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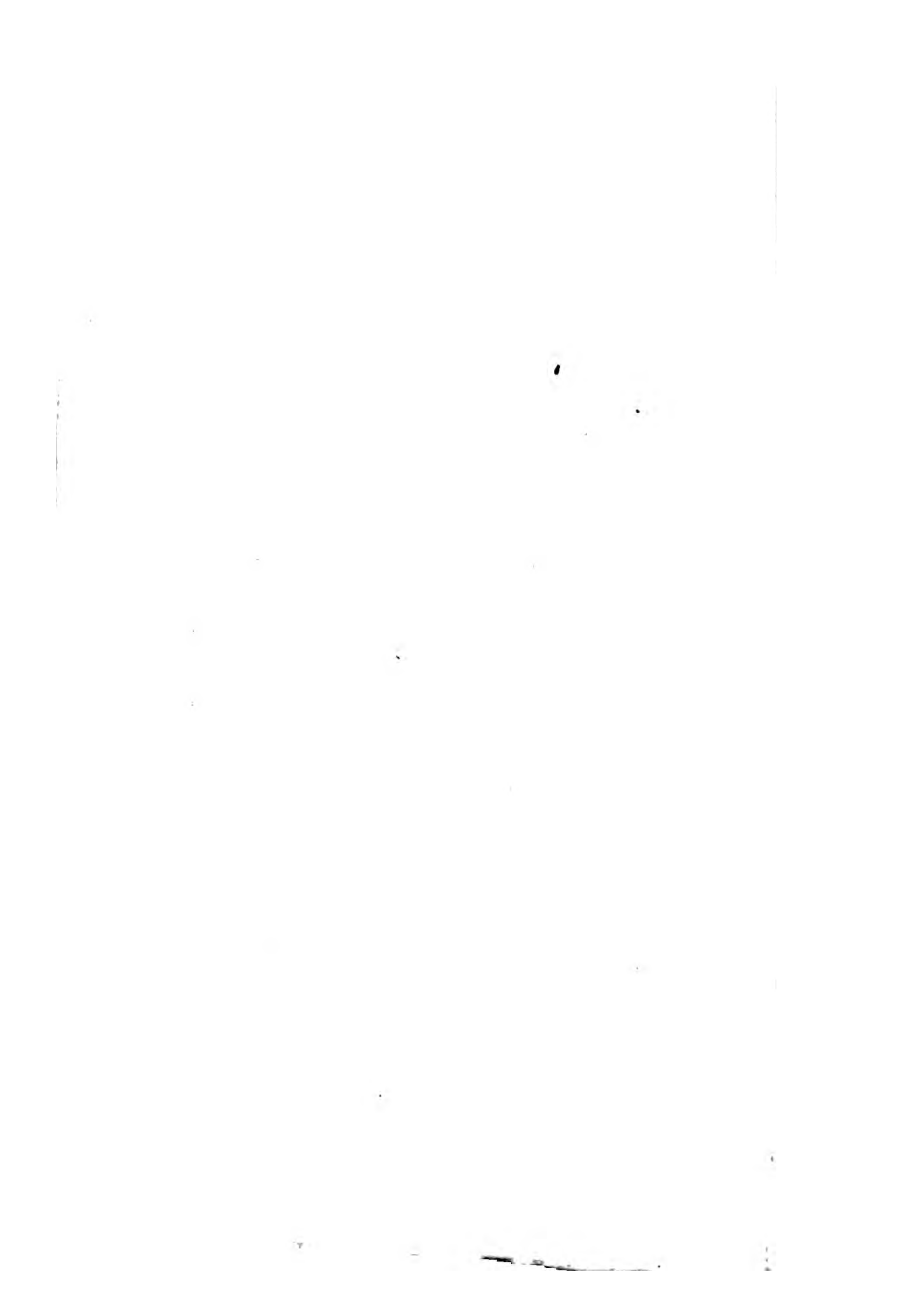
BOS







Alias Walt Whitman



Alias

WALT WHITMAN

BY

Harvey O'Higgins

The Carteret Book Club

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N O T E

AFTER viewing the vast accumulation of books and articles about Walt Whitman, it would seem that the subject had been exhausted and that every possible line of approach had been exploited to the limit.

However, shortly before his lamented death last winter, Harvey O'Higgins completed the essay which is here first produced in permanent form.

It is full of insight and humor and exposes a number of weaknesses or worse, in the character of an overlauded person-

ality about whom have grown up many legends, apocryphal and otherwise.

