CHAPTER XXXVIII

WALT WHITMAN

THREE years ago I gave a lecture on Walt Whitman; and I think that within another three years from to-day a third lecture ought to be given upon the same subject. The reason is that the influence of Whitman has extended even to Japan, and that a number of Japanese students and scholars have written things in imitation of Whitman. Now, to begin with, I want to tell you that the influence of Whitman may be an extremely mischievous thing; that to Japanese students of English literature it is in the supreme degree dangerous and bad; and that the principal purpose of this short lecture upon Whitman will be, not to praise him, but to warn you against him, so far as I am able.

Before speaking about Whitman himself, I must honestly tell you that very great men have taken a view of Whitman exactly the opposite of that which I am going to take. For example, Emerson said that Whitman's book was the greatest thing in literature and thought that had been produced in America. In England, the great poet and great critic, Swinburne not only praised Whitman as a grand thinker, and a grand poet: he actually addressed him in a very fine ode, containing such verses as these* :—

O strong-winged soul with prophetic
    Lips hot with the bloodbeats of song
With tremor of heartstrings magnetic,
    With thoughts as thunders in throng,
With consonant ardours of chords
That pierce men's souls as with swords
    And hale them hearing along.

* *To Walt Whitman in America.*

And as for his book, it is,—

> Sweet-smelling of pine-leaves and grasses,
> And blown as a tree through and through,
> With the winds of the keen mountain-passes,
> And tender as sun-smitten dew;
> Sharp-tongued as the winter that shakes
> The wastes of your limitless lakes,
> Wide-eyed as the sea-line's blue.

This is great praise from two very great men; and there are many other great men who have praised Whitman almost as warmly. The list of the names of them would almost startle you. But there is one curious fact to be noticed about all this praise, — namely that nobody who praised Whitman in this way has ever been able to quote from Whitman anything to justify such delight in his work. On the other hand Whitman has been fiercely and unjustly abused by religious people and by conventional people because he offended their prejudices. There is perhaps only one man of great ability who has been able to tell the truth about Whitman, without either abusing him or praising him. That man is Professor Gosse, — and I should advise you to read the delightful essay which he wrote on the subject. I mentioned Professor Gosse because I must give you some justification for the position which I take when I tell you that all the praise of Whitman is utter nonsense, and that all the abuse which has been showered upon him is equally nonsense. Whitman did not deserve to be either praised or abused; and he has been both to a most extraordinary degree. His influence has been very largely due to the reaction provoked by ferocious criticism made upon him.

Some years ago in Paris, a number of young artists formed a society of a very curious kind. They used to meet regularly for dinner in a certain place; and after the dinner was over, every artist poured out the last drops of his coffee-cup upon a sheet of paper. The stains of coffee upon

the paper were then examined; and every artist found some suggestion for a picture in the shapes of these stains. From such suggestions pictures were at once made—which were called coffee-pictures. At the end of the year all this work was published and sold, in large volumes which were called "Coffee-Albums." These are very precious now, because the work was done by great artists.

Let us think about this matter for a moment. Imagine a hundred men looking at a blot of ink or stain of coffee upon a sheet of white paper. Many persons will not be able to see, in the shape of the blot or stain, anything interesting. But among those hundred persons there may be two or three very imaginative minds; and these persons will find that the shape of the blot or stain reminds them of dragons, or trees, or running horses, or mountains, or faces of men. The greater the artist, the more he will see, in the shape of that blot.

The more shapeless a thing is, the more it is likely to affect the imagination. Take, for example, the clouds. The clouds have no definite shapes; and therefore they seem to have all kinds of shapes. They make you think of mountains and seas and islands; they make you think of dragons and castles and ghosts and monsters. I suppose you can remember Hamlet talking about the shapes of clouds. A definitely shaped object does not appeal to the imagination at all. It is the object without shape—smoke, or clouds, or ink stains or coffee stains — which appeals to the imagination.

And what are we to say of the results of their effect upon the imagination? Here is a great French artist, Gustave Doré who looks at clouds and finds in them all kinds of strange and ghostly things — armies of horsemen, giants, goblins, and devils. Were these things *really* in the clouds? Certainly not; they were only in the imagination of the artist. Here again is that book of coffee drawing about which I was speaking: you will discover in it figures of gods, and beautiful faces, and cows, and naked women,

and priests, and forests in the moonlight. Were all these things in the coffee drop? Of course not: they were only in the imagination of the persons who drew them. But the more the imagination, the more one finds in a cloud or a drop of ink or a drop of coffee. And I should say, without any hesitation, that the work of Walt Whitman represents to his critic exactly as much, perhaps even less. He is the cloud, the shapeless ink stain, the shapeless coffee stain, which is just queer enough, just undefined enough to suggest different fancies to different minds.

