

WALT WHITMAN: A CHARACTER STUDY

By OSCAR LOVELL TRIGGS

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A warm, magnetic personality penetrates *Leaves of Grass*, felt through the poem as sunlight through vapor. It is this presence that gives the poems significance. Indeed the opinion may come to prevail that the life was greater than the literature. "In Walt Whitman," said Robert Buchanan, "I see more than the maker of poems. I see a personality worthy to rank even above that of Socrates." And it has always been true that those who derided his poetry held it an honor to revere the man. One of the old Pfaff group used to say that Whitman would have served the world better had he stuck to the printer's case and left poetry alone; but as to the man—he was large of heart, large of soul, and large of nature. It may be deemed more important, therefore, that Whitman should come to be known for his expansive personality rather than for any particular literary gift. Let the doubt stand for the moment in order to emphasize the query as to the character of the man. Curiously, it will be found that the book presupposes the man, and that the man—his features, walk, speech, touch, the glance of the eye, his mind and spirit—enters into and completes the book. His influence, in short, is mesmeric; that is, he does not affect men by his thought or conduct, but seizes them directly by his living personality.

I

Physically Whitman was a man of remarkably perfect proportion and impressive ensemble. Fortunately, on account of the many portraits* of the poet, photographs, paintings, sculptures, and descriptions, it is not difficult for one who did not know him to image to the sense his form and features. One observes from the portraits the physical largeness and majesty of the man. There is expressiveness about the whole body, a character attached to the trunk and limbs as well as to the face. This gives him a certain primitive look and suggests ideas of the Beginners. One also notes the symmetrical high domed head, combining elements of weight and ascension, the strength and repose of the face, the arching eyebrows, the drooping eyelids, the straight and broad nose. In the paintings the face is florid and rich in color, the eye not flashing and intellectual but blue and absorbing. Some photographs have touches of the savage, an alertness like the Indian. Some are stern and unyielding. Of the two busts by Sidney Morse, one conveys the sense of serenity, a calm Jovian expression; the other—what Browning would call a “rough hammered head”—has the sense of rapidity resting on depth. One of the Cox photographs has the look of a laughing philosopher. The Johnston daguerreotype conveys the aspect of a man of sorrows, one acquainted with grief. The Gilchrist painting has the bearing of an Apostle of Love. All have the look of amplitude and scope. At the sight of one of the Cox portraits,

* Nearly every photographer of note has portraits of him, the most notable being the three Cox photographs taken in New York. The picture prefixed to the *Song of Myself*, which was daguerreotyped from life one hot day in August in 1855, is the earliest of the series, with the exception, perhaps, of the Johnston daguerreotype, which may have been taken in 1854. He was painted in oils by Hine in 1859, by Gilchrist in 1894, by Waters in 1877, by Eakins in 1887, and by Alexander in 1892. A crayon of heroic size was made by Kurtz in 1873. Two portrait busts were sculptured in 1887 by Sidney H. Morse, and one in 1891 by Samuel Murray, and one in 1898 by William Ordway Partridge.

Duse is reported to have exclaimed: "But the soul! How can one photograph the soul!"

The contemporary descriptions are numerous. One of the earliest recorded comments is that of Thoreau, in 1856, undoubtedly made as much with reference to the physical as the spiritual impression: "He occasionally suggests something a little more than human." William Dean Howells saw him in the autumn of 1860, and thus describes the event:

Whitman was often at Pfaff's, and the night of my visit he was the chief fact of my experience. I did not know he was there till I was on my way out, for he did not sit at the table under the pavement, but at the head of one farther in the room. There, as I passed, some friendly fellow stopped me and named me to him, and I remember how he leaned back in his chair, and reached out his great hand to me, as if he were going to give it me for good and all. He had a fine head, with a cloud of Jovian hair upon it, and a branching beard and mustache, and gentle eyes that looked most kindly into mine, and seemed to wish the liking which I instantly gave him, though we hardly passed a word, and our acquaintance was summed up in that glance and the grasp of his mighty fist upon my hand.

