisms. As a note on the idealistic description in "Hyperion," Whitman wrote: "See how these fellows always take a *handsome* man for their God!" ¹⁴³ Again, he made a note to the effect that Keats wrote Grecian poems, even though their words were English.¹⁴⁴ Whitman said that Keats's richly orna-

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Traubel, I, p. 232.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, p. 391.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, III, p. 400.

¹³⁹ "Whitman on His Contemporaries (From the Camden Diary of Horace Traubel)," in the *American Mercury*, II (July, 1924), p. 330.

¹⁴⁰ Traubel, I, p. 41.

¹⁴¹ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 216.

¹⁴² "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 84.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

mented poetry expressed, at second hand, the sentiment of ancient gods and goddesses; and in a passage more felicitously phrased than truthful, he said that the feeling in Keats's poetry "is the feeling of a gentlemanly person lately at college, accepting what was commanded him there, who moves and would only move in elegant society, reading classical books in libraries."¹⁴⁵ Keats wrote lines too classically disciplined to please Whitman; and he felt that Keats did not interpret the life of his century.¹⁴⁶ This criticism is not unexpected from the Whitman who demanded spokesmen for the people; and not unexpected also is his cruel description of Keats's works as "sweet—oh! very sweet—all sweetness: almost lush: lush, polish, ornateness, elegance."¹⁴⁷ Strangely enough, however, when he reviewed Keats's *Poetical Works* for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, twenty-five years after the English poet's death, Whitman wrote a wise judgment which must satisfy any disciple of Keats, no matter how exacting: "Keats—peace to his ashes—was one of the pleasantest of modern poets, and had not the grim monster of Death so early claimed him, would doubtless have become one of the most distinguished."¹⁴⁸ Obviously, Keats was acceptable to Whitman as a poet; but he was unacceptable in that he was no strong-lunged chanter of democracy.

Almost at the end of his years, Whitman wrote that he knew too little about Browning to speak with authority of him: he knew only that Browning required deep study, and he complained that he was too old and indolent to give the labor Browning required.¹⁴⁹ Swinburne was one of the technical versifiers criticized by Whitman; and after Swinburne had made counter-criticism in the *Fortnightly*, the American poet asked: "Ain't he the damned simulacrum?"¹⁵⁰ And in reference to Swinburne he said: "I know of nothing I think of so little account as pretty words, pretty thoughts, pretty china, pretty arrangements."¹⁵¹

AMERICAN LITERATURE

The heart of Whitman's essay called "British Literature" is the expression that, while England is among the greatest of lands, "the spirit of English literature is not great, at least is not greatest—and *its products are no models for us.*"¹⁵² In an early editorial Whitman exclaimed: "And what perfect cataracts of trash come to us at the present day from

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ Traubel, III, p. 83.

¹⁴⁸ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, pp. 303-304.

¹⁴⁹ "Old Poets," in *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VI, p. 295.

¹⁵⁰ Emory Holloway, *Whitman: An Interpretation in Narrative*, New York and London, 1926, p. 256.

¹⁵¹ Traubel, II, p. 188.

¹⁵² "British Literature," in *Collect*, V, p. 276.

abroad!" His plea for an independent American literature is present in *Democratic Vistas*, in "Poetry To-Day in America," in "British Literature," in "Old Poets," and almost everywhere in his formal and informal criticism. One of the things Whitman most deplored in the reception of native literature, beyond the stubborn obsession that good things must come from abroad, was the ridiculously small compensation paid by American publishers. He asks: "Shall Hawthorne get a paltry seventy-five dollars for a two volume work?"¹⁵³ And, again, he writes bitterly that he knows of a capable American writer who received a mere five dollars a month for his services to a magazine—and this "while a mademoiselle who can kick her nose with her heels goes home with two or three 20000s."¹⁵⁴ But, most important of all, American literature would have to be indigenous, with its roots in the soil of Long Island, or Kentucky, or California, and not in Athens or along the Thames.

When Whitman reviewed the American Washington Irving's *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*, he waived any personal commendation as being too insignificant for a man with such a reputation as Irving's.¹⁵⁵ But it was a matter of reputations which interested him when he talked of Charles Brockden Brown and James Fenimore Cooper. He was pleased to contrast the merits of the two novelists. Brown he found unnecessarily rank and crude, calling the novel *Wieland* "a sort of Udolpho business watered—twice watered—thinned out. A ghost story," he went on, ". . . must be interesting: it is a bad sign when it is not. . . ."¹⁵⁶ Brown, in Whitman's estimation, was no more a James Fenimore Cooper than a "molehill is a mountain, than disease is health!"¹⁵⁷ Whitman regarded Cooper as an important writer to be recommended with enthusiasm, and he isolated *The Prairie*, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*, and *The Pilot* as his finest novels.¹⁵⁸ On one occasion, at least, Whitman talked at length of Cooper with Horace Traubel:

W. questioned me closely. How was I impressed with Cooper's "outdoorness"—and so forth? Then: "I do not wonder that he lasts—that you still find yourself drawn to him. He is justified by what you say: Cooper was a masterman in many very significant ways. Cooper had a growl—the cynicism of Carlyle, without the tophlofticalness with which Carlyle carried it off: and there was a healthy vigor in everything Cooper did—even to the libel suits he had so many of. . . . Have you got the Cooper stories: the Leatherstocking tales? The Last of the Mohicans, chiefly?—and The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish? Can you bring me that? It is beautiful indeed: and The Bravo, too—I remember that:

¹⁵³ "'Home' Literature," in *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 245.

¹⁵⁴ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 276.

¹⁵⁵ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 133.

¹⁵⁶ Traubel, III, p. 183.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁵⁸ John Johnston and J. W. Wallace, *Visits to Walt Whitman in 1890-1891*, London, 1917, p. 216.

the wonderful, splendid Jacapo—who can forget him? It is years and years since I read Cooper: now the mood comes back to me, I should like to take him up again." He asked me: "Do you ever find Cooper long-winded—tiresome? I have always regarded Cooper as essentially fresh, robust, noble: one of the original characters—the tonic natures. Over in England, among the fellows, there's a word they use—'guts': if a man is a man of power they say he has 'guts'. . . . Well—Cooper has guts." ¹⁵⁹

Although he did not approve of "a morbid streak" in Hawthorne, Whitman thought highly of him;¹⁶⁰ in the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* he wrote of his pleasure upon learning that Hawthorne had been given a government appointment—an appointment not greatly different from the one he begrudged Wordsworth. Whitman called Hawthorne the "Elia of America";¹⁶¹ he called Bronson Alcott "one of the divine simples. . . , the wise wondering seers";¹⁶² he welcomed Margaret Fuller's *Papers on Literature and Art* "right heartily";¹⁶³ and he praised William Gilmore Simms's *The Wigwam and the Cabin*, although he objected to coarse details in that collection of stories.¹⁶⁴ "Rather too *wordy*, overloads his descriptions—too *self-conscious*," he said of Simms.¹⁶⁵

Edgar Allan Poe, whose reputation today is as secure as that of any of Whitman's literary contemporaries, was spoken of at some length in *Specimen Days*. During most of his life Whitman confessed to a distaste for the gloomy writings of Poe;¹⁶⁶ he saw, however, that "beyond their limited range of melody (like perpetual chimes of music bells, ringing from *b* flat up to *g*) they were melodious expressions, and perhaps never excell'd ones, of certain pronounc'd phases of human morbidity."¹⁶⁷ Neither Hawthorne nor Poe provided for Whitman the optimism he desired. But late in life Whitman came to appreciate what Poe was trying to do artistically, and he spoke with respect of Poe's melodious, though limited, poetry. In the section of *Specimen Days* called "Edgar Poe's Significance" he states his impressions exactly. Based upon no moral code, and containing none of the warm human affection which Whitman loved, Poe's work finally appealed to him as excellent in its technical and abstract beauty, as well as in its profound suggestiveness.¹⁶⁸ With critical acumen Whitman wrote that "Poe's verses, . . . by final judgment, probably belong among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling,

¹⁵⁹ Traubel, II, pp. 531-532.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 111.

¹⁶¹ T. A. Zunder, "Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne," in *Modern Language Notes*, XLVII (May, 1932), pp. 314-315.

¹⁶² Traubel, III, p. 267.

¹⁶³ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 132.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁶⁵ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 166.

¹⁶⁶ "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, p. 56.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ IV, p. 285.

but with no heat."¹⁶⁹ Poe was not a singer of American democracy, certainly; and Whitman felt that in all he wrote one might find evidence of his spurning his native land. Whitman told of a lurid dream he had had, in which he saw a small voyaging ship flying with rent sails and shattered spars through the night. On the deck of the ship was a "slender, slight, beautiful figure, a dim man," who seemed to be enjoying the chaos. This dim man Whitman thought might aptly stand for Poe and his writings—"all lurid dreams."¹⁷⁰ In reading "The Poetic Principle" Whitman felt agreement with Poe's idea that there can be no such thing as a successful long poem.¹⁷¹

Henry David Thoreau's love of Nature seemed too confined to literary boundaries to suit Whitman; but he did admire Thoreau's "going his own absolute road let hell blaze all it chooses."¹⁷² In conversation Whitman spoke of Thoreau as an American, a Transcendentalist, a protester, an "outdoor man," and a force not easily defined.¹⁷³ The popularity of Thoreau's writings in a later day adds weight to Whitman's remark that the author of *Walden* "looms up bigger and bigger: his dying does not seem to have hurt him a bit: every year has added to his fame."¹⁷⁴

In less critical fashion than that in which he spoke of the "dim man" who was Poe and the "outdoor man" who was Thoreau, Walt Whitman made mention of Herman Melville, James Russell Lowell, Edmund Clarence Stedman, and Bayard Taylor. He called Melville's *Omoo* the "most readable sort of reading,"¹⁷⁵ but he seems not to have come upon *Moby Dick*. Horace Traubel records Whitman's avowal that Lowell was one of his "real enemies." "He not only objected to my book," Whitman explained; "he objected to me."¹⁷⁶ Two years after *Leaves of Grass* first appeared, however, Whitman had written of Lowell as "one of the truest of our poets."¹⁷⁷ Stedman was called "a bit overripe here and there, too much cultivated, too little able to be foolish. . . : cute, but hardly more than cute. . . ." ¹⁷⁸ Bayard Taylor's youthful *Views Afoot* was read by Whitman with "much enjoyment," and thirteen years later Whitman maintained that judgment, calling Taylor a "delightful author."¹⁷⁹

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹⁷¹ "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, p. 56.

¹⁷² Traubel, III, p. 375.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 134.

¹⁷⁶ "Whitman on His Contemporaries (From the Camden Diary of Horace Traubel)," in the *American Mercury*, II (July, 1924), p. 328.

¹⁷⁷ *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 63.

¹⁷⁸ Traubel, I, p. 56.

¹⁷⁹ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 136, and *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 69.

