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Walt Whitman as a literary critic

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WALT WHITMAN

AS A

LITERARY CRITIC

by

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INTRODUCTION

Though Walt Whitman, as man and poet, has been considerably under fire for the past two decades,[1] he still remains a major figure in American letters and is likely to remain so for centuries to come. In view of his creative genius, therefore, it is surprising that his critical talent has been, comparatively speaking, less regarded. Some of this neglect may be owing to the poet's own well-known mock or genuine humility regarding his critical acumen, despite the fact that few famous men more than he loved talking formally or informally about literary trends or personalities. His early training, as a newspaper reporter and editor, probably accentuated this trait and his own genial disposition and gregariousness were surely no deterrents to its development. Whitman's emphatic statement that he was "a hell of a critic," therefore, should be taken with considerable reservation. At least, some contemporary critics think so. Norman Foerster, for instance, compared him with Wordsworth for his theory set forth in a series of prefaces.[2] Edgar Lee Masters, perhaps overly enthusiastic, claimed that "Whitman was not surpassed by any other American as a critic of literature."[3] Emory Holloway,

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1 See especially Harvey J. O'Higgins, "Alias Walt Whitman," Harpers Magazine CLVIII (May, 1929), 698-707; Mark VanDoren, "Walt Whitman, Stranger," American Mercury XXXV (July, 1935), 277-295; and Esther Shepherd, Walt Whitman's Pose, p. 141.

2 Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. 157.

3 Maurice C. Johnson, "Walt Whitman as a Critic of Literature," University of Nebraska Studies, XVI (1938), p. 9.

an eminent Whitman scholar, stated that, although Whitman's journalistic book reviews were often hastily written or incomplete, his later judgments were "peculiarly stimulating."[4]

Although some mention must be made in this study of Whitman's literary theory, emphasis is here placed on the theory underlying his criticism of other writers and upon his relative importance as a literary critic. Before any conclusion can be drawn it is necessary to examine judgments originally written upon scraps of paper or in the pages of books and magazines. In doing so one finds garbled passages beside bright and flashing phrases and shrewd observation beside naive speculation. Whitman's sometimes chaotic prose and his scrappily recorded talk must be observed with an eye to selection and organization. When such procedure has been followed, his literary criticism stands as a body of work peculiarly revealing. It is not only important for a more complete understanding of the man and his Leaves of Grass, but is also in itself interesting, amusing, and occasionally profound. And while his literary opinions may sometimes be inaccurate, they are seldom dull. Although sometimes swayed unduly by outside influences, Whitman was a more careful critic than has generally been thought, basing his judgment upon literary excellence and democratic thought.

Realizing that there are distinct and diverse approach-

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4 Ibid.

as to literary criticism, in a preliminary chapter, I have tried to identify Whitman rather closely as belonging to a certain type of critic. Next, I have felt it necessary to describe in some detail the critical climate in which Whitman worked, especially during his formative period prior to the Civil War, believing that there is truth in the observation that "I am a part of all that I have met." Although early nineteenth century American writers encouraged a native American literature, both literature and criticism were highly imitative of European models, and especially English models. Morality was a prime requisite, a morality which too quickly degenerated into a pallid gentility. We must keep in mind, therefore, that Whitman's doctrines were sometimes overstated in a strenuous effort on his part to counteract this weakening prudishness.

Also, in a survey of this kind, it would be well to compare Whitman, as to literary equipment, with his contemporaries, the most representative of which are Poe, Emerson, and Lowell. With this, Chapter III is concerned.

It should be remembered, too, that in Whitman it is practically impossible to separate categorically the social from the literary critic. More than most writers, his is in this regard all of one piece, a unity similar to that in his attitude to the physical and spiritual man. He declined to place one above the other or even consider them separate-

ly. In his late essay, "A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads," he avowedly stressed sex and even animality on the ground that these were a part of the whole personality. Similarly, he continually merged social and literary aims, once declaring that, if a reader accepted Leaves of Grass as a literary exercise, he would miss the whole import of the work. In Chapter V. therefore, I have tried to face this dilemma by including only Whitman's comments on literary writing or writers.

CHAPTER I

TYPES OF CRITICS

In their attitude toward past, present and future, let us, at the risk of over-simplification, divide critics into three classes; the traditional, the contemporary, and the prophetic.[1] A brief discussion of each class will be sufficient for the purposes of this paper.

The traditional or historical critics were those who looked backward, men impressed with the fact that humanity was made up of more dead than living, and with the right of the dead to a hearing. These critics devoted themselves to such topics as reason, correctness, wit, taste, rules, imitation, the classics, the functions of imagination, the status of emotion, and the dangers of enthusiasm. They were concerned with Aristotle's Poetics, stressing the importance of imitation, catharsis, and the unities; with Longinus' On the Sublime, stressing noble passions and elevated diction; and with Horace's Art of Poetry, emphasizing the importance of Greek models, decorum and instruction.[2]

In eighteenth century England the traditional critics found representatives in Addison and Pope, and particularly in Samuel Johnson, who remained the defender of the older

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1 This is the division suggested by Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. 211.

2 William F. Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, p. 108.

order.[3] In the nineteenth century, Matthew Arnold admired the classical qualities of form, order, and measure.[4] Patterned after these writers, early American taste was classical. In the early nineteenth century, Joseph Dennie best represents this group of critics. Though he made an attempt to break away, Charles Brockden Brown might also be called, at least in part, traditional.[5] Emerson and Lowell were appraisers of tradition, enemies alike of convention and revolution.[6] It remained for Lowell to state more clearly the nature of historical criticism. He exemplified it in the study of a series of great writers and demonstrated its value as a preparation for literary criticism in its highest form, defining historical criticism as measuring a critic "relatively to his position in the literary history of his country and conditions of his generation."[7]

The contemporary critics were the men who look around, consciously or unconsciously impressed with compelling force or movement of which they were a part and eagerly responsive to what appeared most vital in their

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3 Ibid., p. 109.

4 Ibid., p. 110.

5 Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 18.

6 Foerster, op. cit., p. 212.

7 Ibid., p. 120.

own day or the day just before.[8] The English romanticists; Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, could be placed in this group. Among American critics, Foerster names Poe as leader,[9] since he was as indifferent to tradition as to convention, content to work out the implications of the movement to which he chanced to belong.

The third class, the prophetic critics, was composed of those who look forward. These critics were the men who felt that the future would be different from and better than the past, anxiously awaiting signs to aid them in foreseeing the nature of the new age.[10] The romanticists mentioned in the preceding paragraph were of this nature, but not until Whitman did American literature possess a truly great prophetic critic.[11]

In the words of Foerster, these three classes of critics are distinguished as follows:

> "The traditional critics attain a certain breadth and centrality, at the risk of prematurely closing their minds; the contemporary critics attain a striking definiteness, at the risk of equally striking narrowness, and the prophetic critics attain freedom from the limitations of the past and present fact, at the risk of having their theories belied by event."[12]

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8 Ibid., p. 212.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, and remembering that we are later in Chapter III to compare Whitman with Poe, Emerson, and Lowell; we can proceed first to the survey of the critical climate in the United States prior to the Civil War.

CHAPTER II

THE CRITICAL CLIMATE IN THE UNITED STATES PRIOR TO THE CIVIL WAR

In any civilization criticism is bound to come late, since there must first develop a sturdy and somewhat varied native stock of writing. In Greece, Aristotle had the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes to work on, but no novel. Therefore, his Poetics dealt chiefly with the drama and not at all with prose fiction. In England, centuries later, a vigorous native criticism did not appear until the Renaissance of Spenser and Shakespeare, although much writing preceded this date, notably that of Chaucer.

This late flowering was all the more marked in the American Colonies, since there were additional determining factors besides chronology. According to Bernard Smith,[1] the history of literary criticism in the United States began with the founding of America. But two centuries elapsed before identifiable patterns or standards developed,[2] and while a definite beginning for such development cannot be established, critics agree that it came late and that, besides reflecting European attitudes, it concerned itself with questions peculiar to a literature growing out of a transplanted culture.

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1 Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 13.

2 Robert E. Spiller, The Roots of National Culture, p. v.

Literary criticism in America has not had the support of a native cultural tradition. The discovery of America, says Norman Foerster,[3] provided a new setting for European culture. The frontier transformed Europeans into such Americans as Jefferson, Jackson, and Lincoln; yet the influx of immigrants and foreign ideas postponed indefinitely the achievement of a distinctive culture. It is understandable that the writing of the period of settlement would be important for its bearing upon the construction of a new civilization rather than its artistic excellence or defects. Not until the early eighteenth century when the merchants rose to power, creating a secular community and a leisure class, do we find the real beginnings of American literature and criticism.

From colonization to the early 18th century, there existed a firm belief that art should be judged in terms of morality. This characteristic is usually labeled Puritanism, although Smith[4] points out that such use of the term is misleading. Moralistic criticism existed centuries before Cotton Mather or Oliver Cromwell, it being the essence even of Greek criticism. While theology was responsible for the Puritans' distrust of beauty, environment determined the duration of the Puritan creed. When the land was conquered

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3 Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. XIII.

4 Smith, op. cit., p. 3.

and towns became wealthy there was a lessening need for the harsh discipline of Calvinism. With the rise of the secular community, with the rapid increase of wealth and leisure, came also the beginnings of American literature and criticism.

From the early eighteenth century to 1780 might be called the period of "borrowing."[5] Periodicals celebrated the appearance of American poets and scholars, but this did not indicate a national spirit. A national tradition could not begin until the colonies had had years of political isolation.[6] It was necessary, too, that the West be opened and its riches discovered, that native sons, children of the lower as well as of the higher classes, be allowed to share the benefits of higher education and of business. This was a period of provincialism--of quest for poets who would live here but carry on the traditions of England.[7]

Patterned after Addison & Steele, early taste was definitely classical. Periodicals printed remarks on Defoe, Swift, and Pope and published excerpts from the original Spectator. Until 1825, when The North American Review, began to yield to the influence of Coleridge and Wordsworth, the prevailing models were Augustan and Johnsonian. The heroic couplet was considered the greatest of all English metres and Pope was highly praised for his versification.

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5 Spiller, op. cit., p. 3.

6 Smith, op. cit., p. 6.

7 Ibid., p. 8.

What Smith calls "the handmaiden of classicism"[8] was the cult of authority. The ancient classics and recent English classicists were adored for their own sake. They were considered models of literary eloquence. Writers were advised to go only to them for advice on style, philosophy and propriety of emotions. This insistence upon authority and tradition was naturally not encouraging to budding arts. Critics, in the roles of editors, reviewers, and teachers have always been the molders of public taste and artists' desires. They were at this time almost in unanimous agreement as to the nature of the poetic ideal.

By 1780 there were sufficient schools, colleges, literary societies, and libraries to create a public taste for literature. The half century following this might be called the period of awakening of literary consciousness through imitation, or the imitative period.[9] Literature and criticism were imitative of the English in mode and form and still showed a marked interest in tradition. Although there was a growing curiosity about literary possibilities of native materials and ideas, the American environment did not inspire boldness. Such liberals or Jeffersonian democrats as Charles Brockden Brown and Philip Freneau did not dare to follow the paths of the earlier English romanticists. There was no effective resistance to

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8 Ibid., p. 11.

