

THE OPEN COURT AND "LEAVES OF GRASS"

To the Editor of the Open Court :

In the January number of the *Open Court* there appeared (amongst other good things) a portrait of the Hon. C. C. Bonney, a representative individual ; an article written by that gentleman on the principles of the *Open Court*, a representative individualistic magazine, an extract of great beauty from the last prose-poem of that (perhaps extreme) incarnation of Individualism—Robert Ingersoll ; and finally an editorial note — not by any means appreciative — respecting the writings of Walt Whitman, whom I have long held to be, *par excellence*, the poet of individualism.

In an article in the March number, *The Jesuits and the Mohammedans*, the writer (Dr. Pfungst) states that the battle between Jesuitism and Republicanism "is at present at its height"; by that, of course, is to be understood the struggle between Authority on the one hand and Individual Freedom on the other. If that statement be true, it represents a very serious state of affairs, and all your readers and all sympathisers with the *Open Court* idea should do everything in their power to cultivate Individuality in themselves and all those with whom they may be associated, and to encourage the circulation of literature bearing on the subject of Freedom.

Of literature of the kind, I know of none more powerful than *Leaves of Grass*, and I confess to a feeling of some disappointment on reading the admission of the Editor that "there must be something in Walt Whitman" not as the result of his own study, but merely on the authority of Professor W. K. Clifford.

Then the Editor proceeds to remark upon Whitman's "breaches of etiquette" and "immoral penchants," evidently not recognising that—read in their meaning—the *Children of Adam* series is not immoral, that it is not written for the sake of mere obscenity ; for mark these words from *Starting from Paumanok* :

"And sexual organs and acts do you concentrate in me ; for I am determined to tell you with courageous clear voice, to prove you illustrious."

He does not say "to prove you obscene and impure," but "illustrious." True, he may not have taken the most judicious means for robbing Sex of its obscene aspect and rendering it "illustrious"; but so long as Sex is a tabooed subject for any but physiological literature, so long will the majority of people continue to regard it as impure.

The Editor continues, "his lack of poetic strength" and "genuine sentiment"; perhaps I am mistaken, but I do wish the Editor would read the *Song of the Open Road* and *This Compost*, and a few of the *Drum Taps*, particularly *Over the Carnage rose prophetic a Voice*; I cannot help thinking that here he will find both "genuine sentiment" and "poetic strength." Then the "gardner will not wind" blades of grass "into garlands for a bride"; perhaps not, yet it is as well not to be too sure about that, either ; if the Editor will examine for himself some of the commonest varieties of grasses, he will see what marvelous beauty they possess ; when he has done this and read *Leaves of Grass* in a friendly (and not hypercritical) spirit, I hope he will acknowledge that the beautiful grasses of the fields (and there are no ugly ones) are typical of dear old Walt and his book, and might, in default of Orange Blossoms, adorn even a marriage-feast.

Respecting the lines "Stranger, if you, passing, meet me," etc., the Editor says, "surely there is no objection to a conversation between strangers," and the "thought is trivial and not worth incorporating in a poem." No, from the author of the *Primer of Philosophy* there can be no objection whatever ; but how many

people are there who live up to *his* philosophy? I take those lines to be an assertion of Equality, which is so closely allied to Freedom and Brotherhood, that the two latter imply the former. Think for a moment how many strangers will voluntarily speak to one another, and then say whether Whitman's lines are justified or not. His own antithesis to the lines in question is this :

"It shall be customary in the houses and streets to see manly affection;
 "The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly;
 "The dependence of Liberty shall be Lovers;
 "The continuance of Equality shall be Comrades."

The Editor's concluding remark, that Witman's popularity is closely connected with the stir which will always be unfliningly produced by any free discussion of the "questionable passages" is, I think, incorrect; for several years after I had recognised the beauty of *Leaves of Grass*, I did not encounter the book in its complete form—having to content myself with Stead's *Penny Post* edition, the selection edited by Mr. W. M. Rossetti and published by Chatto & Windus, and the little *Canterbury Poet* edition, edited by Mr. Ernest Rhys and published by Walter Scott; and I am fully aware that most of the admirers of *Leaves of Grass* whom I met are quite unacquainted with the *Children of Adam* series, and that some are not even aware of its existence. If in America that is not the case, then all I can say is that the sooner an "expurgated" edition is published there, and the "harmless" poems circulated far and wide amongst the people whom Whitman loved so well, the better.

The Editor complains that "long strings of enumerations are not poetry"; perhaps not; like the Editor, I have never "had the patience to read them through," but it has occurred to me that the author may have had a definite purpose in inserting them, and that perhaps the *Song of the Broad Axe*, which otherwise contains some noble sentiments, would be incomplete without such enumerations. I have no wish to represent Whitman as faultless, and admit that much of his work is "mere talk" and that it is "sometimes shallow."

"Most of the admirers of Walt Whitman belong to the class of eccentrics whose indorsement of a cause is not always a recommendation"; perhaps the present writer is one of these; but, if in this respect he is a sinner, he at least sins in good company; for he has always understood that the lucid *Open Court* contributor, Dr. Moncure D. Conway, was one of Whitman's warmest admirers and friends; in *Liberty in Literature* the late Robert G. Ingersoll extolled and eulogised *Leaves of Grass* and its author; Wm. M. Rossetti (of a poet and artist-family) calls Whitman one of the "great" poets; and *Leaves of Grass* has drawn admiration from such literary men as R. L. Stevenson, Sir Edwin Arnold, Havelock Ellis, Robert Buchanan, J. A. Symonds, John Burroughs, Professor Clifford, and others. These may belong to a "class of eccentrics," but whether or no, I should feel disposed to take their "indorsement of a cause" as "a recommendation."

W. H. TRIMBLE.

DUNEDIN, NEW ZEALAND, April 24th, 1900.

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