

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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O Her: Jesu Chuste/der du als ein strenger vnd gerechter richter der arme sündigē seelē so sich von dir ist abwerffen/ein vñendliche hellische straff verordnet hast bey Lucifers vnd ander en sein mit verstoffēnē geistē vnd verdampfen: Ich bitt dich/verlyh mir ein verdienstlich lebe hic in zeit der gnaden also fñren/dz ich theilhaft deins bitterē sterben/enttinnen mög solicher grausamē straff durch die grundtlose barmhertzigkeit deiner allmēchtigen genaden: Amen.

### THE JAWS OF HELL.

German woodcut of the age of the Reformation.

(From Paul Carus, *History of the Devil*.)

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## WALT WHITMAN'S MESSAGE.

BY O. E. LESSING.

WHITMAN'S "main life-work, the principal object" from which he was resolved never to be diverted, was the "great construction of the New Bible." In contrast to the Old Bible the new one was to reconcile "materialism and spirituality" through the medium of the "intellect, the esthetic." It was at the same time to be the poem of adherence to "the good old cause," and the good old cause "is that in all diversities, in all lands, at all times, under all circumstances,—which promulges liberty, justice, the cause of the people as against infidels and tyrants." Such was, according to Whitman's own words, the plan and purpose of *Leaves of Grass*, and Mr. Shipley in his article "Democracy as a Religion" has given us an enlightening exposition of the poet's ideas. It was a bold undertaking, indeed, for one man to do single-handed, within a few years, what the accumulated wisdom of many religious leaders had taken centuries to achieve. It may therefore well be doubted from the outset whether the poet's intentions ever reached their ultimate goal, the "construction of the *New Bible*."

Love, fidelity, social service, generous comradeship, democracy, humanity, universal sympathy, spiritualism, immortality, providential predestination,—if these are the ideals of *Leaves of Grass*, they are certainly no newer than the teachings of Christ and of His Apostles, than the gospel of love, brotherhood in God Father, redemption, and resurrection. As to the intended reconciliation of materialism and spiritualism, it is true that Whitman, like so many other visionaries—Lessing, Heine, Ibsen, e. g.,—dreamed of the possibility of a "third gospel." Among his very last utterances we find the following remark: "The philosophy of Greece taught normality and the beauty of life. Christianity teaches how to endure



illness and death. I have wondered whether a third philosophy fusing both, and doing full justice to both, might not be outlined."

On the other hand, it has irrefutably been pointed out (by Dr. Bertz in his unjustly ignored book *Der Yankce-Heiland*) that Whitman's idea of immortality and of the relation of body and soul, is essentially the same as St. Paul's conception of the "natural body" and the "spiritual body" (cf. 1 Cor. xvi. 44ff). Whereas Whitman seems to accept the hypotheses of modern science, like evolution, heredity, etc., thereby uniting, as he thought, religion and science, he holds in reality fast to the doctrines of Christianity as laid down in the New Testament, with one or two exceptions which constitute a relapse into Judaism. There never was a man with a less scientific mind than Whitman. He took for granted what appealed to his own nature. He believed what he wished to believe. He shrank from analysis. The disinterested objectivity of scientific investigation was distasteful to him. He welcomed science whenever it affirmed what he had chosen to affirm; to its negative results he shut his eyes. An almost feminine, not to say childlike, self-deception is revealed by such statements as this: "The utmost pride goes with the utmost resignation: science says to us—be ready to say yes whatever happens, whatever don't happen: yes, yes, yes. That's where science becomes religion—where the new spirit utters the highest truth—makes the last demonstration of faith: looks the universe full in the face—its bad in the face, its good—and says yes to it" (to Horace Traubel). He was unable to see, or would not see, the difference there is between a scientific affirmation of the facts of observable life and a demonstration of faith in things unobservable. He is delighted to hear that Huxley called the theory of evolution a mere working hypothesis. At the same time he says that his own work "must assume the essential truths of evolution, or something like them."<sup>1</sup> And in *Notes Left Over* he expects "first-class metaphysicians and speculative *philosophs*" to give to "the highest and subtlest and broadest truths of modern science their true assignment and last vivid flashes of light." Similarly he turns in his *Democratic Vistas* from the cold facts of science to the "living glow, fondness, warmth, which the old *exaltés* and poets supply," mentioning especially the "Hebrew Bible." In other words: science remained to Whitman a problem, religion a fact. He did not succeed in reconciling the two. His philosophy is anything but modern.