The Carteret Book Club, with the kind permission of the Editor of Harpers Magazine, in which periodical the article first appeared and with the consent of Mrs. O'Higgins, is pleased to issue the essay in fitting format, to its members and friends.

W. M. S.

November, 1929



ALIAS WALT WHITMAN



I

IN 1841, the editor of *The Daily Aurora* of New York City was a rather debonair young man from Brooklyn, a Mr. Walter Whitman, twenty-two years old, who “usually wore a frock coat and a high hat, carried a small cane” and had “the lapel of his coat almost invariably ornamented with a boutonnière.” A contemporary described him as “tall and graceful in appearance, neat in attire, and possessed of a very pleasing and impressive eye and a cheerful and happy-looking countenance.” It is also recorded that he was a success with the blue-stockings of the day. “I have been with him often in the society

of ladies,” a friend wrote, “and I never knew of any woman young or old but thought him a most agreeable gentleman of great culture.”

It was a brave day for blue-stockings and gentlemen of great culture. A diarist of the time observes, “Walked down Broadway with all the fashion, and met the pretty blue-stocking, Miss Julia Ward. . . . She had on a blue satin cloak and a white muslin dress. I looked to see if she had on blue stockings, but I think not. I suspect that her stockings were pink, and she wore low slippers. They say that she dreams in Italian and quotes French verses.” She was the same age as the editor of *The Daily Aurora*, having been born, like him, in May, 1819. And walking down Broadway, “with all the fashion,” she may have seen him—tall and graceful, in his high hat and his frock coat, swinging his small cane—since he promenaded on Broadway, in those days, as devotedly as Thoreau roamed his woods.

He was more professional in literature than she; he was trying to make his living by writing, and she did not need to; but they both produced the same kind of verse—the kind that was fashionable in the literary journals of the moment. He was about to announce in print:

*Not in a gorgeous hall of pride,
Where tears fall thick and loved ones sigh,
Wished he, when the dark hour approach'd,
To drop his veil of flesh and die.*

In spite of his buttonhole bouquet and his high hat, he really much preferred to end

*Amid the thunder-clash of strife,
Where hovers War's ensanguined cloud,
And bright swords flash and banners fly
Above the wounds and groans and blood.*

As elegant sad verse, this would seem to compare favorably with Julia Ward's stanza from her poem "On Looking Over a Dairy

Kept While I Was Under Serious Impressions”:

*Oh! happy days, gone, never to return,
At which fond memory will ever burn,
Oh! Joyous hours, with peace and gladness blest,
When hope and joy dwelt in this careworn breast.*
which she had written, seven years before,
at the careworn age of fifteen.

Although they were both made famous, twenty years later, by their poems about the Civil War—he by his “O Captain! My Captain!” and she by her “Battle Hymn of the Republic”—I do not know of any record that they ever met. Certainly not in the 1840’s. They were worlds apart socially. As the daughter of Mr. Samuel Ward, the rich New York banker, she was “a frequenter of fashionable society,” to quote her own subsequent description of herself, “a musical amateur, a dilettante in literature.” He, in spite of his fashionable appearance, was the

son of a Long Island farmer-carpenter, and he had worked his way up to the office of *The Daily Aurora* as a lawyer's errand boy, a doctor's office boy, a typesetter, and a country school-teacher. He had a rather meager education, and if any lady mistook him for "a gentleman of great culture" she must have been hypnotized by his pleasing and impressive eye. In the 1860's and 70's he could still write to his mother, from Washington, "I wish you was here," and to his brother, "I was very sorry you wasn't able to come on to see the Review."

All he had of the fashionable gentleman were the clothes and the taste for idleness. The proprietor of the *Aurora* thought him "the laziest fellow who ever undertook to edit a city paper." It was his habit to arrive at his office "between eleven and twelve o'clock in the morning," according to one of his editorial associates, and after looking

over "the daily and exchange papers," he always strolled down Broadway to the Battery, spent "an hour or two amid the trees, enjoying the water view," and returned "to the office location at about two or three o'clock in the afternoon." Apparently, these leisurely habits lost him his position on the *Aurora*, and he became what is called a free-lance.