With more penetrating phrases, and in language which exhibits his own sensitivity to music in poetry, Whitman spoke at length of Sidney Lanier:

This extreme sense of the melodic, a virtue in itself, when carried into the art of the writer becomes a fault. . . . Study Lanier's choice of words—they are too often fit rather for sound than for sense. His ear was sensitive. He had genius—a delicate clairvoyant genius: but this over-tuning of the ear, this extreme deference paid to oral nicety, reduced the majesty, the solid worth of his rhythms. . . .¹⁸⁰

Both Joaquin Miller and John Burroughs were intimate with Whitman. In his letters to Peter Doyle there are such casual references to those men as: "I have been spending a couple of hours with Joaquin Miller—I like him real well";¹⁸¹ or "I hear often from John Burroughs—he has bought a spot of land."¹⁸² Whitman liked Miller's dependence upon American landscapes in his writings and thought that this alone in Miller's work might put him in advance of all his Old World-imbued contemporaries.¹⁸³ Burroughs, the Nature lover, served as a critic of Whitman, but Whitman seems to have accepted Burroughs and his work without making judgment. It has lately been discovered that Burroughs's *Notes on Walt Whitman as a Poet and Person* was not written by the naturalist, but by Whitman himself, in the main.¹⁸⁴ William Dean Howells was too conservative for Whitman. "He's fine, subtle, but not revolutionary," Whitman told Horace Traubel; he "goes a certain distance—then hauls himself in with a shock. That's enough—quite enough, he is saying to himself."¹⁸⁵

Because Walt Whitman and Henry James are sometimes singled out as dominating figures in American literature, it is interesting to read what the grandly blundering poet had to say of the subtle novelist. "Look at the younger Henry James," Whitman told his friend Traubel. "I don't see anything above common in him: he has a vogue—but surely his vogue won't last: he don't stand permanently for anything."¹⁸⁶ On another occasion and in more memorable fashion, Whitman said: "James is only feathers to me."¹⁸⁷ Writers of mere stories, he was saying, seemed to him to have doubtful significance; and he wondered whether they would have any significance at all after a few years had passed. He considered

¹⁸⁰ Traubel, I, pp. 170-171.

¹⁸¹ *Calamus*, V, p. 88.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁸³ *Specimen Days*, IV, p. 276.

¹⁸⁴ Frederick P. Hier, Jr., "The End of a Literary Mystery," in the *American Mercury*, II (April, 1924), pp. 471 ff.

¹⁸⁵ "Whitman on His Contemporaries (From the Camden Diary of Horace Traubel)," in the *American Mercury*, II (July, 1924), p. 331.

¹⁸⁶ Traubel, II, p. 233.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 78.

such writers as ephemeral and trivial, asking, "Don't they just come and go—don't they just skim about, butterfly about, daintily, in fragile literary vessels, for a while—then bow their way out?"¹⁸⁸ Generalization of this sort is amusing, is a good weapon, and perhaps is to some extent applicable in the case of Henry James. But Mark Twain, usually credited with as much literary importance as Whitman or James, could certainly never have been accused of butterfly about in fragile literary vessels. One is curious as to why Whitman seems to have said nothing of Mark Twain's work: surely he would have liked it: it would qualify as excellent whether judged as literature or judged as being meaningful to the common people of America. Whitman was not ignorant of his young contemporary. Mark Twain wrote him the famous letter which biographers have found so interesting; and Mark Twain was among those who sent the aged poet a handsome birthday gift. The most obvious gap in the literary criticism of Walt Whitman is his having said nothing now recorded of Mark Twain.

The aging Whitman seemed to become less and less able to read with any pleasure work by younger Americans. When he spoke of Agnes Repplier he called her "a woman who tries for smartness at all hazards,"¹⁸⁹ and dismissed her with the characterization. When Hamlin Garland interviewed Whitman, he was told that American literature lacked a certain distinctive tang—the tang of "a wild strawberry, a wild grape."¹⁹⁰ Upon Garland's suggestion that the work of young writers like George W. Cable, Joseph Kirkland, Joseph Harris, and Mary E. Wilkins might have just such a flavor, Whitman admitted that he had read little of their productions. But he felt that these writers, like Poe, wrote too often of abnormal "delirium tremens" characters, rather than celebrating the normal man as he himself tried to do in *Leaves of Grass*.

We have now examined Whitman's casual comments on the world's literature, from the writings of Homer to those of Agnes Repplier. Some of his judgments were wise, and some of them were too colored by his desire for a democratic literature at any price. So far as a background of acquaintance with books is of value to a literary critic, Whitman was well equipped. "He was," says Norman Foerster, "better equipped than Poe, probably in quantity of reading, quite certainly in quality."¹⁹¹

In the next three chapters of the present paper, Whitman's formal and careful criticism of ten authors is treated in detail. Whitman singled out, for his special attention: Shakespeare, Tennyson, Scott, Dickens, Carlyle, Burns, and four Americans—Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 77.

¹⁹⁰ "Walt Whitman Old and Poor," in *Roadside Meetings*, New York, 1930, p. 135.

¹⁹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 170.

II

SHAKESPEARE

Pass'd! pass'd! for us, forever pass'd, that once so mighty world, now void,
inanimate, phantom world,
Embroider'd, dazzling, foreign world, with all its gorgeous legends, myths,
Its kings and castles proud, its priests and warlike lords and courtly dames,
Pass'd to its charnel vault, coffin'd with crown and armor on,
Blazon'd with Shakspeare's purple page,
And dirged by Tennyson's sweet sad rhyme.

From "Song of the Exposition"

It seems fitting that the poet who designated himself a literary spokesman for the New World should have written at length in judgment of the poet he accepted as the most estimable spokesman for the Old. Even at the beginning of his career, Walt Whitman evinced considerable interest in the life and works of Shakespeare, and that interest never diminished. Concern with Shakespearean matters is indicated by the titles of some of Whitman's essays and sketches: "A Thought on Shakspeare," "What Lurks Behind Shakspeare's Historical Plays," "Poetry To-Day in America—Shakespeare—The Future," and "Shakspeare for America."¹ In these prose works and elsewhere Whitman displays close acquaintance with Shakespeare's writings. He reread the plays in an eight-volume edition when he was forty-six,² and in the last years of his life he conversed with friends about Shakespeare as the poet of "lordly port."³ Whitman was often a member of Shakespearean audiences; as a boy or young man he saw, always reading them carefully one or two days beforehand, "quite all Shakspeare's acting dramas."⁴ He was impressed by the excellence of the productions; and he remembered with pleasure having seen Booth as Richard III, Lear, and Iago; Tom Hamblin in *Macbeth*; Mrs. Austin as Ariel, with Peter Richings acting the part of Caliban.⁵ Whitman's essay "The Old Bowery" dwells at length upon New York plays and acting of the time of his youth.⁶ He opens the piece with a quotation from an article called "Mrs. Siddons as Lady Macbeth,"⁷ and he proceeds

¹ Throughout the bulk of Whitman's criticism the spelling *Shakspeare* is usually employed; but *Shakespere* and *Shakespeare* are also used.

² "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 189; "Reading Shakespeare, Sept., 1865, Washington. Edition in eight volumes of Wm. Veazie, Boston, 1859."

³ John Johnston and J. W. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁴ *Specimen Days*, IV, p. 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ In *November Boughs*, VI, pp. 184-195.

⁷ Whitman identifies the article as being by Fleeming Jenkin, in *The Nineteenth Century*.

to tell of having seen, among other plays, *Hamlet* and *Henry IV* at the Park, and *Julius Caesar*, *King John*, and *Richard III* at the Bowery. In detail Whitman pictures the famous Shakespearean actor Booth *père* and judges him to be an actor in many respects excelling all of his kind on record. Plays having to do with intense human passions were popular in Booth's day, and Booth as Iago, or Shylock, or Richard III, was certain to draw a crowded house, Whitman tells us. He would note such personages as Cooper, Bryant, Irving, Charles King, N. P. Willis, Halleck, and Presidents Adams and Jackson in the Bowery audiences; but more memorable to Whitman were Booth's performances—perhaps as Richard, coming quietly down the stage to the footlights, musingly kicking his sword. Whitman exhibits his appreciation of the action of Shakespearean drama when he writes:

Though fifty years have pass'd since then, I can hear the clank, and feel
the perfect following hush of perhaps three thousand people waiting. . . . And
so throughout the entire play, all parts, voice, atmosphere, magnetism, from
"Now is the winter of our discontent,"
to the closing death fight with Richmond, were of the finest and grandest. . . .
Especially was the dream scene very impressive. A shudder went through every
nervous system in the audience; it certainly did through mine.⁸

Whitman's familiarity with the plays is attested to in his telling how he declaimed stormy passages from the histories and tragedies while on Broadway omnibus jaunts. And while on walks about Washington with his driver-friend Peter Doyle, Whitman would often recite poetry—especially that of Shakespeare.⁹

Among the magazines and newspaper articles studied and preserved by Whitman, and which were found in his huge and chaotic scrapbooks, those having to do with Shakespeare were several. They include newspaper pieces dealing with Shakespeare as a man, Shakespeare's stage, the text of Shakespeare's plays, and a report of an oration on Shakespeare. Numerous fragmentary references are made to Shakespeare in the notes which Whitman left to Dr. Bucke. Most of these references are either of an uncritical sort or formally quote the work of other commentators. Whitman repeatedly read Edward Dowden's Shakespearean criticism: he called Dowden "One of the best of the late commentators on Shakspeare."¹⁰ Edward Dowden was perhaps the first scholarly admirer of Whitman, and Whitman felt indebtedness to him for his faithful defense of *Leaves of Grass*. He told Horace Traubel that if he had any right to pride at all, he might be proud to have convinced the learned Dowden that he was

⁸ "The Old Bowery," in *November Boughs*, p. 193.

⁹ Richard M. Bucke, "Interview with Peter Doyle," in *Complete Writings of Walt Whitman*, VIII, pp. 8-9.

¹⁰ "Abraham Lincoln," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 205.

not "entirely useless."¹¹ Whitman had read with care the critical work of his friend William O'Connor, as well, and there is heavy dependence upon O'Connor in such essays as "What Lurks Behind Shakspeare's Historical Plays." Richard C. Harrison has made the conjecture that Whitman was familiar with the criticism of Donnelly, Voltaire, Jenkin, Winter, and Elze;¹² but although Whitman on occasion cited these writers on Shakespearean subjects, one suspects that his familiarity with their writings was second-hand, or at least that he had made no special study of them.

To impose order upon Whitman's scattered criticism of Shakespeare it is suitable to make the approach a biographical one. Whitman himself gave much attention to the facts and conjectures concerning the dramatist's life; and this attention was justified in his saying that he held in high esteem Hippolyte Taine's efforts to make criticism largely a matter of biography and history.¹³ Whitman agreed with Taine that the only way to understand completely a great literary work lies in minutely studying the personality of the one who created it. An author's origin, times, surroundings, and his actual fortunes, life, and ways, supplied Whitman "not only the glass through which to look, but . . . the atmosphere, the very light itself."¹⁴ Who, he asks, can profoundly explain the works of Byron and Burns without making these significant inquiries? He would apply the rule to Shakespeare too, he says, and do so unhesitatingly; for to him the great poet's plays "are not only the concentration of all that lambently played in the best fancies of those times—not only the gathered sunset of the stirring days of feudalism," but they indicate and measure the kind of man Shakespeare was, the particular life he led, and all that was absorbed by his individual experience.¹⁵

In Whitman's notes there are informally catalogued some 235 lines of facts and observations having to do with Shakespeare's course of activity: the dates of his birth, marriage, and his children's births;¹⁶ the amount of his income in 1608;¹⁷ the facts concerning Lord Southampton, the actor Burbage, and the Elizabethan theater;¹⁸ and a conclusion that "Shakespeare, Drayton and Ben Jonson had a merrie meeting, and, it seems, drank too hard, for Shakespeare died of a fever there contracted."¹⁹ Some of the observations, however, are not mere impersonal inventories, but

¹¹ Harold Blodgett, "Whitman and Dowden," in *American Literature*, I (May, 1929), p. 182.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 1208.