Now let us consider, first of all, what the man has done. I presume to say that he has not done anything deserving the name of poetry. He has made a book — that is all. This book is not written in verse. This book is not written in prose. When a book is not written either in prose or in verse, it must be written contrary to all the rules of grammar in all languages. And that is exactly how Whitman's book was written. It was written against all rules of correct expression, all rules of verse, all rules of prose construction, all rules of good taste. Therefore I must start out by telling you that it is bad English, and bad English without any approach to style. It is just as ill-defined, as shapeless, as vague as the clouds or the coffee stain that I was telling you about. Presently I will tell you why it could not have been written in any other way.

Perhaps some of you will ask me whether a man cannot write in any way that he pleases? I should call that a very good question. And I should further say that I am in favour of the most absolute liberty in regard to literary matters. I should be very sorry to tell you that I thought the classic school better than the romantic school;—I should not like you to believe that any school is either entirely bad or entirely good. And I should take exactly the same ground on the question of religion. But, after all, there are some ethics of literature which common human experience obliges us to respect. Any religion means the whole moral experience of a race or nation for thousands of years; and the

man who cannot respect every good religion for that simple reason must be something of a brute. Because a man who cannot respect the moral experience of all the dead behind us must be either very bad or very stupid. Well, in literature we have the very same thing. For at least six or seven thousand years mankind has been expressing its emotion and its ideas in two forms — prose and poetry; and these forms, together with the rules governing them, represent the whole human experience with language. And the man who has no respect for all this experience must also be something of a brute, and an animal or at the very best an ignorant savage.

Of course you must not understand me to say anything in favour of conservatism in literature. I should advise you against conservatism always, and under all circumstances. But since literary custom happens to be as I have stated, there is only one thing for a man to do in contravention to that custom. He must do something better, if he wants to be a reformer — not something worse. If a man does not want to write in prose or in poetry, or even according to grammar,—then he should invent something superior either to prose or to poetry or to grammar. If he is able to do that, we shall worship him as the greatest genius that the world has ever produced. And if he cannot do that, then he must either follow old custom, or give us something very much worse than we already have. Whitman did the latter thing. He could not give us anything better than prose and poetry and grammar; but he gave us something utterly barbarous, something representing the condition of language in a time before grammar, before poetry, and before prose. His book is absolutely savage; and the man himself was a savage, living a savage life in the midst of nineteenth century civilization.

What was Whitman? Who was he? Whitman was what would be called in Japan a coolie; he was educated just enough to read and write, not any more. He was not even taught a trade. He lived all his life in the manner of a

poor working man, and never had any opportunities to improve his mind except those which he obtained at the public libraries. Never was he able to raise himself in the world as a man of real genius would have done; nor was he ever able to learn enough about English grammar and English prosody to produce even a single page correctly composed. And when I have said this much about him, you will understand what a very extraordinary mystery lies before us. To unravel this mystery is the object of the present lecture.

It will be necessary for me to explain many things before I can make my opinion of Whitman quite clear to you. And I am very anxious that you should understand exactly how I feel about him, and how little any kind of prejudices enters into my feeling. Therefore let me first explain to you what I mean about the defect in Whitman's education. I have told you that he was an uneducated man, a common man, a vulgar man of the vulgar classes. But you must not think that I should speak ill of his work for this reason only. Can a man of the lowest class become a great poet? Certainly he can. Robert Burns was a labouring man, but he became one of the greatest poets that ever lived. Can a man write great poetry in the vulgar tongue — in the language of the uneducated common people? Most certainly he can. Robert Burns did it; the greatest living English song writer is even now doing the very same thing. And do not think that I would speak disrespectfully of the language of the common people. On the contrary I believe very firmly in what Emerson says,—that the language of the street is much more forcible and eloquent than the language of universities. A man who can express himself naturally and well in the language of the people may be a very great poet and a very great thinker. But if a man tries to write in language which is neither the language of the people nor the language of the educated, he is likely to do something very absurd. Even when a man, who knows only the popular speech, tries to write in educated speech, he is almost certain to make a serious mistake. Burns, for