9 Spiller, op. cit., p. 3.

the eighteenth century spirit until after the War of 1812. In this period of "beginnings" criticism was not on a very high plane. It was full of prejudice, ulterior motives and pretense, and largely tinged with personal animosities and political partisanships. The frequent false or distorted criticism of the works of romantic poets may have been due to the failure of the critic to understand an ideology so opposed to his own. He may not have willingly falsified. When the poor work of an American was puffed, it was likely due to the warping effect of patriotism rather than to neighborly sentiment. A critic's attack on the art of his political enemies and his praise of that of his allies, may not have been an instance of premeditated misstatement so much as that of blindness to merit in the hated object which so often accompanies ardent devotion to a subject. The modern reader, says Smith,[10] may call this untrustworthiness and find it odious to the same degree that he finds corruption of the truth odious; yet it is sometimes refreshing to find critics who employed their craft in the interests of class, party, and state. This period of "awakening" produced a body of essays, poems, novels, short stories and plays. In it developed literary groups of similar tastes and ideals. It laid the foundations for a romantic movement of native origin and growth; it was a period of transition from the most classical to the most

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10 Smith, op. cit., p. 14.

romantic period American literature has ever known.[11] Romantic and classical (liberal and Tory) opinion appeared side by side. The chief representative of the romantic was Charles Brockden Brown and of the classic, Joseph Dennie. They represent the literary boundaries of their age, America's first professional men of letters, and the first in America to make literary criticism a profession. Hence they merit a very brief discussion.

Charles Brockden Brown was a forerunner in the movement to free American letters from English domination. In the first issue of Monthly Magazine he stated that "the literary character of America is extremely superficial."[12] In this preface to Edgar Huntly he emphasized the fact that America opened new views and that his purpose in writing was to profit by the rich American sources.[13] He stressed as American sources particularly the perils of the West and Indian hostilities. He was careful to keep the good will of the clergy, and he considered the moral prejudices of his community. Nevertheless, he is considered the representative of whatever radicalism there was in early American literature. He introduced a liberal and romantic spirit into American criticism.

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11 Spiller, op. cit., p. 15.

12 Smith, op. cit., p. 17.

13 Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Huntly, Preface.

Joseph Dennie was an admirer of English literature, politics and culture. There was so little of liberalism in him that he virtually hated France, Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine. He agreed with Charles Brockden Brown in matters of religion and morality, but he was antagonistic toward a state which claimed greater interest in furthering the welfare of the commonalty than in patronizing the arts and letters created for the diversion of the wealthy. His creed is well stated in the following quotations: "The common people, in every age, are nearly the same. Their praise is often to be dreaded, and their censure is generally proof of the merit of the object."[14] He adored Thomas Moore for the latter's cultivation of elegant formal verse and his ultra-conservative politics. He called Coleridge a man of genius and a poet despite his erroneous political creed. Current neglect of elegant letters he attributed to an administration "utterly destitute of classical taste."[15]

It is the decades following 1820 or 1830, the period in which Whitman lived and wrote, with which this paper is chiefly concerned, years which Spiller calls the period of creation.[16] There were many sociological and economic changes which were accompanied by intellectual and moral

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14 Smith, op. cit., p. 17.

15 Ibid.

16 Spiller, op. cit., p. 3.

changes. It was an era of expansion the details of which are too extended to receive more than a passing reference here. A few statistics, however, may serve to dramatize its chief characteristics. From 1790 to 1811 the Patent Office reported an average of 77 inventions annually; in the year 1930 alone 544 patents were recorded. At the beginning of the period the sale of public lands was negligible; in 1834 about four million acres were sold. From 1800 to 1830 the total value of our imports decreased about 290 million. The value of our exports which had increased only about one million dollars in the first period, increased about 260 million in the second period. These were the decades in which canals, highways, and railroads were built. This period saw the development of the factory system in textile and machine production. Immigration began on a grand scale. Urban population in the United States grew from about four percent of the total in 1800 to about eight and one half percent in 1840. The country was on its way to riches and power. This development of the interior of the United States and the growth of economic independence resulted in a vigorous nationalism. The reflection of this development in arts and letters is called romanticism.[17] The rise of romance in literary criticism may be traced to the early history of the North American

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17 Smith, op. cit., p. 23.

Review. It was founded in 1815 with William Tudor as its first editor. It was the recognized spokesman of conservative New England, and its chief contributors could be depended upon to remember that one of the reasons for establishing the magazine was "to neutralize the effects of the French Revolution on American political thought."[18] It was unfriendly to romanticism at the outset and its slighting of Keats, Shelley and Coleridge were but negative symptoms of a deliberate or calculated Toryism. Alex Everett, writing of Byron in the North American Review[19] said that the English poet appeared "to have thrown off very early (if he ever felt it) the wholesome restraint, which is generally imposed upon young minds by the authority of received opinions." By the authority of received opinions Everett very likely meant the authority of government and church. When this "authority" eventually changed its bias and became sympathetic to the romantics; it was because the New England mind was undergoing a similar change. The North American Review could hardly resist the influence of the times. It became an adventurer in new ideas. It was not less scholarly nor less conscious of its obligation to preserve the best in New England

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18 Cambridge History of American Literature (N. Y., 1918). Vol. II, p. 164, cited by Bernard Smith, op. cit., p. 24.

19 North American Review, Vol. XX No. 36 (Jan. 1825) p. 40, cited by Bernard Smith, op. cit., p. 24.

culture, but it was more liberal than at its beginning. What was true of the North American Review was true almost everywhere in America. Others followed the path of Charles Brockden Brown. Cooper, for example, possessed psychological traits, sentimentalities and boldness that were really native. Yet literary criticism wavered between the traditional and the romantic for most of the nineteenth century. Even Emerson who declared our cultural independence, said in 1844 that Europe extended to the Alleghany Mountains. Whitman himself, though he heralded the beginning of a new order, left the fulfillment of it to poets of a remote future.[20] Nevertheless, a native American literature had been born. Nationalism developed in critical as well as imaginative writing. The way was cleared for it by three important factors, the first of which was the death of Tories and southern gentlemen with Anglican Church affiliations who had sown the seeds of American letters. The new generation was home bred. The second of these factors was the rise of a society based upon an internal economy. The third, and not the least important factor, was in the 1820's and 30's the waning interest in winning the approval of England. There was less need to sustain the ego by falsifying the achievements in the arts. Nearly a century elapsed before the interest and need disappeared but their decline dated from these years. Spiller

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[20] Foerster, op. cit., p. XIII.

summarizes the characteristics of the period as follows; strong national pride, immediate contemplation of nature, appreciation of simple elements in the lives of living men, and the search of the past for new forms and themes.[21] The task of pointing out the nationalistic elements of the leading writers of the period vastly exceeds the limits of this paper. In varying degrees they displayed, both in the selection of materials and in the manner of treating them, evidence of nationalistic and patriotic sentiment, along with many evidences of indebtedness to the great literary traditions of the Old World. Walt Whitman, the most nationalistic of all, remained obscure throughout the period.[22]

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21 Spiller, op. cit., p. 20.

22 Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought, p. 419.

CHAPTER III

WHITMAN'S CONTEMPORARIES

In order to discuss Whitman's relative importance as a critic of literature, it is necessary to consider his major and also some of his contemporary writer-critics. His major contemporaries were without question Poe, Emerson, and Lowell. Of the minor writer-critics, Charles Brockden Brown has previously been discussed.[1] Others worthy of mention are William Cullen Bryant, William Ellery Channing, and James Fenimore Cooper.

Considering the minor contemporaries of Whitman first, it can be said that a common characteristic was the revolt against the imitation of European literature accompanied by a demand for a native American literature with certain reservations and differences. Bryant warned against applauding the writings of an American simply because they were written by an American.[2] Cooper felt that the literature of England and that of America must be fashioned after the same pattern,[3] the only expected difference being that of political opinions. Channing defined national literature as "the expression of a nation's

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1 See p. 14.

2 Spiller, Roots of National Culture, p. 470.

3 Ibid., p. 662.

mind in writing" and added "the expression of a superior mind."[4] He can well be considered a forerunner of Whitman in his belief that the great distinction of a country is that it produces superior men. He anticipated Whitman, too, in stating the purpose of literature. "We look to literature," he said, "to form a better race of human beings."[5] There is also a hint of Whitman's internationalism in Channing's statement that we love our country but not blindly and that we love our country but mankind more.[6]

Bryant described the style of American poetry as a sickly and affected imitation of popular poets of England.[7] Poetry he defined as an imitative but suggestive art in contrast to painting and sculpture which he considered literally imitative arts.[8] By this he meant that poetry, by symbols and words, suggests both the sensible object and the association. He gave to poetry three functions closely allied to the romantic position; it must excite the heart, and it must appeal to the understanding.[9]

Neither Cooper nor Channing set up such definite

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4 Ibid., p. 556.

5 Ibid.,

6 Ibid.,

7 Ibid., p. 475.

8 Ibid.,

9 Ibid.

standards, but each stated what he considered the obstacles to the progress of a native literature. In Cooper's opinion the obstacles were; first, that an American publisher could get an English work without money; and secondly, that there existed in the new nation a poverty of material.[10] To Channing the obstacles were also two in number, but they were of a different nature. The first obstacle, he said, was the idea that useful knowledge should receive our first care.[11] This, he felt, was too readily interpreted as being that which is useful only to animal man, while he would have it include what is useful to intellectual, moral and religious man. Poetry, he argued, is useful by creating beautiful forms of manifestations for great moral truths. The second obstacle he considered was the idea that foreign scholars could do our thinking for us. Such an attitude, Channing felt, would have to be overcome before progress could be made in the creation of a native American literature. He emphasized, too, the importance of style, which, in his opinion, revealed the creative power of the gifted writer.

Of the major contemporaries of Whitman, Thrall and Hibbard say briefly:

> The earlier writer critics were in the main romantic, Poe, Emerson, Lowell. Poe, however, stressed workmanship, technique, structure, the divorce of art and morality; was highly rational; and enunciated indepen-

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10 Ibid., p. 562.

11 Ibid., p. 556.

> dent theories of the lyric and the short story. Emerson believed art should serve moral ends; asserted that all American literature was derivative and assumed the romantic attitude toward nature and individualism. Lowell is first impressionistic and romantic; at times professedly realistic; and eventually classical and ethical, after his revolt against sentimentalism.[12]

To this summary might well be added comments on Whitman, the journalistic writer-critic. He can be placed somewhere between the historical and the impressionistic critic. Another method of classifying these critics is that of Norman Foerster, previously mentioned,[13] who classified them according to their attitudes towards past, present, and future. First there were the traditional critics who look backward, the appraisers of tradition. In this class were Emerson and Lowell. The second class was that of the contemporary critics impressed with the compelling force of the movement of which they are a part. Poe belonged to this class. In the third class were the critics who look forward, the prophetic critics, men dominated with the idea that "the future will be different from or even better than the past." Here is where "the good gray poet" belonged, for he set out to be the foremost prophetic critic of his generation, choosing to work with modern science and modern democracy. This paper, being primarily concerned with Whitman, we shall discuss him at length in subsequent chapters. But since we often learn by contrast or comparison, let us first consider such major

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12 William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, p. 113.

13 See p. 5.

contemporaries as Poe, Emerson, and Lowell.