As a free-lance, he wrote a quantity of verse and prose that was mostly worse than mediocre. The prose especially was falsely done, without conviction, without the faintest glint of artistic conscience, and faked in imitation chiefly of Edgar Allan Poe and James Fenimore Cooper. In November, 1842, he put out an anonymous novel, *Franklin Evans; or The Inebriate*, dedicated to the Temperance Societies of the day. It was published in a weekly story paper called *The New World*, and ballyhooed as written "expressly for *The New World* by one of the

best novelists in this country, with a view to aid the great work of reform and rescue young men from the demon of Intemperance." It was really written, one of his friends records, "mostly in the reading room of Tammany Hall, which was a sort of Bohemian resort, and he afterwards told me that he frequently indulged in gin cocktails, while writing it, at the 'Pewter Mug,' another resort for Bohemians around the corner in Spruce Street."

Copies of *Franklin Evans* are now so extremely rare that it is not easy to confirm the adverse judgment of his biographers upon it as "chaotic," "ill-told," "rambling," and "difficult to treat seriously." But much of his other free-lance work of the period has been collected and reprinted, and most of it deserves the epithets that have been used on *Franklin Evans*. Among these fugitive pieces is an article called "Richard Parker's Widow" from a monthly magazine, *The Aristidean*,

published in New York in 1845. It begins, "When I was in London some years since," and it describes how Whitman saw the widow of Richard Parker, a once famous mutineer, applying for "parish assistance" from a "magistrate" in a "police office." A friend, he says, pointed her out to him secretly and then "went on to give me the particulars of this celebrated mutiny." Whitman, of course, was never in London, and the story of the mutiny, as he tells it, is taken almost word for word from Pelham's *Chronicles of Crime* or *The New Newgate Calendar* (London, 1841). The only considerable change that he makes in Pelham's narrative is this: according to Pelham, the convicted mutineer, before he was hanged at the yard-arm, was given a glass of white wine which he drank "to the salvation of his soul and the forgiveness of all his enemies"; Whitman makes it "a glass of water."

The Aristidean printed also, in March 1845, a long story by Walter Whitman, called "The Arrow-Tip"; and Whitman subsequently reprinted it anonymously as "The Half-Breed," an "original novelette by a Brooklynite," in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 1846, when he was editing that newspaper. In spite of his apparent pride in the story, it is as dull and pretentious an imitation of Fenimore Cooper as any high-school boy ever wrote. It may have been founded on some true anecdote which Whitman had heard, but there is scarcely an incident in it that has any near relation to reality. No character has any life. The plot is awkward and improbable. There is not an accent of sincerity in any line of it—from the "merry peals of laughter" among the "young elves" of school-children in the opening paragraph, down to the closing sentences in which one of the children (after the tragedy of the story has

been concluded) becomes a "young political aspirant" for "a respectable legislative office"—quite irrelevantly and pathetically.

I doubt whether anyone can read these magazine contributions by Walter Whitman without concluding that he was not only a lazy young man but a stupid and insincere one. Here is a specimen of his writing when he is imitating Fenimore Cooper:

"Just out from the village when the hunting party started that morning, they had been joined by Arrow-Tip's brother the Deer. He, accompanied by a favorite dog, was watching the evolutions of a large bird that lazily skimmed near the surface of a cascade near by—a charming spot, that, were it in the neighborhood of our eastern cities, would be visited by thousands for its beauty. "Call the dog from me, brother," said the Deer, "he frightens the bird." Arrow-Tip did as he was desired. The party had passed on, bidding the two Indians to follow. And the chief sat himself down

a moment, at the foot of a large tree, and waited till the successful aim of the Deer should bring the bird to the ground. One hand grasped his hunting-bow, and with the other he caressed the dog. The plot of the narrative makes it preferable not to detail minutely here all the events that took place during the day. One of these events—a startling and bloody one—has already been intimated to the reader, at the conclusion of the last chapter.”

And here is a paragraph when he is imitating Poe:

“And there is one, childlike, with helpless and unsteady movements, but a countenance of immortal bloom, whose long-lashed eyes droop downward. The name of the Shape is Dai. When he comes near, the angels are silent, and gaze upon him with pity and affection. And the fair eyes of the Shape roll, but fix upon no object; while his lips move, but in a plaintive tone only is heard the speaking of a single name. Wandering in the confines of earth, or restlessly amid the streets of the

beautiful land, goes Dai, earnestly calling on one he loves. Wherefore is there no response?"

