

## WAS WALT WHITMAN MAD?

By RICHARD MAURICE BUCKE

[Read for Dr. Bucke, who was not present, by Thomas B. Harned, Afternoon Session, Annual Meeting, May 31st.]

*The multitude answered: Thou hast a devil.—John 8-20.*

*Many of them said: He hath a devil and is mad.—John 10-20.*

*Festus saith with a loud voice: Paul, thou art mad.—Acts 26-24.*

And now Lombroso pronounces: "Walt Whitman . . . assuredly a mad genius." And Max Nordau echoes: "Mad, Whitman was, without doubt."

Is it well to notice such allegations? Perhaps not. The proof must always rest (in last resort) upon the acceptance of the world—of posterity. Nothing that may be said, for or against, will influence by a hair's breadth this final verdict, for it will rest not upon opinion, scientific or popular, but upon something far deeper—upon the absorption, namely, of the man by the race. Of a given food or drink no argument will settle the question, Is it wholesome?—is it finally good for man? But the instinct of the race, after sufficient experience, may be absolutely depended upon to give a correct answer. It must be so. No race either of plants or animals could continue to exist were this not true. Is it not the same—must it not be the same—with mental ailment? And does not Whitman himself speak the last word when he says that "the proof of a poet shall be (must necessarily be) sternly deferr'd till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorb'd it"?

Granting all this, I am still impelled by my love for the poet to say a few words upon the point that has been raised. I am more willing to speak because, having known Whitman

intimately for the last fifteen years of his life, having been his physician for a large part of that time, having been for now over nineteen years superintendent of a large lunatic asylum, in which capacity I have made, both theoretically and practically, a special study of insanity for nearly half a lifetime; for all these reasons, I say, if this allegation or charge of insanity is to be replied to at all it would seem that I am the person (or, at all events, *a* person) to accept the undertaking.

It is said that a given man is a case of degenerative insanity. I am ordered, we will say, by my government, to examine him. I go into the witness box and say, "He is not insane." I am asked, "How do you know?" I answer: "He has none of the marks of degenerative insanity or of any form of insanity" (for nearly all insanity is degenerative, that is, rests and depends upon degeneration). Counsel again demands: "What are these marks which are absent in this case, and, being present in other cases, prove insanity?" I respond: "The marks are enormously varied in different cases, it seldom happening that one individual has all or nearly all of them. These marks are bodily and mental. The latter class is divisible into defects and perversions of the senses, of the intellect, and of the moral nature. The bodily marks are defects in evolution and want of symmetry." So that the marks of such degeneration as results in insanity may be scheduled as follows:

1. Imperfect growth or evolution of the body.
2. Asymmetry of the body or any part or parts of it.
3. Defects in the sense organs, making one or more of the senses imperfect.
4. Perversions of sense, giving rise to illusions and hallucinations.
5. Defect of the intellect from absolute idiocy (a form of insanity) to the least degree of imbecility.
6. Perversions of the intellect shown by the existence of extreme and unfounded opinions and by the presence of delusions.
7. Defect of the moral nature from absence of it (moral idiocy) to lesser defects such as are very common.

8. Perversions of the moral nature, as when, to take an extreme case, a loving wife and mother conceives a hatred to her husband and children, or as when (a very common symptom) a man is haunted for weeks, months, or years, either constantly or intermittently, with intense fear, there being no objective cause therefor. 9. And lastly. What is called hyperkinesia—want of inhibition: a condition, when it exists, mostly lifelong, in which, from congenital defect, a person is more or less unable to control his thoughts, words, feelings, acts.

I have seen more than one insane degenerate who was defective under all of the above nine heads; many are defective under eight, seven, six, or five; there is no true insane degenerate but is defective under several. Now, I should be glad to be told under which of these heads the degenerative insanity of Whitman should be classed? Let us see. His defect does not belong to the first or second category, for he was of good stature—six feet tall—and weighed two hundred pounds; he was neither fat nor lean; his body was symmetrical, and his features were exceptionally formed and unusually noble. Whitman was, I think, the handsomest man I have ever seen. I must have seen in my life several tens of thousands of lunatics. I have not seen one handsome man or beautiful woman among them all. Beauty depends on the highest evolution. Here is a question of devolution. Degeneration and beauty could hardly exist together.