example, thought he could write good poetry in classic English; and everything that he tried to write in English is of no use or interest whatever. And there is still another fact to remember, — that the ideas of modern philosophy could only be expressed by a very great genius in simple language. They could not be expressed at all in the speech of the street. Now, Whitman, although an uneducated man, attempted to utter the thoughts of educated men in his own way—a mixture of slang and of literary English,—perhaps I had better say newspaper English. What is more, he was not mentally capable of understanding the subjects that he wanted to talk about. He only half understood the books that he had read; and this half understanding of them only impelled to repeat in his own way the utterances of men far beyond his comprehension. The result is very curious: the greater part of what he says reads like utter nonsense. And I am inclined to think that most of it is nonsense; and that the great mistake made by Emerson and by other men of letters has been in imagining it to be something better than nonsense.

Now let me speak again on the subject of form. No matter what anybody may say to the contrary, the plain, indisputable fact is that Whitman had no form. In the matter of form itself, I can assure you that I have no prejudices. I should never tell you that any one kind of poetical form is better than another. I should never tell you that one kind of poetry is better than another. All forms of verse, and all kinds of poetry, are good in their own ways. But when a composition has no form at all, it is nonsense to call it poetry. The difference between poetry and prose in English, or in any European language, is the same as in Japanese. Poetry has a certain measure, a certain form, which distinguishes it from prose. When there is nothing to distinguish a composition from prose, it is nonsense to call it poetry. Now you may call it poetical prose, if it is musical enough and emotional enough to deserve such praise—"poetical prose" meaning prose which

contains something of the merits of poetry, the feeling of poetry, without being poetry. But you cannot call it poetry or verse. You cannot make poetry by dividing a prose sentence into a certain number of lines, and half lines, and beginning each line or half line with a capital letter. Capital letters do not make poetry. But that is all that Whitman has ever tried to do. He simply paragraphed a certain quantity of bad prose, and put capital letters at the beginning of every paragraph; and he called that poetry. It is not poetry; it is not even good English for the most part; but it has done a good deal of mischief,—for Whitman has had many imitators among the young, and some imitators even among Japanese students.

Perhaps these imitators may have felt that there was a certain truth suggested by Whitman's disregard of form. A great many thinking men have expressed their opinions that rhymed poetry is somewhat barbarous, and that any kind of poetry might be dispensed with at some future time—because perfect prose should be able to express well everything that poetry can express. I may tell you that Professor Max Müller, for example, does not believe in the value of rhymed verse. And many other people have said that the greatest poetry ever written, the Greek poetry, was not rhymed. Neither was the great poetry of the Arabs before the time of Mahomet. Neither was a great deal of the finest Indian poetry. I think myself that rhyme may be given up in the course of time. I should not be disinclined even to believe that, at some very intellectual time to come, a perfected prose might be found capable of taking the place of poetry. But even granting these theories, Whitman's position cannot possibly be excused. So long as there is such a thing as poetry, there must be such a thing as poetical form; and when Whitman says that form is quite unnecessary, he only meant or confessed that he could not write poetry of any sort. He has simply written a great deal of bad prose, printed in a form contrary even to the rules of prose. So I might even declare that Whitman has

written neither prose nor poetry: his production cannot be dignified by either name — for it is utterly shapeless. And you know that even in prose there must be such a thing as form: there must be shape of some kind. When we find shapeless prose — prose with bad grammar, and bad construction and no sort of symmetry,—there we think that we are looking at the composition of a little child, a little child beginning to learn how to write. In this respect Whitman's work is the work of a little child. The man always remained a child up to the time of his death. He always wrote like a child — except, indeed, when he tried to write for newspapers: that was in his old age.

I said before that a man who cannot respect precedents must be something of a brute. But a man may be this and be a very good man. The term only signifies that he is incapable of the higher qualities of thinking and of feeling, — that the animal part of the man dominates in his character. The French word *brutal* expresses this better than the English word, which is rather rough. Whitman was what the French word implies. He was a very fine animal; but as an animal, he could not have understood the value of precedents; he could not have understood the reason of many things. He ignored all rules, because he could not understand the value of rules. It is not necessary that a wise man should follow established rules. I should never insist upon such a doctrine. But I should insist this doctrine — if you do not wish to obey existing rules, then you must invent better ones. Great reformers do that. But progress in morals or in politics, or in religion or in literature is not made by refusing to accept any of the rules which have been: that does not mean progress; it means going back to the childish beginning of things. And Whitman really went back to the childish beginning of things.