¹³ "How I Get Around," in the *Critic*, I (Dec. 3, 1881), p. 331.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 88.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

reflect Whitman's own nature and interests. He employs italics to emphasize the point that the plays were printed neither at Shakespeare's instigation nor with his assistance. "It is thought quite certain *he was indifferent as to their appearance in print*, and did not mind even the blunders and omissions that marred them—probably for the same reason that Forrest²⁰ would not like to have his plays printed now."²¹ Among the notes is the expression of belief that, although the florid style of praise was applied almost indiscriminately in Shakespeare's time (unlike Whitman's time, he would suggest), the Stratford poet was acknowledged as a master in his own day.²² Something of the wide, embracing sweep of Whitman's own poetry is in his generalization that Shakespeare, like all men, "Did right and wrong—was entrusted with commissions—lost by fires, thieves, cheats, committed follies, debaucheries, crimes."²³ Amusing rather than enlightening is the conclusion that "He must have been a superb man. He left children, two sons."²⁴

There is evidence in his jotted-down notes and in his recorded conversations that Whitman found a certain fascination in the Baconian theory. In giving his attention to that fruitless controversy, says Norman Foerster, he "wasted not a little time."²⁵ Only three or four substantial references are made to the subject, however, in Whitman's writings. One of these is a definite statement that at one time, at least, Whitman gave credence to the belief that Bacon, or perhaps Raleigh, had some part in the construction of Shakespeare's plays. "How much," Whitman writes, "whether as furnisher, pruner, poetical illuminator, knowledge infuser—what he was or did—if anything, it is not possible to tell with certainty."²⁶ That dubious "if anything" would lead one to believe that Whitman's interest in the Baconian conjecture was based upon its romantic aspects, rather than upon any scholarly conviction that it would bring startling truths into daylight. This impression is furthered when one examines the poem Whitman called "Shakspere-Bacon Cipher": in it one reads of a "mystic cipher" which "waits infolded" in "every object, mountain, tree, and star—in every birth and life."²⁷ Here it is quite obvious that he is primarily interested in the imaginative idea the cipher affords. Less revealing is the isolated note which is in the main a quotation from a paper²⁸ by William

²⁰ Edwin Forrest, actor prominent in the first half of the nineteenth century.

²¹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 71.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

²⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 70.

²⁷ From *Leaves of Grass*, III, p. 12.

²⁸ Identified by Whitman as being from the *Illustrated London News* (Oct. 25, 1856).

Henry Smith, the author of *Was Lord Bacon the Author of Shakespeare's Plays?* Its suggestion is that either all the plays were works of unknown authors or that they were merely revised and added to by a man named Shakespeare.²⁹ Whitman makes no comment of his own. Elsewhere he says that he can understand why scholars of his own time introduce the theory that "other brains and fingers" had to do with the Shakespearean plays: it is because of the remarkable paucity of information about the individual Shakespeare, leaving as it does, many a riddle unsolved, and preventing the "last and dearest descriptive touches and dicta of criticism."³⁰

The bulk of information concerning Whitman's interest in the Baconian theory lies in Traubel's notes on Whitman's conversations. Asked "Do you accept the whole Bacon proposition?" Whitman replied that he did not accept the whole of it. He was "anti-Shakespeare," but he could make no final conclusions. He sensibly added that he was not considered a scholar worthy "to go with the critics into any thorough examination of the evidences."³¹ In a later conversation with Traubel, Whitman summed up what he thought about the problem in a few lucid sentences:

I do not know that I really care who made the plays—who wrote them. No—I do not think it a supreme human question, though it is without doubt a great literary question. I am not as much interested in the question direct as in what it drags along with it—the great store of curious information that it turns up—information forgotten or near lost . . . But after all, Shakespeare, the author Shakespeare, whoever he was, was a great man: much was summed up in him.³²

The chapter entitled "The Camden Bard," in Bliss Perry's biography of Whitman, introduces and dismisses Whitman's Shakespearean criticism in a single sentence. "He enjoyed the simplicity of Homer," says Perry, "but Shakespeare was to him something 'feudal,' remote, 'lacking both in the democratic and the spiritual.'"³³ Taken as a generalization this statement has much truth in it; but that Shakespeare meant much more to Whitman than Perry suggests can easily be discerned from the evidence which lies in his discussions of the individual plays and the characterization, style, and form which distinguish those plays. This matter is to be found chiefly in Whitman's occasional essays on Shakespeare's art and in the allusions scattered throughout his prose and conversations.

The historical plays held special significance for Whitman. Foerster suggests that he loved their "pageantry, color, vivid action," and "splendid personalities" because they were an escape from the drab American life

²⁹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 75-76.

³⁰ "How I Get Around," in the *Critic*, I (Dec. 3, 1881), p. 331.

³¹ Traubel, I, p. 29.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 260.

familiar to persons of his class.³⁴ Perhaps this is the explanation. At any rate, Whitman devoted to these dramas an entire essay called "What Lurks Behind Shakspeare's Historical Plays." Here he asserts that mature judgment confirms his early impression that Shakespeare's distinctiveness and glory are in the plays having to do with the French wars and contests of English dynasties, rather than in his overpraised dramas of the passions. They are, Whitman says, in some respects greater than any other works of literature: they are given blood from the fullest pulse of European feudalism, and they excellently portray the medieval aristocracy, with its arrogance and its "towering spirit of ruthlessness and gigantic caste."³⁵ Whitman is fully conscious of the bungling attempts in the worst of the historical plays, the three parts of *Henry VI*. He calls it the seed, merely, for the rest of the dynastic dramas.³⁶ It seems evident to him that after inexpertly drafting the first part of the trilogy, Shakespeare came nearer to developing and defining a plan in the second and third parts; and it seems evident to him that from that time on, Shakespeare systematically perfected and enlarged his plan to include the masterful plays like *Richard II*, *King John*, *Henry IV*, and finally such plays as *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Before examining the remarkable plan which Whitman finds lurking in these plays, let us look at his general criticism of the plays.³⁷

Whitman's judgment on *Richard II* is that the play is in some respects one of the most characteristic of Shakespeare's works; and it was a favorite, certainly, with Whitman. When an old man, he found a "home-bound" copy of *Richard II* in the piles of miscellaneous papers and books he kept about him in his cluttered room. The sight of the familiar old pages he had long before bound in brown wrapping-paper made him become almost dithyrambic in his enthusiasm: "What a flood of memories it lets loose. It is my old play-book, used many and many times in my itinerant theatre days: Richard: Shakespeare's Richard: one of the best of the plays, I always say—one of the best—in its vehemence, power, even in its grace."³⁸ Happily leafing through the old book, Whitman told Traubel: "That is Richard—this same Richard. How often I spouted this—these first pages—on the Broadway stage-coaches, in the awful din of the street."³⁹ Knowledge that he "spouted" the play on holiday jaunts would lead one to believe that part of Whitman's pleasure in *Richard II* lay in the fancifully rhetorical speeches of the self-indulgent, though rather charming, Richard. In his criticism of the play, Coleridge notes especially

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

³⁵ In *November Boughs*, VI, pp. 120-123.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³⁷ *Vide post*, p. 49.

³⁸ Traubel, II, p. 245.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

the "constant overflow of feelings" and the "incapability of controlling them" as being characteristic of its tone. Whitman's 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* gives evidence of his belief in the good of restraint; but it is difficult not to think of a "constant overflow of feelings" as being inherent in Whitman's nature. He liked the ranting in *Richard II*. Furthermore, its permeating spirit is that of patriotic reminiscence, and if he was not a discerning critic, or even a profound poet, Whitman was nevertheless an ardent nationalist. Although the reference was to feudal England, Whitman could not have kept from glorying in the patriotic sentiment of such lines as Gaunt's exultant:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise; . . .
This precious stone set in the silver sea. . . .

King John engaged Whitman's attention almost as much as did *Richard II*. In *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, published the year before his death, Whitman told with reminiscent pleasure of a production of *King John* he had seen over forty-five years before.⁴⁰ Charles Kean had played the title role, and his wife, Ellen Tree, had played the part of Constance, the personification of all the hope and despair of maternal passion. The Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, had been played by Tom Hamblin, who impressed Whitman as surely giving the best of interpretations of that remarkable character. Philip Faulconbridge is the most memorable of the persons in the play: he is the true hero. As Edward Dowden points out, he is a patriot to England when the King is not: he is representative of English courage, manliness, tenderness and humor." Whitman remarks Faulconbridge's "gloating pleasure over the fact that he the *bastard of a King* rather than the legitimate son of a Knight."⁴¹ This pleasure came either from a sentiment since repudiated or was purposefully intended to please the titled patrons of the theater—the aristocracy. As much as he dislikes the aristocracy and all that it implies, Whitman admits that Faulconbridge's attitude is made credible and is well drawn, in that it is a true depiction of the attitude of his day. The Kean production is reported by Whitman as being "an immense show-piece," with elaborate stage settings, crowds of soldiers in fine armor, and a large brass band.⁴² Even all this did not distract Whitman's attention from the exalted scenes of the play. He says that he remembers vividly the interviews between the French and the English armies and the tense conversation between Hubert and the boy Arthur, with its

⁴⁰ VII, p. 51.

⁴¹ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 74.

⁴² *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VII, p. 51.

Will you put out mine eyes?
 These eyes that never did nor never shall
 So much as frown on you?

Especially memorable to Whitman was the scene of King John's death in the orchard of Swinstead Abbey, when, a doomed man, he cries bitterly:

Within me is a hell; and there the poison
 Is as a fiend confin'd to tyrannize
 On unreprieveable condemned blood.

With even more effective results than would be had from following the old direction of having King John carried upon the stage by attendants, "Kean rush'd in, gray-pale and yellow, and threw himself on a lounge in the open. His pangs were horribly realistic."⁴³ Kean must have taken lessons in some hospital to so faithfully portray the agonies of the dying, Whitman says. There are some tell-tale phrases in Whitman's discussion of *King John*: summing up the effect of the armored stage crowds and the brass band, he mentions with praise the "fine *blare* and court pomp" of the play.⁴⁴ Perhaps there is justification for saying that Whitman delighted in the historical plays because of the contrast their grandeur offered to his own rather commonplace existence.

References to Shakespearean tragedies in Whitman's works are fragmentary. Among his notes is a quotation pertaining to the period of Shakespeare's life which Dowden called "In the Depths"—those eight or nine years in which Shakespeare wrote the tragedies for which he is most praised. Whitman has underlined three phrases in the quotation. Thus, he emphasizes the statement that the period from 1601 to 1609 was the one in which there is the greatest evidence of "his tragic power, of *his resistless control over the emotions of terror and pity*."⁴⁵ Again, he italicizes the phrase "*the stern censurer of man*," referring to Shakespeare in the years he wrote of Hamlet and Lear. It was also the period in which Shakespeare wrote in a new and unmistakable style by "*crowding into his words a weight of thought until the language bent under it*." In "British Literature" Whitman writes of his distaste for Hamlet, a figure "moping, sick, uncertain, and leaving ever after a secret taste for the blues, the morbid fascination, the luxury of wo. . . ."⁴⁶ This impression of Hamlet was doubtless fostered by the actors of Whitman's time who pictured a tragic Dane tortured by indecision. One of the strongest scenes in *Hamlet* is introduced by Whitman as a measurement for the impassioned pleading and "human-harassing" approach which probes to the deepest recesses of

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 89.