I have never seen any person who could fairly be called an insane degenerate who had noble features or a noble expression. It would then be a singular exception in my long experience if the best formed man I have known, and the man with undoubtedly the noblest expression, should have been a lunatic.

The most important test of the perfection of the senses, from our present point of view, will be the perfection or otherwise of those sense functions which, having been last evolved, are the least stable, and are therefore the

most liable to lapse and perversion. The most prominent of these are the musical sense, the color sense and the sense of fragrance. My means of ascertaining the so have been ample, and I am satisfied that all three of ade were in Whitman highly developed; his writings incoherently prove the same thing. His more basic sense functions were all, as far as I know or have reason to believe, w t and some of them, as his sense of hearing, exceptionally developed. Had he sense perversions? If he had I had remarked or heard of them, and no one has ever suggested to me, or in my hearing, a single suspicion pointing thence.

To pass on to the next point: I do not believe that this one will claim that Whitman's intellect was defective. I have never heard that proposition suggested, while I myself have always considered him the most all-round intelligent of men that I have known. His intuitive grasp and complete acceptance of evolution before Spencer or Darwin published (see 1855 ed. of "Leaves of Grass") ought to settle the question. But was he eccentric? notional? Did he take up fads and believe things without sufficient reason? Did he adopt extreme views? I do not ask whether he had perversions, because such a question to those who know anything of the man would be too absurd. But had he any mental traits that could be considered as approximations to abnormalities? Well, if he had such mental traits, if he was eccentric, notional, if he took up with fads or extreme views, I must say that my fifteen years' acquaintance with the man has left me absolutely ignorant as to his character. Let me take one or two examples of his calmness and moderation—on matters of opinion which are apt to move men deeply. Whitman was an abolitionist, and in "The Body Electric" he wrote, long before the war, as strong antislavery words that have ever been penned. Nor did he afterwards change his opinion. Still he was so moderate that he would never attach himself to the extreme abolitionists, and he never adopted their methods or their doctrines. Again, if Whitman were the

believed in any one thing more than another it was in government by the people as contrasted with government by caste, but so tolerant was he of the opposite view that he mortally offended some of his strongest friends by his lines to Emperor William upon his death in 1888. Once more—his whole life, and the tenor of his writings from beginning to end, show that Whitman's sympathies were steadily with temperance. Nevertheless he declined to rank himself among total abstainers, but from first to last held himself free to drink wine when he pleased. His religious feelings and convictions were as deep as those of any man I have known, yet his tolerance of all religious views, honestly held, was absolute, insomuch that it could be, and was, truthfully said of him that "he accepted and absorbed all theories, all creeds, all religions." We may then surely acquit Whitman of perversions of the intellect, indicative of degeneracy, shown by the existence of delusions or by the presence of extreme and unfounded opinions.

Let us pass now to a brief consideration of Walt Whitman's moral nature, and ask, in the first place, whether there was evidence in that direction of absence or defect? You all know that this question can neither be seriously asked nor answered by a man who knew the poet. You all know his almost preter-human faculties of affection, courage, trust, compassion. You know how, throughout a long life, he proved them day by day, year in and year out—how he was loved by almost all the men and women who were brought into relationship with him and how he loved them in return—how he proved this love on battle-fields and in hospitals. Many of you know his calm courage in the face of great danger. You all know his invincible faith in the absolute and infinite goodness of God, and that to him eternal life was as certain as the life he was living when we knew him. How could one of us who knew all this ask or answer such a question? But in this well-nigh divine moral nature were there perversions? If there were I have not seen them.

Of one thing I am certain: that in the moral nature of Walt Whitman there were no perversions indicative of degeneration. My personal knowledge of the man satisfies me beyond all question that he was troubled with no hates, no remorse or qualms either insane or sane—either degenerative or normal; the spiritual atmosphere in which he grew being above and beyond all such human marsh emanations.

We come now to the final point—the most important of all: was he hyperkinetic? I may say here, for the benefit of those who are not psychologists, that man's mastery of himself—his own control of his own ego—is one of the products evolved of our psychical functions, and, being so, is one of the most liable to be defective or absent. You all know from daily observation how true this is; how many men and women there are in all cities and all countries, in all classes and in all societies, who, in this respect, come short of the stature of manhood; how many there are who yield to their dislikes, impulses, passions, temptations, when unyielding resistance would be (and they know it) wiser and better.

