

THE PROBLEM.

Pretty well up toward skylight and garret,
With none but herself to use or share it,
The schoolma'am sat in her room all alone;
The night was far spent yet her work was not
ended.

A rather tough job remained to be done,
Though she felt that her strength was well nigh ex-
pended.

Some books, full of figures, lay open before her—
A headachy chaos, both many and mazy—
A muddle that bothered her poor little head—
Of data to sift out the prompt from the lazy.

But at 'em she went, though she whimpered and
sighed;

Then added, subtracted, divided and—groaned;
Mixed means and extremes, got square root and—
cried;

Took fractional ratios, reduced 'em and—moaned;
Then adding again, she divided and scored,
Cube rooted, and worked up the tens and the
digits.

Till, fretted—dead reckoned—her fate she deplored,
And seemed like to die of the figures and fidgets.

She summed up the absent, and worked up the late,
She reckoned the clean and the dirty;
She averaged Jimmy and Sally and Kate,
And brought out percentage at thirty;

"Arithmetic—perfect," she made five per cent.,
The "perfect in spelling" but two;

Then to get at the spelling her brain she bent,
And she worried "till all was blue,"
For it looked like $\frac{1}{2}$ of $\frac{3}{4}$ of 15

Divided by 9 plus 1;
And it bothered her head and vexed her spleen,
And dimmed her blue eyes with water.

So giving it up she sprang for relief
To a very different quarter.

Sending backward her thoughts and fond belief
Toward those she dreamed had once sought her,
In hopes of devising some possible plan
Of working out, some way, an "average" man,
And changing the school for a bridal.

And so of achieving deliverance
From tasks she deemed useless and idle.

"Ah! yes; what's the chance, the blessed chance?"
But the "answer" gave chance but for 2

Among the schoolma'ams 90 plus 4,
While all that remained must still "average" do,
And, like Poe's Raven, sigh "Nevermore!"

"Dear me! what's for it?" she exclaimed in a pet;
"Why not leave us poor bodies some way?"

Let us use some small judgment—not keep us in
fret.

Tied up in this Procrustean way,"
Ah, poor little noodle! the powers that reign
Are so wise, so precise and so keen
That they know the sole way "perfection" to gain
Is to make each schoolma'am a machine.

—Boston Transcript.

WALT WHITMAN.

AN ENGLISH CRITIC ON THE AMERICAN POET.

(From the London Nineteenth Century.)

I.

Whitman has been the object of a good deal of enthusiastic and rather indiscriminating admiration, and also of a certain amount of furious and equally indiscriminating abuse. Neither is deserved, but he lays himself open, it must be said, almost equally to both. It is time, however, that an attempt was made to arrive at a sober estimate of his real value; and to the formation of such an estimate those should contribute who, having carefully considered the writings of the man, feel his influence strongly indeed, as all such will, but are not overpowered by it, and see his great merits plainly without being thereby prevented from seeing plainly also his great excesses and defects. A few of such critics have already essayed the task, but it will hardly be said that there is no room for more.

It is said, and, so far as I know, said truly, that this prophet is not honoured in his own country. This does not mean that his books have not been brought and read: indeed, the number of copies sold of the first editions of "Leaves of Grass" is to me rather a subject of surprise. Astonishment at the audacity of the venture must have had some share in raising the public interest, for the book unquestionably sold well. Nor does it mean that the merit of the author was quite unrecognized: on the contrary, by some who were most competent to judge, he was estimated at a very high value. "The most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed" was Emerson's verdict on the book, and Thoreau thought he saw something almost more than human in the personality of the man. But the mass of his countrymen were not and are not strong enough to accept him; they have perhaps too little confidence in their own literary originality to appreciate duly one from among themselves who breaks through all the conventional usages of literature; they have too much squeamish delicacy to admit to their society one who is so brutally outspoken and unrefined. It is necessary perhaps that this writer, for we need not be zealous to claim for him the title of poet, should be first accepted in the old world before he can be recognized by the new, which at present can see nothing in literature but by reflected light. Strange irony of fate, if such should be the destiny of one who cast off the conventional forms in order to free himself and his country from old world influences! "The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." This he has said and still believes, waiting in confidence for that proof of his title to be forthcoming. But there are many reasons why he should be slowly if at all admitted to his rights, whether in old world or in new, and to glance at some of these reasons before we proceed further will not be amiss.