William D. O'Connor was intimate with the poet during his residence at Washington through the sixties. He described him as "a man of striking masculine beauty—a poet powerful and venerable in appearance; large, calm, superbly formed. . . . I marked the countenance serene, proud, fluid, grave; the brow seamed with noble wrinkles; the features massive and handsome, with firm blue eyes; the eyebrows and eyelids especially showing that fulness of arch seldom seen save in the antique busts; the flowing hair and fleecy beard, both very gray, and tempering with a look of age the youthful aspect of one who is but forty-five; the simplicity and purity of his dress, . . . the whole form surrounded with manliness as with a nimbus and breathing, in its perfect health and vigor, the august charm of the strong." The same writer described Whitman again in his story of

The Carpenter: "In his aspect were singularly blended the prophet and the child. The child in him inspired love; the prophet, awe. He drew and he repelled." Another portrait of the poet as he appeared in 1877 has been drawn by the pen of Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke:

He was a man of about six feet in height and weighing about two hundred pounds, erect, broad chested, dressed in a light gray suit—a white shirt with broad turned down collar open at the throat and no necktie. His face was broad and red, the picture of robust health, his hair and beard long and almost white. After he had welcomed me, which he did with cordiality, and we had sat down to talk, I saw that his eyes, which were a good part of the time half covered by heavy lids, were pale blue, that his nose was strong and straight, his lips full and more expressive of tenderness than firmness, his cheeks rosy and smooth almost as a boy's; his ears large, fleshy and extraordinarily handsome, his head massive and well rounded both from front to back and from side to side, his brows prominent and very high arched. Head and body were well and somewhat proudly carried. His ruddy face, his flowing, almost white, hair and beard, his spotless linen, his plain, fresh looking gray garments, exhaled an impalpable odor of purity. Almost the dominant initial feeling was: here is a man who is absolutely clean and sweet—and with this came upon me an impression of the man's simple majesty, such as might be produced by an immense handsome tree, or a large, magnificent, beautiful animal. The poet's voice, which was soft, clear and sympathetic, added much to the charm of his presence.

In 1878 he was present at the funeral of William Cullen Bryant, and the New York Sun of that date makes this record: "The man most looked at was the white haired poet, Walt Whitman, who presented a Homeric picture, in which were combined the easy going nature of Grandfather Whitehead and the heroic build of an antique statue." A casual observer at the same time said: "I think the old fellow the most human being I ever met."

Edmund Clarence Stedman described his presence at the time of the New York Lincoln lecture, in 1887: "As he

entered haltingly, and took the seat placed for him, his appearance satisfied the eye. His manly figure, clothed in a drab suit that sat loosely and well became him, his head, crowned with flowing silvery hair, his bearded, ruddy and winsome face, upon which sat a look of friendliness, the wise benignity that comes with ripened years—all these gave him the aspect of a poet and sage." Dr. J. Johnston, an English friend, saw the poet in 1890. "The whole face," he wrote, "impresses one with a sense of resoluteness, strength, and intellectual power, and yet withal a winning sweetness, unconquerable radiance, and hopeful joyousness." By John Burroughs Whitman's portrait has been most skilfully drawn again and again. The obituary notice in *The Critic* contained the following portrayal :

In person, Whitman was large and tall, above six feet, with a breezy openair look. His temperament was sanguine, his voice was a tender baritone. The dominant impression he made was that of something fresh and clean. His physiognomy was undoubtedly remarkably unique. The full beauty of his face and head did not appear till he was past sixty. After that, I have little doubt, it was the finest head this age or country has seen. The lines were so simple, so free and so strong. High arching brows, straight, cleancut nose, heavy lidded bluegray eyes, forehead not thrust out and emphasized but a vital part of a symmetrical, dome shaped head ; ear large, and the most delicately carved I have ever seen, the mouth and chin hidden by a soft, long white beard.

Edwin Arnold considered the poet one of the most beautiful men he ever beheld, "with his clear keen eyes, sculptured profile, flowing silver hair and beard, and mien of lofty content and independence."

As to general impression, these various records are singularly concurrent. And the descriptions become more than ordinarily suggestive, inasmuch as they relate to one who so curiously, and completely identified the body and soul. His poems were purposely the counterpart of his physical

makeup. His body actually finds itself utterance. The was permitted consciously, in accordance with his th the that life should be more physical than it had become through generations of repression and abuse, in order that the prophesy hidden in the form "shaped in the likeness of God" should appear, and also that more perfect physical equilibrium might give freer play for the soul. "As if life," he used to say, "this wonderful, mysterious life, were not primarily a physical phenomenon. How beautiful to live a free and healthy life complete in all parts until old age."

