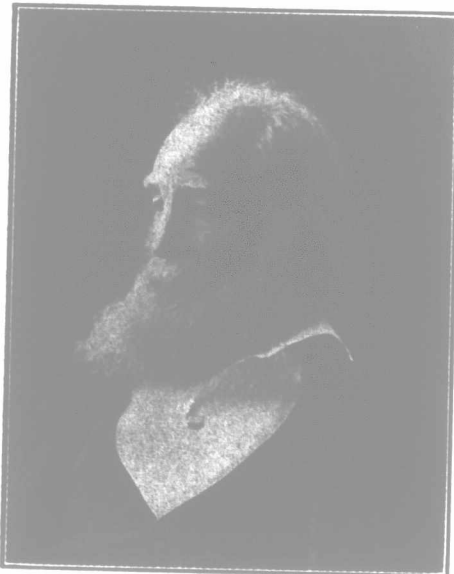
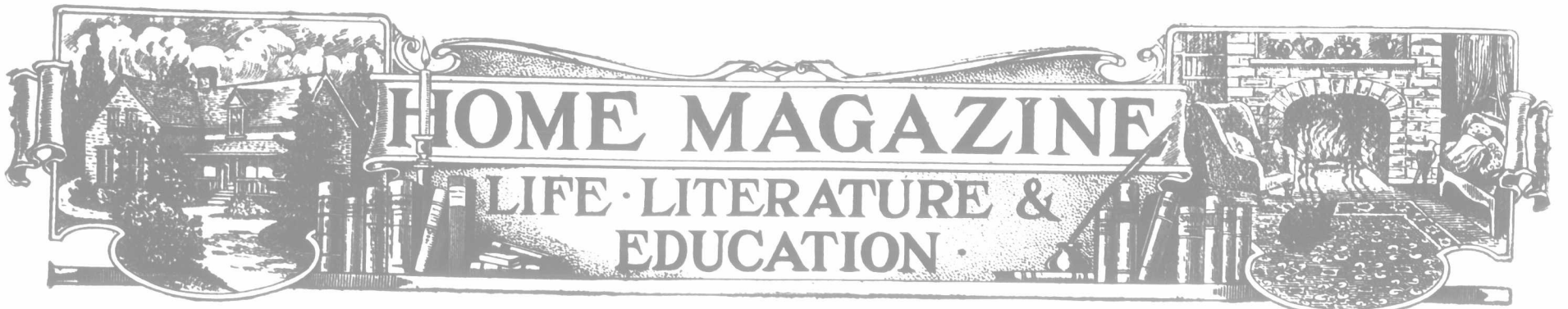




Walt Whitman.

Little Trips Among the Eminent.

Walt Whitman.

Walt Whitman is, perhaps, the most unique figure in modern literature. Although a contemporary, he can scarcely be said to have been one of the group of New England writers who found inspiration and companionship in one another during the brilliant literary period of the last century. Apart he ran, as he wished, the democratic individualist; nor, had he wished otherwise, was the door very well opened to him, for, with the exception of Emerson and Thoreau (no mean exception, be it noted), he was repelled on all sides, held up as a vulgarian and a poseur. Yet Walt Whitman has not been wholly without admirers—and he was willing to wait. It is safe enough to say, however, that he will never be universally approved. Popular taste, ever conservative, will turn aside from him, as it has turned, and he will continue to be, as a critic has noted, appreciated by but the "literary few."

He was born at West Hills, Long Island, N. Y., May 31st, 1819, on a farm which had been in the family since the early settlement, and although the family moved to Brooklyn while he was yet but a child, the hills, and long sea-beaches, and vast outlook upon the Atlantic, of his birthplace were always interwoven with his sweetest dreams, and so the home of his childhood became the "Paumanok" of his poems. All his life he continued to revisit Long Island, staying with friends, and obtaining the contrast, the other side of life, from the hurrying, surging humanity of great cities, which also he loved.

In Brooklyn the lad attended public school, but at thirteen entered a printing office, and remained there for a few years. At seventeen he was teaching school and beginning to write articles for the papers, and in 1839 he became publisher and editor of a little paper of his own at Huntington, which existed for about two years.

At the end of that time he entered upon a time of "loafing and inviting his soul," as he called it—a time of apparent idleness and shiftlessness which puzzled his friends. For fifteen years he did just enough work at writing, carpentering, printing—anything, in fact, that he could find to do—to keep him in food and clothes, spending the greater part of

his time in wandering about on lone sea-shores, up crowded Broadway, in workshops watching the men and talking to them, passing and re-passing on the ferry-boats at Brooklyn, observing everywhere, and thinking out the philosophy which was finally to be voiced in "Leaves of Grass."

In 1848 he took a long trip through the Western and Southern States, as far as New Orleans, and in 1855, "Leaves of Grass" appeared—a thin volume, with, for frontispiece, a picture of Walt himself in shirt-sleeves, with a slouch hat tipped to one side, his arms akimbo.

The result was not, perhaps, what Whitman, after fifteen years of thinking and two years of anxious, feverish work, expected. The unusual form of the poem, its defiance of all tenets of rhyme and poetical beauty, as popularly accepted (the "barbaric yawp," upon which Whitman really prided himself), its untamed, unshorn thought, apparently "unsettling" things more than Emerson himself had done, while cutting loose altogether from the refined taste and quiet polish of "the master"—all combined to call down upon the author's head a storm of ridicule and criticism. His constantly-repeated "I," and "I, Walt Whitman," were looked upon as intolerable egotism, the critics missing the point altogether that Whitman, by his "I," placed himself in the shoes of the democratic American, the "divine average," the new superman of his dreams whom he would see supplant the old. Even the unfortunate frontispiece did not escape, but was pointed to as proof positive that the author was but a common poseur.