<sup>1</sup> Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Vol. II, p. 65; Vol. III, pp. 94f.

Even Whitman's strong opposition to any and all forms of orthodoxy, to ecclesiastical definitions, to organized systems of religion, cannot be considered an innovation. The New Testament itself knows nothing of a Church in the medieval sense. And Whitman in his aversion to orthodoxy had only to follow the example of the dissenters of the seventeenth or of the pietists and rationalists of the eighteenth century. It must be remembered that he always laid much stress upon his Quaker affiliations; witness his essay on Elias Hicks whom, with George Fox, he was inclined to rank as high as Shakespeare. Furthermore he is, through Carlyle and Emerson, connected with the romantic mysticism of Novalis, and through the latter with Jakob Böhme. It is safe to say that, except for temporary and rather whimsical, more or less esthetic, excursions into non-Christian fields, Whitman was at the bottom of his heart as devoted a disciple of Jesus as Elias Hicks himself. In the disguise of an iconoclast he was an ardent believer. The roaring lion was in fact a meek and faithful lamb—to use Dr. Bertz's quaint phraseology. He was not an "immoralist" like Nietzsche who destroyed established conventions so as to construct his "New Bible," *Zarathustra*. Whitman was very far indeed from the bold independence of the hermit of Sils Maria. Ecclesiastical critics may not admit that such is the case. They are, perhaps, shocked and misled by sensational details in reading *Children of Adam*, for instance, while they fail to grasp the innermost meaning of Whitman's religious message. This message is, contrary to his original intentions, identical in spirit with the Sermon on the Mount. It is old, not new. But is it not more beneficial to mankind to have the old message of unselfish love so emphatically and so unreservedly restated as was done by Whitman, than to have a *new* Bible? Whitman's failure as a religious innovator is his greatest asset.

If the Swan of Avon knew little Latin and less Greek, the Bard of Camden knew neither the one nor the other. Whitman was not a scholar nor an original thinker. He was always a poet: emotional as a man; impressionistic as an artist. The more exclusively he relied upon his immediate, personal experience, observation, and perception; the more he refrained from drawing upon indirect sources, the greater was his artistic success, the stronger his human appeal. His one central experience was love, an unbounded, nay, indiscriminate love of man and nature. It is this all-comprehensive love, together with his artistic impressionism, that accounts for his innumerable inconsistencies and self-contradictions. Not only in

matters of religion was there often the discrepancy between the lion's garb and the lamb's soul.

How revolutionary do certain passages of the "New Bible" sound! "Resist much, obey little!" "O latent right of insurrection! O quenchless, indispensable fire!" So he writes in 1860 and again in 1870. Was he indeed a revolutionary? As late as in April, 1888, so Traubel reports, he said to a Russian anarchist: "My heart is with all you rebels—all of you, to-day, always, wherever: your flag is my flag." But he refused to be impressed into his service by way of an endorsement. "I suppose I am radical his way, but I am not radical his way alone." At another occasion, in the same month, he delivers an after-dinner speech in praise of Cleveland, Gladstone, and Emperor Friedrich III, while four months later he says to Traubel: "God bless the red flag of revolt!" He evidently did not mean the red flag at all, for Carnegie was a good friend of his, and he had admittedly been unable to follow the drift of the economic and social movements of his time. What he meant was only the young man whom he was speaking to and whom he loved as an individual, not as the representative of any cause. In the same spirit he kissed a criminal on his brow and helped him escape the officers of the law, convinced, no doubt, that in so doing he was living up to the example of Him who sat with the publicans and sinners.