⁴⁶ "British Literature," in *Collect*, V, p. 277.

the "latent conscience and remorse" lying somewhere in every life.⁴⁷ This is the scene in which Hamlet pleads with his mother in the closet, and in which the mother implores:

O Hamlet! speak no more:
Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;
And there I see such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

Whitman speaks of the "greasy and stupid canaille that Coriolanus cannot stomach,"⁴⁸ of "garrulous" and "irascible" as descriptive of old Lear,⁴⁹ and again of Hamlet in terms of "hair-splitting doubts" and "sickly sulking and suffering."⁵⁰

For Whitman, that which was pessimistic was seldom good. He could not approve of the essential tone of the Shakespearean tragedies, therefore, and said as much to his friend Traubel. Whitman complained that Shakespeare was gloomy, that he looked upon mankind with despair, that in the most mature of the plays Shakespeare seems to have said that "after all, the human critter is a devil of a poor fellow—full of frailties, evils, poisons. . . ." ⁵¹ But even though one may feel a weight of gloom in reading of them, Whitman must still admit the excellence of such figures as Othello, Hamlet, and Lear. These fictitious characters, he says, are as real as any English or European lords, and they are indeed more real to us today than the man Shakespeare himself.⁵²

At the age of twenty-seven Whitman wrote for the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* an editorial on actors and dramatic affairs which tells of the necessity for "modernizing and Americanizing" the drama for the New World.⁵³ In looking back over the noble specimens of literary art which have come from England, Whitman mentioned "the varied beauties of Shakespeare" and the "sturdy old comedies, with their satire upon folly and vice of all kinds." ⁵⁴ For these, he said, we are indebted to England, and he suggested that their influence should be spread forever. Writing in a later mood, Whitman still maintained that the comedies of Shakespeare were excellent in their own way; but they "are altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy."⁵⁵ This surprisingly unreserved statement is based upon the contention that the common characters in plays like *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are nothing

⁴⁷ "Father Taylor (and Oratory)," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 113.

⁴⁸ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 75.

⁴⁹ *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VII, p. 72.

⁵⁰ "The Bible as Poetry," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 106.

⁵¹ Traubel, III, 443.

⁵² "George Fox (and Shakspeare)," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 279.

⁵³ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, pp. 156-158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵⁵ "A Thought on Shakspeare," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 126.

more than foils to the aristocracy: they are created for the diversion of the lords of the castle. Whitman himself seems to have found nothing more than diversion in *The Tempest*. He mentions it as one of his "big treats," and he stresses the excellence of the accompanying instrumental band and its leader.⁵⁶ He was pleased, too, by the drunken song of Caliban. This affords an excellent example of the frequent contradiction to be found in Whitman's criticism. Earthly Caliban, pictured as an unpleasant creature by Shakespeare, might personify all the persons of low caste held in feudal bondage, and thus be condemned by Whitman; but nevertheless Whitman might enjoy the spectacle Caliban presented.

Shakespeare's best humor and his subtlest, Whitman believed, was not in his comedies at all, but was in some of his tragedies. "The humor in the Shakespearean comedies is very broad, obvious, often brutal, coarse," Whitman said. "But in some of the tragedies—take *Lear* for instance—you will find another kind of humor, a humor more remote, subtle, illusive. . . ." ⁵⁷

When Whitman thought of Shakespeare's plays he thought of "their movement: their intensity of life, action: everything hell-bent to get along: on: on. . . ." ⁵⁸ But he thought of the sonnets as being in direct contrast. They are, he told Traubel, "perfect of their kind—exquisite, sweet: lush: eleganted: refined and refined, then again refined—again: refinement multiplied by refinement." ⁵⁹ He saw no vigor in the sonnets, and he felt that no vigor was necessary for them. "They are personal: more or less of small affairs: they do their own work in their own way: that's all we could ask and more than most of us do, I suppose." ⁶⁰ But even though Whitman regarded the sonnets as being complete in themselves, he did not by any means approve of their "eleganted" style. He called them "often over-done—over-ornate," and he said that their elaboration too often obscured the ideas behind them.⁶¹ The tremendous virility of the plays seemed to Whitman totally absent from the sonnets.

Whitman thought of Shakespeare's reputation for sublimity as resting upon his portrayals of character even more than upon the greatness of his poetry. Shakespeare, Whitman writes in his notes, is a limner and recorder like Walter Scott and Homer. Each in this strange triad mastered the depiction of characters and of events as well.⁶² Employing another triad, and this time for contrast, Whitman differentiates Shakespeare as a depicter

⁵⁶ Good-Bye, My Fancy, VII, p. 52.

⁵⁷ Traubel, II, p. 252.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, III, p. 83.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 248.

⁶² "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 84.

of actual life, Schiller of the ideal life, and Goethe of both actual and ideal.⁶³ We read in a note of Whitman's written about 1856: "Shakespeare, the gentle, the sweet musical, well-beloved Shakespeare, delineated *characters*. They are better represented by him than by any other poet at any time—Kings, traitors, lovers, . . . ambition, perplexed persons, youth, old age he easily reflects. He through them delivers many profound thoughts—many poetical, subtle fancies—many involved, rather elaborate, unnatural comparisons."⁶⁴ This is high praise indeed; and the chief fault Whitman had to find with the characters in Shakespeare's plays was that they were too obviously meant for the pleasure of nobility. He praised the women characters in the plays, at least for their constancy. In the Brooklyn *Daily Times* for February 10, 1858, Whitman wrote a literary note entitled "Shakespeare's Women Characters." "Having by his domestic infelicities," the note reads, "much reason to upbraid womankind, it is to the credit of Shakespeare and the women of his day, that in all his plays we find but three inconstant dames—the false Greek, Cressida and Lear's cruel daughters."⁶⁵ In the art of portraying medieval European lords and barons Shakespeare stands alone; and Whitman says that this art explains why he is capable of witching the whole world with his plays.

As an interpreter, through his characters, of man's passions "at their stormiest outstretch," however, Shakespeare does not stand alone. He spans the arch wide enough, Whitman says in this regard; but he is excelled by the best of the old Greek dramatists—Æschylus, for instance.⁶⁶ In conversation late in life, Whitman maintained that judgment of his earlier days. While some persons, he said, consider Shakespeare primarily a poet of the passions and their unfolding, Æschylus is greater in "cyclonic, thunder-crashing, air-clearing passion."⁶⁷

Whitman writes of the "rich and tangled jungle of the Shakespearean area,"⁶⁸ its dazzling splendor, and its place in "the roses and gold."⁶⁹ Certainly Whitman was not unaware of the rich color in Shakespeare's works, and he made ample statement of his opinion of the style and treatment of materials in those works. In his essay "A Thought on Shaksperc," Whitman writes:

The inward and outward characteristics of Shakespere are his vast and rich variety of persons and themes, with his wondrous delineation of each and all—not only limitless funds of verbal and pictorial resource, but great excess, super-

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁶⁵ *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 66.

⁶⁶ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 209.

⁶⁷ John Johnston and J. W. Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁶⁸ "What Lurks Behind Shaksperc's Historical Plays," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 123.

⁶⁹ "George Fox (and Shaksperc)," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 279.

foetation—mannerism, like a fine, aristocratic perfume, holding a touch of musk (Euphues, his mark)—with boundless sumptuousness and adornment, real velvet and gems, not shoddy nor paste—but a good deal of bombast and fustian—(certainly some terrific mouthing in Shakspeare)!⁷⁰

Whitman seems almost to be parodying the terrific mouthing he refers to. Superb and inimitable, Whitman calls Shakespeare's work, and yet he feels that it is in the main "an objective and physiological kind of power and beauty" that is offered by Shakespeare.⁷¹ Here is a style almost supremely grand in Whitman's estimation, but not so grand as that of the Greeks, and not grand enough to satisfy "modern and scientific and democratic" United States.⁷² Whitman complains, too, that Shakespeare does not dwell upon Nature's wonders. He rhetorically asks what Nature meant to Hamlet, King Lear, the English-Norman kings, and the Romans of Shakespeare's plays.⁷³ In the plays there are no vast forests, no Yellowstone geysers, and no deep-cut Colorado ravines. Instead, one finds fabulous marble palaces, with walks and bowers, miniature lakes, groups of statutes, and carefully cultivated flowers.⁷⁴ And Whitman, so often accused of being undisciplined, is critical of Shakespeare's lack of restraint. In his notes he writes of the plays: "Immensely too much is unnaturally colored—the sentiment is piled on, similes, comparisons, defiances, exaltation, immortalities, bestowed upon themes certainly not worthy the same, thus losing proportion."⁷⁵ Whitman always reminds us, nevertheless, that it is unfair to pick and choose from the rich profusion which Shakespeare left. Shakespeare was a master artist who, although he "often fell down in his own wreckage," has an unequalled place in the evolution of poetry.⁷⁶ The deepest soul must feel shame, Whitman writes in *November Boughs*, to criticize the great playwright's wonderfully fertile and varied art.⁷⁷ Shakespeare is, after all, the sun of English literature,⁷⁸ the only "first class" genius in that literature;⁷⁹ and it is hopeless to attempt to measure scientifically "the dazzle of his sunlike beams."⁸⁰

In his *Democratic Vistas* Whitman writes that the great poems of Shakespeare and his kind are "poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life-blood of democracy."⁸¹ There was

⁷⁰ In *November Boughs*, VI, pp. 125-126.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, pp. 222-223.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

⁷⁵ "Notes and Fragments," IX, pp. 76-77.

⁷⁶ Traubel, I, p. 136.

⁷⁷ "A Thought on Shakspeare," VI, pp. 126-127.

⁷⁸ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 208.

⁷⁹ "British Literature," in *Collect*, V, pp. 276-277.

⁸⁰ "A Thought on Shakspeare," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 127.

⁸¹ *Democratic Vistas*, V, p. 99.

much in Shakespeare which Whitman found utterly offensive: not only did he suggest feudalism, but in his works he was "incarcerated, unpromising feudalism" itself.⁸² Fully conscious of Shakespeare's dazzling genius, Whitman still felt a most distasteful hint of snobbishness in his writings. This was a quality Whitman did not find in the ancient Oriental poetry, the Homeric epics, the *Cid*, the stories of the Bible, or in *Don Quixote*.⁸³ Instead of snobbishness, these works contained notions acceptable in a democracy. In Shakespearean productions, Whitman says, democratic notions are made the victims of new insults on almost every page. And he sums up most British literature as material and sensual in content, cold and stately in tone, and anti-democratic; he calls it moody and melancholy in the main.⁸⁴ The "dragon-rancors and stormy feudal splendor of medieval caste" were all right for Shakespeare's time, but Whitman was convinced that dragon-rancors had no meaning in America.⁸⁵

Shakespeare wrote not for the common man, the laborer and his wife, but he wrote for the court, the youths of title, and the gentry; he had no other audience, Whitman says.⁸⁶ Shakespeare may be respected as the most sublime of singers to whom life has given voice, but his affiliations seemed to Whitman to be essentially with a buried past.⁸⁷ The conditions, standards, politics, sociologies, and ranges of belief of the past can—happily—never again be realized. Therefore, even though the elements of human experience they depict are not radically changed, the writings of Shakespeare are not vital for all time, but have significance only as documents of an age past.

