

Book Chat.

W.P.'s Little White Book June 4 1919

THE CENTENARY OF WALT WHITMAN—THE MESSAGE OF THE GOOD GREY POET—ANOTHER CONVERTED INFIDEL.

FIFTY years ago an obscure American writer was dismissed from a small Government position because he had written a book of poetry, entitled *Leaves of Grass*. What would Walt Whitman have said could he have foreseen that his little book would be treasured by posterity, and that, amid the awful distractions of a world-war, the centenary of his birth would be commemorated? For Whitman has been celebrated as the most notable among the men who laboured to lay the foundations of a national literature for America, and as the poet of democracy.

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Emerson's magnificent tribute to *Leaves of Grass* is an historic utterance. "I find it," said the great Bostonian, "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I greet you at the beginning of a great career." Three generations later all the auspices seem in favour of Whitman's permanence in literature. It is the old, old story of the fate of pioneers. First the neglect of his countrymen tempered by abuse, then the recognition by a few keener minds, and finally the slow emergence into appreciation by the larger reading public. Not only were Whitman's ideas unconventional, but they constituted a new and extended criticism of life. If Whitman had merely re-arranged the old poetic materials, such a departure would in no sense be remarkable. He set himself the Herculean task of dealing with the nineteenth century without regard to convention. His cultured contemporaries were content to carve cherry stones, but this self-educated man elected to hew granite.

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Possessed of a remarkable personality, Whitman insists on the supreme value of individuality. Shakespeare had asked: "Which can say more than this rich praise, that you alone are you?" Shakespeare was addressing a beloved friend; but Whitman says the same thing to the whole world. Of mankind the great American poet has nothing to say. In his universe there were only individuals. The man who held such ideas could not help being audacious. Morality, to Whitman, is simply the normal activity of a healthy nature, not the product of tradition and convention. It is this idea, that whatever tastes sweet to the most perfect person is finally right, that underlies the most abused poems of *Leaves of Grass*. It is the antipodes of the Christian ideal. It is a lesson most sorely needed in our over-strained civilization. "Dismiss whatever insults your own soul" is Whitman's insistent cry.

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Whitman was a true singer of democracy. He had the keenest sympathy with life, and all activity interested him. This world-wide love is the key to those poems of his in which he seems to catalogue human occupations, merely naming the singing of the stevedores, the raftmen sounding their bugles, the Arabs turning to the East. This intense sympathy, which was his natural gift, was reinforced with emotion, sometimes very startling, as in his words, addressed to a courtesan: "Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you." In all the poems on slavery and war he was at his best, and the claims of humanity are eternal in his songs. "You celebrate bygones," Whitman says defiantly to the historians; "I project the history of the future."

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When Abraham Lincoln saw Whitman from the windows of the White House he said: "He looks a man." How noble he

was may be read in the account of his devotion to his fellows in the Civil War. For three years he was a nurse in the military hospitals, and the strain of that service broke his perfect constitution. Paralysis laid him low, and his last twenty years of life formed but a maimed existence.

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The orthodox press comments on the Whitman centenary were delightful reading. The *Times Literary Supplement* was freezingly polite, and compared the tan-faced Poet of the West to Edgar Allan Poe—of all men. According to the sapient reviewer, "the grace of God sometimes descends on Poe." This does not mean that the author of *The Raven* was a very devout Christian who frequently troubled the pew-openers, but that he was a brilliant literary artist. Most people were aware of that without the picturesque phraseology and belated assurance of the *Times*; but what comparison can be made between the two men, who were the poles asunder in their work and outlook on life? Poe was an artist for art's sake. Of morality he has nothing; of patriotism he has nothing; of any concern with the world around him, nothing. His poetry might have been written in Paris, Petrograd, London, Berlin, Vienna, or almost any country at almost any time. His verse is disso-

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Even the delicate Epicureans, though quite unaware of it, made an ethical appeal, and tugged at our heart strings. Villon, with his plaintive query, "Where are the snows of yesteryear?"; Herrick, singing, "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may"; Catullus, chanting, "Let us live, my Lesbia, and love. Suns may set and rise, but when our brief life fades that night lasts for ever"—these poets, with a thrill of passion flashed across the centuries, cannot evade the ethical note. Without noble thought poetry cannot become a satisfaction of the mind.

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The hypercritical *Times* reviewer, who, referring to Whitman, asked sneeringly, "But what did he teach?", was answered by Sir William Osler with crushing effect. As the physician of the good, grey poet his words have added weight. "One day, sitting at the open window of his little house, there passed a group of workmen, whom he greeted in his usual friendly way, and then said: 'Ah! the glory of the day's work, whether with hand or brain.'" The distinguished physician adds that Whitman tried "to exist the present and the real, and to teach the average man the glory of his daily work." This, as I read it, was his message.

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