It was one of his charitable inconsistencies that he, while unshakably believing in the perpetuity of individual identity—"the simple, separate person"—he did not consider the individual responsible for his actions. He loved any human being as such. He saw a divine soul even in the criminal. Crime to him was a disease or the result of the imperfections of society. He went so far as to doubt whether he had made emphatic enough "his affirmative feeling about the underdog—the vicious, the criminal, the malignant (if there are any malignant)." And one of the last words of the dying poet gave expression to the same feeling. The chief source of such ultra-Christian sympathy for the malignant may be found in Whitman's theory of the origin and purpose of evil which he thinks is foreordained by Providence and an integral part of the Deity (cf. *The Square Deific*). The affirmative and universalistic mysticism of Jakob Böhme and the negative exclusiveness of the Calvinistic predestination are thus curiously blended. In addition to both evidently the optimism of Leibniz's "pre-established harmony" had filtered through to Whitman by the channels of popular articles in newspapers and magazines. That the problem of evil seriously



occupied his attention is shown by such notes as this: "Theories of evil—Festus, Faust, Manfred, Paradise Lost, Book of Job."<sup>2</sup> At any rate he believed that ours was the best possible of all worlds and that everything, good or evil alike, would eventually come to a state of harmony which, if he had known Nietzsche, he might have characterized as "Beyond Good and Evil." *Leaves of Grass* is the American theodicy.

Long after the first edition of the *Leaves* had appeared, Whitman became superficially acquainted with the "Hegelian formulas," and now, if never before, he felt completely assured and justified in his optimism. This optimism again was for him the very core and substance of democracy. Among a number of notes for a proposed course of public lectures, between 1860 and 1870, we are surprised by the following statement: "Identity's continuance despite of death—Humanity, the race, History, with all its long train of baffling, contradictory events—the tumultuous procession—the dark problem of evil, forming half of the infinite scheme—these are the themes, questions, which have directly or indirectly to do with any profound consideration of democracy and finally testing it, as all questions and as underlying all questions. Who advances me to light upon these? And without depreciating poets, patriots, saints, statesmen, inventors and the like I rate Hegel as Humanity's chiefest teacher and the choicest-loved physician of my mind and soul." No less enthusiastic, and in the same connection, does Whitman speak of Hegel in his *Democratic Vistas* and elsewhere. As late as 1888 he finds consolation in him. Of Hegel's works he seems to have known a translation of the *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* which he mentions about 1860. Otherwise he depended for his information upon popularizing extracts and, like certain Young-Hegelians, he interpreted the "formulas" to suit his democratic instincts.

There remains the strong individualism of the *Leaves* as a possible element of Whitman's original creation. As a matter of fact, however, we here approach his most fruitful source of inspiration: Emerson. His indebtedness to the Concord sage Whitman throughout his own life never became tired of acknowledging. The praise of Emerson runs as a golden thread through all of Whitman's private and public utterances from notes preparatory to the *Leaves*<sup>3</sup> to the conversations with Horace Traubel.<sup>4</sup> It was

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Putnam edition, Vol. VI, p. 154.

<sup>3</sup> Putnam edition, Vol. VI, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the three volumes of *With Walt Whitman in Camden* for dozens of testimonies.

not merely the poet's gratitude for Emerson's early and decisive recognition—which he might have used with more discretion—but the realization of his nearly absolute dependence upon Emerson's philosophy. It is true that Whitman himself, but more particularly a few uncritical disciples of his, at times endeavored to reduce Emerson's influence to a minimum of encouragement. Nevertheless, even statements to the contrary only prove the perfectly evident. Dr. Bertz is not exaggerating when he says that it would be an easy matter to make up a concordance of parallel passages from Emerson's *Essays* and Whitman's *Leaves*.<sup>5</sup>

No, Whitman misunderstood himself if he believed that his was a *new* gospel. His Bible, i. e., *Leaves of Grass*, was not new in its ideas but in its poetical form of expression, in its individual variations and adaptations in so far as these were the results of the poet's artistic and personal experiences. It is not as a philosopher or a religious reformer that Whitman has a message of his own but as a poet and as a man of extraordinary dynamic power. Following the trancelike enthusiasm of the first *Leaves* there came the stern reality of the Civil War. Whitman, like his great antipode Friedrich Nietzsche a few years later, became the wounddresser. Now, in the hospitals, at the bedsides of convalescent or dying soldiers, Whitman's love of mankind underwent its supreme test. There is no more touching document of unselfish devotion and inexhaustible love to be found in any war literature than in the wounddresser's letters to his mother and in his war reminiscences. Through all the unspeakable horrors, cruelties, atrocities, sufferings, caused by a fratricidal struggle, shines forth the comforting light of a sympathetic and forgiving love that possesses a stronger healing quality than do the medicines and the skill of physicians.