Poe, as has been stated, was the aesthetic writer-critic, primarily concerned with technique. Like his fellow critics, he pointed to the fact that American literature and criticism were too imitative of European models, commenting satirically that "books having crossed the ocean with us is so great a distinction."[14] A second error evoking his ire was the belief that no poet could form an estimate of his own writings. Poe thought that a good poet could justly criticize his own work. The deduction, he said, due to self-love would be made up by intimate acquaintance with the subject. In his essay, The Poetic Principle, he defined poetry as follows:

> A poem is opposed to a work of science, by having for its immediate object, pleasure not truth; to romance by having for its object an indefinite instead of a definite pleasure, being a poem only so far as this object is obtained[15]

One of Poe's most quoted expressions is that "a long poem does not exist."[16] A work of art, he believed, must be judged by the impression or effect, not by the time it took to impress the effect or by the amount of sustained effort required. The worst error, however, was "the heresy of the didactic." To Poe nothing was "more dignified, more supreme-

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14 The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, p. 762.

15 Ibid., p. 764.

16 Ibid., p. 766.

ly noble than a poem written solely for the poem's sake."[17] For him there was no reconciling the "obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth." Beauty, in Poe's creed, was the province of the poem, because in it was attained most nearly, that pleasure which was at once the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense. In his emphasis on technique, Poe defined verse as including rhythm, rhyme, metre, and versification. He stressed melody as well as harmony and therefore believed that where verse was pleasant to the ear, it was silly to find fault with it because it didn't scan.[18] In the same work, however, Poe expressed his belief that no feet differing in time should be used in the same line. Time must not be tampered with.

Despite his own statements to the contrary, Whitman was likewise much concerned with technique and imitated Poe both in his short stories[19] and in his poems. His own statement in his notes, "Make this more musical," showed his interest in melody. He also made use of symbol,[20] word-coinage, vowel sounds, reiterative devices, alliteration, and, in a few instances, rhyme.[21] His use of vowel sounds

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17 Ibid., p. 772.

18 Ibid., p. 783.

19 The Half-breed and Other Stories by Walt Whitman. Edited by Thomas Clive Babbott.

20 Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, I, p. 298.

21 Ibid., p. 305.

in particular excels that of Poe. If one will compare Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"[22] or "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed"[23] with Poe's "The Bells"[24] he will find Whitman's use of vowel sounds much richer and less affected than Poe's use of the same device. Whitman's interest in music is further illustrated by the fact that "Song of Myself"[25] is arranged symphonically. To save his own creative soul, he soon reacted against Poe, but Poe's influence, though negative, was considerable. Late in life, Whitman admitted to Horace Traubel that his attitude toward Poe had changed and that he appreciated Poe's artistic ability, and what he was trying to do.[26] Like Poe, Whitman believed that a long poem does not exist. Though he maintained that style in itself was nothing, he was, like Poe, concerned with technique. Proof of this is largely in his long and elaborate revision of his own work. Poe's influence on Whitman, it can be seen, was negative, but despite this fact, considerable.

In contrast to Poe, Emerson was the scholarly and philosophic critic, concerned with profounder ethics. His

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22 Ibid., p. 237.

23 Ibid., p. 305.

24 The Works of Edgar Allan Poe, p. 653.

25 Complete Poetry and Prose, I, 62.

26 Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 138.

creed embraced more than beauty; it included inspiration, intellect and history. His literary criticism was directed in particular to poetry, books, and the fine arts.

Emerson's conception of poetry was the transcendental conception; that is, that beyond the ideal poem was the poem itself. He believed that the true poet subjected form to thought.[27] This would place Poe in the category of what he believed a "jingle man." "It is not metre", he said, "but metre-making argument that makes a poem."[28] Unlike Poe, he never severed beauty from the ideal. To him ideal beauty was also ideal truth and goodness. The superior poem, Emerson thought, could not be analyzed; word and thought could not be severed. The beauty of a work of art was supreme when there was a balance of perfect quality and quantity.

Emerson emphasized the idea that the poet was representative; that is, he apprised us not only of his own wealth but of common wealth. Adequate expression of experiences was so rare that an interpreter was needed. The poet was this interpreter. He was the person who had a balance of the power of receiving and the power of reproducing impressions. The poet could do this, because he used everything as symbols and because he used forms according to

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27 Essays, First and Second Series, Part II, p. 15.

28 Ibid.

life and not according to form.[29] According to Emerson, the poet must express what was in him, a belief that was echoed again and again in Whitman's work. The poet was universal; he belonged to all ages and all people. In this belief lay Emerson's admiration of Shakespeare of whom he said, "He wrote the text of modern life."[30] Shakespeare's secret, spoken of in the same essay, was said to be that of having thought construct the tune so that reading for sense would best bring out the rhythm.

Emerson believed that the degree of inspiration could be measured by the degree of necessity of expression. Poetry is timeless, "must be as new as the foam and as old as the rock."[31] Like Poe, Emerson defined art as the creation of beauty, but unlike Poe, his interest was in the organic rather than the mechanical quality. By his law of the organic, he meant that a work of art must perfectly present its thought; making thought supreme and nature only its vehicle.[32] He was again the forerunner of Whitman in his belief that the chief necessity in life was the right obedience to the human soul. He applauded Whitman as a result of his fulfillment of the Greek union of childish spontaneity and great energy; of

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29 Ibid.

30 Representative Men, p. 201.

31 Bliss Perry, The Heart of Emerson's Journal, p. 213.

32 Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. 61.

buffalo strength, good morals and human insight.[33] Like Whitman, he held that writing was the greatest of arts. He held further that classic art was organic art in the widest sense, drawing directly from the soul both the material and the appropriate form.

In regard to books, it is interesting to note that Emerson rarely read a novel. Foerster stated that Emerson read two of Jane Austen's novels and pronounced them "vulgar in tone, sterile in artistic invention, imprisoned in the wretched conventions of English society."[34] He seems to have given Dickens credit for his faithful portrayal of surfaces but deplored his deficiency in poetry and insight into character. In English Traits he wrote mildly of Dickens as being "local and temporary in his tints and style and local in his aims."[35] As can be seen in Representative Men, Emerson, unlike Poe, devoted himself to such men as Plato, Shakespeare, and Montaigne. He read Plotinus, Plutarch, Milton, and Bacon. His modern masters were Wordsworth and Goethe, particularly because of their regard for nature. When writing about the Romantic Period in English Traits,[36] he said that the exceptional fact of the

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33 Ibid., p. 83, Footnote.

34 Ibid., p. 57.

35 English Traits, p. 231.

36 Ibid., p. 242.

period was the genius of Wordsworth, who had no master but nature and solitude. "His verse is the voice of sanity in a worldly and ambitious age." Writing of Goethe in Representative Men, Emerson said that he "has said the best things about nature that ever were said." And again "He drew strength from Nature with which he lived in full communion."[37]

Emerson believed in what he called creative reading. To him the actions of the individual were more important than any he could read about. "Books", he wrote in The American Scholar,[38] "are for the scholar's idle times." In his Journal[39] he entered the brief comment, "Some books leave us free and some books make us free." Though in a milder and more reserved manner than that of Whitman, Emerson continually urged the breaking away from the dominance of Europe. The strongest statement is in English Traits[40] where he said that in estimating the merit of a production he would exclude "all rules drawn from ancient or modern literature of Europe, all references to such sentiments or manners as are become the standards of propriety for opinion and action in our own modes, and equally all appeals

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37 Representative Men, p. 258.

38 Bliss Perry, Selections from the Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, p. 55.

39 The Heart of Emerson's Journal, p. 14.

40 English Traits, p. 245.

to our revealed tenets of religion and moral duty."

Emerson's attitude toward the fine arts should also be noted. In his essay on art he distinguished between art and the fine arts. "Art", he said, "is the creative instinct within human beings. The arts are abortive, vitiated instincts."[41] It was Emerson's belief that the art of his day had no religious feeling for nature. The arts were too static. True art must be alive and flowing, simple, understandable, optimistic and religious. Art is needed only for its function to refine and educate to beauty. Emerson's belief that art and literature alike should give us that of which we can say with the fullest conviction that it is, later finds support in Whitman.

As has been emphasized previously, Poe was concerned with technique, Emerson with the ethics of art. Lowell was concerned with both. Poe was contemporary, reading little outside of his own time, while Lowell, like Emerson, was traditional, though in a different way. While Emerson read widely but transcendentally, Lowell attempted rounded portraits of many authors of the past. Foerster believes that Lowell virtually wrote a critical history of literature, from Dante to his own age.[42] He must be regarded as our most distinguished literary critic. Of importance among

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41 Essays, First and Second Series, Part I, p. 328.

42 Foerster, op. cit., p. 114.

his achievements is the fact that he pointed out for us that historical criticism measures an author relatively to his position in the literary history of his country and the conditions of his generation. An illustration of this can be found in his criticism of Pope whom he considered the greatest of English poets of his own kind. This was different from the old superstition that Pope was the greatest poet who ever lived.

In A Certain Condescension in Foreigners,[43] Lowell admitted, like his contemporaries, that America had nothing to boast of in arts and letters; that there was too much bragging about merely material prosperity. Yet he disliked being told that his country was without arts, science, literature, culture, or any hope of supplying them. America, he continued, is the only colony whose people sought God instead of gold.[44] Foreigners, it seemed to him, regarded America as a country only to sleep, eat and trade in. But as long as Americans continued to be the most common schooled and the least cultivated people in the world, he felt that they would have to endure this condescending manner in foreigners. In the same essay, Lowell stated that the highest art of a Republic is to make men of flesh and blood, and not the marble imitations of such, a belief

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43 James Russell Lowell, My Study Windows, pp. 54-92.

44 The same idea is found in another of Lowell's essays, "New England Two Centuries Ago," in Among My Books, pp. 228-290.

held by others of this group of writers and certainly by Whitman.

Thrall and Hibbard[45] believe that Lowell was impressionistic at first. It might be inferred that he was an impressionist, since the center of interest in his essays is the man himself, his delightful personality. In him is found a blending of the qualities of sympathy, enthusiasm, imagination and fancy, wit and humor, sanity and common sense. He stood forth because of his versatility and his attempt to use the best ideas offered by both great critical traditions, the classic and the romantic. His was a moral and aesthetic literary creed. He was indebted to the Greeks for the qualities which guided his aesthetic criticism. Every literary work, he believed, must have a self-contained form, possessing unity, economy, power, control, repose, sanity, and impersonality. Yet he used in setting forth his own doctrine the manner of obiter dicta which violated his own law of design. But then he was known to invoke standards which would deprecate himself along with his contemporaries. He protested as vigorously as Poe against the teaching of morals in literature, yet, as has already been stated, he eventually came to the ethical position himself.[46] Behind the product, said Lowell, lies,

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45 Thrall and Hibbard, op. cit., p. 113.

46 See p. 23.

or should lie, the writer's experience, because nothing that has not been living experience can become living expression.[47] Here is the organic principle in less mystical language than that found in Emerson and in less forceful language than that found in Whitman. Both Poe and Whitman saw a small part of the truth steadily. Emerson made all truth his province and had the power to conquer a very large part. Lowell was midway, a useful lieutenant to the great leaders. His conception of the task of the critic can be summed up under three points; a sensitiveness to impression, historical understanding, and aesthetical-ethical judgment.[48] He believed that a book should be judged by its total effect, not by the adequacy of its parts. The effect of such judgment is moral as well as aesthetic. The form must be not only organic but ideal; that is, it must embody the real that resides in the actual.