He is perhaps of all writers the most repellent to the reader who glances at him superficially. In the first place he is indecent, and that too, not accidentally, but on principle. Whatever

may be thought of his morality, and that I hold to be essentially sound and healthy, it cannot be denied that in one section of his work, and occasionally throughout the poems and prose, he outrages every ordinary rule of decency. There is nothing impure in this kind of exposure; it has indeed the direct antithesis to prurient suggestion, and the intention of it is unquestionably honest, but from an artistic point of view it is the gravest of faults, it is essentially and irredeemably ugly and repulsive. We are most of us agreed that there is and ought to be a region of reticence, and into this region the writer has rushed himself and drags us unwillingly after him. He stands convicted of "ape-irokalia," if of nothing worse. Akin to the first instance of defect in artistic perception is a second—his use, namely, of words which are either not English or essentially vulgar; and to this must be added a not unfrequent neglect of syntax, which, together with the looseness in the application of some words, makes him at times vague and unintelligible. Occasionally there occur words or expressions which, though not ordinarily found in literature, have a native force which justifies them; but generally it is the case that for the French word or for the vulgarism savoring either of the gutter on the one hand or of the Yankee penny-a-liner on the other, might be substituted a good English word equally expressive. But here also we too probably have before us a fault of wilfulness, for we know that he will not allow the language of English literature to be large enough for the poets of America, but expects accessions to it from Tennessee and California. If, however, he has in his choice of words sought that simplicity which (to quote his own words) is "the art of art, the glory of expression, and the sunshine of the light of letters," he has certainly not seldom failed to attain it, and it was hardly to be attained by pouring out indiscriminately into his pages the words which ran naturally off his pen. "The art of sinking" is illustrated in his juxtaposition of the most incongruous things, and this especially in his well-known catalogues, which, though sometimes picturesque and interesting, are generally only absurd and dull. The fact that they are introduced on principle is not to be admitted as an excuse for their inartistic and formless character any more than a similar excuse is to be allowed for offences against decency. From many of these faults a sense of humor would have protected him; and this also might have preserved him from some of that violently feeble exaggeration with which he speaks especially of his own country and its institutions, and from the parade with which he sometimes announces truisms, as if they had been just now for the first time discovered by himself. His defence on the general charge is finely given in a poem now published for the first time, written in Platte Canon, Colorado.

Spirit that formed this scene,
These tumbled rock-piles grim and red,
These reckless heaven-ambitious peaks,
These gorges, turbulent-clear streams, this naked
freshness,
These formless wilderarrays
Was't charged against my chants they had forgotten
art?
But thou that revelest here, spirit that formed this
scene,
They have remembered thee.

But the grandeur of nature is not always to be attained by heaping together uncouth masses. We complain not so much that the work lacks polish, as that the writer has not been preserved by his own native genius from ugly ex-
cesses.

These artistic defects and his general disregard of form make many of his works repulsive, and do not allow us to accept any one as faultless. But they are mostly such as expurgation could remove, and therefore are not vital. The characteristic which cannot be got rid of, and yet repels, is his intense egotism and self-assertion. His longest, and in some respects most important work—a poem of twelve or fourteen hundred lines, with which the original "Leaves of Grass" opened—has or had his own name as the title* and his own personality as the subject; and this self assertion of the individual is perhaps the prevailing characteristic in Whitman's work, that which makes it in fact representative in some degree of the spirit of the age; and the egotism, after all, is not so much personal as typical. The poet is a Kosmos, and contains within himself all unity and all diversity. What he claims for himself he thereby claims for others on the same terms. "Underneath all, to me is myself, to you yourself." We feel when the poet proclaims himself "an acme of things accomplished," for whose birth all the forces of the universe have been a preparation, he is speaking less for himself individually than for humanity, the humanity of his own day and of future days. The egotism becomes more offensive when it is obviously personal and indicates himself as the Michael Angelo of literature; and that, it must be admitted, is not unseldom, though here too he claims to be speaking less for himself than for the future race of democratic poets. To these charges it may be added that, notwithstanding his boasted freedom from the trammels of conventionality, he is in his more ordinary work a mannerist of the most vulgar kind. "Oh! to realize space?" "Have you reckoned a thousand acres much?" "Has any one supposed it lucky to be born?" I hasten to inform him or her that it is just as lucky to die. "I have said that the soul is