This is hyperkinesia as we see it every day in sane men and women. When this defect is still greater it constitutes a form of insanity. Not only so, but hyperkinesia—there is a lack of inhibitory power—is necessarily, because of the retrogression of self-control, an element in all cases of mental degeneracy. Was Whitman in his make-up deficient in power to master and subordinate his own thoughts, words and acts? In other words, did he possess fixed intentions or ideals, and did he, to a greater or less degree than ordinary men, live up to his ideals and carry out his intentions?

Whitman—almost, perhaps quite, casually—expressed to me one day, in the following words, what was, I think, the leading aspiration of his life. He said: "I never imagined a life which should be that of the average man in average circumstances, and still grand, heroic." His wish was undoubtedly to lead such a life himself, and by so doing to show *that* it might and *how* it might be led by any man,

person. This ideal he held up before his own eyes during a long career, and those who have made him a study, though not pretending but that at times he may have come short of attainment to it, yet know well that, day by day, and year by year, to a very marvelous extent, it dominated his every thought, word and act, and that, lofty as it was, he lived up to it with extraordinary constancy.

For another fact, pointing to qualities in the man the reverse of those included under the term hyperkinesia, take the history of the writing of "Leaves of Grass." This book was planned, as an extended entry in his own hand in one of his notebooks shows, back in the forties. It was actually begun in the early fifties. It was part of the plan that the book should cover his whole life. So rigidly was this carried out that he worked upon it every year afterwards as long as he lived, and in June, 1888, when he thought himself dying, he actually added a poem to speak for him from that condition. I cannot see anything like excessive mobility, want of fixedness of purpose, indicated by these facts. But perhaps the best of all tests of the presence or absence of hyperkinesia is the very common-place one of temper. There is no person having this defect but breaks out into passions and goes into the sulks with or without cause and with greater or less frequency. Was Whitman troubled in this way? During the fifteen years of our friendship, and the four months that he lived in my home, I never saw him out of temper but once, and then only for a few minutes. Neither have I known of his being out of temper at any other time.

I have now honestly gone over the full list of symptoms indicating, when they are present, mental degeneration, and I cannot find that Whitman had any of them.

The above is necessarily a mere outline. A full analysis of Whitman's character, made in answer to the charge of madness, would fill a volume. I will merely say, in conclusion, that knowing, as I cannot help but know, something



of degeneration and of insanity, and knowing Whitman almost as well, I suppose, as one man can know another, I am prepared to say that I believe he was not only what is called sane, but that he was, from all points of view, exceptionally so; that he had the characteristic elements which constitute sanity exceptionally developed; and that the traits as suggest mental alienation were in him less numerous and less pronounced than in any other man with whom I have had acquaintance.

It remains to ask why, he being what he was and is, one should specify him as a mental degenerate? The answer seems to be that Whitman belongs to a class of men who, possessing attributes beyond those of ordinary humanity, are, for that reason, not understood—are consequently bizarre, eccentric, insane. We have seen that this judgment was passed upon Jesus and Paul. We know it is passed upon William Blake and Honoré de Balzac. A man could name other men of the same class who have lain under the same imputation. Nobody ever heard of Sophocles, Euripides, Horace, Virgil, Goethe, Milton, or Wordsworth being pronounced insane. They were all men of genius, but they were all built upon the lines of ordinary humanity. They and their like *belong to* epochs, they do not *make* epochs. But men of the class to which Whitman belongs, such as Gautama, Jesus, Paul, Mohammed, Dante, "Shakespeare," and Balzac, have faculties beyond. They belong to another order; have relations to the cosmos that in other cases do not exist. Through them streams a divine ray for which the ordinary man no passage is found. If for this they are by the average man sometimes ill understood, misunderstood, maligned, charged with insanity, persecuted, even put to death, we dare not, overmuch, pity them, for, in compensation for these drawbacks, they have had bestowed upon them incomparably out-weighing advantages—they have seen things to which those of the common earth are as dross, and have had happiness beyond the loftiest imagination of their critics.