Though Whitman reacted against Lowell's snobbishness, the two poets held some ideas in common. Both men loved Lincoln. For evidence of Whitman's attitude we have particularly his poem, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed." For evidence of Lowell's attitude the reader need only to turn to his poem, "Commemoration Ode." Both men loved democracy, although Lowell did so more in principle than in

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47 Foerster, op. cit., p. 159.

48 Ibid., p. 150.

practice. Lowell's influence on Whitman, like that of Poe, was negative, but nevertheless present.

And now let us summarize the relations that these above three writers bear to Whitman. Though we have little information regarding Poe's attitude to Whitman, we have, as has been suggested,[49] some interesting data concerning Whitman's opinion of Poe. While a young Brooklyn reporter, Whitman visited Poe in New York. He thought Poe too morbid and too much attached to form at the expense of content. He considered Poe to be anti-democratic in both theme and manner. Alone, among the American writers, Whitman attended the dedication of Poe's tomb in 1895, and at the time listed Poe "among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling, but with no heat.[50] Despite obvious differences temperamentally, these two were much more alike than one might at first suppose. Both suffered somewhat from an inferiority complex and both were, in consequence, show-offs who at times disseminated wrong information about their personal affairs.

In Emerson and Whitman we see the relationship of master and disciple, even though in later years, Whitman, entered upon establishing his own reputation as an original, played down this relationship. Emerson looked upon Whitman

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49 See p. 26.

50 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 156.

as the fulfillment of his own prophecies, and, while he thought Whitman too headstrong and undiscriminating, nevertheless took pride in the accomplishment of Leaves of Grass. And unlike Lowell, though a Brahmin, Emerson was large-souled enough to appreciate the vast potentialities of Whitman. Whitman, of course, always held Emerson in veneration, although he looked upon the whole New England group as dwelling in too attenuated and too aristocratic an atmosphere for full-blooded Americans.

In his attitude to Whitman, Lowell was not only highly unsympathetic, but often muddle-headed. His innate snobbishness resented Whitman's brag and bluster, and he could not overlook Whitman's disregard for conventional rhyme and rhythm. The differing attitudes of these two toward democracy is no where better illustrated than in Lowell's essay on Democracy and Whitman's Democratic Vistas. The first, in its supercilliousness, reveals a basic distrust of the common man, while the latter extols him. Lowell was responsible for the omission of Whitman's name from the list of American writers whose names were carved on the cornices of the Boston Public Library. Though astute in many fields, Lowell, in training and temperament alike, was unable to understand this vulgar fellow from Camden.

CHAPTER IV

WHITMAN'S CRITICAL BACKGROUND

This discussion of Whitman's background for critical work is divided into four parts; his status as a literary critic, his literary equipment, his media of criticism, and his idea regarding the function of literature. These parts are discussed in the order named.

"I am a hell of a critic," Whitman told Horace Traubel in 1888.[1] He also admitted to Traubel that he hated literature:

> I am not a literary West Pointer: I do not love a literary man as a literary man, as a minister loves other ministers: it is a means to an end, that is all there is to it: I never attribute any other significance to it.[2]

Whitman was not a professional critic like Poe or Lowell, nor a scholarly one like Emerson, concerning himself only casually with reviewing contemporary books and writing rounded estimates of authors in journalistic style. As we suggested earlier,[3] he should be placed midway between the historical and the impressionistic critic. Despite Whitman's above disclaimer, however, Norman Foerster regarded him as

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1 Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, I, 56. Hereafter this work will be referred to as "Traubel."

2 Ibid., p. 58.

3 See p. 23.

one of the most important American critics, because of the theory of literature that he formulated.[4] Comparing him to Wordsworth, Foerster pointed out that both were concerned with a theory of poetry, both illustrated their theories with collections of poems, and both set forth their theories in a series of prefaces. Maurice O. Johnson, in his dissertation, Walt Whitman as a Critic of Literature,[5] commended Foerster for a kinder opinion than Whitman's own, "I'm a hell of a critic." According to Johnson, Foerster based Whitman's importance as a critic on the "virtue of a few pages of speculation on the nature of poetry."[6]

Henry S. Canby did not attempt to place Whitman as a critic but admitted his importance as a poet. "Whitman seems," he said, "shallow, facile and ignorant beside Emerson and Thoreau; yet Emerson hailed him as author of the American poem." Canby continued by saying that if the function of poetry was to lift the emotions and to enliven the imagination by its final statements of the essence of experience, then there was not much room left for argument in Whitman's case.[7] Agreeing with Bernard Smith,[8] Canby

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4 Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. 157.

5 Maurice O. Johnson, "Walt Whitman as a Critic of Literature", University of Nebraska Studies, XVI (1938), p. 8.

6 Ibid.

7 Robert E. Spiller et al, ed., Literary History of the United States, I, 495.

8 Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 155.

thought that Whitman predicted the future while he consummated the past, even going so far as to say that Whitman would come to be regarded as poetry's most prophetic if not most perfect voice. Smith carried the argument into criticism, stating that Whitman's importance as a critic was not that of a guide to good reading, nor that of an interpreter of values and meanings of other men's accomplishments.[9] Since he influenced chiefly following generations, his importance was entirely that of a prophet. The most important thing about Whitman's estimates of individuals was what they revealed about his social and philosophical ideas. Some of these estimates will be examined later in this paper. Smith believed, too, that Whitman was a romantic, pure and simple. When his reactions to eminent romantics differed from those of other critics, said Smith, it was because of the temperamental differences which were social in origin, not because of differences in principle.

Emory Holloway, in an article, "Whitman as a Critic of America,"[10] placed Whitman in a new light, that of a satirist. Though Whitman was seldom thought of as a satirist, Holloway believed that his appeal to the future linked him with the satirical temper. "A satirist," said Holloway, "is an idealist who, compellingly conscious of an

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9 Ibid., p. 156.

10 Emory Holloway, "Whitman as a Critic of America," Studies in Philology, XX (July, 1923), 345-369.

ideal superior to that whereby his age is actually living, sets out, whether in the bitterness of disillusion or in the patience of cheerful optimism, to make ridiculous the shortcomings of that age."[11] This definition, it can be seen, could place Whitman in the class of satirist. In addition, Emerson's "brave and free thought" made Leaves of Grass a criticism, if not an indirect indictment, of life and letters in America in 1855. Holloway was careful to point out that Whitman could not be a scoffer on equal terms with Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Carlyle, Nietzsche, and Mark Twain.[12] Whitman had too much mystical humanitarianism to make a typical satirist, not being detached from his subject as a true satirist must be. When he did observe imperfections of the world at a distance, he was silent, as in the poem, "I Sit and Look Out," where he said:

> All these--all the manners and agony without and
> I sitting look /out upon/
>
> See, hear and am silent.[13]

Though Lowell disapproved of Whitman, Whitman fulfilled the former's statement of the aim of the satirist, which was, in substance, not to be severe upon persons, but only upon falsehood. Seemingly, then, Whitman was not a

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11 Ibid., p. 347.

12 Ibid., p. 345.

13 The Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, I, 258. Hereafter this work will be referred to as Complete Poetry and Prose.

great satirist, because he believed that the great poet seldom used this power of attack. He might chide his country, but he preferred to spend his great strength in her service. Though not a satirist in any great sense, he remained, as Holloway insisted, "the most discerning, the most courageous, the most loving critic America ever had."[14]

Though Whitman never gained a high place as a critic, he was better equipped for critical speculation and appraisal than has ordinarily been realized, possessing without question, massive emotional and imaginative powers, served by sound physical organization, and especially by his senses, which Foerster declared more exquisitely responsive than those of any other American writer.[15] His passion for living and inducing to live a more abundant life and his intense moral earnestness were unquestionable, though he was not notable for humor, common sense, or reason, three of the critic's most valued characteristics.[16] Having plenty of curiosity and plenty of modern passion for exact knowledge, he most certainly gained a rich background of material from experience, varying from association with common workingmen to attendance at the theatre or opera.

His education was partly vocational and partly self-

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14 Holloway, "Whitman as a Critic of America," p. 369.

15 Foerster, op. cit., p. 159.

16 The three "servants" of the critic were freely attributed to Lowell by Foerster.

obtained. Experience furnished him with facts to be used as tools, weapons or poetic symbols. His self-education came from reading, though he acknowledged that he was not a constitutional reader, having read "cartloads of novels, good and bad."[17] This, however, seems an understatement, since he excelled Poe in the quantity and quite likely in the quality of his reading. The average reader is usually surprised to learn that Whitman's reading was so extensive and his choice of books so discerning. One explanation might be that Whitman, who had little formal schooling, suggested many times that he would rather listen to the roar of the sea than listen to the most powerful epic, and he often spoke with scorn of writing which was not original, as he interpreted the word. He was not ignorant of the classics, even though he forbade any great American poets making models of those works of literature.[18] He knew by heart extended and varied portions of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare and Homer. As a newspaper editor, he secured and often reviewed the new books of his age and new editions of old books. In old age his favorite readings were Homer; Shakespeare, Scott, Emerson, and Epictetus, whose writings in a small edition, he almost always had with him. Homer was his favorite among the Greeks, Aeschyl-

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17 Foerster, op. cit., p. 160.

18 Cleveland Rodgers and John Block, ed., The Gathering of the Forces, II, 237.

us and Sophocles ranking next, and less prominently, Euripides and Aristophanes. Whitman showed little interest in Roman civilization and literature, though he read Virgil freely in translation. He knew little of Middle English literature, a few ballads, some Chaucer, the Nibelungenlied, and Dante, to whom he was comparatively indifferent. As can be noted throughout all his work, he was drawn to the Germans by all that he read or heard of their philosophy and belles-lettres. His interest in the literature of Germany was possibly influenced by Carlyle, and Foerster suggested that it might have been influenced also by the attraction New Englanders, like Emerson, felt for German philosophy and belles-lettres.[19]

Having seen that Whitman had a certain status as a critic and considerable equipment to do critical work, we can now turn to a discussion of the media through which he expressed his criticism. For convenience in this discussion these media can be divided into three general classes; the journalistic criticism, the longer citations, and the obiter dicta, or incidental remarks.

By far the most important of the journalistic group, are the book reviews, which have already been mentioned briefly.[20] Whitman reviewed many books, but few of the re-

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19 Foerster, op. cit., pp. 163-164.

20 See p. 37.

views have been preserved in their entirety. For those which have been preserved, readers are especially indebted to Emory Holloway, editor of The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, and to Cleveland Rodgers and John Black, editors of The Gathering of the Forces. As reference has already been made to these works, no further comments are necessary here.[21]

Whitman's chief work as a book reviewer was done over a two-year period, 1846-1848, during which time he was editor of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. It seems safe to say that Whitman reviewed more books, and knew more about books than any other contemporary editor in Brooklyn, perhaps even in New York, if one excludes the editors of literary periodicals.[22] Holloway pointed out, however, that these early journalistic book reviews are hastily written or incomplete. During the two-year period Whitman quoted from nearly a hundred more or less well-known books.[23] To some books he gave more than one notice, possessing as he did the belief that a newspaper which did not give notices to books was "behind the age." The custom of book reviewing, he thought, was essential in enabling editors to keep up with the foremost ones of their times. He preferred to

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21 See p. 42, Footnote 18, and p. 44, footnote 22.