Whitman's conviction of the justice of the Northern cause does not make him love the individual Southerner the less. Reports of Rebel atrocities, some of which he vividly narrates himself, do not blind him to the fact that the Southerners too are human beings. He chivalrously admires their heroism in battle. He suffers with them when they suffer from wounds or diseases. He knows that they, too, are the sons of loving mothers and that they, too, have access to the kingdom of God. Rebel or Unionist, each has a divine and immortal soul. He "had no feelings detrimental to the honor of the masses south—the great body of people there: workers, toilers, men and women: whose share in noble qualifications, in

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bertz, *op. cit.*, pp. 109ff.

richness of character, I cannot, must not, dare not, question: no." He "only had a horror of the leaders, the conspirators, the group on top who prepared the way for all these terrors."<sup>6</sup> The fearful tragedy of it all appears in the brief paragraph of *Specimen Days* entitled: "Two brothers, one South one North," which ends: "One was a strong Unionist, the other Secesh; both fought on their respective sides, both badly wounded, and both brought together here (to a Washington hospital) after a separation of four years. Each died for his cause." Each died for his cause—not a word of hatred or reproach; only love. Just as the wounddresser knew of no hatred, so the author of *Drum-Taps*, the only reflex in American literature worthy of the events, does not gloat over the downfall of the opponent, nor boast of the deeds of the victor, but he celebrates the heroic grandeur of the conflict and the triumph of the contested idea as such. He mourns the fallen as the martyrs of a cause, not as the victims of a personal enemy. Even his graphic account of Lincoln's assassination contains no word of hatred for the murderer. Nor is the beautiful dignity of the Lincoln poems marred by any outburst of resentment. He looks upon the war as one of the many tragic crises the human race has to go through on its march to universal freedom. Lincoln is the noblest of all sacrifices upon the altar of humanity. Thus we read in *Reconciliation*:

"Word over all, beautiful as the sky!

Beautiful that war, and all its deeds of carnage, must in time be utterly lost;  
That the hands of the sisters Death and Night, incessantly softly wash  
again, and ever again, this soil'd world:

... For my enemy is dead—a man divine as myself is dead;

I look where he lies, white-faced and still, in the coffin—I draw near;

I bend down, and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin."

The success of the Union cause promised to him the ultimate victory of liberty and democracy throughout the world. But he never was bound by narrow party limits. A faithful adherent of the principles for which Lincoln had died, a "Republican" by name, he did not submit to anything like an official party creed. His toast to President Cleveland has been mentioned above. He believed in a patriotism far beyond sectional or nationalistic prejudices: "Not my country whether or no, God bless it and damn the rest!—no, not that—but my country: to be kept big, to grow bigger, to lead the procession, not in conquest, however, but in inspiration."

Whitman's political program may be called humanitarian. Its main ideas are accordingly simple, too simple indeed in view of

<sup>6</sup> *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Vol. III, pp. 545f.

man's real nature that has made civilization, or what we call civilization, so terribly complex. Was it not rather naive of him, long after the appearance of the *Communist Manifesto*, still to believe that social injustice, exploitation of the masses, and poverty, could be remedied by such devices as the single tax or the creation "of myriads of actual homes in fee simple" for "the bulk of the people"? He evidently had had a glimpse of Sismondi's *Social Science* and of Henry George's theories; and from Rousseau and our own Declaration of Independence he remembered that democracy was to be based upon the equal rights of all human beings. Karl Marx, the principles he represented, the economic facts looming in the backgrounds of *Capital*, he was unable fully to understand. And yet he knew that something was wrong with society, because he had for many years lived among the crowds of the big cities and had observed the lives of thousands with the keen eyes of the artist and with the sympathetic heart of the lover. So he was, for instance, passionately opposed to a protective tariff "primarily because it is not humanitarian, because it is a damnable imposition upon the masses." Very pertinently he raises the question: "Who gets the plunder?" and answers it in a way that is more than discouraging in its timeliness: "The profits of 'protection' go altogether to a few score select persons—who, by favor of Congress, State legislatures, the banks, and other special advantages, are forming a vulgar aristocracy, full as bad as anything in the British or European castes, of blood, or the dynasties of the past." Instead, he thought, free trade would help bring about the brotherhood of man. But no political, economic, or social system could in the least contribute to that end without love. Love was Whitman's panacea:

"Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?  
Or by an agreement on paper? or by arms?  
—Nay—nor the world, nor any living thing, will so cohere."