Going back to the beginning of things means going back to the time of shapelessness, the time before order and system began;—it means going back to the condition of the coffee stain, the ink stain, the cloud — in any of which we

can *imagine* that we see all kinds of things. People have imagined that they could see all kinds of things in Whitman only because he is like the cloud, like the ink stain, like the coffee stain—that is to say, utterly shapeless. He is in what is called astronomically nebulous condition.

But perhaps some of you will say: "We have seen lines in Whitman's poetry which have measure and form; he has written hexametres." That is true; but you must not think that Whitman intended to write hexametres. He has made a few hexametres entirely by accident—never by design. Owing to the peculiar tonic qualities of the English language, we sometimes find accidental hexametres in English prose. About seventeen or eighteen have been found in the English of the Bible, such as the famous,

> "God is gone up with a shout, the Lord with
> the sound of a trumpet."

That is a very fair hexametre; but it was made unintentionally and accidentally. Anything resembling form in Whitman is also accidental and unintentional. If he had tried to write hexametres he could not possibly have done it. He had no literary training, no capacity for literary training, and no ear for the music of English poetry.

Now I have said everything bad about him that I can say with a good conscience. But before considering the good side of the man, I want to talk to you about bad things that other people have said about him — things that are not true. He has been called indecent, impure, lascivious: that is not true. And he has been called irreligious, a mocker of Christianity, a mocker of faith and morality: that is not true. The things which Whitman wrote that displeased many people were not things at all deserving of blame. He wrote about the sexual relations between man and woman; but he wrote about them in a natural healthy manner; and nobody except a very prudish persons could be shocked by them. In this regard I cannot do better than

tell you what he himself said upon the subject. Emerson and several other persons promised to help him in a literary way if he would only agree to suppress certain passages in his book relating to sexual matters. He answered very sensibly: "What I am trying to write is a poem or epic about a man—a man representing humanity. I want to write about a complete man; and I will not castrate him." That was good common sense. As for the religious question, I should call Whitman a very religious man indeed; but he had read too much and thought too much to believe in the simpler forms of doctrine. Otherwise he has plainly declared himself an admirer of all that is good in religious teaching.

The first part of the lecture is done. Now I want to speak about the good side of Whitman. What is the reason that a man, having no education, no literary ability, no great culture of any kind, should have been so widely praised and admired? After fifty years his influence is still growing. If there is no value in his work, how happens it that such work could continue for a half a century to please the minds of great poets and great men of letters.

As for the influence of Whitman upon other poets, I think it has been tolerably well explained by the simile of the coffee stain, or the cloud. Mr. Gosse likens Whitman's poetry to literary protoplasm, — a condition of the material before form began, fluid, and therefore capable of reflecting objects like water. Therefore he says that every man who reads Whitman sees himself in Whitman. The religious person sees a religious man there; the sceptical person sees a sceptical; the evolutionist sees an evolutional philosopher; the sensualist sees a man like himself. Whitman reflects everything, like water does, though there is no solidity, no material, behind the reflection. This is a very good comparison; and I believe that it is true. But there is another side of Whitman's influence much less difficult to explain—his influence upon the young. Whitman is unintentionally a great temptation to the lazy and to the incapable. These have seen praise given to Whitman for writing bad prose

and calling it poetry. Therefore they, many of them, have written bad prose and called it poetry in the hope of having the same praise given to them. But nobody can do what Whitman did, unless he happens to be a man of identical feeling and character. You cannot imitate Whitman, without becoming ridiculed. Whitman himself was not altogether ridiculous. He wrote in that way only because he could not help it; and his wonderful simplicity and sincerity have had the power to redeem his work from the worst kind of vulgarism. Let us try to imagine the man a little.

Think of a big simple-hearted, uneducated labourer—honest and kind, full of generous feeling, but quite incapable of the higher class of intellectual emotion. This man loves life—the mere pleasure of living, the joy of seeing the sun upon a fine day, the joy of swimming in rivers, sleeping in woods; also the amusement of chatting in the evening with men like himself. To us perhaps all this seems quite childish; but you must not forget that this big man was a child—simple-hearted like a child to whom the commonest things in this world are infinitely wonderful. He wanted to sing about these things; he wanted to tell every body how happy he was and how beautiful the world is, and how beautiful men and women and flowers and trees and birds are. And in order to do this he tried to write poetry. But before he could write this poetry, something extraordinary happened to him.