22 Holloway, The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, I, 126, 127.

23 Ibid.

give candid opinions with a leaning toward a kindly view, although he once refused to print a highly eulogistic written notice sent to him to be inserted as an editorial. His attitude is aptly expressed in the following quotation from his own notes:

> As to book notices in this journal, we hope to say nothing amiss, when we say that our readers lose something when they lose the reading of them. They are our candid opinions; leaning as we prefer to lean to a kindly view--as it is not our province to cut up authors.[24]

One of the most mature of Whitman's journalistic book reviews is that concerning the translation of Goethe's autobiography, from which he quoted four long extracts and commented at length, saying:

> This Life of Goethe, this famous Wahrheit and Dichtung, seems shaped with the intention of rendering a history of the soul and body's growth. It goes right on, stating what it has to say, exuberant in its seeds of reflection and influence.[25]

According to Holloway,[26] Whitman's opinion of this work showed that he was longing for a biographical work, in prose or verse, which would express the entire man very much as his own Leaves of Grass set out to do.

Of the second group, the longer critical works, Leaves of Grass and Democratic Vistas are the most important. We have already mentioned Emerson's statement which made

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24 The Gathering of the Forces, II, 126, 127

25 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 140.

26 Ibid., II, 140.

Leaves of Grass an indirect indictment of life and letters in America in 1855.[27] Both works mentioned above state Whitman's demand for any American literature to supersede all other literatures. Though he heralded the beginning of a new order, he left the fulfillment of it to the poets of a remote future. This is expressed in the poem, "Poets to Come," in which he said:

> I myself write one or two indicative words for the future,
> Leaving it to you to prove and define it.[28]

In such a poem as "The Base of all Metaphysics,"[29] Whitman expressed his doctrine that the greatest of all great men lay in "the dear love of his comrade." In "The United States to Old World Critics,"[30] he pointed out, as he did in Democratic Vistas, America's error in placing first importance on material things. In "Old Chants,"[31] he recognized America's debt to ancient writers but ended with, "Thou entereet at the entrance porch." In other words, America must enter upon her own. One could go on indefinitely with other examples such as "Yonnondio,"[32]

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27 See p. 40.

28 Complete Poetry and Prose, I, 50.

29 Ibid., p. 137.

30 Ibid., p. 445.

31 Ibid., p. 461.

32 Ibid., p. 444.

"Shakespeare's Bacon Cipher,"[33] and "When the Full-Grown Poet Comes,"[34] but these are sufficient for our purpose here.

In reference to the preface of the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, Smith called Whitman "an Emerson turned passionate, strong, vigorous, without doubts."[35] In Democratic Vistas, 1871, we find a change in the interpreter of the American scene. He had become more critical, more sensitive, due to the fact that he had seen his country rent asunder. His joyous oratory was crossed by an uneasiness and foreboding, leaving him in a mood which he could only call for poetic leadership and reaffirm his optimism.

In a third important work of this group, "A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads," 1888, the poet had become mellowed, sobered and more concerned with spiritual elements. In addition, there are numerous separate articles on literature and authors. Among the chief of these found in Collect and November Boughs, are articles on poetry in America, British literature, Shakespeare, eminent visitors, oratory, the Bible, American national literature, Tennyson, and Burns. Referring to the article on Burns entitled "Robert Burns as Poet and Person," Smith declared Whitman

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33 Ibid., p. 458.

34 Ibid., p. 462.

35 Smith, op. cit., p. 144.

"superb on Burns."[36]

In the obiter dicta class might first be mentioned Whitman's letters, the most important of which were written to his mother. The bulk of his letters were almost devoid of literary references, which was very likely due to the fact that his mother would not have been interested in his opinions on Aeschylus or Shakespeare. When he did mention books, it was usually in such fashion as, "I sent Han (Whitman's younger sister, Hannah) a book, Lady Audley's Secret. Shall send her a letter today."[37] He went so far as to profess little interest in bookish things when writing to his mother; "Heyde has just sent me a letter. He seems to be in a very good humor. Writes a lot of stuff--but not about domestic affairs this time--on 'poetry' and 'criticism,' etc., etc. . . of no interest at all to me."[38] This attitude, according to Johnson, is all the more surprising when one knows that the letter from which the excerpt was taken was written more than ten years after the first appearance of Leaves of Grass, and at a time when the note-books showed deep concern with both 'poetry' and 'criticism.'[39] Whitman's letters, like his journal-

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36 Ibid., p. 155.

37 Johnson, op. cit., p. 11.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

istic book reviews, appear to have been hastily written.

Also in the obiter dicta group is Specimen Days, 1882, a collection of incidental comments dealing chiefly with three subjects; his family, nature, and the Civil War. In addition to these subjects, however, he included articles on literary topics and on authors. Among these are brief articles, largely due to their recent death, on Carlyle, Bryant, Longfellow, and Emerson; on the ranking of the four top poets; and on art and music.

The last of the obiter dicta is Horace Traubel's three volume to which we have already referred.[40] It is well known that Traubel was a Whitman worshipper and attended the poet faithfully during the last years at Camden. Traubel's compilation is a meticulous recording of his daily conversations with Whitman from March, 1888, to January, 1889. It is difficult to know how much significance to attribute to this work, as it is known that the poet's mind wandered during these last years. Gay Wilson Allen, when discussing Whitman biography, passed over Traubel rather hurriedly, with only the following comment:

> Only limitless veneration and uncritical judgment could have enabled anyone to accumulate such a mass of commonplace manuscript though he did preserve valuable letters.[41]

Though the work is discounted in importance because of

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40 See pp. 26, 37.

41 Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, p. 72.

Traubel's idolatry and the poet's forgetfulness, it is valuable, as Allen suggested, for the preservation of valuable letters. In addition, it is valuable for its recording of Whitman's later opinions on books and authors. For example, Traubel recorded over two hundred of Whitman's references to Emerson, which show the poet's steady loyalty to his one time "Master", and also the reservations in his estimation of Emerson as an artist. In general, however, Whitman's opinions of Emerson remained constant.

And now, having considered these media of criticism; the journalistic book reviews, the longer citations, and the obiter dicta; let us turn to a discussion of the ideas expressed through these agencies.

Oftener and more forcefully, Whitman spoke of the need for a native American literature. However, according to Mark Van Doren, his impatience with any literature which was not American quite disappeared in his old age.[42] He came to accept the literature of the past as an inspiration, if not as a model, an attitude illustrated in the following passage from Specimen Days:

> Will the day ever come--no matter how long defer'd--when these models and lay-figures from the British Islands--and even the precious traditions of the classics--will be reminiscences, studies only?[43]

On the other hand, twelve years earlier he had written

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42 Dictionary of American Biography, XX, 151.

43 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 151.

rather scathingly in Democratic Vistas:

> The models of our literature as we get it from other lands, ultra-marine, have had their birth in courts, and bask'd and grown in castle sunshine; all smells of princes' favors. I say I have not seen a single writer, artist, lecturer or what not that has confronted the voiceless but ever erect and active, pervading, underlying will and typic aspiration of the land, in a spirit kindred to itself. Do you call these genteel little creatures American poets?[44]

Whitman had expressed the same idea as early as 1847 in "Independent National Literature"[45] published in the North American Review and republished in Good-Bye My Fancy.[46] Like Emerson and Lowell, Whitman boasted of the equality of opportunity in America; his fundamental criticism, like that of Channing being the need of producing a race of superior men. In the 1855 preface he wrote, "All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain" and "An individual is as superb as a nation when he has the qualities which make a superb nation." "The proof of the poet," he continued, "is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he absorbed it."[47]

Whitman had other principles similar to those of his contemporaries. Like Bryant, he trusted the feelings, and like Lowell he indicated the morbidity of the nineteenth

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44 Ibid., II, 398.

45 Gathering of the Forces, II, 237.

46 Complete Poetry and Prose, I, 455.

47 Ibid., II, 369.

century. Like Emerson and Lowell, he believed that literature, especially poetry, should serve a moral purpose. The function of the poet was to be the leader and teacher of mankind. Whitman's ideas regarding literature, however, bear a greater resemblance to those of Emerson than to those of any other contemporary.

Like the sage of Concord, Whitman suggested that the poet is a hinter not a maker. In the 1855 Preface he wrote, "The expression of the American poet is to be transcontinental and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic."[48] Emerson's belief that the poet must express what is in him has been discussed. Whitman indicated a similar belief when he wrote in "Christmas Graphic" in 1874:

> Poems of the first class (of depth as distinguished from those of the surface) are strictly to be tallied with the poets themselves, and tried by them and their lives.[49]

Likewise the belief that poetry is for all ages and for all people was expressed by Whitman as well as by Emerson. In the 1855 Preface he wrote, "The American poets are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races."[50] He suggested, in the same work, that everyone is in a sense a poet, or equal to the poet:

The messages of great poets to each man and woman

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48 Ibid., p. 270.

49 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, II, 56.

50 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 270.

> are, Come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us. We are no better than you, what we inclose, you inclose, what we enjoy, you may enjoy.[51]

The poet, he thought, seemed to say to the rest of the world, "Come, God and I are now here. What will you have of us?"[52]

To Whitman, as to Lowell and Emerson, the law of expression must be organic. Style alone meant nothing. He once remarked to Horace Traubel:

> What's the use of wax flowers when you can go out for yourself and pick the real flowers? That's what I think when people talk to me of 'style', as if style alone and of itself was anything.[53]

Style, he believed, was not the dress of thought but its expression, was not a shaping from without but a shaping from within, was not mechanical but organic.[54] The poetic principle, the essence of beauty, consisted not in rhyme or uniformity or ornament, but as, as has been previously been quoted, came from "beautiful blood and a beautiful brain." To be organic was to Whitman to be natural. True poems, he believed, happened like events in nature, developed like growing plants. His chief difference from his contemporaries was that he included everything in the realm of poetry. "The United States themselves," he said, "are essentially the greatest poems."[55] He anticipated Carl Sand-

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51 Ibid., p. 274.

52 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, II, 93.

53 Traubel, I; 66.

54 Foerster, op. cit., p. 171.

55 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 969.

burg when he brought America at work into poetry. One might say that he brought the poet down from the mountain too. Everything about the United States was subject matter for poetry and demanded a new form for expression. "The greatest poem forms the consistence of what is to be from what has been and is."[56] It is this looking to the future that sets him apart from his contemporaries. A critic, he believed, must be a revolutionary and a prophet.[57] The function of a poet is the forecast and furtherance of the higher state of human culture and poetic expression that we are approaching in addition to the expression and registration of himself, his time, and his land.[58] In Whitman, the test of a poem was "How far can it elevate, enlarge, purify, deepen and make happy the attributes of the body and soul."[59] He must celebrate man, represented by Walt Whitman himself, both body and soul, as expressed in "Song of Myself."

> I celebrate myself and sing myself--
> (and)
> And I say that the soul is not greater
> than the body
> And I say that the body is not greater
> than the soul.[60]

Whitman's attitude toward books has already been

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56 Ibid., p. 273.

57 Foerster, op. cit., p. 170.

58 Ibid., p. 180.

59 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, Vol II, p. 95.

60 Complete Poetry and Prose, I, 62.

discussed.[61] Of his own criticism, he deprecatingly commented that he "gossiped about it all," or "put down some melang'd cogitations." In a conversation with Horace Traubel on April 25, 1888, he confessed:

> Every time I criticize a man or a book I feel as if I had done something wrong. The criticism may be justified in letter and spirit--yet I feel guilty--feel like a man ought to go to jail.[62]

As early as 1858 he satirized, in the Brooklyn Daily Times, such melodramatic tales as "Blood Burglar of Babylon."[63] This bit of good-humored satire on the stories published by his New York contemporaries showed how complete was his reaction from the mood which he himself had perpetrated in his temperance novel, Franklin Evans, sixteen years before.

