Poems

By

Walt Whitman

SELECTED AND EDITED BY WILLIAM MICHAEL ROSSETTI

A NEW EDITION

"Or si sa il nome, o per tristo o per buono,
E si sa pure al mondo ch'io ci sono."
--MICHELANGELO.

"That Angels are human forms, or men, I have seen a thousand times. I have also frequently told them that men in the Christian world are in such gross ignorance respecting Angels and Spirits as to suppose them to be minds without a form, or mere thoughts, of which they have no other idea than as something ethereal possessing a vital principle. To the first or ultimate heaven also correspond the forms of man's body, called its members, organs, and viscera. Thus the corporeal part of man is that in which heaven

ultimately closes, and upon which, as on its base, it rests."
--SWEDENBORG.

"Yes, truly, it is a great thing for a nation that it get an articulate voice--that it produce a man who will speak forth melodiously what the heart of it means."
--CARLYLE.

"Les efforts de vos ennemis contre vous, leurs cris, leur rage impuissante, et leurs petits succès, ne doivent pas vous effrayer; ce ne sont que des égratignures sur les épaules d'Hercule."
--ROBESPIERRE.

TO WILLIAM BELL SCOTT.

DEAR SCOTT,--Among various gifts which I have received from you, tangible and intangible, was a copy of the original quarto edition of Whitman's Leaves of Grass, which you presented to me soon after its first appearance in 1855. At a time when few people on this side of the Atlantic had looked into the book, and still fewer had found in it anything save matter for ridicule, you had appraised it, and seen that its value was real and great. A true poet and a strong thinker like yourself was indeed likely to see that. I read the book eagerly, and perceived that its substantiality and power were still ahead of any eulogium with which it might have come commended to me--and, in fact, ahead of most attempts that could be made at verbal definition of them.

Some years afterwards, getting to know our friend Swinburne, I found with much satisfaction that he also was an ardent (not of course a blind) admirer of Whitman. Satisfaction, and a degree almost of surprise; for his intense sense of poetic refinement of form in his own works and his exacting acuteness as a critic might have seemed likely to carry him away from Whitman in sympathy at least, if not in actual latitude of perception. Those who find the American poet "utterly formless," "intolerably rough and floundering," "destitute of the A B C of art," and the like, might not unprofitably ponder this very different estimate of him by the author of Atalanta in Calydon.

May we hope that now, twelve years after the first appearance of Leaves of Grass, the English reading public may be prepared for a selection of Whitman's poems, and soon hereafter for a complete edition of them? I trust this may prove to be the case. At any rate, it has been a great gratification to me to be concerned in the experiment; and this is enhanced by my being enabled to associate with it your name, as that of an early and well-qualified appreciator of Whitman, and no less as that of a dear friend.

Yours affectionately,
W. M. ROSSETTI.

October 1867.

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PREFATORY NOTICE.

During the summer of 1867 I had the opportunity (which I had often wished for) of expressing in print my estimate and admiration of the works of the American poet Walt Whitman.[1] Like a stone dropped into a pond, an article of that sort may spread out its concentric circles of consequences. One of these is the invitation which I have received to edit a selection from Whitman's writings; virtually the first sample of his work ever published in England, and offering the first tolerably fair chance he has had of making his way with English readers on his own showing. Hitherto, such readers--except the small percentage of them to whom it has happened to come across the poems in some one of their American editions--have picked acquaintance with them only through the medium of newspaper extracts and criticisms, mostly short-sighted, sneering, and depreciatory, and rather intercepting than forwarding the candid construction which people might be willing to put upon the poems, alike in their beauties and their aberrations. Some English critics, no doubt, have been more discerning--as W. J. Fox, of old, in the Dispatch, the writer of the notice in the Leader, and of late two in the Pall Mall Gazette and the London Review;[2] but these have been the exceptions among us, the great majority of the reviewers presenting that happy and familiar critical combination--scurrility and superciliousness.

[Footnote 1: See The Chronicle for 6th July 1867, article Walt Whitman's Poems.]

[Footnote 2: Since this Prefatory Notice was written [in 1868], another eulogistic review of Whitman has appeared--that by Mr. Robert Buchanan, in the Broadway.]