To most of us this extraordinary thing happens while we are still children. At first a little child cannot form the idea of self. A little child does not think of its "I", its "Ego": it does not even use the word. The English child whose name is Johnny, for example, does not say, "I am hungry," but "Johnny is hungry." The little Japanese child does exactly the same thing. But at last for every child, Japanese or European, there comes one day, when the idea of Self is suddenly developed within him. Then come the questions, asked in silence and wonder, "What am I? Where did I come from? What is the meaning of this

world ?" If you remember the day when this first happened to you, you will remember also what a surprise it was. Then it is that religion comes in to prevent us from being too unhappy about the matter and says "Do not trouble your mind about these matters; but try to be good and to believe in what all good men believe." We call this sudden awakening, the sense of self-consciousness. Sometimes self-consciousness does not come in child life, but later — especially in the case of very simple minds. Self-consciousness came to Whitman suddenly after he became a man; and then he had something indeed to wonder at. Before that the world, the grass and the trees, the animals, and the flowers, were wonderful enough for him; but how much more wonderful was the fact of being alive, and of knowing it! What am I?—this question became the one great question of Whitman's whole life.

In order to be able to understand it better, he read all the books of metaphysics and philosophy and religion that he could understand. He could not buy books;—he did not have money enough for that: but in America the free libraries make it possible for anybody to read any book that he wishes. It was the time of the new discoveries, the new theories of the universe, the new thinking of Emerson and Carlyle, the new philosophy of evolution. And Whitman tried to read all this. He could not digest all that he read. His mind did not have the strength for that; and his want of education was a serious obstacle. But he could understand a few enormous facts, driven into his mind by the intellectual movement of the age; and these vast facts appeared to him to explain a great deal. He had imagined himself different, unique, finite; but here were great thinkers who told him that all humanity was really one, that all life was one, that every man was not finite, but infinite by relation to what is eternal. He read also books that proved to him that life and death were not different, but each a necessary part of the other. The old teaching had been that a man's soul is created at the time of his conception

in his mother's womb; but the new teaching was, "You never had a beginning, and you never have an end." And then in the new philosophy there was also a great deal of talk about this "you" and "I"; and Whitman found that there was not so much difference between "you" and "I" as he had supposed. I do not mean to say that he could understand the deeper things of the time; but he understood enough to fill him with new ideas about life, about the world, and about his own relation to the universe. Then he began to write his book — thinking and writing exactly like a child, in spite of the size of his new imagination.

Now there is something very touching in the history of this poor simple man, this common working man, trying to tell the world what he thought and felt, and quite ignorant of the proper way to do it. As a boy he had read the Bible; and he had been taught that the Bible was full of poetical beauty; and had noticed that the chapters of the Bible were all divided into little paragraphs that made them read more beautifully and more easily. Why should he not try to write his poetry, in paragraphs and divisions of the same kind? He did this; and he did it with such innocence and such perfect sincerity, and such emotional power, that people were astonished and pleased in spite of themselves. This was not poetry, it was not grammar in many cases, it was not always even quite intelligible. But it was so earnest and so honest and so childish that, after all, there was a kind of charm in it. That was what the people thought then — people who could judge; and I believe that it is what people who can judge think to-day. The great charm of Whitman is his childishness, and the innocence or ignorance of his childishness. When you understand that, you will be prepared to understand something of the interest attaching to the famous "Song of Myself." The mischief done by Whitman's influence has been chiefly shown in the imitation of his form, or formlessness. But that part of Whitman is of no significance. The significant part of

Whitman is the part which his would-be imitators never understood and never could understand. It is the charm of simplicity and rustic artlessness.

One great composition of Whitman expresses the whole of him; that is the "Song of Myself." If you remember what man he was, you will understand the "poem" as Whitman's severest critics understood. But if you read it without a knowledge of the author, you can find in it all kinds of things which the author never intended to say. The composition is a literary cloud, coffee stain, ink stain: therefore you can imagine that you see dragons or elephants or anything else you like. The merit of it, to me, is that it so touchingly expresses the effort of a man to speak who can only stutter: he feels with great force; but he can express the feeling only as an animal does, by sudden cries, sudden motions. It is a great piece of stuttering only; but you will be able to judge for yourselves by the extracts which I am now going to give you.