Although his more enthusiastic biographers exult that his contributions were printed in the same literary journals as the work of Hawthorne, Bryant, Longfellow, Lowell, Thoreau, Whittier, and Poe, it must be credited to the good taste of the magazine editors and readers of the period that Walter Whitman failed as a free-lance and returned to newspaper work. In 1846, he was editing the *Brooklyn Eagle*. A number of his editorials are given in Emory Holloway's *Whitman*, and they deserve Bliss Perry's complaint, in his life of Whitman, that "the style is slovenly and the thought quite without distinction." In 1848, having lost his place on the *Eagle*, he was offered, as he says, "a good chance to go down to New Orleans on the staff of the *Crescent*, a daily to be started there with plenty of capital behind it, in op-

position to the *Picayune*." He went to the *Crescent* and worked for it for three months. Holloway reprints several of his "easy-going, whimsical, sometimes puerile sketches" from the *Crescent* and concludes that he lost his position "possibly" because the proprietors saw "that his slovenly writing . . . would add distinction to no paper."

When he returned to Brooklyn he founded a free-soil journal, *The Brooklyn Daily Freeman*, and earned this contemporary notice: "Mr. Whitman is an ardent politician of the radical democratic school, and lately established the *Daily Freeman* in Brooklyn, to promulgate his favorite 'Free Soil' and other reformatory doctrines." He withdrew from the *Freeman* about a year later, and so ended his career as a newspaperman, for the time. In 1850, he wrote some articles anonymously for the New York *Advertiser* and the *Evening Post*, but they were chiefly critical articles

on art and music. "I guess it was about those years," says his brother George, "he had an idea he could lecture. He wrote what mother calls barrels of lectures. We did not know what he was writing. He did not seem more abstracted than usual. He would lie abed late, and after getting up would write a few hours if he took the notion—perhaps would go off the rest of the day. We were all at work—all except Walt."

Only one of these lectures seems to have been delivered—a lecture before the art students of the Brooklyn Art Union, March 31, 1851. In his first paragraph, Walter Whitman turned his back on much of his past. "Among such a people as the Americans," he began, "viewing most things with an eye to pecuniary profit—more for acquiring than enjoying or well developing what they acquire—ambitious of the physical rather than the intellectual; a race to whom matter-of-

fact is everything and the ideal nothing—a nation of whom the steam-engine is no bad symbol—he does a good work who, pausing in the way, calls to the feverish crowd that in the life we live upon this beautiful earth there may after all be something vaster and better than dress and the table, business and politics.” To utter this call was “the glorious province of arts and of all artists worthy of the name.” As an æsthete, contemptuous of dress and the table and business and politics, he reprobated the clothes of “fashionable tailordom”—the clothes which he had worn as editor of *The Aurora*—and especially “the fashionable hat, before which language has nothing to say because sight is the only thing that can begin to do it justice.” And with characteristic sincerity, he included in his lecture, as Bliss Perry points out, “a description of the death-bed of Rousseau quite unwarranted by any historical evidence.”

He had given up the costume of the *Aurora* editor and also the “neat frock coat” which he had worn as a school-teacher. He had become progressively Bohemian in his attire as a free-lance writer. Now, suddenly, he began to dress in the rough clothes of a working-man, belted trousers, a shirt open at the neck to show his undershirt, high boots, and a soft felt hat. He had decided to become the Walt Whitman of the *Leaves of Grass*, and he went to work for his father, the carpenter, while he wrote his book.

II

IF anyone doubts that this “Walt Whitman” was only a new alias for the Walter Whitman of *Franklin Evans* and the imitations of Poe and Cooper, I recommend him to read the anonymous reviews which Walter Whitman wrote of Walt Whitman’s poems. One of the earliest of the series appeared in the

Brooklyn *Times*, Sept. 29, 1855, some two months after the printing of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. He introduces himself, "Very devilish to some, and very divine to some, will appear the poet of these new poems, the *Leaves of Grass*: an attempt, as they are, of a naïve, masculine, affectionate, contemplative, sensual, imperious person, to cast into literature not only his own grit and arrogance, but his own flesh and form, undraped, regardless of models, regardless of modesty or law, and ignorant or silently scornful, as at first appears, of all except his own presence and experience, and all outside the fiercely loved land of his birth, and the birth of his parents, and their parents for several generations before him."

Can anybody imagine that the Walter Whitman who wrote that sentence was really the naïve, masculine, sensual, imperious, undraped, arrogant, and silently scornful per-

son which Walt Whitman pretended to be? Is it possible that his advertisement of his devotion to “the fiercely loved land of his birth, and the birth of his parents, and their parents for several generations before him” arose out of a true patriotism and not out of a blurb-writer’s desire to sell his volume to the hundred-per-centers of his day? Could Walter Whitman have been unaware of the sexual exhibitionism in his poems when he came out before his literary side-show to promise that if you paid the entrance fee you would see Walt Whitman, on the inside, “undraped,” in “his own flesh and form,” “regardless of modesty or law”?