Before long, however, drops of balm began to fall. Thoreau exclaimed, "He is Democracy," and, although puzzled, gave willing tribute: "There are two or three pieces in the book which are disagreeable, to say the least, simply sensual. But I do not believe that all the sermons, so-called, that have been preached in this land, put together, are equal to it for preaching." . . . Burroughs, too, was an early champion, and Emerson himself hailed the book as "The most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed." He also wrote Whitman a letter, in which he said, "I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it." This letter Whitman's publishers persuaded him to have placed in the preface; and afterwards, to Emerson's extreme annoyance, it was not removed when additions had been made to which he could not but take exception. As a matter of fact, many extensions were made to "Leaves of Grass." Edition after edition was issued, according as the poet had means to pay for the printing, each elaborated and increased in volume.

When the great war broke out, Whitman was much criticized for not going into the fighting ranks. He was a man of superb health and magnificent physique. "His appearance used to attract great attention from the passengers when he came on board the ferry boat," a friend who knew him well has written. "He was quite six feet in height, with the frame of a gladiator, a flowing gray beard mingled with the hairs on his broad, slightly bared chest. In his well bandaged checked shirt-sleeves, with trousers frequently pushed into his boot-legs, his fine

head covered with an immense slouch black or light felt hat, he would walk about with a naturally majestic stride, a massive model of ease and independence. I hardly think his style of dress in those days was eccentric; he was very antagonistic to all show or sham, and I fancy he merely attired himself in what was handy, clean, economical and comfortable."

Such a man might have made an ideal soldier, but, like Tolstoi, Whitman believed all war was wrong. He would not go into the fighting ranks, but he did enlist as volunteer nurse, paying his own expenses, and spending his great strength so assiduously in caring for sick and wounded soldiers that his health broke completely down, culminating in a long attack of illness, and finally in a stroke of paralysis, in 1873. At the close of the war he was given a Government position, but was dismissed by the Secretary of State, who disapproved of his writings. Immediately, O'Connor, of Washington, took up the cudgels in his behalf, attacked the Secretary, and, by both speech and writing, urged his vindication of the "Good gray poet." As a result, Whitman was given another clerkship, which he held until stricken down, in 1873.

The remainder of his life was spent in Camden, N. J., where one of his brothers lived. He had never married, and poverty now came to him, but his last years were cheered by the visits of troops of friends, among them many eminent men from abroad, for his work had been appreciated more and earlier in France and England than in America. Indeed, his most enthusiastic following has ever been abroad. He died March 26th, 1892.

"It is permitted to us to doubt his taste and wisdom, but not his brave sincerity," a biographer has written, and it is perhaps true that, in reading Whitman, his defects strike us first—so strongly as to blind against the strength which underlies, for Whitman in many respects was ahead of his time—and ours. His endless enumerations tire us; there is objection to be taken to his uncalled for use of foreign words and exclamations; in certain of his poems the rawness and bareness of his descriptions may even revolt. But beneath all lies Whitman, the poet of Democracy, Whitman the optimist. He believes the divine in everything and in every man, hence:

"I give the sign of democracy, By God, I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."

The universe he looks upon as fluid, changing, ever improving, and going on to some grand end in which each individual soul shall realize itself. Through what seems evil the soul grows strong. Trials and catastrophes strengthen it. Through the body, also, the soul, which in this life is indissolubly united with it, is developed, hence the body and every part of it is sacred, and should be revered as sacred. Life, then, should take most count of the health of the body and the growth of the soul. Riches do not really make a man rich. "I will make the true poem of riches, namely, to earn for the body and the mind what adheres, and goes forward, and is not dropped by death." Death is not to be feared, but to be looked upon as an opening into a broader sphere.

"All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier."

Life, then, should be a vigorous, important thing, and, for the sake of the race, mothers and fathers should be perfect, and bring up perfect children. Whitman is, therefore, a pioneer of eugenics. He would teach independence, individualism, the love of all health and the outdoor life, appreciation of nature, the deep religious sense which may throw aside shams and orthodoxies, but clings to that which is fundamentally hopeful and true. As for himself, he is to be the "poet of Personality"; he is to teach lessons that people are overlooking; literature is a great force in the world, and through it he is to realize his purpose in the world, the emancipation, perhaps, of others. He would make them "bold swimmers," men who think and accomplish, proving their personality, instead of mere automatons, "virtuous out of conformity or fear."

It is hard to know where to stop, in attempting to condense the philosophy of any original thinker within the confines of a short article. Perhaps here, as well as anywhere. Those who are interested may go to the works of the "gray poet" himself; but we would advise those who have not already a broad experience of literature and a deep insight into life, to suspend judgment until they have studied, also, "A Study of Walt Whitman," by Symonds; "Walt Whitman," by Clarke; and Dr. Bucke's Biography. Otherwise, with the exception of that expressed in a few magnificent passages, the poet's philosophy may be lost, and the only impression left one of disappointment and disgust. Whitman is a writer for maturity and for thoughtful maturity, but even that sometimes needs assistance and illumination. Indeed, the tragedy of Whitman's life was that, although he proclaimed himself the poet of the people at large, the people have never cared for him. "They preferred the cultured Longfellow, the 'snow-bound' Whittier. Whitman is still the poet of a literary class—the last thing that he aimed at."

It may be interesting to inhabitants of Western Ontario to know that Whitman once visited Dr. Bucke at London, and that there are still one or two in that city who remember seeing him at that time.

Bits from Whitman.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was, it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward—nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.

* *

I play not here marches for victors only—I play great marches for conquered and slain persons.

Have you heard that it was good to gain the day?
I also say it is good to fall—battles are lost in the same spirit in which they are won.