II

A feature of Whitman's personality is defined by the term emotionalism. The Presence behind *Leaves of Grass* is charged fully with emotionality. Compassion seemed to have been born in him with the infusion of his Quaker blood. Because of an infinite interest he was able as a boy to absorb the natural sights about him and turn them to his soul's growth. Comradeship with men and women became the basis of his life in manhood. The universality of his attachments is without a parallel in modern history. His character culminated grandly in the Civil War, for there as nurse he had an opportunity to display to the uttermost his magnetic love. His physical breakdown at that period was due in large part to the emotional intensity of his service. Emotionality is the element that floods his poems. They float deep in a sea of feeling. Havelock Ellis has expressed an opinion that Whitman's emotional expense in life was the largest of any one since Christ. Certainly *Leaves of Grass* contains the largest emotional element that has appeared anywhere in books. The words he employs become magnetic media, messengers of insurpassable sympathy between himself and readers. For once in literature, feeling is brought flush with the intellectual, perhaps carried beyond it, leading to mysticism, "soul's work" being made as

manifest as "mind's work." His humanity so fuses and dominates his culture that the impression given by his works is not that of a man of letters but of a fresh strong human nature. This is the reason why his personality is so much needed in our national life to affect the solidarity of the race. The intellect isolates and divides men, love binds and unifies. And after all feeling is more fundamental than thought. It is more necessary to feel right than to think right. Furthermore, Whitman's enormous sympathy explains his apparently wayward experiences. As Mr. Burroughs puts it: "What would seem colossal egotism, what would seem shameless confessions, what would seem unworthy affiliations with low rude persons, what would seem confounding good and bad, virtue and vice, etc., in Whitman the man, the citizen, but serves to illustrate the boundless compassion and saving power of Whitman as the spokesman of ideal Democracy." O'Connor said: "His is the strongest and truest compassion I have ever known."

III

Another of Whitman's chief characteristics is egotism—an egotism, let it be at once affirmed, not of the ignoble sort that separates men and is selfish, but an ideal kind, vicarious and all inclusive, consistent with fellowship. He who shared the fortunes of all, who merged himself so fully in the thought of nationality, who assumed even the frailties and vices of his fellows, can hardly be accused of selfishness or arrogance or improper self assertion. Out of pride proceeded charity, and out of his egotism the free gift of himself. "I celebrate myself, but what I assume you shall assume." By a process of idealization the name Whitman came to stand for ideal manhood. He was the Adam: nature culminating in a single experience, the race epitomized in a single individual. On the one hand the germinal essence of the universe, on the other hand the soul of universal humanity. This indeed was his enormous claim. But

it was not presumption but fact. Egotism is closely related to emotionality. The sympathetic identification of oneself with the multitude of men and things accrues to one's sense of being. Oneself then becomes coterminous with the universe of things and men. By the assertion of his own individuality Whitman rose into a state which was inclusive of all individuality. At times in the very intensity of his individuality, like Tennyson's Ancient Sage, like the mystics of the Orient, he would fade away into boundless being. At the same time he could assert: "It is not the universe that is great, it is I who am great." His egotism encouraged self reliance. "I too have felt the resistless call of myself." He was Emerson's absolutely self reliant man—the very one invoked by the elder sage, one who could obey his inner promptings and persist in moving forward in the face of contradictions of others—even though Emerson himself stood in the way.

IV

The ground is now cleared for the statement that Whitman is a colossal mystic, an occultist, a religious genius of the first order. Egotism joined to emotionalism produces mysticism. Special personal intensity working upon ample emotional material creates Orientalism. According to Robert Buchanan the seer is one who sees life newly and assimilates it emotionally. By reason of the special intensity of his sight the world of the seer's vision becomes a new world and his very existence constitutes a new experience. By virtue of the emotional assimilation of impressions the intellectual occupies a subordinate place and utterance is elevated above ratiocination to the plane of poetry. If the seer be also a poet then his speech proportions itself to the quality of the poetic emotion, and thought and vision come to completion in musical representation. The poet-seer realizes life newly, assimilates experience emotionally and gives to consciousness musical utterance. Such a poet-seer