Or consider the following sentence: “Of pure American breed, large and lusty—age thirty-six years—never once using medicine—never dressed in black, always dressed freshly and clean in strong clothes—neck open, shirt-collar flat and broad, countenance tawny

transparent red, beard well-mottled with white, hair like hay after it has been mowed in the field and lies tossed and streaked—his physiology corroborating a rugged phrenology—a person singularly beloved and looked toward, especially by young men and the illiterate—one who has firm attachments here and associates there—one who does not associate with literary people—a man never called upon to make speeches at public dinners—never on platforms amid the crowds of clergymen, or professors, or aldermen, or congressmen—rather down in the bay with pilots in their pilot-boat—or off on a cruise with fishers in their fishing-smack—or riding on a Broadway omnibus, side by side with the driver—or with a band of loungers over the open grounds of the country—fond of New York and Brooklyn—fond of the life of the great ferries—one whom, if you should meet, you need not expect to meet an extra-

ordinary person—one in whom you will see the singularity which consists in no singularity—whose contact is no dazzle or fascination, nor requires any deference, but has the easy fascination of what is homely and accustomed—as of something you knew before, and was waiting for—there you have Walt Whitman, the begetter of a new offspring out of literature, taking with easy nonchalance the chances of its present reception, and, through all misunderstandings and distrusts, the chances of its future reception—preferring always to speak for himself rather than have others speak for him.”

And consider that the man who “never dressed in black” is the Walter Whitman of the frock coat, the high hat, and the boutonnière. He is the roughly clothed and rugged workingman “who does not associate with literary people.” The Democratic politician of the *Freeman* and the public lecturer

on art is “never on platforms amid the crowds of clergymen, or professors, or aldermen, or congressmen.” This anxious barker for his own book is “taking with easy nonchalance the chances of its present reception,” “preferring always to speak for himself”—in his poems, of course—“rather than have others speak for him,” as his anonymous reviewer is supposed to be speaking.

He continues, in his false whiskers, to advertise his Walt: “A rude child of the people!—No imitation—No foreigner—but a growth and idiom of America. No discontented—a careless slouch, enjoying to-day. No dilettante democrat—a man who is art-and-part with the commonalty, and with immediate life—loves the streets—loves the docks—loves the free rasping talk of men—likes to be called by his given name, and nobody at all need Mr. him—can laugh with laughers — likes the ungenteel ways of

laborers—is not prejudiced one mite against the Irish—talks readily with them—talks readily with niggers—does not make a stand on being a gentleman, nor on learning nor manners”—and so on, down to the end of the paragraph: “You may feel the unconscious teaching of a fine brute, but you will never feel the artificial teaching of a fine writer or speaker.”

In other words, the dilettante democrat, Walter Whitman, announces that he is now nothing of the sort; that he is a “careless slouch”; that he is no longer “a fine writer or speaker” but “a fine brute” who is “unconscious” of the teaching of which he is here so conscious. He is such an astonishing radical that he even “likes the ungenteel ways of laborers,” and he feels so little prejudice against the Irish that he “talks readily with them.” Most miraculous of all, he now likes to be called by his given name “and no-

body at all need Mr. him." And this last is a proof of his utter democracy which he repeats with unctio in his later self-advertisements.

He ballyhooed himself, anonymously, in the *American Phrenological Journal* as the "haughtiest of writers that has ever yet written and printed a book." And in the *United States and Democratic Review*, for the same month of September 1855, he hailed himself, anonymously, as "One of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking and breeding, his costume manly and free, his face sunburnt and bearded, his postures strong and erect." No longer the fashionable gentleman of great culture, he announced, rather incoherently: "self-restraint, with haughty eyes, assuming to himself all the attributes of his country, steps Walt Whitman into literature, talking like a man unaware that there was ever hitherto such a production as a book, or such a being as a writer." As

if he were afraid that some contemporary Comstock might fail to advertise his poems by attempting to suppress them, he goes on: "Nature he proclaims inherently clean. Sex will not be put aside; it is the great ordination of the universe. He works the muscle of the male and the teeming fibre of the female, throughout his writings, as wholesome realities, impure only by deliberate intention and effort. . . . If health were not his distinguishing attribute, this poet would be the very harlot of persons. Right and left he flings his arms, drawing men and women with undeniable love to his close embrace, loving the clasp of their hands, the touch of their necks and breasts, and the sound of their voices. All else seems to burn up under his fierce affection for persons." And he printed these three personal advertisements of himself as favorable press notices in the second edition of his poems.