Whitman, as has already been suggested, appreciated the arts in general, and particularly drama and music, but he gave to literature the place of the greatest arts.[64] In Democratic Vistas he declared that for current purposes, literature was not only more eligible than all other arts put together, but was the only general means of morally influencing the world.[65]

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61 See p. 42.

62 Traubel, op. cit., I, 66.

63 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, II, 119.

64 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 249-250.

65 Ibid., p. 211.

In summary, then, we can say with Henry S. Canby that Whitman's idea of the duty of the poet was to give voice and leadership to the dream of a fully developed man in a continent, mastered for the benefit of the whole.[66] A poet, as in Emerson's estimation, must be a man speaking to men. Whitman demanded of a poet, first of all, simplicity, which he defined as definiteness. A second request of the artist was that he must deal with existing things. In addition to these, he must also possess the will to deal with facts, to acknowledge things as they are, and he must have a passionate love for the masses. In both poetry and prose, Whitman considered style the expression of thought rather than its dress. Five adjectives given by Smith sum up Whitman's artistic creed; the artist must have absorbed himself in the average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, and the popular.[67] With his literary principles and ideas in mind, let us next turn to an examination of his principal contribution to literary criticism.

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66 Spiller et al, Literary History of the United States, I, 494.

67 Smith, op. cit., p. 149.

CHAPTER V

WHITMAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO LITERARY CRITICISM

It is the purpose of the present chapter to point out the application of Whitman's significant ideas in his contributions to literary criticism. Naturally, even in a detailed survey of this nature, all of Whitman's critical observations cannot be discussed or even listed, for they are far too many, varied, and, at times, too repetitious, casual or garrulous. Instead, therefore, to clarify my exposition, I shall take up his principal contributions according to the types of writers criticized. These include classical writers, the Bible, Dante, Continental Writers, Scandinavian Writers, English Writers with particular attention to Shakespeare and Burns, and nineteenth century writers, both English and American.

Though Whitman perhaps never fully mastered classical literature, he knew more than a little about it. As a youth he read, in translation, much of the literature of ancient Greece. In "A Backward Glance O'er Travelled Roads"[1] he mentioned reading translations of Homer, Aeschylus, and Sophocles while on jaunts into the country. But Whitman did not exhaust his interest in these authors in his youth. Horace Traubel wrote that the poet was

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1 Complete Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, I, 477.

"very familiar with the formal classics in a general way."[2] In one day's conversation Whitman mentioned Aristophanes, Plato, Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and the Bhagavad gita; and he advised Traubel to read "in Buddhist and Confucian books," saying: "Tackle them any how, they will reward you."[3]

Homer was Whitman's favorite among the Greeks. In his estimation, Homer, like Shakespeare, did his work "divinely". He sang of great men and their wars. The Iliad and the Odyssey seemed excellent to Whitman in that they eulogized courage and dependence upon self; but they did not fit into his Utopian picture of an ideal democracy.[4] After all, Homer had written of god-like kings in his epic poetry; and grand as the poetry might be, god-like kings were not acceptable in democratic America. This was the fault Whitman found with almost all works of literature and their authors. He found them praiseworthy on the one hand, but he disparaged them on the other.

Whitman exhibited less enthusiasm for Roman writers than for Greek. In 1859 he commented on the Riley translation of Terence's comedies in the Brooklyn Daily Times.[5]

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2 Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, II, 332.

3 Ibid.

4 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 412.

5 Emory Holloway and Vermolian Schwartz, editors, I Sit and Look Out, pp. 68-69.

The volume is recommended to the public but there is no mention of the reviewer's opinion of the quality of the plays. We know that "A very choice little Epictetus" was among the books, twine, jars of cologne water, and yellow chrysanthemums Whitman later in life described as being in his study.[6] He found the reading of Epictetus as pleasurable at seventy as he had at sixteen: "He belongs with the best--the best of great teachers--is a universe in himself. He sets me free in a flood of life, of vista."[7] Though Whitman made incidental mention of such writers as Juvenal and Lucretius, he found no Homer or Aeschylus among the Romans. Whitman's admiration for the classics and classical qualities indicates that he was not ready to throw out the traditional entirely, though he may have at times suggested it. He was not so far removed from the position of other critics as is usually supposed.

Whitman was highly aware of the Bible as literature. In November Boughs he devoted an entire essay to the subject of the Bible as poetry.[8] In comparison with the great epics of the world, he found the "Spinal supports" of the Bible simple and meagre.[9] Yet he concluded that no poet

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6 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 533.

7 Traubel, op. cit., II, 71.

8 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 396.

9 Ibid., p. 396.

will ever eclipse the power of the Bible. He felt that even in a time when the Bible would have no religious significance, it would still be just as much read for its beautiful poetry.[10] Whitman's attention was by no means limited to the Christian or Hebrew religions, although there are about one hundred and sixty Biblical references in his own works.[11] Anyone who has read in Leaves of Grass or Democratic Vistas of Whitman's demand for a literature to supersede all literature of the past is surprised to find so much attention given to ancient works. Yet pleas can be found in Whitman's writings for the appreciation of the tiny ships we call Old and New Testament, Homer, Aeschylus, Plato, Juvenal, etc. "Precious minims!"[12] Whether treating of a single work or of many, Whitman was able to approve on one basis and condemn on another.

Whitman expressed his admiration for Dante and his work when he spoke of the Italian poet as "stalking with a lion form, nothing but fibre, not a grain of superfluous flesh."[13] Although Whitman's own poetry is often tangled, he admired and respected simplicity in the writing of others.

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10 Ibid., p. 398.

11 Maurice O. Johnson, "Walt Whitman as a Critic of Literature," University of Nebraska Studies, XVI, (1938), 1-73.

12 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 943.

13 Ibid.

According to Johnson,[14] Whitman read Dante's Inferno in the spring of 1859, and his first impression was that the work was wonderfully free from unnecessary elaboration. In the virtue of economy of words, Whitman thought it possible that Dante might never be equaled. By the time he wrote his essay on "British Literature" he was willing to accept for America certain ancient works which he thought adjusted themselves to the New World by their compliance with some of the democratic requirements. Almost no British work was placed in this category. He mentioned the Bible, Homer's work, The Cid, and Cervante's Don Quixote as being among those acceptable.[15] Here again, though he emphasized democratic thought, Whitman also gave attention to style. The influence of the Bible is shown in the use of parallelism in his own work. He was not blind to the various techniques of style.

Whitman's comments on Continental literature were directed naturally to German and French writers and their works. His interest in German literature and his particular attention to Goethe's autobiography have already been mentioned.[16] Ten years after his review of Goethe's book in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle he wrote down some of his

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14 Johnson, op. cit., p. 15.

15 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 334.

16 See p. 45.

reflections on Goethe in his notebook. There he gives Carlyle credit for most of his critical impressions of the German poet. He told Horace Traubel years later, that Goethe's purpose in writing seemed to him to be that of centering all life in himself, of making the universal personified in a single life. To Traubel he admitted, "I have not read Faust, looked into it--not with care, not studiously, yet intelligently, in my own way. Goethe was for beauty, erudition, knowledge--first of all for culture."[17] Goethe seemed to him a profound reviewer of experience, but not entirely suited to American needs. Of Goethean philosophy Whitman said in "Good-Bye My Fancy":

> The Goethean theory and lesson (if I may briefly state it so) of the exclusive sufficiency, literary equipment to the character, irrespective of any strong claims of the political ties of the nation, state, or city, could have answered under the conventionality and pettiness of Weimar, or the German or even the Europe, of those times; but it will not do for America today at all.[18]

Whitman made page after page of notes on the German meta-physicians, in preparation for speeches he never gave. He had evidently weighed the German philosophy carefully in his mind. He exalted Hegel to the place of "Humanity's chief teacher and the chiefest teacher of my mind and soul."[19] It is interesting to note, too, that the two line

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17 Traubel, op. cit., III, 154.

18 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 501.

19 Complete Writings of Walt Whitman, IX, 83.

poem, "Roaming in Thought", is subtitled "After Reading Hegel."

> Roaming in thought over the Universe
> I saw little that is good
> Steadily hastening toward immortality
> And the vast all that is called
> Evil I saw hastening to merge
> itself and become lost and dead.[20]

To Whitman, Kant's writings seemed in their final analysis, to be an attempt of undescribable value, "but which after all is said, paradoxically 'decides little or nothing'."[21] Fichte's philosophy, growing from Kant's, took subjectiveness as its all-explaining principle, and Schelling's philosophy differed from Fichte's only in that it was more emphatically objective. Schlegel, in Whitman's opinion, was a man of great prejudices who undemocratically set off great masters from the crowds of common persons. Richter was characterized as "a thoroughly irregular genius" whom Whitman made responsible for introducing the soft and sentimental tales which were popular in England and America when his own Leaves of Grass was shouting to be heard. Shortly after Heine's death in 1856, Whitman said of his poems that they were "fanciful and vivacious, rather ironical and melancholy with a dash of poetical craziness." More than three decades later, he said to Traubel, "Heine: O, how great! The more you stop to look, to examine, the

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20 Complete Poetry and Prose, I, 258.

21 Complete Writings, IX, 176.

deeper seem the roots, the broader and higher the umbrage."[22]

Thus it seems certain that Whitman's interest in German literature and writers was not superficial. He wanted to get at the essential meaning of German thought and to accept or reject what he found there as being suitable or unsuitable for America.

Regarding Whitman's knowledge of French literature and writers, Norman Foerster believes that it was mostly derived from hearsay, and that Whitman had nothing more profound to say about modern French literature than that it had the virtue of not being Puritanical.[23] There is evidence that Whitman read with some care the works of Rousseau, George Sand, and Victor Hugo. If he knew of French writing only through hearsay, he could not have spoken so convincingly as Traubel recorded:

> The French have a wonderful knack in certain directions--for extreme finesse, often--why it is so good sometimes it seems almost natural..... The easy touch of French writers does not necessarily come from frivolity, insincerity: Arnold was wrong if he ever thought that. There are incomparable things in Hugo--in some of the other French literature: immense, immortal things: things that belong to every day of all time.[24]

Though Whitman's knowledge of the plays of Racine and Corneille, and even of the works of Voltaire, seemed scant,

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22 Traubel, op. cit., I, 461.

23 Norman Foerster, American Criticism, p. 163.

24 Traubel, op. cit., I, 465.

he did comment to Traubel on Voltaire, "Now there was a great man, too, an emancipator--a shining spiritual light; a miraculous man whose ridicule did more for justice than the battles of armies."[25]

Emory Holloway preserved a part of Whitman's review of the poet Lamartine's History of the Girondists, and of Michelet's History of France, but it is more significant that a number of his book reviews for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle were based upon the works of Alexander Dumas. In 1846 he wrote concerning the Count of Monte Cristo, which he admitted not having read. He spoke of the earlier works of Dumas with which he was more familiar, as having "pleasant gracefulness and vivacity."[26] A year later reviews of three novels by Dumas appeared; Diana of Mendor, Sylvandire, and Memoirs of a Physician. Whitman wrote of them as having "superior interest," and of the Memoirs of a Physician he added that it was "a wild, hurrying, exciting affair full of its author's characteristics."[27] More to Whitman's liking were the novels of George Sand. In his review of Journeyman Joiner, he spoke of her talent with praise, saying that she was "one of a class much needed in the world--needed lest

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25 Traubel, op. cit., II, 16.