was Whitman. "How like the Orientals," said Thoreau when he first met him. In every way, in truth, he approaches the Oriental type. Occultists claim that he states the fullest measure of mystic truths, as concerning death and reincarnation, to be met with in any modern poet. His habit of concentration and power to enter the rhythmic removed state of self contemplation evidences a kinship with Eastern seers. His dominant state of feeling was that of the exalte who regards everything with wonder, reverence and love. In his mental processes he avoided the intellectualization of a subject. His face does not suggest intellectuality but life. He saw but he was not the "maker see." His works abound in paradoxes and mystical declarations. He offers conclusions but not arguments. Speaking of Carlyle's want of soul sight he maintained that in the makeup of every superior human identity there is a wondrous something quite apart from argument that realizes the absolute truth of things. "Common teachers or critics are always asking 'what does it mean?' Symphony of fine musician, or sunset, or sea waves rolling up the beach—what do they mean? Undoubtedly in the most subtle elusive sense they mean something—as love does, and religion does, and the best poem; but who shall fathom and define those meanings?" This was said not to justify his own or another's vagaries but to give warrant to the soul's joy in perceiving what cannot be intellectually defined. There was always for him something in the universe untold though not unfelt, something understood though eluding statement. *Leaves of Grass* is full of this certainty yet mystery. To the sunset breeze Whitman could whisper companionably:

Thou hast, O Nature! elements! utterances to my heart
beyond the rest—and this is of them.

Though he could not give a reason for his knowledge, yet he knew the universe was a vital whole, that eventual harmony would be reached, that all being was somehow im-

mortal. "There are *arguments* against immortality," he said, "but there is no *vision* of denial." Of course the intellectual is not denied or the real overlooked. While an Orientalist he was Yankee too. But the rational and the real formed only an area of his dwelling. In conclusion he would say: "Give me to sing the Great Idea."

This tendency toward Orientalism is not exceptional in Whitman's case. Orientalism has been slowly conquering the Occident for fully a century. The renascence of the twentieth century in the west will be due not as in the sixteenth, to the Greek, but rather to the Indian. One feature of Orientalism, pessimism, has characterized one branch of European philosophy since Schopenhauer. Wagner set Orientalism to music. Matthew Arnold sang it in verse. Emerson reproduced the fine thoughts of Hafiz, Saadi and the Persian mystics. Thoreau was steeped in Oriental lore. Alcott had the air of an Eastern priest. This tendency in the West is natural and free from affectation. Whitman's most mystical poem, *Passage to India*, expresses a genuine longing on his part to return to primal thought, to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions. In Whitman the Eastern and the Western lovingly fuse and live together.

V

Throughout his life Whitman grew in kindness, serenity and optimism. In youth an easy going tolerance was matched by sterner "fighting qualities." Probably at all times he was capable of hate and scorn, despondency and despair. He could sound occasionally harsh notes of dismay, as in *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*: "Out of struggle and turmoil I have written." But as he advanced in age the spirit of good will obtained complete supremacy, showing the conscious subordination of evil, and this was done in the face of such irony of life, such odds and encounters, such scorn and villification, such poverty and illness, as but few men of his generation endured. The adverse influences of

the time conspired against him in vain. Scorn was never answered with scorn or hate with hate. He never showed antipathy or complained or remonstrated.

Better the pride of the comrade, great in his vision of greatness, than the pride of the sage or the scorner, letting his kind pass by.

When the onset against his book was strongest he simply said: "It's a poor book that can't weather such storms." By no adversity was his calmness affected. When about his work he usually sang or whistled. Doyle relates how in their walks in Washington Walt went always singing or whistling, or he would recite poetry, especially Shakespeare; always happy, cheerful, good natured. After his paralysis at Camden he would spend days out of doors at Timber Creek in perfect contentment, looking at the grass, the trees, the flowers, the aspects of sky, the lay of light and shadow, listening to the birds, the squirrels and the crickets in the woods. In his severest illness at this time he wrote to Doyle: "Pete, it seems pretty clear that there is no substantial recovery probable (hardly possible) for me—how long it will last this way it is of course impossible to tell—I take it all without growling—things are steadily growing worse with me—But I must not worry you—and maybe there is something more favorable ahead." If needs be he was content with small and common things. He liked the lilacs that bloomed in every door-yard. The elevation of thought and sentiment, the seriousness and calm, that characterized him betokened somehow his harmonious adjustment to the universal order. "I listen and wait." To the last hour, through untold suffering, he remained cheerful and serene.