Alarmed by his friend's apparent blasphemy, Jonathan Trumbull wrote for *Poet Lore*, in 1890, an article called "Walt Whitman's View of Shakespeare." Trumbull pointed out that Whitman had reverence for Shakespeare; but he found difficulty in explaining Whitman's insistence that the plays be relegated to a mere historical position in literature. The essay "A Thought on Shakespeare" was most disappointing and perplexing, Trumbull admitted.⁸⁸ He found it necessary to infer, from all Whitman wrote, that Shakespeare's work was recognized simply as art which proves inadequate when subjected to the tests of democratic criticism in America. Trumbull's conclusion was that he and his compatriots would have to accept both Shakespeare and Whitman and place the two great poets on equal footing. Both of them "are singing of humanity, which

⁸² "British Literature," in *Collect*, V, p. 276.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁸⁵ "A Thought on Shakespeare," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 124.

⁸⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 115.

⁸⁷ "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, p. 53.

⁸⁸ II (July, 1890), p. 368.

knows no distinction of persons.”⁸⁹ Trumbull ended on a note of doubt, however: he was not certain he had understood the Good Gray Poet aright after all, in spite of Whitman’s “noble simplicity.”⁹⁰ A few months later Whitman wrote a reply to Trumbull in the same publication. In his letter to the editor he suggests that one important consideration had been overlooked, and he quotes at length from his *November Boughs* for support. “The Old World,” he maintains,

is the region of the poetry of concrete and real things.—the past, the aesthetic, palaces, etiquette, the literature of war and love, the mythological gods, and the myths anyhow. But the New World (America) is the region of the future, and its poetry must be spiritual and democratic. Evolution is not the rule in Nature, in Politics, and Inventions only, but in verse. . . . Then science, the final critic of all, has the casting vote for “future poetry.”⁹¹

These words of Whitman were no more satisfying to Trumbull than they are to a modern reader; and the next year he wrote again for *Poet Lore* on the same subject. In “The Whitman-Shakespeare Question” he expresses anew his bewilderment at finding one of his two favorite poets at odds with the other.⁹² Now, however, he hopes he has found a solution: he refers to Whitman’s placing of Shakespeare as supreme in his phase of the evolution of poetry. What Whitman really means, Trumbull thinks, is that America requires a poet greater than any Elizabethan poet, greater in proportion to the progress by which American has distinguished herself from Elizabethan England. Shall we love Shakespeare less and Whitman more? he queries. Shall we give up our Shakespeare? No, this is not necessary, Trumbull decides.⁹³ But one question still torments him: “Is it a foolish stretch of the imagination and sentiment to feel, or imagine we feel, the grand personality of the man Shakespeare through his works? To give up that idea seems much like giving up our Shakespeare, after all; yet it seems impossible to find distinct traces of the idea in Whitman’s words concerning Shakespeare.”⁹⁴ Trumbull’s bewilderment is obvious. He could perhaps have found some satisfaction in Whitman’s “Poetry of the Future,” published ten years earlier in the *North American Review*. There one is told that no matter how feudal castles, courts, etiquettes, or their hovering ghosts might scowl at rude life in democratic Kansas or Kentucky, Kansas and Kentucky “may by no means repudiate or leave out the former.”⁹⁵ But this would not stand as solution for the whole

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ “Shakespeare for America,” in *Poet Lore*, II (Sept., 1890), p. 493.

⁹² III (Dec., 1891), p. 626.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 629.

⁹⁵ “Poetry To-Day in America,” in *Collect*, V, p. 212.

problem. Trumbull would have had to recognize and accept Whitman's double-standard of literary criticism to clear away his doubts.

It was in a strange attempt to make for Shakespeare a bed of Procrustes from this double-standard of criticism that Whitman became interested in William O'Connor's "plan." Whitman rebelled at the treatment of Joan of Arc and Jack Cade in *Henry IV*, and wrote that Shakespeare's subordination of the lower classes fed the aristocratic vanity of the young noblemen and gentlemen and "feed them in England yet."⁹⁶ Whitman found pleasure in the vivid pageantry of the historical plays, and yet he was constantly reminded that in them were apparently vicious attacks upon his beloved democracy. A dilemma moved about annoyingly in his mind: he did not know whether to accept or wholly damn. He found a solution, or a refuge at least, in the revealing "plan" which O'Connor found lurking behind Shakespeare's historical plays. It is impossible, Whitman writes, to grasp the whole cluster of those plays without thinking of them as the result of an essentially controlling plan.⁹⁷ This is true despite the fact that we know the first part of *Henry VI* to have been written as early as 1591 and *Henry VIII* to have been written as late as 1612, under vastly different circumstances. Whitman accepts in its entirety O'Connor's theory that there is an ulterior design in the historical plays: one which time and criticism will wholly reveal. Such plays as *Henry VI* and *King John* have an effect of depressing gloom: surely their purpose is not to make one approve of the times they depict. Episodes such as those in which Jack Cade and Joan of Arc figure are interpolated to throw critics of Elizabethan times off the scent, Whitman blandly suggests.⁹⁸ Shakespeare was dangerously but cautiously exposing the faults of feudal life. Whitman defies anyone to escape the significance of O'Connor's theory, and he likens the new-found information to momentous writing in magic ink, which was invisible until warmed by the fire.⁹⁹

Would it not be strange, Whitman asks, if the author of *Othello* and *Hamlet* were destined to be known chiefly for the *exposé* of feudal political theory and its results, "of the reason-why and necessity for them which America has come on earth to abnegate and replace?"¹⁰⁰ America-loving Whitman thinks that perhaps a future generation of critics, scrutinizing their materials with patient eyes, might discover in Shakespeare's historical plays—those plays which Whitman liked best—the suggestion for modern democracy. In them one might find, upon examining the morbid

⁹⁶ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 75.

⁹⁷ "What Lurks Behind Shakspeare's Historical Plays," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 121.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

feudal characters and institutions they portray, a potent criticism of an entire decadent world which was sore in need of such a catharsis as Whitman's own democratic America afforded. This, Whitman is certain, was the more or less conscious purpose of the genius who fashioned "those marvellous architectonics."¹⁰¹

We have examined Whitman's estimation of Shakespeare as a dramatist, as a depicter of characters and their passions, and as an over-rich stylist. Shakespeare has been nominated by Whitman for a place second only to one or two of the ancient Greeks, and he is singled out from all English writers as the greatest. Even in America, Whitman admits, "Shakespeare has served, and serves, maybe, the best of any."¹⁰² But Whitman had little success in fitting one aspect of Shakespeare's work into the requirements of America: Shakespeare was offensively feudal. Even Whitman's eager grasp at a "plan" for the historical plays did not really solve the problem for him. Shakespeare had to be damned, then, as a writer for aristocrats: his position in the future of democratic America was an uncertain one.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

III

TENNYSON

Yes, Alfred Tennyson's is a superb character, and will help give illustriousness, through the long roll of time, to our Nineteenth Century. In its bunch of orbic names, shining like a constellation of stars, his will be one of the brightest. His very faults, doubts, swervings, doublings upon himself, have been typical of our age.

—From "A Word About Tennyson."

Whitman repeatedly named Lord Tennyson as Shakespeare's successor: and he believed he understood Tennyson and his writings. This was more than Tennyson could say for Whitman, however; he came only to the unsatisfactory conclusion that the American poet was a "great big something."¹ Tennyson was rather amusedly fond of the boisterous American, and he praised the fine quality of spirit which he felt throughout *Leaves of Grass*. His chief criticism of Whitman's poetry was that a lack of form made it often "quite unreadable."²

Among the papers in Whitman's scrapbooks, there was found a long magazine article on "Tennyson's Poems—The Princess," much scored.³ "The Princess" was by no means Whitman's favorite among Tennyson's works, however. This is indicated by a note which praises "Ulysses" as redeeming "a hundred *Princesses* and *Mauds*."⁴ The work of a "great master" is evident in "Ulysses," Whitman wrote;⁵ he was appreciative, as many other critics have been, of the heroic quality of that poem, and he was appreciative of its feeling of aspiration for action, enduring all things. Of "Maud" he had nothing good to say: his comment is that "Maud" will not live long, that it is merely a love-story, and a rather affected and wearisome one at that, despite its "sweet passages."⁶ "De Profundis" pleased Whitman. He said it sounded to him like the music of an organ.⁷ The characters in *Idylls of the King* seemed "lofty, devoted, and starlike" to Whitman;⁸ and he wrote lyrically of the "sumptuous, perfumed, arras-and-gold Nature" in the *Idylls*.⁹ He mentioned the "strange dalliance" of

¹ Emory Hollowy, *op. cit.*, p. 254.

² Quoted by Hallam Tennyson, *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A memoir by His Son*, 12 vols., London, 1899, IV, p. 112.

³ "Notes and Fragments," X, p. 67.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IX, p. 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

⁷ John Bailey, *Walt Whitman*, London, 1926, p. 46.

⁸ "The Bible as Poetry," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 106.

⁹ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 210.

Vivien and Merlin, the "death-float" of fair Elaine, the long journey of "disgraced" Enid, and the plight of Geraint in the wood.¹⁰

The musical charm in Tennyson's choice of words did not pass unnoticed by Whitman. One reads that such a line as "And hollow, hollow, hollow, all delight," from "The Passing of Arthur," is indeed an excellent one among many.¹¹ In "A Word About Tennyson," Whitman mentions "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Deserted House" as being musically pleasurable.¹² He mentions lingering again and again over "The Lotus Eaters," "The Northern Farmer," and "Lucretius"; and he says he would not wish to give up his pleasure in minor poems like "Break, Break," or "Flower in the Crannied Wall," or "Edward Gray."¹³ But all that Whitman had to say of Tennyson was not flattering. He did not find felicitous versification enough to provide full poetic excellence.

In his essay on Tennyson, Whitman writes in halting phrases of "Locksley Hall" as "morbid, heart-broken, finding fault with everything, especially the fact of money's being made (as it ever must be, and perhaps should be) the paramount matter in worldly affairs; 'Every door is barr'd with gold, and opens but to golden keys.'"¹⁴ Whitman is not pleased that the woman in the poem is proved false; and he says that Tennyson's reflections are also false—"at any rate for America."¹⁵

Tennyson was another of the great poets of the world who were refused recognition by Whitman as proper singers for American ears. But Whitman could not bring himself to call the author of the *Idylls* an enemy of America,¹⁶ even though he did call him "the imitation of Shakespeare, through a refined, educated, traveled, modern English dandy."¹⁷ Whitman designated himself as the proper judge of Tennyson's place in the New World: and he found that, first of all, Tennyson was a rugged and healthy force, for his "moral line" was both vital and sincere.¹⁸ Whitman quotes his friend John Burrough's phrase concerning Tennyson as an apt one: "His glove is a glove of silk, but the hand is a hand of iron."¹⁹ Tennyson seemed elegant, and a little queer; but he had, at the same time, a virile moral power.