26 The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, I, 131.

27 Ibid., p. 132.

the world stagnate in wrongs merely from precedent."[28] In "Good Bye My Nancy" he spoke of having a copy of Sand's Consuelo near him in his study.[29] Esther Shephard in her book, Walt Whitman's Pose, accused Whitman of trying to live the life of the carpenter depicted in Sand's Countess of Rudolstadt. It seems that there is no sound basis for this accusation,[30] though Whitman did regard highly Sand's works. Whitman commented, too, on the works of Victor Hugo. In "Poetry Today in America" he spoke of Hugo as being quite the reverse of personally friendly or admirant toward America.[31] In "Christmas Graphic" in 1874 he took Hugo to task for his lack of restraint in the words: "Victor Hugo, for instance, runs off into the craziest, and sometimes (in his novels) the most ridiculous and flatulent, literary botches and excesses, and by almost entire want of prudence allows them to stand."[32] Whitman felt that the fine passion of Hugo's poetry saved it from the plight of the novels. Here again he preferred George Sand, who, unlike Hugo, did not seek after excesses; her simple yet profound stories were a refreshing, healthy stimulus to him.

Of Scandinavian writers Whitman gave the greatest

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28 Ibid., p. 135

29 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 298.

30 Gay Wilson Allen, Walt Whitman Handbook, pp. 74-76.

31 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 298.

32 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, II, 53.

praise to Fredrika Bremer. A review of her works in 1846 declared that her novels should be made the first household companion of children next to the New Testament. "We know nothing more likely", he wrote, "to melt and refine human character, particularly the young character."[33] He went on to say that every youth of either sex would be irresistibly impelled to draw some moral, and make some profitable application to his or her own case. He spoke of Miss Bremer's novels as both profitable and charming, especially when contrasted with the "affected sentimentality of Bulwer and the verbose weakness of James (G.P.R.)."[34] Maurice Johnson felt that Whitman gave this high praise "in a lamentable moment"[35] and that he consistently and almost pitifully stumbled into his judgments on Scandinavian writers. For example, he referred to Swendenborg as an innovator who escaped the usual fate of innovators.[36] He went on praising the mediocre and denying praise to the excellent. He had little good to say of Ibsen, and after reading Pillars of Society, he remarked that it was "too prettily done."[37] He later offered the book to Traubel,

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33 Ibid., I, 128.

34 The Gathering of the Forces, II, 268.

35 Johnson, op. cit., p. 22.

36 Ibid.

37 Traubel, op. cit., p. 371.

telling him to keep it for good if he could make any good out of it. In the conversation which followed, he agreed with Traubel that Ibsen had a place, "but", he asked, "where is it?"[38] In his failure to recognize the good in Scandinavian literature, we have one of Whitman's weakest judgments. We know that he was likely to be inconsistent, but his judgment here is generally considered inexcusable.

Naturally Whitman gave more attention to English writers than to any others, Shakespeare and Burns deserving particular attention. His references to Shakespeare are second in number only to those from the Bible, his quotations being culled from at least twenty-three of the plays. In all, about 155 quotations are readily identifiable.[39] He praised Shakespeare almost unreservedly, yet his hopeful attempt to make him fit into American democratic molds proved unsuccessful. Though he considered Shakespeare the greatest of English writers, Whitman admitted that the English poet was feudal and a writer for aristocrats. "It took me a long time," Whitman said to Horace Traubel, "to say no to Shakespeare--the rest of the problem is still unsolved--I have no answer to the questions."[40]

Whitman's concern with Shakespearean matters is

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38 Ibid., p. 483.

39 R. C. Harrison, "Walt Whitman and Shakespeare", P.M.L.A., XLIV, (Dec. 1929), p. 1213.

40 Traubel, op. cit., I, 234 and II, 170.

indicated by the titles of some of his essays and sketches. "A Thought on Shakespeare", "What Lurks behind Shakespeare's Historical Plays", "Poetry Today in America--Shakespeare--the Future", and "Shakespeare for America". In these works Whitman displayed close acquaintance with Shakespeare's writings. Even as a young man, he frequented New York theatres seeing "quite all Shakespeare's acting dramas,"[41] always reading them carefully one or two days beforehand in order to make the acting more understandable. He was impressed with the excellence of the productions and remembered with pleasure having seen Booth as Richard III, Lear and Iago; Tom Hamblin in Macbeth; Mrs. Austin as Ariel, with Peter Richings acting the part of Caliban.[42] In his essay, "The Old Bowery", Whitman dwelt at length upon New York plays and acting of his time,[43] and exhibited his appreciation of the action of Shakespearean drama when he wrote:

> Though fifty years have pass'd since then, I can hear the clank and feel the perfect following hush of perhaps three thousand people waiting.... And so throughout the entire play, all parts, voice, atmosphere, magnetism, from
> "Now is the winter of our discontent", to the closing death fight with Richmond, were of the finest and grandest - - - - Especially was the dream scene very impressive. A shudder went through every nervous system in the audience; it certainly did through mine.[44]

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41 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 15.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p. 439.

44 Ibid., p. 443.

Whitman's familiarity with the plays is proved by his statement that he declaimed "Homer or Shakespeare to the surf and sea-gulls by the hour."[45] His interest in Shakespeare was shown, too, by the many newspaper articles that he saved and by the numerous references to Shakespeare in his notes.[46] He also exhibited interest in Shakespearean criticism, considering Edward Dowden "one of the best of the late commentators."[47] He read with care the works of William D. O'Connor, himself a noted scholar, on whom Whitman shows heavy dependence in such essays as "What Lurks behind Shakespeare's Historical Plays."[48] There is evidence, too, that Whitman was interested in the Baconian theory. Norman Foerster said that Whitman lost no time in giving his attention to the fruitless controversy. In his poem, "Shakespeare-Bacon Cipher", he spoke of a "mystic cipher" which "waits unfolded in every object, mountain, tree, and stars--in every birth and life."[49] He believed in part at least, that either Bacon or Raleigh had some part in the construction of Shakespeare's plays. When Traubel asked him if he accepted the whole Bacon proposition, Whitman replied that

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45 Ibid., p. 10.

46 Johnson, op. cit., p. 36.

47 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 449.

48 Johnson, op. cit., p. 37.

49 Complete Poetry and Prose, I, p. 458.

he did not accept it entirely, but that he was "anti-Shakespeare" and could draw no final conclusions.[50] In a later conversation with Traubel he summed up his thoughts on the problem thus:

> I do not know that I really care who made the plays--who wrote them. No--I do not think it is a supreme human question, though it is without doubt a great literary question. I am not as much interested in the question direct as in what it drags along with it--the great store of curious information that turns up--information forgotten or near lost. But after all, Shakespeare was a great man; much was summed up in him.[51]

Norman Foerster mentioned Whitman's particular interest in Shakespeare's historical plays, because of their "pageantry, color, vivid action, and splendid personalities."[52] We do know that the entire essay, "What Lurks behind Shakespeare's Historical Plays?," is devoted to these dramas. He considered them in some respects, greater than any other works of literature, saying of them:

> But coming at once to the point, the English historical plays are to me not only the most eminent as dramatic performances (my maturest judgment confirming the impression of my early years, that the distinctiveness and glory of the Poet reside not in his vaunted dramas of the passions but those founded on the contests of English dynasties, and the French wars).[53]

He went on to say that the plays were conceived out of the

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50 Traubel, op. cit., I, 29.

51 Ibid., p. 136.

52 Foerster, op. cit., p. 198.

53 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 405.

fullest heat and pulse of European feudalism, personifying in unparalleled ways the medieval aristocracy."[54]

Whitman could not entirely approve of Shakespeare's tragedies, because of their pessimism, complaining to Traubel that Shakespeare was gloomy and looked upon mankind with despair.[55] Yet he admitted the magnitude of such characters as Othello, Hamlet and Lear. He considered these characters as real as any English or European lords and more real to us than the man Shakespeare himself.[56]

Regarding Shakespeare's comedies, Whitman seemed to maintain an attitude that they were excellent in their own way, though altogether non-acceptable to America and Democracy."[57] Surprisingly, Whitman thought some of Shakespeare's best humor was in the tragedies. He told Traubel that the humor in the comedies was often brutal and course, but in the tragedies there was "a humor more remote, subtle, illusive."[58]

Whitman particularly liked the movement of the plays; the sonnets he considered a direct contrast. In a conversation with Horace Traubel in 1888, he asked:

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54 Ibid.

55 Traubel, op. cit., II, 252.

56 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 491.

57 Ibid., p. 408.

58 Traubel, op. cit., II, 252.

> Has the mystery of the difference suggested itself to you? Try to think of their movement; their intensity of life, action; everything hell-bent to get along; on; on; energy--the splendid play of force; across fields, mire, creeks; never mind who is splashed--spare nothing; this thing must be done, said; let it be done, said; no faltering.[59]

He thought the sonnets "perfect of their kind--exquisite, sweet; lush, eleganted; refined" but he saw no vigor in them.[60] They were complete in themselves, but Whitman did not approve of their "eleganted" style. He said that their elaboration too often obscured the ideas behind them.[61]

In Democratic Vistas, Whitman wrote that the great poems of Shakespeare and his kind were "poisonous to the idea of the pride and dignity of the common people, the life blood of democracy."[62] There was much in Shakespeare which he found offensive. In "British Literature" he spoke of Shakespeare as being "incarcerated, uncompromising feudalism,"[63] itself; yet he was full conscious of the master's dazzling genius. Though Whitman gave Shakespeare the place of the greatest of English writers, he gave him no secure position in the future of democratic America.

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59 Ibid., III, 83.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., I, 248.

62 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 228.

63 Ibid., p. 334.

He could not reconcile himself to one aspect of Shakespeare's work; that he was a writer for aristocrats and offensively feudal. Despite this fact, however, his criticism of Shakespeare is considered one of Whitman's most mature and consistent judgments.

Whitman's criticism of Burns, though limited to a single essay,[64] is often considered among his best. With Dickens, Burns is acceptable to America because of his democratic attitude. Whitman first suggested the nature of the era in which Burns lived. Then he sketched the poet, in his country place, against this background.[65] He approved of Burns' choice of subject matter for it sprang naturally from the common life the poet led. Burns, the ploughman, proved to Whitman that laboring classes may produce poets as easily as the nobility.[66] Since Burns lacked a unifying purpose or philosophy, Whitman decided that his celebration of "Work-a day agricultural labor and life"[67] was purpose enough. He did not mean, however, that there was no further significance in Burn's work; "Burns will do things for you no one else can do."[68] He described Burns as a man who was all

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64 "Robert Burns as Poet and Person", Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 409-415.

65 Johnson, op. cit., p. 60.

66 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 411.

67 Ibid., p. 413.

68 Traubel, op. cit., II, 247.

heart and Scotch, "which means human", from top to toe.[69] And again Whitman said of Burns, "He is as dear to me as my old clothing."[70]

Whitman's praise of Burns was not without reservation, however. Since Burns lacked the grand and heroic themes of Homer and Shakespeare, he must not be compared to them.[71] His works were merely simple melodies. Though he praised Burns almost above all others as a poet of the people, Whitman recognized that, as an artist, Burns should not even be compared to Shakespeare and Tennyson. The use of a double standard here, critics agree, made Whitman's judgment a wise one.