About this feature of his character there is abounding evidence. Mr. Howells, meeting him in 1860, testified that "the apostle of the rough, the uncouth, was the gentlest person; his 'barbaric yawp,' translated into the terms of social encounter, was an address of singular quiet, delivered

in a voice of winning and endearing friendliness." In O'Connor's story of *The Carpenter* he is pictured as the image of simple charity and wisdom: "'Love,' said the gray redeemer, lifting his clear face, bright with deathless smiling, and wet with the sweet waters of immortals, 'love, love! that includes all. There is nothing in the world but that—nothing, in all the world. Better than all is love. Love is better than all.' " Mr. Edmund Gosse, acknowledging himself "a stiff necked and froward unbeliever," in visiting Whitman, in 1884, was captivated—on his own confession—by his "serene self unconsciousness, the sweet dignified urbanity, the feline immobility." Captivated but, we know, not converted. Still he gives his witness: "As I passed from the little house and stood in dull deserted Mickle street once more, my heart was full of affection for the beautiful old man, who had just said in his calm accents: 'Good bye, my friend.' I felt that the experience of the day was embalmed by something that a great poet had written, but I could not find what it was till we started once more to cross the frosty Delaware; then it came to me, and I knew that when Shelley spoke of

A peace within, a calm around,
And that content, surpassing wealth,
The sage in meditation found,
And walk'd with inmost glory crown'd,

he had been prophesying of Walt Whitman; nor shall I ever read those lines again without thinking of the old rhapsodist in his empty room, glorified by patience and philosophy." Confirmatory testimony comes also from Mr. Burroughs: "Old age may be a valley leading down and down, as it has been so often depicted, but I always thought of Walt Whitman as on the heights, and when I made my annual or semi-annual pilgrimage to visit him, I always found him on the heights—at least never in the valley of doubt and despair or of spiritual decrepitude—always tonic and uplifting."

Whitman's optimism was not a mere matter of temperament—it was a conviction. His serenity was doubtless due to the harmony existing between himself and the universal order. As Jeremy Taylor says: "He to whom all things are one, who draweth all things to one, and seeth all things in one, may enjoy true peace and rest of spirit." But beside this repose in nature there was an optimism in belief that rose to a philosophy. By conviction, that is, he was an absolute optimist. His belief was firmly grounded in reason, based as deeply in rationality as the pessimism of Carlyle or the doubts of Tennyson.

Pleasantly and well suited I walk.

Whither I walk I cannot define, but I know it is good,
The whole universe indicates that it is good,
The past and the present indicate that it is good.

All forces have been steadily employ'd to complete and delight me.

Now on this spot I stand with my robust soul.

My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The Lord will be there and wait till I come on perfect terms,
The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine will be there.

Do you see O my brothers and sisters?

It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal life—it is Happiness.

VI

It has been asserted by the critics of Whitman that the element most lacking in his make-up was the sense of humor. Mr. Ruskin, acknowledging Whitman's capacity in other respects, thinks him very deficient in the grace that saves the mental faculties from disorder. If this defect be actual it is to be lamented, for there is much reason in Carlyle's opinion that humor, when interwoven with seriousness, gives the last finish and perfection to character.

This criticism, does not refer, I presume, to the poet's perception of the simply laughable, for he could laugh with

the rest when the occasion required, not boisterously, indeed, as Carlyle laughed, but slyly, something like Tennyson. Jestings and persiflage he opposed on principle, observing that these tended to hurt and divide men. But a good story met his approval, and he himself had at his command many apt and quaint tales, derived from his Quaker associations, which gave him and others pleasure in the telling. Occasionally in his poems, as in the first sections of *The Song of the Exposition*, there is evidence of a playful fancy, which he might easily have increased, if he had chosen, to broad humor. He had power of satire, as is shown by an early poem entitled, *Repondez*, which, it is interesting to observe, was omitted from the last editions, probably on the ground of its severity.