* The title "Walt Whitman," which this poem has generally borne in American editions, is now altered to "Song of Myself."

not more than the body, and I have said that the body is not more than the soul." "I swear I think there is nothing but immortality, that the exquisite scheme is for it, and the nebulous float is for it, and the cohering is for it!" If these are not all exact quotations, every one will recognize them as genuine types. No style lends itself more readily to parody and burlesque. But when he is at his best the mannerism is in a great measure shaken off.

The disregard of metrical uniformity is another fact which is observed by the most superficial reader, and probably repels him, but with far less reason than the points above mentioned. It is not indeed correct to say that "there is no trace of rhyme or meter" in these poems. There is at least one poem which affords an instance of perfectly regular meter and rhyme throughout, and in another the regularity in these respects is all but complete; while in some others, such as "Pioneers" and the "Dirge for two Veterans," though there is no rhyme nor an absolute uniformity in the length of lines, there is a stanzaic uniformity, which satisfies, or almost satisfies, the conventional expectations. As for the rest, some are quite formless; but for the most part there is a strongly marked and characteristic rhythm, not strictly metrical, though with metrical tendencies, not properly to be called the rhythm of prose. It has rather the monotony of a chant than the varied tones of the best rhythmical prose, though it must be said that it not only resembles, but is identical with the early prose rhythm of the same author.† Every reader of the preface before us will perceive this; and we are relieved from the possibility of doubt by the fact that passages from this preface have been introduced, word for word, or with insignificant changes, into subsequently published poems, being divided stichometrically into lines by the natural pauses of the sentence. The words which he himself uttered in this preface on the subject of the rhythmical uniformity are among the best which have been spoken on that subject yet, and no apology is needed for quoting them.

The poetic quality is not marshaled in rhyme or uniformity . . . but is the life of these and much else, and is in the soul. The profit of rhyme is that it drops seeds of a sweeter and more luxuriant rhyme, and of uniformity that it conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight. The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of material laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts, and oranges, and melons, and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems, or music, or orations, or recitations are not independent but dependent. . . . Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost.

It has been said already that though Whitman's lines are not ordinarily metrical, yet they have metrical tendencies, and this will readily be perceived by any one who reads them aloud. The prevailing rhythm is dactylic. Every reader of Whitman will recognize as characteristic the following examples, chosen purely to illustrate the movement:—

Vigil strange I kept on the field one night.
When you, my son and my comrade, dropt at my side
that day,
One look I but gave, which your dear eyes return'd
with a look I shall never forget:
One touch of your hand to mine, O boy, reach'd up
as you lay on the ground,
Then onward I sped in the battle . . .

Or again—

It is well—against such I say not a word, I am their
poet also;
But behold such swiftly subside, burnt up for reli-
gion's sake;
For not all matter is fuel to heat, impalpable flame,
the essential life of the earth,
Any more than such are to religion.

Not unseldom we find regular or slightly irregular hexameters, sometimes several in succession, and occasionally also pentameters, e. g.—

Do you not know, O speech, how the buds beneath
you are folded?

Or—

Borne through the smoke of the battles, and pierced
with missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and
torn and bloody.

Or again (an elegiac couplet)—

Chants forth from the centre, from Kansas, and
thence equi-distant
Shooting in pulses of fire, ceaseless, to vivify all.

But these are accidents. Let me call the reader's attention to one form of this rhythm which is doubtless the result of design, the occasional lengthening of line in passionate lyrical outbursts, which produces sometimes a remarkable effect of intensity in that it "crowds and hurries and precipitates" the notes in the eagerness as it were of the verse to find a cadence.