But virile moral power and a charm of words cannot alone make Tennyson suited to democracy. In "Poetry To-Day in America," Whitman

¹⁰ *Democratic Vistas*, V, p. 223.

¹¹ "A Word About Tennyson," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 146.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 143, 145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹⁷ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 127.

¹⁸ "A Word About Tennyson," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 145.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

writes that Tennyson's poetry is of the highest order of verbal melody, "exquisitely clean and pure," but he says that it is almost always "perfumed like the tuberose, to an extreme of sweetness."²⁰ Whitman objects to the knights and feudal chivalry in Tennyson's poems, and he objects to their atmosphere of idleness, *ennui*, brocade and satin. Tennyson's poems are only attractive and sweetly scented flowers; but Whitman admits that flowers "are at least as profound as anything."²¹

On the one hand, Whitman can say that not even Shakespeare outdoes Tennyson in going deep into "those exquisitely touch'd and half-hidden hints and indirections left like faint perfumes in the crevices of the lines."²² And on the other hand, he can speak with bitterness of Tennyson's complete lack of democratic thought.²³ He can speak admiringly of Tennyson's versification and then point with disgust at his sycophantic dedication of *Idylls of the King* to the crowned rulers of England.²⁴ Whitman's criticism of Tennyson's works is based upon a double standard.

²⁰ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 209.

²¹ "Old Poets," in *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VI, p. 294.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 295.

²³ *Democratic Vistas*, V, p. 210.

²⁴ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 210.

IV

FOUR FROM ABROAD

I add that—while England is among the greatest of lands in political freedom, or the idea of it, and in stalwart personal character, &c.—the spirit of English literature is not great, at least is not greatest—and its products are no models for us.

—From "British Literature"

Breaking loose is the thing to do: breaking loose, resenting the bonds, opening new ways.

—Walt Whitman to Horace Traubel

SIR WALTER SCOTT

There were three names that Whitman associated with the highest achievement in English literature: beside Shakespeare and Tennyson stood Sir Walter Scott. Whitman acknowledged these three as England's chief claim to literary excellence; and all three, grand as they were to him, were doomed in America because they sang of a doomed feudal life.

Second only to the *Arabian Nights*, the adolescent Whitman chose Scott's novels and poetry as best.¹ And in his sixteenth year he became possessor of a huge volume of Scott's complete poems. He read all the poems thoroughly, and he read the ballads of the Border Minstrelsy over again and again.² Like Homer, and like Shakespeare, Scott impressed Whitman as one of the "limners and recorders" of literature and as a master of the depiction of characters and events.³ Whitman considered Scott's novels in some respects unsurpassed; and he praised especially *The Heart of Midlothian* as the best of them.⁴ "Who," he asks, "will not follow Jeanie Deans with every warm feeling on her adventurous journey to London?" In artistic considerations, *The Heart of Midlothian* seemed flawless to Whitman, and he felt that it had the power to absorb deeply any reader's interest.⁵ But Whitman's praise was not untempered: he was alarmed that Scott should make his wonderfully-delineated nobles appear at such advantage over "patriots and peasants."⁶

"The Anti-Democratic Bearing of Scott's Novels" is a title which indicates Whitman's point of view. He might find artistic perfection and absorbing interest in the novels; but there is no good to be found in the

¹ *Specimen Days*, IV, p. 18.

² "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," III, p. 55 (note).

³ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 84.

⁴ "The Anti-Democratic Bearing of Scott's Novels," in *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 264.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265.

sympathetic depiction of monarchs hostile to democracy. "In the long line of those warriors for liberty," Whitman writes,

and those large hearted lovers of *men* before *classes* of men, which English history has recorded upon its annals, and which form for the fast anchored isle a greater glory than her first Richard, or her tyrannical Stuarts, Scott has not thought fit to be illustrated by his pen. In him as in Shakspeare, (though in a totally different method) "there's such divinity does hedge a king," as makes them something more than mortal—and though this way of description may be good for poets or loyalists, it is poisonous for freemen. The historical characters of Scott's books, too, are not the characters of truth. He frequently gets the shadow on the wrong face. Cromwell, for instance, was in the main, and even with severe faults, a heroic champion of his countrymen's rights—and the young Stuart was from top to toe a licentious, selfish, deceitful, and unprincipled man, giving his fastest friends to the axe and his subjects to plunder, when a spark of true manly nerve would have saved both. But the inference to be drawn from Scott's representation of these two men makes a villain a good natured pleasant gentleman, and the honest ruler a blood-seeking hypocrite!"

"Shame on such truckling!"⁷ Whitman says in concluding his analysis of Scott's shortcomings.

This criticism of the anti-democratic influence of British literature is expanded in "Poetry To-Day in America." There Whitman states conclusively that Scott, like Tennyson and Shakespeare, personifies the "principle of caste which we Americans have come on earth to destroy."⁸ He refers to Jefferson's comment that the Waverley novels make the aristocracy glamorous while contemptuously subordinating common men.

But, with the memory of his boyhood pleasure in the ballads and the novels, Whitman could not be entirely harsh with Scott. He felt that, like every American, he owed a debt of thanks to "the noblest, healthiest, cheeriest romancer that ever lived."⁹

CHARLES DICKENS

In 1888 Whitman told Horace Traubel that his general feeling toward Dickens was one of great admiration: "I acknowledge him without question: he will live."¹⁰ When he reviewed the first volume of *Dombey and Son*, Whitman wrote that he thought "little Paul" was one of Dickens's most convincing characters.¹¹ Four months later, probably upon reading the rest of the work, he wrote that, aside from Paul and Edith, all the characters in *Dombey and Son* were make-shift imitations.¹² *A Tale of Two Cities* was given rather detailed criticism by Whitman. He liked the

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 265-266.

⁸ "Poetry To-Day in America," in *Collect*, V, p. 209.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Traubel, II, p. 553.

¹¹ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 296.

¹² *Ibid.*

vivid scenes of the "stormy winter night's mail coach adventure, and the spilling of the cask of wine in the streets of Paris."¹³

Dickens's later novels were distressing to many who had once been enthusiastic concerning his work. Whitman agreed that *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, and *Little Dorritt* did not approach Dickens's early standard; but even they had enough of excellence to convince him that none but a great novelist could have written them.¹⁴

When Dickens was being fêted in New York, Whitman wrote that he considered him a truly "democratic author"¹⁵—rare praise indeed from Whitman! Such an author he defined as one who tends to destroy the "old landmarks which pride and fashion have set up, making impossible distinctions between the brethren of the Great Family," one who exposes tyranny, and one who causes men to love their neighbors.¹⁶ Whitman found impressive the contrast Dickens draws by placing wicked characters beside good ones.¹⁷ Specifically, he mentioned *Oliver Twist*, *Squeers*, *Pickwick*, *Weller*, the *Fat Boy*, *Dick Swiveller*, the *Marchioness*, *Kit*, *Miggs*, *Joe Willett*, *Kate Nickleby*, the *Cheeryble Brothers*, *poor Nell*, and *G. Varden*.¹⁸ This list of characters affords evidence of Whitman's acquaintance with *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Barnaby Rudge*, beyond the several novels by Dickens he reviewed in his newspaper column. And in each, democratic thought was the chief virtue.

The concern with low life in Dickens's work seemed a wholesome one to Whitman, for he saw that Dickens never maligned the common man merely to subordinate him to nobility in the fashion of Scott. Dickens "puts the searing iron to wickedness, whether among rich or poor," Whitman wrote.¹⁹ He was the one novelist Whitman singled out for the title of "democratic writer."

In opposition to all his praise of Dickens, Whitman wrote a sentence in his notes which is not a little surprising. "Bring in a sockdologer on the Dickens-fawners,"²⁰ one reads in the midst of uncompleted sentences on literature in general.

THOMAS CARLYLE

It is possible to trace Whitman's interest in Carlyle from his first surprised reading of *Heroes and Hero Worship* to his reverie on the occasion

¹³ *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 70.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁵ "Boz and Democracy," in *Rivulets of Prose*, p. 23.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

²⁰ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 197.

of Carlyle's death. At first the Scot's style of writing seemed to Whitman only weird, on the verge of the grotesque. He wrote that great writers never achieve anything of worth by mere virtue of a new and startling style. Style seemed to him "much as dress in society," in which conformity is more desirable than oddity.²¹ Hidden beneath the tortuous style of *Heroes and Hero Worship* the youthful Whitman discerned "noble thoughts" of a democrat who "is quick to champion the downtrodden, and earnest in his wrath at tyranny." But Carlyle's democratic thought in this book was praised only in spite of his style. The verdict on *Sartor Resartus* did not differ. It was a volume written in its author's same "strange wild way," and its profundities were deep-hidden.²²

In *The French Revolution* Carlyle wrote of a democratic subject for which Whitman should have evinced enthusiasm. He was to call Hazlitt's *Napoleon* a noble and grand work; but in reviewing Carlyle's history of the Revolution, he talked of copyright laws and concluded with a brief sentence to the effect that "Mr. Carlyle's genius" was too broad to be dealt with in a short newspaper notice.²³ With the reading of *Past, Present, and Chartism*, Whitman began to find Carlyle's style no longer an objection, and he called it "strangely agreeable."²⁴ He wrote that the more one reads Carlyle the more one becomes fascinated by him. He found something pleasant in Carlyle's "weird, wild way—his phrases, welded together as it were, with strange twistings of the terminations of words—his startling suggestions—his taking up, fishhook like, certain matters of abuse. . . ." ²⁵ By the time Whitman came to review the first part of the extensive and ambitious *History of Frederick II of Prussia*, two years after his first review of Carlyle's work, he no longer found any difficulty in the style at all. Instead, he spoke with approval of the "Carlyleish and characteristic . . . outbursts of eloquence couched in language as startling."²⁶

One is amused to read in *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, the record of the poet's last years, that he was pleased to pretend that he had never found any difficulty whatever in reading Carlyle's works.²⁷ "It seems to me," he said, "Carlyle's style is the expression of the man—natural, strong, right, for him. I know what is everywhere being said about his style, but I do not see what the objectors want."²⁸ But this was not Whitman's only pretense. In 1888 he complained that Carlyle's "Frederick is much too big a big thing . . . to tackle at this late day. . . . I do not believe the book

²¹ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, pp. 290-291.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 291.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 292-293.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 68.

²⁷ Traubel, II, p. 106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

would interest me a great deal anyhow.”²⁹ This is the book he had professed to review many years before. He admitted that he had looked into it once, but he said that it was necessarily unsuccessful because describing a battle “is like trying to photograph a tempest.”³⁰

On the occasion of Carlyle’s death early in 1881, Whitman wrote of the author whose works he had reviewed thirty-five years before. “And so the fame of the lamp,” he began, “after long wasting and flickering, has gone out entirely.”

As a representative author, a literary figure, no man else will bequeath to the future more significant hints of our stormy era, its fierce paradoxes, its din, and its struggling parturition period, than Carlyle. He belongs to our own branch of the stock, too; neither Latin nor Greek, but altogether Gothic. Rugged, mountainous, volcanic, he was himself more a French revolution than any of his volumes. In some respects, so far in the nineteenth century, the best equipt, keenest mind, even from a college point of view, of all Britain; only he had an ailing body.³¹

It is to be remembered that in his review of *Heroes and Hero Worship* Whitman chose to compliment Carlyle by calling him a democratic writer. Now after Carlyle’s death, Whitman found in Carlyle “short-comings, even positive blur spots, from the American point of view.”³² But he saw as Carlyle’s chief talent, beyond literary ability, his agitated questioning into the self-complacency of the time: “How he shakes our comfortable reading circles with a touch of the old Hebraic anger and prophecy. . . .”³³ Carlyle was to be applauded for his criticism of some feudal tendencies and for his indictment of the wealthy aristocrats and the “stupendous hoggishness” of their system.³⁴ But Whitman suspected that there were some feudal, or at least anti-democratic, tendencies in Carlyle himself.