I would understand, then, that this criticism refers to humor in its technical meaning, "perception of the incongruous," the evidence of the lack being taken from the apparently incongruous association of persons and objects in certain catalogues and poems. If applied in its literalness the charge of defect is no doubt a just one. But, to my mind, the absence of humor in his works is due not to defect, but to the fact of the absorption of the faculty of humor into higher and nobler perceptions.

Technically humor consists in the perception of the incongruous. It springs, as Emerson noted, from comparing fractions with wholes. Professor Vida Scudder illuminates the definition by pointing out that the great humorists of the world have been its pessimists and unbelievers. Aristophanes, master of the comic realities, jested belief out of mind. Heine was a humorist of the first order, because of his knowledge of the vast gulf fixed between desire and fulfillment. Carlyle, who always perceived the differences in things, was a typical humorist. He indulged in sardonic laughter by reason of a profound skepticism and consequent despair. Humor carried to excess becomes cynicism, which fact is a further proof that laughter is often an armor de-

signed to protect the naked soul from the world's hurt.

A man of large views and of perfect faith, who lives in harmony with the order of the world, is rarely a humorist. His perception of the unity of things is so comprehensive that what appears difference to others is to him united in larger synthesis. His utter faith in humanity saves him from the dog-bark of cynicism. Increase faith and the incongruities that appeal to a man of humor are resolved in a nobler unity. The serenity of philosophers who deal with the one and not the many is a proof in point. There is a tradition that Christ never laughed. Plato and Emerson, idealists and optimists, lived in calm serenity of spirit. I think that Browning is the only exception to the rule that the great humorists are pessimistic. But it is not difficult to explain how Browning could jest and prophesy at the same moment. It was because of his exceptional faith. I think it was Richter who said that one must be able to laugh at or sport with one's faith in order to really possess it. In exhibiting in almost the great grim way of Carlyle the terrible irony of fate, Browning is simply exercising his power and testing the sovereignty of faith. He perceived the incongruous, but he had also the penetration to reconcile hate and falsehood and deformity in the oneness of spirit. His humor, therefore, presents characteristics totally different from those of Heine or Carlyle, and he is to be classed rather among the great serene men.

Whitman, above all men of his generation, had faith. His faith indeed was absolute. As he had the most faith he saw the farthest and the clearest. Objects and persons, which are conventionally incongruous, fell into order and harmony in the cosmic sweep of his vision. Consequently he expresses more than humor—he radiates joy and exultation. Arthur Clive, in defending the thesis that Whitman is the Poet of Joy, calls attention to his distinguishing merit in these words: "First and beyond all others I would set this, that he always represents life as a boon beyond price,

and is ever ready to invoke a blessing on his natal day."

Whitman exhibits a character formed by joy and contentment. A defect of humor may be allowed in the interest of fuller and nobler consciousness. The world wants peace and not discord, joy and not despair. We can spare the jester sooner than the seer.

VII

As Whitman saw life steadily he saw it whole. He aimed at the symmetrical development of every faculty. Physically and spiritually there was no lack of proportional organization. Attaining completeness in himself he freely received from all. His manhood was such that he became fully representative of humanity. "In a word," to quote from Gabriel Sarrazin, "he appears as a specimen, rare in the modern world, of those powerful and flexible organizations which rose in the antique cities of the golden age, anxious to cultivate numberless aptitudes and tending instinctively towards the incarnation of a complete manhood." Or in the words of William Clarke: "We see in him the genuine democrat of the very highest type, sharing all the feelings of the average man, and yet adding something unique and precious, something we call genius, unconventional, powerful, with a healthy rudeness, combined with a delicate refinement, born out of deep human sympathy, and therefore outlasting the mere politeness of society. His figure has in it somewhat of the unique heroic type, and yet withal a sweet benignity, so blending the Pagan and the Christian elements into a thoroughly new tone—the tone of the New World Democrat, who is the peer of anyone, and whose vision sweeps the vast horizon of a mighty continent. His own manhood is even greater than anything he has produced; and all that he has produced has flamed forth naturally from the fountain-head of his own humanity." Whitman's message is the expression of his own deepest passion. That passion is the very flower of the life of the race.