As it was my lot to set down so recently several of the considerations which seem to me most essential and most obvious in regard to Whitman's writings, I can scarcely now recur to the subject without either repeating something of what I then said, or else leaving unstated some points of principal importance. I shall therefore adopt the simplest course--that of summarising the critical remarks in my former article; after which, I shall leave without further development (ample as is the amount of development most of them would claim) the particular topics there glanced at, and shall proceed to some other phases of the subject.

Whitman republished in 1867 his complete poetical works in one moderate-sized volume, consisting of the whole Leaves of Grass, with a sort of supplement thereto named Songs before Parting,[3] and of the Drum Taps, with its Sequel. It has been intimated that he does not expect to write any more poems, unless it might be in expression of the religious side of man's nature. However, one poem on the last American harvest sown and reaped by those who had been soldiers in the great war, has already appeared since the volume in question, and has been republished in England.

[Footnote 3: In a copy of the book revised by Whitman himself, which we have seen, this title is modified into Songs of Parting.]

Whitman's poems present no trace of rhyme, save in a couple or so of chance instances. Parts of them, indeed, may be regarded as a warp of prose amid the weft of poetry, such as Shakespeare furnishes the precedent for in drama. Still there is a very powerful and majestic rhythmical sense throughout.

Lavish and persistent has been the abuse poured forth upon Whitman by his own countrymen; the tricklings of the British press give but a moderate idea of it. The poet is known to repay scorn with scorn. Emerson can, however, from the first be claimed as on Whitman's side; nor, it is understood after some inquiry, has that great thinker since then retreated from this position in fundamentals, although his admiration may have entailed some worry upon him, and reports of his recantation have been rife. Of other writers on Whitman's side, expressing themselves with no measured enthusiasm, one may cite Mr. M. D. Conway; Mr. W. D. O'Connor, who wrote a pamphlet named The Good Grey Poet; and Mr. John Burroughs, author of Walt Whitman as Poet and Person, published quite recently in New York. His thorough-paced admirers declare Whitman to be beyond rivalry the poet of the epoch; an estimate which, startling as it will sound at the first, may nevertheless be upheld, on the grounds that Whitman is beyond all his competitors a man of the period, one of audacious personal ascendant, incapable of all compromise, and an initiator in the scheme and form of his works.

Certain faults are charged against him, and, as far as they are true, shall

frankly stand confessed--some of them as very serious faults. Firstly, he speaks on occasion of gross things in gross, crude, and plain terms. Secondly, he uses some words absurd or ill-constructed, others which produce a jarring effect in poetry, or indeed in any lofty literature. Thirdly, he sins from time to time by being obscure, fragmentary, and agglomerative--giving long strings of successive and detached items, not, however, devoid of a certain primitive effectiveness. Fourthly, his self-assertion is boundless; yet not always to be understood as strictly or merely personal to himself, but sometimes as vicarious, the poet speaking on behalf of all men, and every man and woman. These and any other faults appear most harshly on a cursory reading; Whitman is a poet who bears and needs to be read as a whole, and then the volume and torrent of his power carry the disfigurements along with it, and away.

The subject-matter of Whitman's poems, taken individually, is absolutely miscellaneous: he touches upon any and every subject. But he has prefixed to his last edition an "Inscription" in the following terms, showing that the key-words of the whole book are two--"One's-self" and "En Masse:"--

Small is the theme of the following chant, yet the greatest.--namely, ONE'S-SELF; that wondrous thing, a simple separate person. That, for the use of the New World, I sing. Man's physiology complete, from top to toe, I sing. Not physiognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for the Muse: I say the form complete is worthier far. The female equally with the male I sing. Nor cease at the theme of One's-self. I speak the word of the modern, the word EN MASSE. My days I sing, and the lands--with interstice I knew of

hapless war. O friend, whoe'er you are, at last arriving hither to commence, I feel through every leaf the pressure of your hand, which I return. And thus upon our journey linked together let us go.

The book, then, taken as a whole, is the poem both of Personality and of Democracy; and, it may be added, of American nationalism. It is par excellence the modern poem. It is distinguished also by this peculiarity--that in it the most literal view of things is continually merging into the most rhapsodic or passionately abstract. Picturesqueness it has, but mostly of a somewhat patriarchal kind, not deriving from the "word-painting" of the littérateur; a certain echo of the old Hebrew poetry may even be caught in it, extra-modern though it is. Another most prominent and pervading quality of the book is the exuberant physique of the author. The conceptions are throughout those of a man in robust health, and might alter much under different conditions.