As late as 1876, he was still writing of himself, anonymously: "This Walt Whitman—this queer one whom most of us have watched, with more or less amusement, walking by—this goer and comer, for years, about New York and Washington—good natured with everybody, like some farmer, or mate of some coasting vessel, familiarly accosted by all, hardly any one of us stopping to Mr. him—this man of many characters, among the rest that of volunteer help in the army hospitals and on the field during the whole of the late war, carefully tending all the wounded he could, southern or northern—if it should turn out that in this plain unsuspected old customer, dressed in gray & wearing no necktie, America and her republican institutions are possessing that *rara avis* a real national poet, chanting, putting in form, in her own proud spirit, in first-class style, for present and future time, her demo-

cratic shapes even as the bards of Judah put in song, for all time to come, the Hebrew spirit, and Homer the war-life of prehistoric Greece, and Shakespeare the feudal shapes of Europe's kings and lords!"

But perhaps his most extraordinary effort in establishing his alias is the one reported by Fred P. Hill, Jr., in the *American Mercury* of June 1924. Here it appears that Whitman wrote the greater part of the volume *Notes on Walt Whitman* by John Burroughs, published in 1867 as Burroughs' first book and since dropped from the list of his collected works. The style is clearly Whitman's; and Burroughs, shortly before his death, admitted in a letter to Hill that about one-half the book was written by Whitman and that the whole volume had been edited and revised by Whitman. The personal sketch of Whitman was supplied by Whitman himself. It is in the same tone as his anonymous

reviews. "There probably lives not another man," he writes of himself, "so genuinely and utterly indifferent to literary abuse or to 'public opinion,' either when favorable or unfavorable. He has never used the usual means to defend his reputation." He describes himself as "seeking not the least conquest or display," but as "making the impression on any unsuspecting stranger of a good-willed, healthy character, without the least ostensible mark of the philosopher or poet; but all the while, though thus passive and receptive, yet evidently the most masculine of beings." And so forth, to the same end as always—to the end of having Burroughs, like the anonymous newspaper reviewers, certify to the truth of the pose which he had assumed in his poetry.

III

OBVIOUSLY, Walter Whitman was no such person as he thus proclaimed himself to be. He could not be truly such a person and be aware of it. But what was he? What was the real Walter Whitman who adopted this alias of Walt Whitman, and put on this disguise of the "careless slouch," and pretended to all this rough and rugged democracy and sensuality and haughty-eyed contempt?

The answer is written plainly enough in every real biography of him that I have ever seen, as well as by implication in his poems. He was neither sensual, nor rough and rugged, nor truly healthy, nor lusty, nor even very masculine. He was what is nowadays called a Narcissan, in love with himself, introverted, and so wrapped up in his own ego that he got no free delivery of energy except in his exhibitionism. Hence his con-

stitutional laziness. He was arrested in his sexual development very near the homosexual level, as several of his poems show; and like many another case of arrested development he was always "a man's man." He speaks of the "fiercely loved land of his birth" in one of his anonymous blurbs, and in another he assumes "to himself all the attributes of his country"; but when the Civil War broke out on April 12, 1861, he disappeared for eighteen months from the sight of his biographers; and the only entry in his notebook, for that period, is the following, dated April 16, 1861, four days after the beginning of hostilities: "I have this day, this hour, resolved to inaugurate for myself a pure, perfect, sweet, clean-blooded robust body, by ignoring all drinks but water and pure milk, and all fat meats, late suppers—a great body, a purged, cleansed, spiritualized, invigorated body."

This is not the vow of a patriot worrying about the fiercely-loved land of his birth. It is the resolve of a Narcissan thinking only of his fiercely-loved physique. Here is the impulse which dressed him up as a fashionable gentleman of great culture during one phase of his life, and as a rough and rugged workman during another period, and finally as the conspicuous "good, gray poet" in gray cape and wide-awake during his later years. This is the impulse that made him begin his *Leaves of Grass* with the line "I celebrate myself." It is the impulse that drove him to celebrate himself in his "own flesh and form, undraped, regardless of modesty or law." The same impulse moves humorously in a letter to two friends, written from Washington during the war, on March 19, 1863: "My health, strength, personal beauty, etc., are, I am happy to inform you, without diminution, but on the contrary quite the reverse.