Later, when Froude’s memoirs had been published, Whitman wrote in more detail of Carlyle’s place in the democratic scheme of America. In this new essay Whitman conjectures as to what Carlyle’s nature might have been, had he lived in America, “recuperated by the cheering realities and activity of our people and country, . . . inhaling and exhaling our limitless air and eligibilities.”³⁵ Then there would have been no hypochondriac, no “British Hamlet,” to write *Sartor Resartus*. By not living in Kansas or Tennessee, Carlyle moved in a “whirl of fog and fury,” mistakenly seeing only the heroes of the world, contemptuous of republicanism and democracy.³⁶ *Democratic Vistas*, with its insistence upon faith

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Specimen Days*, IV, pp. 305-306.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

over despair, was written by Whitman largely as an answer to Carlyle's "Shooting Niagara," a criticism of the democratic system.³⁷ In "Carlyle From American Points of View" he deals with Carlyle more explicitly. Whitman writes that in many ways "Carlyle was indeed, as Froude terms him, one of those far-off Hebraic utterers, a new Micah or Habbakuk. . . . But while he announces the malady, and scolds and raves about it, he himself, born and bred in the same atmosphere, is a mark'd illustration of it."³⁸

Whitman called Carlyle the most significant of modern men;³⁹ and he called him "that terrible octopus."⁴⁰ "I seem to have all sorts of feelings about Carlyle," Whitman explained to Traubel, "from freezes to thaws and back again."⁴¹ Here, again, was for Whitman an example of an undemocratic writer. Shakespeare reflected the full glory of feudalism; Scott wove it into vivid novels; Tennyson sang its dirge. Carlyle, exalting heroes, was its chief philosopher. His convictions were "earnest and genuine,"⁴² and he was a great and important writer; but he was not for America.

ROBERT BURNS

Although Whitman's criticism of Burns is perhaps his most satisfying, it is limited almost to a single essay. There are several references to Burns in Whitman's lists of the world's great poets, however, and there is a paragraph in the notes which succinctly compasses Burns's whole life. To the extended criticism in "Robert Burns as Poet and Person," this paragraph from the notes may serve as preface:

Burns 1759-1795. By his poems Burns was faithful to lowly things, customs, idioms, Scotland, the lasses, the peasants, and to his own robust nature. He was often hard up, an improvident freehanded man. His poems succeeded—he made £500, an immense sum. He took a farm, was appointed excisemen (£75 a year) lived two or three years in that way, drank, sickened, died.⁴³

Burns is, with Dickens, one of the few writers made acceptable to America by virtue of a democratic attitude. Many things about him and his poems endeared him to America. Whitman calls him a republican, a "good-natured, warm-blooded, proud-spirited" middle-class man.⁴⁴

Like a careful critic, Whitman suggests first the nature of the era in which Burns lived, with its Voltaire, Washington, Goethe, Napoleon, and

³⁷ Emory Holloway, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

³⁸ *Specimen Days*, IV, pp. 322-324.

³⁹ Traubel, II, p. 300.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, I, p. 193.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, II, p. 400.

⁴² *Specimen Days*, IV, p. 316.

⁴³ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 82.

⁴⁴ "Robert Burns as Poet and Person," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 128.

the Revolutions of America and France.⁴⁵ He sketches in the poet, in his Scotch country by-place, against this background. Making use of Burns's letters, Whitman quotes his reference to the simple words and tunes suggested to him by the "Scotch home-singers." The simple songs in dialect, Whitman writes, are fascinating largely because of Burns's meteoric career behind them—"the general bleakness of his lot, his ingrain'd pensiveness, his brief dash into dazzling, tantalizing evanescent sunshine—finally culminating in those last years of his life, his being taboo'd and in debt, sick and sore, yaw'd as by contending gales."⁴⁶ Whitman sees Burns's songs as essentially those of "illicit loves and carousing intoxication"; but this choice of subject matter is not to be decried. It sprang naturally from the common life Burns led, a life with none of the "ease and velvet and rosewood and copious royalties" of Tennyson, for instance. Burns, the ploughman, signifies to Whitman proof that laboring classes may produce poets as easily as the nobility.⁴⁷

There is no unifying purpose or philosophy underlying Burns's work, as there is underlying that of Whitman's; but it is not considered less valuable by Whitman because of that. Burns does not lack purpose in a general sense, for Whitman finds that the celebration of "work-a-day agricultural labor and life," with all its color and diversity, is purpose enough.⁴⁸ But there is further significance in Burns's work. Whitman admonished Traubel to read the poems with great care, skipping nothing: "Burns will do things for you no one else can do."⁴⁹ Whitman described Burns as a man who was all heart and Scotch, "which means human," from top to toe.⁵⁰ "He is as dear to me as my old clothes," Whitman said.⁵¹

In Burns, then, there is at last a poet to be placed beside democratic Dickens as suitable for America; but Whitman does not give him this exalted position without some reservation. Burns attempted none of the grand and heroic themes of Homer, Æschylus, or Shakespeare. His are mere simple melodies. He must not, then, be compared to Shakespeare, even though his work has the enlightenment of democratic thought while Shakespeare's is monarchical.⁵² Even Burns, Whitman said, went against his independence to adhere to the "brainless dynasty" of the Stuarts. If there is no sublime grandeur, there is a raw, "home-brew'd flavor" in Burns's poems, appearing even in his titles. Whitman names, among others, "Last May a Braw Wooer," "Merry Hae I Been Teething a Heckle,"

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

⁴⁹ Traubel, II, p. 247.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

⁵² "Robert Burns as Poet and Person," in *November Boughs*, VI, p. 128.

and "Lay Thy Loof in Mine, Lass."⁵³ The raw quality in these titles, and in the poems, is to be praised, for it serves as refreshment after the sleek, polished work of aristocratic poets. Whitman selects as Burns's most characteristic poems, "The Jolly Beggars," his "Rigs o' Barley," "Scotch Drink," "The Epistle to John Rankins," "Holy Willie's Prayer," and "Hallowe'en."⁵⁴ These poems call out in Burn's own voice: "I, Rob, am here."⁵⁵

Whitman notes Burns's cantering rhyme, and he notes its tendency to become doggerel, the "steel-flashes of wit":⁵⁶ and he characterizes Burns, finally as remaining to him "the tenderest, manliest, and (even if contradiction) dearest flesh-and-blood figure in all the streams and clusters of by-gone poets."⁵⁷

Burns's place in the literature of the world is this: he is to be praised almost above all others, above Shakespeare and Tennyson, as a poet of the people; but as an artist he is not even to be compared to Shakespeare and Tennyson. This is the obvious conclusion to which anyone must come. Here Whitman's use of the double standard is unusually well suited; and his final rejection on the one hand, and his whole-hearted acceptance on the other, make his judgment a wise one.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

V

FOUR AMERICANS

Do you call those genteel little creatures American poets?

—From *Democratic Vistas*.

To all which we conclude, and repeat the terrible query: American National Literature—is there distinctively any such thing, or can there ever be?

—From "American National Literature."

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

In 1865 Emerson wrote to Carlyle that he would perhaps send him a volume of poems called *Leaves of Grass*. The book was, he told Carlyle, "a nondescript monster, which yet had terrible eyes and buffalo strength, and was indisputably American. . . ." ¹ The author of the nondescript monster was a man who had been profoundly influenced by Emerson and had delightedly received praise from him in the form of felicitations at the beginning of a great career.

As early as 1847 Whitman had quoted from one of Emerson's speeches in the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*; ² and he commented on the poem "Brahma" in the *Times* in 1857. ³ "Brahma" had just appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and it was being ridiculed on a charge of unintelligibility. Whitman endeavored to defend it, suggesting Emerson's pantheistic thought and remarking upon the grace and melody of expression. He found that the little poem had special meaning; and he pointed out that Emerson's work was distinguished, as a whole, by special meaning. In his notes he wrote that the chief excellence of Emerson's writings lay in their great pertinence. Emerson may be obscure, Whitman wrote,

. . . but he is certain. . . He has what none else has; he does what none else does. He pierces the crusts that envelope the secrets of life. He joins on equal terms the few great sages and original seers. He represents the freeman, America, the individual. He represents the gentleman. No teacher or poet of old times made a better report of many and womanly qualities, heroism, chastity, temperance, friendship, fortitude. None has given more beautiful accounts of truth and justice. ⁴

Later, of course, Whitman was to have the pleasure of personal association with Emerson. Their relationship of elder and younger brother was maintained through most of their acquaintance. Whitman subordinated himself, or was subordinated, to the more experienced poet. Whit-

¹ See the *Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1834-1872* (ed. C. E. Norton), Boston, 1888.

² *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 270.

³ *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 64.

⁴ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 159.

man did not, however, always accept Emerson "with grudging loyalty," as Vernon L. Parrington has suggested.⁵ Piqued, perhaps, by Emerson's criticism of sensuality in his work, Whitman finally went so far as to write to a friend that "if I were to unbosom to you in the matter I should say that I never cared so very much for E's writings, prose or poems. . . ."⁶ But he was untruthful. He had previously written that among the poets of America, Emerson stood at the head.⁷ He praised Emerson for his "sweet, vital tasting melody, rhym'd philosophy, and poems as amber-clear as the honey of the wild bee he loves to sing."⁸

In 1881 Whitman visited the aged Emerson in Concord. On the first evening numerous persons were present ("My friend A. B. Alcott and his daughter Louisa were there early"), but Whitman sat where he could watch Emerson closely. He noticed the "sweetness" of expression which was combined with a "cold-peering aspect."⁹ The next day he had dinner at the Emerson home and spent several hours there. The pride with which Whitman records such details indicates his respect and affection for Emerson the man as well as for Emerson the author. A little over a year later Whitman was standing beside his friend's grave, remembering him as a "just man, poised on himself, all-loving, all-inclosing, and sane and clear as the sun."¹⁰

In his attempt at evaluation of Emerson's literary worth, Whitman begins with the adverse criticism he considers necessary. Emerson's pages are "perhaps too perfect, too concentrated," he writes.¹¹ Emerson seems greatest to him, not as poet or artist, or teacher, but as a critic or "diagnoser." Emerson is a good critic: he does not give way to passion, but is dominated by a cold intellectuality; he does not take any one side, but is aware of all sides of any issue.¹² Whitman writes that Emerson's final influence is to make his disciples believe in nothing outside themselves. And for that reason, although his books will be an important experience, one will not turn to them in "solemnest or dying hours."¹³ Emerson is not vigorous enough for Whitman, or close enough to the people, to stand among the immortals; Whitman finds that his polite poems have something of the quaintness of Waller's or Lovelace's, and not enough true greatness.¹⁴ Contradictory though Whitman's criticism of Emerson may

⁵ *Main Currents in American Thought*, 3 vols, New York, 1927, III, p. 78.