EXTRACTS FROM "SONG OF MYSELF"

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good as belongs to you.

. . . . . .

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

. . . . . .

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,

And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.

. . . . . .

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest.

. . . . . .

I believe in the flesh and the appetites,
Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from,
The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer,
This head more than churches, bibles, and all the creeds.

. . . . . .

I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.

What blurt is this about virtues and vice?
Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent.

. . . . . .

Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical nude;
How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?

What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?

. . . . . .

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass.

. . . . . .

I know I am august,
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,
I see that the elementary laws never apologize.

. . . . . .

I exist as I am, that is enough.

. . . . . .

Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and I know it.

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe, and am not contain'd between my hat and boots.

. . . . . .

I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.

I tramp a perpetual journey.

. . . . . .

I have said that the soul is not more than the body,
And I have said that the body is not more than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is.

. . . . . .

Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself.

. . . . . .

Why should I pray? why should I venerate, and be ceremonious?

. . . . . .

I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.

The first question to ask oneself after reading the above lines is the question, Is this poetry? Certainly it is not. There can be no discussion on that point. The second question to ask is, Does it mean anything? Here discussion is possible. You have before you the cloud, the coffee stain, of which I spoke at the beginning of this lecture; and if you have a brilliant imagination, you can imagine that it means a hundred different things. But to be generous in the matter, I must tell you that you will find in it the real effort of the man to express the ideas of the nineteenth century philosophy. I mean not only evolutional philosophy in the strictest sense, but also such philosophy of Individ-

ualism as was uttered by Emerson and by Carlyle. These three forms of new thinking were all mixed together in Whitman's head; and his attempt at poetry is an attempt to speak the result. When he says that whatever of good there is in him belongs also to everybody else, he means that he has felt the truth of the new idea of the Unity of Human Life. When he says that he is divine, and that he thinks the smell of his own body is better than prayer and religion, he is only saying—in a very vulgar way—that he knows himself to be eternal, not eternal only as ghost, but eternal as body. Perhaps he has heard of the German theory of Perpetual Recurrence—the strange theory that whatever has happened once must happen again—that all that exists now existed millions of times in the past, and will exist again millions of times in the future. Of this philosophy there are several forms—the latest being the Philosophy of Nietzsche. I must tell you that although there is some truth in this theory, it is considered by Spencer and other thinkers scientifically impossible as to *Identity*. What I mean is this: it is scientific to believe that the whole universe alternately appears and disappears; but it is not scientific to believe that every new universe is exactly the same as the preceding one. But, as I say, Whitman, speaking of his own divinity, means that even as a body he is part of the eternal substance of things; and therefore he is holier than religions and beliefs which have lasted only a little while. When he says that he reveres the flesh and the passions, he means that these, however much we are bound to keep them under control, are not only good in themselves, but necessary parts of the being of man. He is making a rough protest against ascetic theories. So again he says that he is no more modest than immodest: I think he means that to a truly reasonable mind there should be no necessity for the use of such words to distinguish one's own conduct. To be immodest is simply foolish; but to be too modest is equally foolish. But he likes to state his opinions in as strong a way as he can.

"What is this blurt about virtue and vice?" he asks. He means that to a clear mind, the existence of evil in the world appears a necessity; for without evil there could not be good; without temptation there could not be virtue; without pain there could not be pleasure; without struggle there could not be progress. I think you have heard that philosophy before. There is a great deal of truth in it; and the part played by evil in the great human drama deserves the attention of the thinker — therefore Whitman says that he intends to be the poet of wickedness as well as the poet of goodness. Again he tells us that he has read and been influenced by the teaching that man is a universe in himself — a microcosmos as the philosophers say. Moreover, because he is, he believes that he has always been, and always will be. Like Carlyle, he recognizes himself as a part of the infinite: therefore divine. He utters his conviction very clumsily and roughly, and so as to shock religious feeling in narrow minds; but that is what he means when he asks, "Why should I pray? Why should I venerate and be ceremonious?" A larger thinker than Whitman would have recognized that the forms and the convention of life are also part of the eternal things. Indeed elsewhere Whitman shows that he could understand this. By the "Song of Myself" he represents the first exultation of mental freedom — the man's first revolt against the ancient forms of thought. He crowds his new ideas together at times in a most curious way; but we can generally recognize where they come from. When he tells us that life and death are not different, he is uttering a thought probably very familiar to Oriental minds, but less familiar to Western readers. He might have got it from Emerson; he might have got it from Carlyle, without going to Oriental books. But we know that he read translations of the Indian Vedantic philosophy, and some translations of Buddhist books. When a man mixes up such a variety of ideas together, the result is somewhat amazing; but with a little patience, I think that his meaning can be generally perceived.