† It should be observed that in the later prose of "Democratic Vistas," a book which is comparatively free from his characteristic weaknesses, the writer attains to a prose style of much greater excellence. This book, with its Carlylian eloquence and anti-Carlylian optimism, is not more remarkable on account of the robust faith of the writer of the future of American democracy, than on account of his keen perception and vigorous denunciation of its present faults and failings, and is enough by itself to stamp him as a master of the English language and a prose poet of the first order. The English reader who would understand the author's drift and hear the key-note of his philosophy could not do better than begin with this book, but that it is in England almost unobtainable.

Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me
my mate back again, if you only would.

From these dactylics we pass to the inspiring trochaics of "Pioneers," and finally, as the poet grows graver, in the more deeply spiritual songs of the soul and of death, which are among his last productions, with the rapid flow of the earlier rhythm mingles the graver tone of the iambic, as in the remarkable poem called "Passage to India."

Passage, indeed, O soul, to primal thought,
Not lands and seas alone, thy own clear freshness,
The young maturity of brood and bloom,
To realms of budding bibles.

Or, again, in the still more recent "Song of the Redwood Tree"—

Nor yield we mournfully, majestic brothers,
We who have grandly filled our time;
With nature's calm content, with tacit huge delight,
We welcome what we wrought for through the past,
And leave the field for them.

But enough of the outward form; it is time that we examine more closely the value of the contents.

II.

If we were asked for justification of the high estimate of this poet, which has been implied, if not expressed, in what has been hitherto said, the answer would be perhaps first, that he has a power of passionate expression, of strong and simple utterance of the deepest tones of grief, which is almost or altogether without its counterpart in the world. Not often has he exerted his power, but often enough to let us understand that he possesses it, and to stamp him as a poet inferior to few, if any, of our time in strength of native genius, however he may fall behind many in artistic perception. Two poems of death, indicated often by himself as the highest theme, though not faultless, for none of his work is so, are enough in themselves to rest his claim upon. The first is "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking;" and the other that funeral hymn for President Lincoln, which begins, "When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed." Nothing illustrates more strongly than these two poems the intense sympathy of the writer with nature, animate and inanimate, and the deep emotional significance which it has for him. Both are saturated with influences of sky, sea, or forest. The first is of the ocean, whose husky moaning is a fit accompaniment to the song of desolate loneliness; the second is of the forest, whose pine fragrance is as the perfume of the sweet soul that is gone. In both the most passionate outpourings come forth in the notes of birds—the mocking-bird, the most magnificent of songsters, and the hermit thrush, the gray-brown minstrel of the cedar swamp, lyrical mourners whose chant is fused and translated into words by the ecstatic listener. Shelley's skylark pours forth a harmonious madness of joy, Keats' nightingale seems to be intoxicated with passionate yearning; but never before has a bird poured forth to a poet a song so capable of stirring the depths of emotion in the heart, so heart-breaking indeed in its intensity of grief, as that of the lone singer "on the prong of a moss-scalloped stake, down almost among the slapping waves." The burden of the first division of the chant is "Two together."

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

Such is the joyous and careless song of the two feathered guests on the seashore of Paumanok, when the snows had melted and the lilac scent was in the air, while every day the boy, curious but never disturbing them, peered cautiously at the he-bird flitting to and fro, and the she-bird "crouch'd on her nest, silent with bright eyes," till on a sudden, "may be killed unknown to her mate," she disappeared, nor returned that day nor the next, nor ever appeared again. And thenceforward all the summer, day and night over the surging of the fierce mother the sea, the boy hears at intervals the solitary one who is left.

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

Often the child, gliding down to the beach, had stood with bare feet, the wind wafting his hair, with "the white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing," to listen and translate the notes of the demon or bird.

Soothe! soothe! soothe!
Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,
And again another behind, embracing and lapping
every one close,
But my love soothes not me, not me.
Low hangs the moon, it rose late,
It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, heavy
with love.
O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
With love, with love.
O night! I do not see my love fluttering out among
the breakers!
What is that little black thing I see there in the
white?
Loud! loud! loud!
Loud I call to you, my love!
High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves.
Surely you must know who is here, is here,
You must know who I am, my love.
Low-hanging moon!
What is the dusky spot on your brown yellow?
O it is the shape, the shape of my mate!
O moon, do not keep her from me any longer.
Land! land! O land!
Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me
my mate back again, if you only would.