Further, there is a strong tone of paradox in Whitman's writings. He is both a realist and an optimist in extreme measure: he contemplates evil as in some sense not existing, or, if existing, then as being of as much importance as anything else. Not that he is a materialist; on the contrary, he is a most strenuous assertor of the soul, and, with the soul, of the body as its infallible associate and vehicle in the present frame of things. Neither does he drift into fatalism or indifferentism; the energy of his temperament, and ever-fresh sympathy with national and other developments, being an effectual bar to this. The paradoxical element of the poems is such that one may sometimes find them in conflict with what

has preceded, and would not be much surprised if they said at any moment the reverse of whatever they do say. This is mainly due to the multiplicity of the aspects of things, and to the immense width of relation in which Whitman stands to all sorts and all aspects of them.

But the greatest of this poet's distinctions is his absolute and entire originality. He may be termed formless by those who, not without much reason to show for themselves, are wedded to the established forms and ratified refinements of poetic art; but it seems reasonable to enlarge the canon till it includes so great and startling a genius, rather than to draw it close and exclude him. His work is practically certain to stand as archetypal for many future poetic efforts--so great is his power as an originator, so fervid his initiative. It forms incomparably the largest performance of our period in poetry. Victor Hugo's Légende des Siècles alone might be named with it for largeness, and even that with much less of a new starting-point in conception and treatment. Whitman breaks with all precedent. To what he himself perceives and knows he has a personal relation of the intensest kind: to anything in the way of prescription, no relation at all. But he is saved from isolation by the depth of his Americanism; with the movement of his predominant nation he is moved. His comprehension, energy, and tenderness are all extreme, and all inspired by actualities. And, as for poetic genius, those who, without being ready to concede that faculty to Whitman, confess his iconoclastic boldness and his Titanic power of temperament, working in the sphere of poetry, do in effect confess his genius as well.

Such, still further condensed, was the critical summary which I gave of Whitman's position among poets. It remains to say something a little more precise of the particular qualities of his works. And first, not to slur over defects, I shall extract some sentences from a letter which a friend, most highly entitled to form and express an opinion on any poetic question--one, too, who abundantly upholds the greatness of Whitman as a poet--has addressed to me with regard to the criticism above condensed. His observations, though severe on this individual point, appear to me not other than correct. "I don't think that you quite put strength enough into your blame on one side, while you make at least enough of minor faults or eccentricities. To me it seems always that Whitman's great flaw is a fault of debility, not an excess of strength--I mean his bluster. His own personal and national self-reliance and arrogance, I need not tell you, I applaud, and sympathise and rejoice in; but the blatant ebullience of feeling and speech, at times, is feeble for so great a poet of so great a people. He is in part certainly the poet of democracy; but not wholly, because he tries so openly to be, and asserts so violently that he is--always as if he was fighting the case out on a platform. This is the only thing I really or greatly dislike or revolt from. On the whole" (adds my correspondent), "my admiration and enjoyment of his greatness grow keener and warmer every time I think of him"--a feeling, I may be permitted to observe, which is fully shared by myself, and, I suppose, by all who consent in any adequate measure to recognise Whitman, and to yield themselves to his influence.

To continue. Besides originality and daring, which have been already

insisted upon, width and intensity are leading characteristics of his writings--width both of subject-matter and of comprehension, intensity of self-absorption into what the poet contemplates and expresses. He scans and presents an enormous panorama, unrolled before him as from a mountain-top; and yet, whatever most large or most minute or casual thing his eye glances upon, that he enters into with a depth of affection which identifies him with it for a time, be the object what it may. There is a singular interchange also of actuality and of ideal substratum and suggestion. While he sees men, with even abnormal exactness and sympathy, as men, he sees them also "as trees walking," and admits us to perceive that the whole show is in a measure spectral and unsubstantial, and the mask of a larger and profounder reality beneath it, of which it is giving perpetual intimations and auguries. He is the poet indeed of literality, but of passionate and significant literality, full of indirections as well as directness, and of readings between the lines. If he is the 'cutest of Yankees, he is also as truly an enthusiast as any the most typical poet. All his faculties and performance glow into a white heat of brotherliness; and there is a poignancy both of tenderness and of beauty about his finer works which discriminates them quite as much as their modernness, audacity, or any other exceptional point. If the reader wishes to see the great and more intimate powers of Whitman in their fullest expression, he may consult the Nocturn for the Death of Lincoln; than which it would be difficult to find anywhere a purer, more elevated, more poetic, more ideally abstract, or at the same time more pathetically personal, threnody--uniting the thrilling chords of grief, of beauty, of triumph, and of final unfathomed satisfaction. With all his singularities, Whitman is a master of words and