That he contradicts himself he is well aware; but he has the excuse of Emerson for contradicting himself. Emerson said that if you believe and say one thing to-day, and another thing to-morrow, you should not be afraid to find that you had contradicted yourself. There was a meaning in what Emerson said; but Whitman must have taken him literary—too much so. However, he has a nobler and stronger explanation for his self-contradiction:—

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well, then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes.)

This means something interesting enough;—he has not only learned the fact of Unity in Multiplicity; he has also learned the fact of Multiplicity in Unity. The millions of men are by their eternal nature One; but each, inheriting the feelings, the tendencies, the emotions and sentiments of the whole past, is also one with the past and its millions of millions. In each of us there are many natures: a man is not single: he is multiple exceedingly. It is but natural that he should contradict himself. He has many selves; but one may very well contradict another.

Then, to support the confidence of Man in himself there is the depth and the height of his enormous relation to the past. "Before I was born out of my mother, generations guided me. My embryo has never been torpid, nothing could overlay it. For it the nebula cohered to an orb; the long, slow strata piled to rest on it; vast vegetables gave it sustenance; monstrous sauroids transported it in their mouths, and deposited it with care." This is Whitman's rude way of expressing his reading of evolution. The essence of man has always been. It was in the nebula, — that is in the fiery vapor out of which suns and worlds are shaped—before there was any sun; thereafter it passed through all the forms of lower life before attaining to the condition of intelligence. The reference to "Vast Vegetables" and to "sauroids" shows that Whitman had read some-

thing about extinct forms of trees and of reptiles — the monstrous life that existed in the world before man appeared. Yet the spirit of man was there. It is the same thought that made Whitman write such sentences as these: "If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles. I bequeath myself from the dirt to grow from the grass I love." For the beginnings of life, according to evolutional philosophy, are in the humblest forms of matter; and no philosopher or man of science can exactly say where life begins and matter ends. The distinction between living matter and dead matter cannot be made. Huxley has stated this very strongly. Life comes out of that which seems to have no life; but who can say where the life commences? Indeed it is rush to say that any form of matter is absolutely dead; potential life probably exists everywhere. Whitman had read this and understood it; he says, "The ground is my brother—nay, it is myself. When you walk upon the ground you walk upon me; my substance is the substance of the earth and the moon and the sun and the universe."

From this conception of things, it is but a short step to the conviction of the infinity of self:

> Within me latitude widens; longitude lengthens.
> My elbows rest in sea-gaps; my palms cover continents.
> I am greater than sunshine, for I go into depth.

The essence of man is infinite by relation to the infinite; it is universal by relation to the universe. And hence, for Whitman, a new idea about human unity in the social sense,—a new idea of democracy.

I am inclined to think that the most interesting vagaries of Whitman are the democratic, socialistic, republican ones. Merely as an American workman, dissatisfied with his position in life, Whitman would have been something of a socialist in feeling. His reading must have exaggerated these sentiments—created within him a new kind of democracy, a new republicanism of the most astonishing kind. The distinction between classes signify nothing to this

common man who has learned thus suddenly something of philosophical monism.

"There is no God any more divine than myself,"

he says:—"therefore what man can call himself better than I?" Of course if you hold this belief on philosophical grounds, you must also accept the other side of the argument,—namely that no man can be worthless than yourself. If you are divine because humanity is divine in its good qualities, then by your bad qualities, you must be the reverse of the divine, and accept as brothers and sisters all the bad people and foolish people and ignorant people in the universe. We must give Whitman credit for his logical honesty in doing this. He says:—

I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is deathless within me.

Elsewhere he describes the thief, the drunkard, the prostitute, the vicious, the malignant—all forms of disgusting and hateful humanity; and he says: "These are my brothers, my sisters; they are more than brothers and sisters; they are part of my very self. How should I hate them or despise them? They are only unhappy. They are just as eternal and as divine as I am by their relation to the eternal life of the universe." And there will be described how he feels towards all the people of the lower classes, and the unfortunate classes, without distinction of race or occupation.