⁶ William Kennedy, *Reminiscences of Walt Whitman*, Paisley, Scotland, 1896, p. 76.

⁷ *Specimen Days*, V, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

seem, he explains his change of attitude as being that of everyone who, like him, reads Emerson's writings with reverence and then passes through "this stage of exercise."¹⁵

But although Whitman told Traubel that he had finally relegated Emerson to second place in American poetry, beneath Bryant,¹⁶ he also told Traubel that "the wonderful heart and soul" of Emerson, "present in all he writes, thinks, does, hopes," went a long way toward "justifying the whole literary business."¹⁷

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

In his notes Whitman made the observation that Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is a "pleasing ripply poem."¹⁸ He made no display of enthusiasm, but he said that "the measure, the absence of ideas, the Indian process of thought, the droning metre, the sleepy, misty, woody character, the traditions, pleased me well enough."¹⁹ In conversation Whitman spoke of Longfellow not as a creator but as a scholar and translator and adapter—"adapter and adopter!" He accused Longfellow of having borrowed many of the elements in *Hiawatha*. And he asked: "But did an Indian ever talk so? Was it not the man in the library who was doing the talking?"²⁰

Comment on *Hiawatha* comprises what is surely Whitman's most accurate judgment of Longfellow's work. When, at twenty-seven, he reviewed an edition of Longfellow's poems for the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle*, he spoke of the poet as "gifted by God" with talent to express beautiful thoughts in a beautiful manner.²¹ In the review Whitman argued for Longfellow's being placed beside Bryant and Wordsworth in rank: a combination of names which seems strange today. The little poem "Rain" pleased him because of its "startlingly wild and solemn thought," and he reprinted the poem in his column of reviews.²²

A year later Whitman exhibited respect for Longfellow's work in his review of *Evangeline*. His praise is sincere and unreserved, and it is also surprisingly conventional:

And so ends the poem like a solemn psalm, the essence of whole deep religious music still lives on in your soul, and becomes a part of you. You have soon turned over its few pages, scanned every line, you reached the issue of the story, and perhaps idly regret that there is no more of it,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁶ Traubel, II, p. 533.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I, p. 466.

¹⁸ "Notes and Fragments," IX, p. 156.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 156-157.

²⁰ Traubel, III, p. 549.

²¹ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 297.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

"But a thing of beauty is a joy forever"; and we may thank Mr. Longfellow for some hours of pure religious, living tranquillity of the soul.²³

One would probably look in vain for the sublimity in *Evangeline* which Whitman suggests he finds there.

In 1881 Whitman repaid a visit of Longfellow's and conversed with the poet in Boston. He was impressed by his host's "lit up face and glowing warmth and courtesy, in the modes of what is called the old school." At that time he felt that Longfellow's poems were distinguished by their "rich color, graceful forms and incidents—all that makes life beautiful and love refined."²⁴ The next year, while Whitman was in "an old forest haunt," news of Longfellow's death reached him. Shortly after, he wrote a final criticism of Longfellow.²⁵

Whitman felt that in his many works Longfellow was not only eminent in poetical style and form, but that he brought "what is always dearest as poetry to the general human heart and taste." Longfellow impressed Whitman as having been a poet of "melody, courtesy, deference," the "universal poet of women and young people." As a judge of poetry and as a translator of classics, Longfellow was given high place. But his poetical gifts were not to be minimized: Whitman thought that the movement of his poems was like that of a "strong and steady wind or tide. . . ." Longfellow had maintained a "splendid average," had not been given to undue pensiveness, had not avoided death as a theme.²⁶

It might seem consistent with his other criticism that Whitman should complain of Longfellow's lack of American feeling. In one place Whitman dismisses any such complaint, agreeing with Longfellow's own words to the effect that "ere the New World can be worthily original and announce herself and her own heroes, she must be well saturated with the originality of others, and respectfully consider the heroes that lived before Agamemnon."²⁷ It is Bliss Perry's belief that Longfellow has never been characterized more felicitously than by Whitman;²⁸ but that characterization is a double one: Whitman praised Longfellow; but he was not American enough. Whitman called him "reminiscent, polish'd, elegant, with the air of the finest conventional library, picture-gallery or parlor, with ladies and gentlemen in them, and plush and rosewood, and ground-glass lamps, and mahogany and ebony furniture, and a silver inkstand and scented

²³ *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, I, p. 134.

²⁴ *Specimen Days*, V, pp. 8-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 234.

²⁹ "Old Poets," in *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VI, p. 291.

paper to write on.”²⁹ Whitman finally went so far to rate Longfellow only fourth among American poets.³⁰

WILLIAM CULLEN BRYANT

In an editorial written in 1846, Whitman spoke of Bryant as a poet who “stands among the first in the world.”³¹ Whitman diluted his enthusiasm by admitting that “American criticism is given to superlatives,” but his judgment was still an over-estimate of Bryant’s excellence. And forty-two years later Whitman said that of all American poets he ranked Bryant as the best, going so extravagantly far as to say that “Bryant has all that was knotty, gnarled, in Dante, Carlyle. . . .”³² It is not difficult to understand why he might have made such an error in 1846, Norman Foerster comments, but it is difficult to understand why he maintained the judgment as late as 1888.³³ Whitman may have been impressed by Bryant’s “broad surveys and his American panoramas,” Louise Pound suggests;³⁴ and this explanation is perhaps the best one. When contrasting the merits of Bryant and Emerson, as he often did, Whitman said that “Bryant is more significant for his patriotism, Americanism, love of external nature, the woods, the sea, the skies, the rivers, and this at times, the objective features of it especially, seems to outweigh Emerson’s urgent intelligence and psychic depth.”³⁵

Writing in the Brooklyn *Daily Times*, Whitman called Bryant “one of the most lovable characters in the country.”³⁶ His affection and his respect for Bryant are always in evidence, even when he is admitting the inferiority of the work of Bryant’s last twenty years. He kindly made a generalization which did not exclude himself: “Old men are too apt to insist upon being in the swim after their virility is departed.”³⁷ Whitman liked to think that Bryant possessed the dignity of a

. . . bard of the river and the wood, ever conveying a taste of open air, with scents as from hayfields, grapes, birch-borders—always lurkingly fond of threnodies—beginning and ending his long career with chants of death, with here and there through all, poems, or passages of poems, touching the highest universal truths, enthusiasms, duties—morals as grim and eternal, if not as stormy and fateful, as anything in Eschylus.³⁸

³⁰ Traubel, II, p. 533.

³¹ *Gathering of the Forces*, II, p. 260.

³² Traubel, II, p. 532.

³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. xii.

³⁵ Traubel, I, p. 56.

³⁶ *I Sit and Look Out*, p. 66.

³⁷ Traubel, I, p. 69.

³⁸ *Specimen Days*, V, p. 9.

Whitman felt that no one could ask for more magnificent poems than Bryant's "The Battle-Field" and "A Forest Hymn."³⁹

Whitman was fully conscious of the discipline which differentiated Bryant's work from his own. He once amused himself by speculating as to what *Leaves of Grass* would be like if written in "Thanatopsisian verse."⁴⁰ "Bryant was trained in the classics," he said;⁴¹ "Bryant is a bit Greek," he said on another occasion;⁴² and again: "Bryant was built up of the Pope and Dryden school."⁴³ Although he respected Bryant's liking for "the stately measures prescribed by the old formula," and although he gave Bryant the extravagant praise with which we have just been concerned, Whitman nevertheless felt that breaking the old bonds of formality was a courageous and necessary thing. Whitman, himself, did break loose: "I expected hell: I got it: nothing that has occurred to me was a surprise: there probably is still more to come: that will not surprise me either."⁴⁴

JOHN GREENLEAF WHITTIER

Whittier, the Quaker poet, was not denied a place among the first four poets of America. To Whitman he seemed a figure grand enough, "but pretty lean and ascetic."⁴⁵ The severe moral tone in Whittier's work was accepted by Whitman because it was "wholly, beautifully genuine."⁴⁶ And Whitman was pleased to note, slyly, that Whittier's "moral eye did not prevent him from slopping over Burns: he did that at the first: he does it still—has done it this year."⁴⁷ In his most confusing, parenthetical manner, Whitman writes of Whittier as one who

. . . stands for morality (not in any all-accepting philosophic or Hegelian sense, but) filter'd through a Puritanical or Quaker filter—is incalculably valuable as a genuine utterance, (and the finest,)—with many local and Yankee and *genre* bits—all hues with anti-slavery coloring—(the *genre* and anti-slavery contributions all previous—all help.)⁴⁸

An attempt at succinct interpretation may more clearly give Whitman's impression of Whittier than his own gasping words. He recognized that the author of *Snow-Bound* was great in all the essentials of old New England, including zeal and moral energy. He recognized a kind of excellence in his verses which proceed with the "measur'd step of Crom-

³⁹ "Old Poets," in *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VI, p. 292.

⁴⁰ Traubel, II, p. 515.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, I, p. 222.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, III, p. 551.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

⁴⁵ "Old Poets," in *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VI, p. 292.

⁴⁶ Traubel, II, p. 552.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ "Old Poets," in *Good-By, My Fancy*, VI, p. 292.

well's old veterans."⁴⁹ But so far as his place in America was concerned, Whittier was not "universal and composite enough" for final acceptance on the basis of a double standard of judgment.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ *Specimen Days*, V, p. 9.

⁵⁰ "Old Poets," in *Good-Bye, My Fancy*, VI, p. 291.

VI

CONCLUSION

The foregoing study presents Walt Whitman's literary criticism as resting upon a double standard. In every piece of literature Whitman looked for artistic excellence, but he looked also for democratic purpose. If he found a combination of the two, as he almost never did, then the work which possessed them was truly great; if there was one without the other, the work deserved praise with reservation. For great literature Whitman prescribed restraint, originality, purpose, optimism, universality, concern with Nature, concern with contemporary life, and emphasis upon democracy. In the main, these are the essentials for literature of which Whitman spoke in his prefaces and elsewhere, but they have been determined here from his criticism alone.

Whitman found weakness in the excesses of Shakespeare, the bombast of Hugo, and the lurid detail of Byron. He preferred, instead, the measured music of Keats and Tennyson, and the subtleties of Coleridge. He found fault with Racine and Corneille because their work was based upon models. Where Emerson was rich with purpose and meaning, Poe was not; and Carlyle's pessimism made his work less commendable. Longfellow was too parlor-bound to be universal. Bryant imbued his works with Nature, while Shakespeare suffered by not having done so. Arnold seemed removed from contemporary affairs, and Goethe placed artist and poet in a world apart. Denying the common man his due, Homer wrote of god-descended dynastic houses, Wordsworth and Southey embraced kingcraft, Johnson was a fawner, and Shakespeare, Scott, and Tennyson represented three phases of feudalism.

Hegel was free enough to be acceptable in America, and Hazlitt was democratic and wholesome. Burns had sufficient democratic purpose, but he lacked a balancing quality of sublimity. Dickens, at his best, was a democratic writer who was an artist as well, a creator of excellent characters.

One's final inference is that the poet who was to combine all the prescribed virtues was Walt Whitman himself; and in occasional passages he does fulfil his requirements. He endeavored assuredly to be a democratic writer. Inconsistent in many ways, both in his poetry and in his prose, Whitman maintained consistency in his application of the double standard: he asked invariably for democratic implication as well as for artistic excellence.

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