I weigh full 220 pounds avoirdupois, yet still retain my usual perfect shape—a regular model.” It is an impulse to exhibitionism that is neither sensual nor healthy, but morbid, introverted, and very near perversion.

Narcissism is apparently produced by an adoring mother in a mother-fixated boy. Whitman loved his mother “with a sort of mariolotry” as Holloway says. He broke down, during her final illness, with a partial paralysis. At the age of fifty-six, he wrote of himself, “I occupy myself, arranging these pages for publication, still enveloped in thoughts of the death, two years since, of my dear Mother, the most perfect and magnetic character, the rarest combination of practical, moral and spiritual, and the least selfish of all and any I have ever known—and by me O so much the most deeply loved.” He never married. As a young school-teacher he was “diffident with women.” One of his pupils

records, "The girls did not attract him. He did not especially go anywhere with them or show any extra fondness for their society. Before and after school, he was a boy among boys." A few years later, at the age of about twenty, as the editor of *The Long Islander*, he wrote of himself, "I would carefully avoid saying anything of women; because it behooves a modest personage like myself not to speak upon a class of beings whose nature, habits, notions and ways he has not been able to gather any knowledge, either by experience or observation." During his mature years in Washington, from the age of forty-seven to fifty-four, his most intimate companion was a young street-car conductor named Peter Doyle; and Doyle has said of him, "I never knew a case of Walt's being bothered up by a woman. Woman in that sense never entered his head. Walt was too clean. No trace of any kind of dissipation in

him. I ought to know about him those years—we were awful close together.”

The appearance of sensuality in Whitman’s verse—and in his ballyhoos—is good evidence to a modern psychiatrist that Whitman never experienced the dissoluteness which he celebrates. The sexuality in his poems is a compensation, in phantasy, for his lack of potency in experience. Much of this sexual expression is dangerously near the homosexual level—which is to be expected where the sexual impulse is anchored by a mother-fixation and unable to achieve a heterosexual goal.

When an English critic, J. A. Symonds, read the homosexual poems in “Calamus,” he wrote to ask Whitman the truth about himself, and Whitman, at the age of seventy-two, replied: “My life, young manhood, mid-age, times South, etc., have been jolly bodily and doubtless open to criticism. Though

unmarried, I have had six children—two are dead—one living Southern grandchild, fine boy, writes to me occasionally—circumstances (connected with their fortune and benefit) have separated me from intimate relations.” But that statement, written to allay the suspicion of homosexuality, is no more to be trusted than Whitman’s anonymous advertisement of himself as “a lusty breeder.” He wrote of himself, by the hand of John Burroughs, in Burroughs’ *Notes on Walt Whitman*: “Throughout this period (1840-1855) without entering into particulars, it is enough to say that he sounded all experiences of life, with all their passions, pleasures, and abandonments. He was young, in perfect bodily condition, and had the city of New York and its ample opportunities around him. I trace this period in some of the poems of ‘Children of Adam’ and occasionally in other parts of his book, includ-

ing 'Calamus.'" But this testimony from John Burroughs has now been wiped out by Burroughs' own confession that Whitman wrote it. He and Whitman did not meet until 1861 in Washington, and Burroughs knew nothing of Whitman's life in the years 1840-1855, except what Whitman told him.

The truth in all this elaborate deception about "passions, pleasures, and abandonments" seems to be—as Holloway suggests in his *Whitman*—that Walter Whitman, in 1848, had some sort of love-affair in New Orleans "with a Creole octoroon," when he was working on the New Orleans *Crescent*. And it also seems probable that he ran away from that affair and never had another. Horace Traubel says, "During Walt's last sickness his grandson came to the house. I was not there at the time. When Whitman mentioned the occurrence to me, I expressed the regret that I had missed him. 'I wish I

might see him.' 'God forbid!' said Whitman.' Henry Bryan Binns in his *Life of Whitman* supposes that the lady in New Orleans "was of higher social rank than his own—a lady of the South where social rank is of the first consideration." And Binns asks, "Why did he leave her? Why did he allow the foulest of reproaches to blacken that whitest of reputations, a Southern lady's virtue?" The answer might seem to be that perhaps the lady was not so white as all that. And Whitman's "God forbid!" to Traubel may mean that the grandson, if he really existed at all, was also somewhat colored.