of sounds: he has them at his command--made for, and instinct with, his purpose--messengers of unsurpassable sympathy and intelligence between himself and his readers. The entire book may be called the paean of the natural man--not of the merely physical, still less of the disjunctively intellectual or spiritual man, but of him who, being a man first and foremost, is therein also a spirit and an intellect.

There is a singular and impressive intuition or revelation of Swedenborg's: that the whole of heaven is in the form of one man, and the separate societies of heaven in the forms of the several parts of man. In a large sense, the general drift of Whitman's writings, even down to the passages which read as most bluntly physical, bear a striking correspondence or analogy to this dogma. He takes man, and every organism and faculty of man, as the unit--the datum--from which all that we know, discern, and speculate, of abstract and supersensual, as well as of concrete and sensual, has to be computed. He knows of nothing nobler than that unit man; but, knowing that, he can use it for any multiple, and for any dynamical extension or recast.

Let us next obtain some idea of what this most remarkable poet--the founder of American poetry rightly to be so called, and the most sonorous poetic voice of the tangibilities of actual and prospective democracy--is in his proper life and person.

Walt Whitman was born at the farm-village of West Hills, Long Island, in the State of New York, and about thirty miles distant from the capital, on

the 31st of May 1819. His father's family, English by origin, had already been settled in this locality for five generations. His mother, named Louisa van Velsor, was of Dutch extraction, and came from Cold Spring, Queen's County, about three miles from West Hills. "A fine-looking old lady" she has been termed in her advanced age. A large family ensued from the marriage. The father was a farmer, and afterwards a carpenter and builder; both parents adhered in religion to "the great Quaker iconoclast, Elias Hicks." Walt was schooled at Brooklyn, a suburb of New York, and began life at the age of thirteen, working as a printer, later on as a country teacher, and then as a miscellaneous press-writer in New York. From 1837 to 1848 he had, as Mr. Burroughs too promiscuously expresses it, "sounded all experiences of life, with all their passions, pleasures, and abandonments." In 1849 he began travelling, and became at New Orleans a newspaper editor, and at Brooklyn, two years afterwards, a printer. He next followed his father's business of carpenter and builder. In 1862, after the breaking-out of the great Civil War, in which his enthusiastic unionism and also his anti-slavery feelings attached him inseparably though not rancorously to the good cause of the North, he undertook the nursing of the sick and wounded in the field, writing also a correspondence in the New York Times. I am informed that it was through Emerson's intervention that he obtained the sanction of President Lincoln for this purpose of charity, with authority to draw the ordinary army rations; Whitman stipulating at the same time that he would not receive any remuneration for his services. The first immediate occasion of his going down to camp was on behalf of his brother, Lieutenant-Colonel George W. Whitman, of the 51st New York Veterans, who had been struck in the face by a piece of shell at

Fredericksburg. From the spring of 1863 this nursing, both in the field and more especially in hospital at Washington, became his "one daily and nightly occupation;" and the strongest testimony is borne to his measureless self-devotion and kindliness in the work, and to the unbounded fascination, a kind of magnetic attraction and ascendency, which he exercised over the patients, often with the happiest sanitary results. Northerner or Southerner, the belligerents received the same tending from him. It is said that by the end of the war he had personally ministered to upwards of 100,000 sick and wounded. In a Washington hospital he caught, in the summer of 1864, the first illness he had ever known, caused by poison absorbed into the system in attending some of the worst cases of gangrene. It disabled him for six months. He returned to the hospitals towards the beginning of 1865, and obtained also a clerkship in the Department of the Interior. It should be added that, though he never actually joined the army as a combatant, he made a point of putting down his name on the enrolment-lists for the draft, to take his chance as it might happen for serving the country in arms. The reward of his devotedness came at the end of June 1865, in the form of dismissal from his clerkship by the minister, Mr. Harlan, who learned that Whitman was the author of the Leaves of Grass; a book whose outspokenness, or (as the official chief considered it) immorality, raised a holy horror in the ministerial breast. The poet, however, soon obtained another modest but creditable post in the office of the Attorney-General. He still visits the hospitals on Sundays, and often on other days as well.