But who is there to heed this warning? Who is there to practise universal love in a world which has so completely turned away from its true God for the orgiastic worship of the Golden Calf? How many of his dreams would Whitman, if he lived to-day, see fulfilled?

After the Civil War he hoped for a national regeneration that was to give a final justification to the victorious Union and its growing material prosperity. Universal love, in his sense, did not mean anything like a vague and sentimental cosmopolitanism.

"One's Self I sing—a simple, separate Person  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse."

And again:

"I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms."

Inconsistent as he was in many things, this fundamental principle of genuine democracy he firmly adhered to through all the various phases of his inner development. It is collectivism based upon a responsible individualism both national and personal. Self-assertion and the collective conscience he wished to stimulate in his readers. The harmony of the individual with the collective spirit is the keynote of Whitman's literary Declaration of Independence, the *Democratic Vistas*.

Before America can become the leader of mankind, she must establish "the science of healthy average personalism the object of which should be to raise up and supply through the States a copious race of superb American men and women, cheerful, religious, ahead of any known." The masses must be built up by building up "grand individuals." To attain this end it is necessary to carry out a plan of practical eugenics which in turn results from an entire elimination of the prudery, hypocrisy, and sterility of Puritanism. "The Puritanical standards are constipated, narrow, and non-philosophic," he says in another connection. Only healthy fathers and mothers can beget the new race. Only if the functions of conjugal life are frankly and honestly acknowledged in their natural sanctity will it be possible to avoid the fatal extremes of Puritanism on the one hand and of licentiousness on the other. It is Puritanic sham-moralism that degrades the mothers of the race as shamefully as they were degraded in the Middle Ages, when monkish asceticism looked down upon woman as the originator of sin and as the ever dangerous tool of Satan. But no less degrading are the conventions and fashions of modern society. If Whitman saw the bacchantic lust, the irresponsible unrestraint, the frivolous immodesty that is rampant at the present time in all classes of our people, the so-called educated not excepted, he would think his whole life-work lost. "Everywhere an abnormal libidinousness, unhealthy forms, male, female, painted, padded, dyed, chignoned, muddy complexions, bad blood, the capacity for good motherhood deceasing or deceased." Can we rightly say that these words of 1870 have been refuted by the succeeding fifty years? Any one familiar with the conditions



in our public schools, colleges, factories, stores, places of amusement, will mournfully admit that we are still very far from Whitman's ideal of a race of athletic men and women.

The *ideal* race of the future, "the divine average," consisting of free, strong, healthy personalities bound together by mutual love, woman enjoying equal rights with man, will form a true democracy. Such a democracy will have overcome the evils of frivolity, corruption, hypocrisy, greed for money, moral depravity. Physical and spiritual health create genuine liberty. For the petrified formalism of dogmatic creeds and obsolete political institutions will not be tolerated by a healthy people. The collective personality of ideal democracy is a law unto itself and needs no laws decreed from above. Such is Whitman's interpretation of Lincoln's immortal definition of popular government.<sup>7</sup>

As if he had read Schiller's *Esthetic Education* he defines democratic liberty as freedom under the law. The pseudo-democrat seeks for "elevation" and "special privileges"; "the full-grown man or woman," the true democrat, "the master, sees greatness and health in being part of the masses; would you have in yourself the divine, vast, general law? then merge yourself in it." "Great, unspeakably great—is the Will! the free Soul of Man! at its greatest, understanding and obeying the laws, it can then, and then only, maintain true liberty." But the vast, divine Law is the law of justice, righteousness, and universal love. It is not the tyranny of autocratic rulers who disregard the craving of mankind for love; who give the starving people the stones of slavery instead of the bread of liberty. Whitman would have considered any violation of the sacred rights of the people as guaranteed by our constitution inconceivable. "What is independence?" he asks. "Freedom from all laws and bonds except those of one's own being, controlled by the universal ones."

True democracy once established within the nation—and not until then—the universal democracy will be founded upon the "religion of love that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all." This is Whitman's idea of a league of nations. It combines national independence with international good will. It is really American and at the same time humanitarian. It is indeed a league of free peoples, not a capitalistic syndicate for the enslavement of the masses.