No one ever saw that grandson, or any of the "six children," or any woman with whom Walt Whitman appeared to be having a love-affair. In his relations with the women who were emotionally attracted by him—like Mrs. Gilchrist, Mrs. Berenson, and his housekeeper, Mrs. Davis—he was coolly af-

fectionate and detached. Says Perry, "A daily companion of Whitman in Washington tells me that he never heard him utter a word that could not have been used to his mother. There is overwhelming testimony that for thirty years thereafter his conversation, though often blunt enough, was scrupulously chaste. There is also abundant evidence that from 1862 onward his life was stainless so far as sexual relations were concerned." I do not see how anyone can doubt that previous to 1862 it had been equally "stainless," except for his adventure in New Orleans. I see no evidence that he ever gave way to "passions, pleasures, and abandonments." I do not believe his story that he wrote *Franklin Evans* on gin cocktails from the "Pewter Mug." Just previous to the period of 1840-1855, "he neither smoked nor drank nor swore," says Binns. And the impulse under which he wrote *Franklin Evans*

was the same impulse that made him take the glass of white wine out of the hands of the dying mutineer and let him drink to the salvation of his soul in a glass of water. Any form of dissipation is a danger to the "pure, perfect, sweet, clean-blooded, robust body" of a Narcissan. And any real "abandonment" to love is impossible for the introvert who is in love with himself.

IV

THERE remains to consider Whitman's pose as the true poet of democracy, "chanting, putting in form, in her own proud spirit, in first class style, for present & future time, her democratic shapes." And, in the first place, one must admit that, from his earliest days, Walter Whitman was a militant democrat in the sense that he was opposed to aristocracy, class rule, slavery, blue laws, or anything else that threatened or interfered with the free-

dom of the common American. As a newspaper man and a free-lance writer, he did valiant service in the paper wars that were fought for liberty and the free-soil doctrines before the firing on Fort Sumter. It is no disparagement of this service to point out that it was inspired by his own colossal egotism. He was an advocate of freedom and equality because it was necessary for him to feel himself the equal in freedom of any man. "I never yet knew," he wrote in his notes, "how it felt to think I stood in the presence of my superior." And in describing the "true, noble, expanded American character" he wrote, "It is to be illimitably proud, independent, self-possessed, generous and gentle. It is to accept nothing except what is equally free and eligible to anybody else. It is to be poor rather than rich—but to prefer death rather than any mean dependence."

But with his failure as an editor, a freelance writer, an art critic, and a lecturer, he receded into a purer egotism than ever—and he accepted financial dependence, at least, without any apparent qualms. Encouraged by his reading of Emerson's famous address, "The American Scholar"—America's "intellectual Declaration of Independence," as Oliver Wendell Holmes has called it—he undertook to be a new sort of poet, the poet of the New World, "with the feeling or ambition," as he wrote, "to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and æsthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America—and to exploit that personality, identified with place and date, in a far more comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or

book.” That is to say, instead of any longer identifying himself with his country and expressing its aspirations, he was now to identify his country with himself, “assuming to himself all its attributes,” and expressing his own ego as “tallying the momentous spirit” of “current America.”

He turned his back, at once, on the economic aspirations of the democracy. In the preface to the first edition of his poems, he wrote, “Beyond the independence of a little sum laid aside for burial money, and of a few clapboards around and shingles overhead on a lot of American soil owned, and the easy dollars that supply the year’s plain clothing and meals, the melancholy prudence of the abandonment of such a great being as man is, to the toll and pallor of years of money-making, with all their scorching days and icy nights and all their stifling deceptions and underhand dodging, or infinites-

imals of parlors and shameless stuffing while others starve . . . and the issuing sickness and desperate revolt of a life without elevation of naïveté, and the ghastly chatter of a death without serenity or majesty, is the great fraud upon modern civilization.” The average American, he declared, cheated by that fraud, suffered “all the loss of the bloom and odor of the earth and of the taste of women and men you pass or have to do with in youth or middle age.” And Walt Whitman was to sing, rather, a sort of hobo democracy of the Open Road.

Being himself far from normal, he gave voice to few of the normal emotions of America. “The home, the fireside, the domestic allurements are not in him,” says John Burroughs. “Love, as we find it in other poets, is not in him.” They are not in his poetry and they were not in him. He neither felt them, appreciated them, nor understood them. What

he chiefly voiced was his own egotism—swollen to the dimensions of his country—his own morbidity, his own introversion. These are not typically American nor democratic, and the democracy has never accepted him.



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