The portrait of Mr. Whitman reproduced in the present volume is taken from

an engraving after a daguerreotype given in the original Leaves of Grass. He is much above the average size, and noticeably well-proportioned--a model of physique and of health, and, by natural consequence, as fully and finely related to all physical facts by his bodily constitution as to all mental and spiritual facts by his mind and his consciousness. He is now, however, old-looking for his years, and might even (according to the statement of one of his enthusiasts, Mr. O'Connor) have passed for being beyond the age for the draft when the war was going on. The same gentleman, in confutation of any inferences which might be drawn from the Leaves of Grass by a Harlan or other Holy Willie, affirms that "one more irreproachable in his relations to the other sex lives not upon this earth"--an assertion which one must take as one finds it, having neither confirmatory nor traversing evidence at hand. Whitman has light blue eyes, a florid complexion, a fleecy beard now grey, and a quite peculiar sort of magnetism about him in relation to those with whom he comes in contact. His ordinary appearance is masculine and cheerful: he never shows depression of spirits, and is sufficiently undemonstrative, and even somewhat silent in company. He has always been carried by predilection towards the society of the common people; but is not the less for that open to refined and artistic impressions--fond of operatic and other good music, and discerning in works of art. As to either praise or blame of what he writes, he is totally indifferent, not to say scornful--having in fact a very decisive opinion of his own concerning its calibre and destinies. Thoreau, a very congenial spirit, said of Whitman, "He is Democracy;" and again, "After all, he suggests something a little more than human." Lincoln broke out into the exclamation, "Well, he looks like a man!" Whitman responded to

the instinctive appreciation of the President, considering him (it is said by Mr. Burroughs) "by far the noblest and purest of the political characters of the time;" and, if anything can cast, in the eyes of posterity, an added halo of brightness round the unsullied personal qualities and the great doings of Lincoln, it will assuredly be the written monument reared to him by Whitman.

The best sketch that I know of Whitman as an accessible human individual is that given by Mr. Conway.[4] I borrow from it the following few details. "Having occasion to visit New York soon after the appearance of Walt Whitman's book, I was urged by some friends to search him out.... The day was excessively hot, the thermometer at nearly 100°, and the sun blazed down as only on sandy Long Island can the sun blaze.... I saw stretched upon his back, and gazing up straight at the terrible sun, the man I was seeking. With his grey clothing, his blue-grey shirt, his iron-grey hair, his swart sunburnt face and bare neck, he lay upon the brown-and-white grass--for the sun had burnt away its greenness--and was so like the earth upon which he rested that he seemed almost enough a part of it for one to pass by without recognition. I approached him, gave my name and reason for searching him out, and asked him if he did not find the sun rather hot. 'Not at all too hot,' was his reply; and he confided to me that this was one of his favourite places and attitudes for composing 'poems.' He then walked with me to his home, and took me along its narrow ways to his room. A small room of about fifteen feet square, with a single window looking out on the barren solitudes of the island; a small cot; a wash-stand with a little looking-glass hung over it from a tack in the wall; a pine table

with pen, ink, and paper on it; an old line-engraving representing Bacchus, hung on the wall, and opposite a similar one of Silenus: these constituted the visible environments of Walt Whitman. There was not, apparently, a single book in the room.... The books he seemed to know and love best were the Bible, Homer, and Shakespeare: these he owned, and probably had in his pockets while we were talking. He had two studies where he read; one was the top of an omnibus, and the other a small mass of sand, then entirely uninhabited, far out in the ocean, called Coney Island.... The only distinguished contemporary he had ever met was the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, of Brooklyn, who had visited him.... He confessed to having no talent for industry, and that his forte was 'loafing and writing poems:' he was poor, but had discovered that he could, on the whole, live magnificently on bread and water.... On no occasion did he laugh, nor indeed did I ever see him smile."