<sup>7</sup> The writer may be pardoned for using here an article of his on *Democratic Utopias* in *The New Times*.

American democracy in its individual form must seek its culmination and expression in a great, indigenous, thoroughly American literature. No problem occupied Whitman's thought more intensely than this. From the early sketches of his *American Primer* on to the last jottings of his dying days we find him pondering over "the terrible query: American National Literature—is there distinctively any such thing, or can there ever be?" Taking issue with reviewers who charged him with an "attitude of contempt and scorn and intolerance" toward the leading American poets, Whitman gives testimony of his appreciation of "the mighty four who stamp the first American century with its birthmarks of poetic literature." "I can't imagine any better luck befalling these States for a poetical beginning and initiation than has come from Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier." However great in their respective places, they were either not independent enough of European influence or not great enough to measure up to what Whitman had conceived to be the highest American standard. Compared with the immense realities of American life and nature, with the "teeming region of the Mississippi Valley," with "the pure breath, primitiveness, boundless prodigality, and amplitude of these prairies, the Rocky Mountains," even the mighty four must have seemed bookish and imitative to a poet whose imagination spanned the whole vast continent, the multitude of its people, and their relation to the universe. Let the American poet gratefully accept the treasures of Old World literature but beware of the un-American spirit they express. Let the American poet be inspired by his illustrious predecessors to greater achievements. To be genuinely American does not mean "to bluster out: 'nothing foreign'" but "to supply such forcible and superb specimens of American models that they put foreign models in second class." "Just go on supplying American models." But imitation was not to be eradicated so easily as Whitman occasionally dreamed. If only the models which were copied by American writers were genuine! "We all see London, Paris, Italy—not original, superb, as where they belong—but second-hand here, where they do not belong. We see the shreds of Hebrews, Romans, Greeks; but where, on her own soil do we see, in any faithful, highest, proud expression, America herself? I sometimes question whether she has a corner in her own house." "America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding, and cosmical, as she is herself. It must bend the vision toward the future more than the past. Erect, inflated, and fully self-esteeming be the chant; and then America will listen with pleased ears."

As a literary critic Whitman is, as may be expected, no less impressionistic and subjective than in his attitude toward science. The literature of the world, Old or New, he measures by the standard of his personal conception of American democracy, the essence of which was or was to be spiritual and cosmic. By "cosmic" he evidently meant what the German romanticists called the infinite. He must have known enough of Schelling, whom indeed he invariably quotes with Kant, Fichte, and Hegel in support of his views, to share with him the theory that the function of art is to express the infinite by the image of the finite. And he was himself romantic enough to demand of poetry that it be suggestive, emotional, "interesting," rather than complete, plastic, and objective. On the other hand, he was opposed to the abnormal and morbid so many romanticists became entangled in, demanding "for these States a cheerful, religious fervor, endued with the ever-present modifications of the human emotions, friendship, benevolence, with a fair field for scientific inquiry, the right of individual judgment, and always the cooling influences of material nature." The democratic, the cosmic, the suggestive, the healthy and natural, therefore, are the four criteria Whitman applies to literature and its creators. From this point of view he prefers the Hebrew prophets, the "*exaltés*," to almost any other kind of poets, and goes so far as to place Shakespeare rather low inasmuch as he was a representative of an obsolete feudalistic order. He finds fault with Carlyle because he is undemocratic and pessimistic; with Emerson for his lack of original naturalness. As late as 1880 he sees in Poe hardly more than the "morbid, shadowy," artist. It seems to have been the result of an entire re-reading and revision, when in 1888, in conversation with Traubel he admits that Poe may, after all, be "a star of considerable magnitude, if not a sun, in the literary firmament." That there was a spiritual affinity between his and Poe's romantic philosophy (with Novalis's magic idealism for a common source), Whitman never suspected.

All of his ideals Whitman would have found realized in the one great poet of modern times, if he only had known him: Goethe. But Whitman, so it seems, never read all of *Faust*; he certainly knew nothing of *Wanderjahre*. At one time, upon being asked to express his opinion of Goethe, he frankly confesses that he does not know him, but ventures to express an "opinion" just the same. What a pity! For in *Faust* and *Wanderjahre* there were supreme examples of a poetry democratic in spirit, cosmic in scope; combining suggestiveness with health, spirituality with the sensuous

concreteness of nature. And withal, it was America that symbolized in Goethe's vision the ideal of liberty the European nations were so desperately striving for even then.