To cotton-field drudge or cleaner of privies I lean,
On his right cheek I put the family kiss,
And in my soul I swear I never will deny him.

This kind of philosophy may be carried too far; Whitman does carry it too far; but remember two things,—first, that only a generous and kindly nature could accept such a philosophy; and second, that Whitman actually lived according to his philosophy. He passed a good deal of his life in hospitals, nursing the sick, the diseased, the vicious,

and really treating them as brothers and sisters. There are errors in his way of looking at things; but they are not mean errors. They are noble ones. From this large way of looking at things, one would expect large ability to bear contempt as well as ability to show kindness. And this virtue Whitman had. He was not afraid of being despised; he was not frightened by criticism; he was not angered by scorn and disdain. And when he saw others tortured by class contempt, social cruelty, social meaness, he could say to them; "Have you learned lessons only from those who admired you and were tender with you, and stood aside for you? Have you not learned greater lessons from those who rejected you, who treated you with contempt, who disputed the passage with you?" This is not boldly said — although Emerson said the same thing in other words long before. Our best teachers in this world are often the men who dislike us and who oppose us in everything—not because they wish to teach us anything, but because they oblige us to practice patience and to multiply effort.

Now we come to the subject of religion. You might think from some of the passages which I have quoted that Whitman had no religion at all. But what say you to such sentences as these? — "I respect Assyria, China, Teutonia, the Hebrews. I accept each theory, myth, god, and demigod. I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true without exception. My faith is the greatest of faiths, and the least of faiths, inclosing worship ancient and modern; and all between ancient and modern — believing I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years; — waiting responses from oracles, honouring gods, saluting the sun; — making fetish of first rock or stamp powowing with sticks in the circle of Obis, etc." There is only one possible meaning in such thought as this — that Whitman has attempted to utter in his own way the truth that in all religions there is something to be respected. Spencer has said that all religions contain some truth; Carlyle has said, more loosely, that all are true; — we might also say that

nearly all contained both what is false and what is true. Philosophically no fault can be found with Whitman's statement of faith—although I should not ask you to admire the way in which he says it.

There is not very much more to tell you about Whitman's philosophy, if it can be called a philosophy at all. His book contains little else than constant repetition of the thought which I have just explained to you: really the "Song of Myself" gives us all that he knew. His work cannot be called in any way systematic. It is a great hotch-potch of philosophical ideas of all kinds learned from all kinds of books. Perhaps the only original part in it is the part treating of the sexual relations as divine and wonderful and worthy of all reverence. This part is not suitable for consideration in the class-room; — neither is it altogether worthy of commendation. It is very vulgar at times; and the chief weakness of Whitman's philosophical position in this one respect, is that he seems to ignore the value of modesty and modest conventions in themselves. I do not mean to say that he has written anything really bad: he has not. But he wrote under provocation when he wrote on sex — wrote while feeling angry with the false modesty and the hypocricy of the new England school of morals. He was right to make some kind of protest; for when women become so prudish that they cannot say "leg" but only "limb"; that they cannot say "cock" but "rooster" — then such false modesty certainly requires correction in the shape of moral medicine. The only objection to Whitman's medicine is that it is too strong. And I cannot help thinking that if he had read more carefully what Carlyle said about the value of clothes it would have been better for him. But, leaving the sex question aside, here you have the substance of Whitman's work — the very roughest and loosest collection of Monistic ideas ever put together in modern time. It is not poetry; it is not literature in the true sense; yet it has certain merits of coarse strength and of excellent sincerity. No more honest man ever lived than

Whitman; no more kindly heart ever beat in a human breast. He is worth reading for the sake of his honesty, his simplicity, his real innocence; but he is not worth reading twice. I imagine that he may have had some lesson to teach—the lesson of being true to oneself in literature. This lesson seems to be indicated by the popularity which his book obtained. The purpose of this lecture has not been to belittle him in your estimation as a man; but to convince you, if possible, that he should never be imitated in his sins against the laws of the English language.

It would be natural for you to ask me, How do you know that you yourself have not been imagining that Whitman meant to say all those things that you have made him say? That would be a very sensible question. The reply is this — that when you find the same thought repeated by an author in twenty or thirty different places, you can generally discover where that thought came from. I have explained only thoughts expressed by Whitman, not once, nor in one poem only, but scores of times in the four hundred fifty pages of his eccentric composition.