[Footnote 4: In the Fortnightly Review, 15th October 1866.]

The first trace of Whitman as a writer is in the pages of the Democratic Review in or about 1841. Here he wrote some prose tales and sketches--poor stuff mostly, so far as I have seen of them, yet not to be wholly confounded with the commonplace. One of them is a tragic school-incident, which may be surmised to have fallen under his personal observation in his early experience as a teacher. His first poem of any sort was named Blood Money, in denunciation of the Fugitive Slave Law, which severed him from the Democratic party. His first considerable work was the Leaves of Grass. He began it in 1853, and it underwent two or three complete

rewritings prior to its publication at Brooklyn in 1855, in a quarto volume--peculiar-looking, but with something perceptibly artistic about it. The type of that edition was set up entirely by himself. He was moved to undertake this formidable poetic work (as indicated in a private letter of Whitman's, from which Mr. Conway has given a sentence or two) by his sense of the great materials which America could offer for a really American poetry, and by his contempt for the current work of his compatriots--"either the poetry of an elegantly weak sentimentalism, at bottom nothing but maudlin puerilities or more or less musical verbiage, arising out of a life of depression and enervation as their result; or else that class of poetry, plays, &c., of which the foundation is feudalism, with its ideas of lords and ladies, its imported standard of gentility, and the manners of European high-life-below-stairs in every line and verse." Thus incited to poetic self-expression, Whitman (adds Mr. Conway) "wrote on a sheet of paper, in large letters, these words, 'Make the Work,' and fixed it above his table, where he could always see it whilst writing. Thenceforth every cloud that flitted over him, every distant sail, every face and form encountered, wrote a line in his book."

The Leaves of Grass excited no sort of notice until a letter from Emerson[5] appeared, expressing a deep sense of its power and magnitude. He termed it "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed."

[Footnote 5: Mr. Burroughs (to whom I have recourse for most biographical facts concerning Whitman) is careful to note, in order that no

misapprehension may arise on the subject, that, up to the time of his publishing the Leaves of Grass, the author had not read either the essays or the poems of Emerson.]

The edition of about a thousand copies sold off in less than a year. Towards the end of 1856 a second edition in 16mo appeared, printed in New York, also of about a thousand copies. Its chief feature was an additional poem beginning "A Woman waits for me." It excited a considerable storm. Another edition, of about four to five thousand copies, duodecimo, came out at Boston in 1860-61, including a number of new pieces. The Drum Taps, consequent upon the war, with their Sequel, which comprises the poem on Lincoln, followed in 1865; and in 1867, as I have already noted, a complete edition of all the poems, including a supplement named Songs before Parting. The first of all the Leaves of Grass, in point of date, was the long and powerful composition entitled Walt Whitman--perhaps the most typical and memorable of all of his productions, but shut out from the present selection for reasons given further on. The final edition shows numerous and considerable variations from all its precursors; evidencing once again that Whitman is by no means the rough-and-ready writer, panoplied in rude art and egotistic self-sufficiency, that many people suppose him to be. Even since this issue, the book has been slightly revised by its author's own hand, with a special view to possible English circulation. The copy so revised has reached me (through the liberal and friendly hands of Mr. Conway) after my selection had already been decided on; and the few departures from the last printed text which might on comparison be found in the present volume are due to my having had the

advantage of following this revised copy. In all other respects I have felt bound to reproduce the last edition, without so much as considering whether here and there I might personally prefer the readings of the earlier issues.

The selection here offered to the English reader contains a little less than half the entire bulk of Whitman's poetry. My choice has proceeded upon two simple rules: first, to omit entirely every poem which could with any tolerable fairness be deemed offensive to the feelings of morals or propriety in this peculiarly nervous age; and, second, to include every remaining poem which appeared to me of conspicuous beauty or interest. I have also inserted the very remarkable prose preface which Whitman printed in the original edition of Leaves of Grass, an edition that has become a literary rarity. This preface has not been reproduced in any later publication, although its materials have to some extent been worked up into poems of a subsequent date.[6] From this prose composition, contrary to what has been my rule with any of the poems, it has appeared to me permissible to omit two or three short phrases which would have shocked ordinary readers, and the retention of which, had I held it obligatory, would have entailed the exclusion of the preface itself as a whole.