Does America "listen with pleased ears" to her own poets who endeavor to come up to Whitman's high standard? Is it too pessimistic a view, if we state our fear that Whitman's message is practically lost in the mad turmoil of our materialistic age? How little known is Whitman himself! *Drum-Taps*, to be sure, was revived during the war. But there are no indications of a general and whole-hearted acceptance of Whitman's essential ideals. After the flood of anniversary articles has subsided, *Leaves of Grass* will continue to slumber in the libraries. And our academic critics will go on harping on the theme of Whitman's "impossible" verse form. After all Whitman has done, the regularity of rhyme and meter are taught to be so much more important in poetry than the life pulsating in rhythms born of life. What a miserable spectacle does the attitude of our general public to modern American poetry afford! Just as Whitman is at best only half understood, so his peers and his worthiest followers are neglected. Mark Twain's popularity, e. g., is that of a general merrymaker, while his profound analysis of modern society remains unheeded and his Faustian search of truth unknown. Another terra incognita is the grandiose poetry of Moody. While the melodramatic *Great Divide* was hailed as a national triumph, the much deeper *Faith Healer* was rejected, and the Prometheus trilogy, dramatic poems of truly cosmic significance, never had a hearing at all. Horace Traubel who, in his *Optimos*, has given us the most powerful and inspiring book of indigenous American poetry since *Leaves of Grass*, has grown old and feeble without receiving a sign of gratitude or mere recognition from his people.

This tragic situation has, in part at least, been brought about by the failure of our responsible literary mediators to mediate between authors and public. In this new country of ours, in this twentieth century, there still predominates in the field of esthetics a pseudo-Aristotelian orthodoxy, combined with medieval asceticism and Puritanic narrow-mindedness. Instead of generous and sympathetic interpretation encouraging the new generation of poets in their struggle for literary independence, we see scholastic inquisition at work stifling by the weight of academic authority any contemporary effort toward characteristically American self-assertion. Whitman's impressionistic method of criticism certainly had its faults; but it was on the whole constructive and imbued with an artistic sense; and it instinctively pointed in the direction of progress. "The letter

of destructive criticism must not be pushed too far—it tends to render a man unfit to build.”<sup>8</sup> If ever there is to be an authentic American literature such as Whitman demanded, criticism must approach the works of aspiring contemporaries in the spirit of discerning appreciation and unprejudiced sympathy rather than with the air of suspicious and antagonistic superiority as is the habit among our literary augurs now. Then, maybe, there will be found creative geniuses, and a public ready to listen to them, who give artistic expression to the ideals of national independence and super-national good will; who courageously proclaim the eternal values of justice, freedom, and love for all peoples and races on earth. Then Whitman’s terrible query will be answered in the affirmative: “American literature—is there distinctively any such thing, or can there ever be?”

## OUT OF THE TWILIGHT.

BY T. SWANN HARDING.

AS Alan Seeger has reminded us, there is a perspective one can get only at Death’s door; and this holds true whether that death be in war or at peace. Here is a vision of reality, a clear revealing view of naked life for once brushed free of the encumbering excrescences which normally render it obscure and very often make it into a rude caricature. There, in a peaceful, pleasant condition, in the twilight zone, neither Life nor Death—we can look down the long vista of the past or peer dimly through the dissolving veil that hides eternal reality. And the fruits of this experience are revelations otherwise utterly impossible.

This wonderful possibility counterbalances the cruel pains of a hundred illnesses, and he that has undergone this walks the earth ever after a man apart. Second only to this personal experience is the passing of one held really dear; and when these two circumstances occur simultaneously, the effect is tremendous.

The actual, close-range contemplation of death has about it little indeed of unpleasantness, certainly nothing of terror; for with the emergency comes the strength to meet it, although in close proximity it becomes less a challenge and more “a consummation devoutly to be wished.” One discovers all in a flash that the shadow-world of Plato’s Ideas is after all this side of the threshold to the unknown; that the pleasures and satisfactions of this life

<sup>8</sup> *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, Vol. III, p. 39.