[Footnote 6: Compare, for instance, the Preface, pp. 38, 39, with the poem To a Foiled Revolter or Revoltress, p. 133.]

A few words must be added as to the indecencies scattered through Whitman's writings. Indecencies or improprieties--or, still better, deforming

crudities--they may rightly be termed; to call them immoralities would be going too far. Whitman finds himself, and other men and women, to be a compound of soul and body; he finds that body plays an extremely prominent and determining part in whatever he and other mundane dwellers have cognisance of; he perceives this to be the necessary condition of things, and therefore, as he fully and openly accepts it, the right condition; and he knows of no reason why what is universally seen and known, necessary and right, should not also be allowed and proclaimed in speech. That such a view of the matter is entitled to a great deal of weight, and at any rate to candid consideration and construction, appears to me not to admit of a doubt: neither is it dubious that the contrary view, the only view which a mealy-mouthed British nineteenth century admits as endurable, amounts to the condemnation of nearly every great or eminent literary work of past time, whatever the century it belongs to, the country it comes from, the department of writing it illustrates, or the degree or sort of merit it possesses. Tenth, second, or first century before Christ--first, eighth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, or even eighteenth century A.D.--it is still the same: no book whose subject-matter admits as possible of an impropriety according to current notions can be depended upon to fail of containing such impropriety,--can, if those notions are accepted as the canon, be placed with a sense of security in the hands of girls and youths, or read aloud to women; and this holds good just as much of severely moral or plainly descriptive as of avowedly playful, knowing, or licentious books. For my part, I am far from thinking that earlier state of literature, and the public feeling from which it sprang, the wrong ones--and our present condition the only right one. Equally far, therefore, am I

from indignantly condemning Whitman for every startling allusion or expression which he has admitted into his book, and which I, from motives of policy, have excluded from this selection; except, indeed, that I think many of his tabooed passages are extremely raw and ugly on the ground of poetic or literary art, whatever aspect they may bear in morals. I have been rigid in exclusion, because it appears to me highly desirable that a fair verdict on Whitman should now be pronounced in England on poetic grounds alone; and because it was clearly impossible that the book, with its audacities of topic and of expression included, should run the same chance of justice, and of circulation through refined minds and hands, which may possibly be accorded to it after the rejection of all such peccant poems. As already intimated, I have not in a single instance excised any parts of poems: to do so would have been, I conceive, no less wrongful towards the illustrious American than repugnant, and indeed unendurable, to myself, who aspire to no Bowdlerian honours. The consequence is, that the reader loses in toto several important poems, and some extremely fine ones--notably the one previously alluded to, of quite exceptional value and excellence, entitled Walt Whitman. I sacrifice them grudgingly; and yet willingly, because I believe this to be the only thing to do with due regard to the one reasonable object which a selection can subserve--that of paving the way towards the issue and unprejudiced reception of a complete edition of the poems in England. For the benefit of misconstructionists, let me add in distinct terms that, in respect of morals and propriety, I neither admire nor approve the incriminated passages in Whitman's poems, but, on the contrary, consider that most of them would be much better away; and, in respect of art, I

doubt whether even one of them deserves to be retained in the exact phraseology it at present exhibits. This, however, does not amount to saying that Whitman is a vile man, or a corrupt or corrupting writer; he is none of these.

The only division of his poems into sections, made by Whitman himself, has been noted above: Leaves of Grass, Songs before Parting, supplementary to the preceding, and Drum Taps, with their Sequel. The peculiar title, Leaves of Grass, has become almost inseparable from the name of Whitman; it seems to express with some aptness the simplicity, universality, and spontaneity of the poems to which it is applied. Songs before Parting may indicate that these compositions close Whitman's poetic roll. Drum Taps are, of course, songs of the Civil War, and their Sequel is mainly on the same theme: the chief poem in this last section being the one on the death of Lincoln. These titles all apply to fully arranged series of compositions. The present volume is not in the same sense a fully arranged series, but a selection: and the relation of the poems inter se appears to me to depend on altered conditions, which, however narrowed they are, it may be as well frankly to recognise in practice. I have therefore redistributed the poems (a latitude of action which I trust the author may not object to), bringing together those whose subject-matter seems to warrant it, however far separated they may possibly be in the original volume. At the same time, I have retained some characteristic terms used by Whitman himself, and have named my sections respectively--

1. Chants Democratic (poems of democracy).

2. Drum Taps (war songs).
3. Walt Whitman (personal poems).
4. Leaves of Grass (unclassified poems).
5. Songs of Parting (missives).

The first three designations explain themselves. The fourth, Leaves of Grass, is not so specially applicable to the particular poems of that section here as I should have liked it to be; but I could not consent to drop this typical name. The Songs of Parting, my fifth section, are compositions in which the poet expresses his own sentiment regarding his works, in which he forecasts their future, or consigns them to the reader's consideration. It deserves mention that, in the copy of Whitman's last American edition revised by his own hand, as previously noticed, the series termed Songs of Parting has been recast, and made to consist of poems of the same character as those included in my section No. 5.

Comparatively few of Whitman's poems have been endowed by himself with titles properly so called. Most of them are merely headed with the opening words of the poems themselves--as "I was looking a long while;" "To get betimes in Boston Town;" "When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed;" and so on. It seems to me that in a selection such a lengthy and circuitous method of identifying the poems is not desirable: I should wish them to be remembered by brief, repeatable, and significant titles. I have therefore supplied titles of my own to such pieces as bear none in the original edition: wherever a real title appears in that edition, I have retained it.

With these remarks I commend to the English reader the ensuing selection from a writer whom I sincerely believe to be, whatever his faults, of the order of great poets, and by no means of pretty good ones. I would urge the reader not to ask himself, and not to return any answer to the questions, whether or not this poet is like other poets--whether or not the particular application of rules of art which is found to hold good in the works of those others, and to constitute a part of their excellence, can be traced also in Whitman. Let the questions rather be--Is he powerful? Is he American? Is he new? Is he rousing? Does he feel and make me feel? I entertain no doubt as to the response which in due course of time will be returned to these questions and such as these, in America, in England, and elsewhere--or to the further question, "Is Whitman then indeed a true and a great poet?" Lincoln's verdict bespeaks the ultimate decision upon him, in his books as in his habit as he lives--"Well, he looks like a man."

Walt Whitman occupies at the present moment a unique position on the globe, and one which, even in past time, can have been occupied by only an infinitesimally small number of men. He is the one man who entertains and professes respecting himself the grave conviction that he is the actual and prospective founder of a new poetic literature, and a great one--a literature proportional to the material vastness and the unmeasured destinies of America: he believes that the Columbus of the continent or the Washington of the States was not more truly than himself in the future a founder and upbuilder of this America. Surely a sublime conviction, and expressed more than once in magnificent words--none more so than the lines beginning

"Come, I will make this continent indissoluble."[7]

[Footnote 7: See the poem headed Love of Comrades, p. 308.]

Were the idea untrue, it would still be a glorious dream, which a man of genius might be content to live in and die for: but is it untrue? Is it not, on the contrary, true, if not absolutely, yet with a most genuine and substantial approximation? I believe it is thus true. I believe that Whitman is one of the huge, as yet mainly unrecognised, forces of our time; privileged to evoke, in a country hitherto still asking for its poet, a fresh, athletic, and American poetry, and predestined to be traced up to by generation after generation of believing and ardent--let us hope not servile--disciples.

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." Shelley, who knew what he was talking about when poetry was the subject, has said it, and with a profundity of truth Whitman seems in a peculiar degree marked out for "legislation" of the kind referred to. His voice will one day be potential or magisterial wherever the English language is spoken--that is to say, in the four corners of the earth; and in his own American hemisphere, the uttermost avatars of democracy will confess him not more their announcer than their inspirer.

1868.

W. M. ROSSETTI.

N.B.--The above prefatory notice was written in 1868, and is reproduced practically unaltered. Were it to be brought up to the present date, 1886, I should have to mention Whitman's books Two Rivulets and Specimen-days and Collect, and the fact that for several years past he has been partially disabled by a paralytic attack. He now lives at Camden, New Jersey.

1886.

W. M. R.