Whitman mentioned many English writers, but generally at less length than the ones we have listed. On Scott, his essay, "The Anti-Democratic Bearing of Scott's Novels,"[72] expresses his point of view. He found artistic perfection and absorbing interest in the novels, but he could find no good in the sympathetic portrayal of monarchs who were hostile to democracy. Yet he could not be entirely harsh with a writer who had given him so much boyhood pleasure. He felt that every American owed a debt to

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69 Ibid., p. 95.

70 Ibid., p. 436.

71 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 413.

72 Gathering of the Forces, II, 264.

the cheery romancer.[73] Whitman apparently cared little for Milton, pointing out that the poet himself was too conscious of the gigantic proportions of his work.[74] Yet in a review of Milton's poems, he agreed that they "must remain a choice work of the age."[75] His negative judgment on Milton remained constant though he always questioned himself about the English poet. Dr. Samuel Johnson, Whitman criticized for his didactic and sermonizing qualities, but he did allow him a certain amount of credit for his dictionary. His opinion of Johnson did not change, for he said to Horace Traubel, "I don't admire the old man's ponderous arrogance."[76] For Whitman, Johnson was too much at enmity with the humanitarian democracy which he loved. Chaucer, Whitman rated among the thirteen assured writers and his poems among the most distinctive ever written,[77] yet he told Traubel that he did not think we would ever go back to Chaucer.[78] Spenser, who was also one of the thirteen, Whitman spoke of as a highly contemplative person, a lover of princely themes, "haunted by a morbid refinement of beauty--beauty three times washed

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73 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 297.

74 Gathering of the Forces, II, 288.

75 Ibid.

76 Traubel, op. cit., I, 45.

77 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 407.

78 Traubel, op. cit., II, 104.

and strained."[79] Though Whitman was opposed to anything anti-democratic, he still agreed generally with other critics on the great writers and recognized the qualities of great literature.

Among the more recent English writers, Whitman mentioned particularly Dickens, Carlyle, Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold. He consistently expressed a liking for Dickens, saying to Traubel in 1888, "I acknowledge him without question; he will live."[80] In 1842, when Dickens was being feted in New York, Whitman gave him his rare praise of a truly "democratic author."[81] Such an author Whitman defined as one who tends to destroy the "old landmarks which pride and fashion have set up, making impossible distinction between the brethren of the Great Family."[82] He liked Dickens' manner of placing wicked characters beside good ones. The concern with low life in Dickens' work seemed to Whitman a wholesome one, because Dickens did not malign the common man to subordinate him to nobility. His mention of specific Dickens' character showed his acquaintance with Nicholas Nickleby, Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, The Old Curiosity Shop, and Barnaby Rudge, in addition to the nov-

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79 Complete Writings, IX, 79.

80 Traubel, op. cit., p. 553.

81 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 67.

82 Ibid., p. 70.

els he reviewed in his newspaper column.[83] In each, democratic thought was the chief virtue. Dickens was the one novelist Whitman would give the title of "democratic writer."

Whitman's interest in Carlyle was first noticeable with his review of Heroes and Hero Worship in 1846. At first he termed the style of writing "rapt" and "weird"; yet under the style he saw, though almost hidden, "many noble thoughts."[84] He praised Carlyle's democratic thought in the book "in spite of his style,"[85] and the verdict on Sartor Resartus did not differ. Whitman reviewed Carlyle's The French Revolution only a month after the review of Heroes and Hero Worship. In this case Carlyle's democratic thought should have aroused some enthusiasm in Whitman; yet he dismissed it rather briefly as being too broad a subject and provoking too many inferences to be treated in so short a notice.[86] With his reading of Past, Present, and Chartism, in two parts, Whitman began to find Carlyle's style no longer an objection. After commenting on the puzzling chapter heads in the book, he concluded

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83 Johnson, op. cit., p. 56.

84 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 129.

85 Gathering of the Forces, II, 290-291.

86 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 130.

that "there lies rich ore under that vague surface."[87] By the time he reviewed the History of Frederick II of Prussia, two years after his first review of Carlyle's work, Whitman no longer found any difficulty in the style. As late as 1888, he said to Horace Traubel, "It seems to me Carlyle's style is the expression of the man--natural, strong, right for him. I know what is being everywhere said about his style but I do not see what the objectors want."[88] This seemed only pretense as did his complaint, also directed to Traubel, that "Frederick is much too big a thing for me to tackle at this late day.... I do not believe the book would interest me a great deal anyhow."[89] Though in his earliest review of Carlyle's work he had called the Scot a democratic writer, Whitman now found in Carlyle "shortcomings, even positive blur-spots, from an American point of view."[89] He considered Carlyle's chief talent, beyond literary ability, his questioning into the self-complacency of the time, yet he suspected that there were some feudal, or at least auto-democratic, tendencies in Carlyle himself.[90] Whitman's Democratic Vistas, with its insistence upon faith over despair, was written largely as an

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87 Ibid.

88 Traubel, op. cit., II, 106.

89 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 168.

90 Ibid., p. 177; and Traubel, op. cit., I, 92.

answer to Carlyle's "Shooting Niagara," a harsh criticism of the democratic system. Here, for Whitman, was another example of an undemocratic writer.

Tennyson, Whitman frequently named as Shakespeare's successor. He believed that he understood Tennyson, and particularly appreciated the musical charm in the English poet's choice of words. In his essay "A Word about Tennyson," he mentioned lingering over "The Lotus Eaters," "The Northern Farmer," and "Lucretius." He mentioned the musical quality of "The Lady of Shalott" and "The Deserted House,"[91] and said he would not like to give up his pleasure in minor poems like "Break, Break," or "Flower in the Crannied Wall."[92] Whitman did not praise Tennyson, however, without reservations. The musical charm and easy versification were not enough. He refused Tennyson recognition as a proper singer for American ears, yet he could not bring himself to call the author of the "Idylls" an enemy of America. Whitman considered himself as a proper judge of Tennyson's place in America and found to his liking that Tennyson was a rugged and healthy force because his "moral line", though local and conventional, was vital and genuine.[93] But moral power and charm of words could not make Tennyson suited to

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91 Ibid., p. 419.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., p. 418.

democracy. Whitman spoke admiringly of Tennyson's versification, but with disgust, even bitterness, of his lack of democratic thought.[94]

Whitman's best known statement regarding Matthew Arnold was that Arnold made him weary.[95] In his later years he spoke to Traubel several times about the Master of Rugby, once declaring, "Arnold always gives you the notion that he hates to touch the dirt--the dirt is so dirty! But everything comes out of the people as you find them and leave them."[96] Later he added, "I can never realize Arnold--like him; we are constitutionally antipathetic; Arnold is porcelain, chinaware hangings."[97] Still later Whitman summed up his criticism of Arnold in these words:

> My worst criticism would be that Arnold brings coal to Newcastle, that he brings to the world what the world already has a surfeit of: is rich, hefted, lousy, reeking, with delicacy, refinement, elegance, prettiness, propriety, criticism analysis: all of them things which threaten to overwhelm us.

But he added, "We must be in no haste to dismiss Arnold."[98] His final and kindest criticism was that Arnold "was weak on the democratic side."[99] To mention briefly Whitman's

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94 Ibid., p. 231.

95 John Howard Birss, "Whitman on Arnold," Modern Language Notes, XLVII (May 1932), 317.

96 Traubel, op. cit., I, 232.

97 Ibid., II, 391.

98 Ibid., III, 400.

99 Johnson, op. cit., p. 28.

criticism of a few more of the English poets, Wordsworth possessed a most un-American aloofness but Coleridge stood "above all poets; he was passionate without being morbid--he was like Adam in Paradise, and almost as free from artificiality.[100] Though Byron was too lurid to suit Whitman, he "had enough fire to burn forever."[101] Shelley was "all ethereal--always living in the presence of a great ideal, as I do not."[102] Keats, who had too much polish, became acceptable as a stylist, but unacceptable in his use of medieval themes. Here, again, Whitman could accept on the one hand and reject on the other.

Among nineteenth century American writers, Whitman gave particular attention to Emerson, Longfellow, Bryant, and Whittier. In the essay, "My Tribute to Four Poets," written in 1881, he ranked them in that order, though he later gave Bryant first place.[103] In 1877, Whitman quoted from one of Emerson's speeches in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle,[104] and he commented on the poem, "Brahma," in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle as early as 1857.[105] Later, of course,

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100 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, II, 392.

101 Traubel, op. cit., I, 41.

102 Ibid.

103 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 179-180.

104 Gathering of the Forces, II, 270.

105 I Sit and Look Out, p. 64.

he met Emerson in person and, though he at times denied it, was vitally influenced by the older poet. He usually had the highest praise for Emerson, though like Melville, considering him "Somewhat thin on the physiological side."[106] Whitman consistently emphasized that he admired Emerson more as a person than a writer. "The wonderful heart and soul of the man," he said to Traubel, "goes far towards justifying this literary business--literature is only valuable in the measure of the passion--the blood and the muscle--with which it is invested--which lies concealed and active in it."[107]

In evaluating Emerson's literary worth, Whitman told Traubel that Emerson "had that last spark, that sharp flash of power, that something or other more which gives life to all great literature."[108] Yet he considered Emerson's work too perfect and too concentrated.[109] To him Emerson was greater as a critic or "diagnoser" than as a poet or artist. Emerson, Whitman thought, was a great critic, because he did not give way to passion, did not take any one side but was aware of all sides of any issue.[110] Yet Emerson was

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106 Traubel, op. cit., I, 46.

107 Ibid., p. 466.

108 Ibid., p. 71.

109 Complete Writings, V, 8.

110 Ibid., p. 266.

not vigorous enough or close enough to the people for Whitman.

Though his criticism of Emerson may seem contradictory, Whitman explained the change of attitude as being common to everyone who read Emerson's writings with reverence and then passed through "this stage of exercise."[111] By Emerson's grave, Whitman remembered him as a "just man poised on himself, all-loving, all inclosing, and sane and clear as the sun."[112] When Traubel asked him what his last words on Emerson would be, Whitman replied, "loyal, loyal, always loyal."[113]

Whitman spoke of Longfellow as "essentially the scholar translator, borrower - adapter and adopter."[114] He accused Longfellow of having borrowed many of the elements in Hiawatha, and asked, "But did an Indian ever talk so? Was it not the man in the library who was doing the talking?"[115] Place beside this mature judgment Whitman's review of Longfellow's Poems for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in 1847, where he argued for Longfellow's being placed beside Bryant and Wordsworth in rank; a combination of

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111 Ibid., p. 290.

112 Ibid., p. 194.

113 Traubel, op. cit., I, 69.

114 Traubel, op. cit., III, 549.

115 Ibid.

names which seems rather strange today.[116] He spoke of the poet as "gifted by God" with talent to express beautiful thoughts in a beautiful manner."[117] In his review of Evangeline a year later, his praise is respectful, sincere, and unreserved:

> And so ends the poem like a solemn psalm, the essence of whole, deep religious music still lives on in your soul, and becomes a part of you. You have soon turned over its few pages, scanned every line, you reached the issue of the story and perhaps idly regret that there is no more of it.[118]

Shortly after his visit to Longfellow in 1881, Whitman wrote his final criticism of the poet. As a judge of poetry and as a translator of classics, he gave Longfellow a high place, yet his poetical gifts were not to be minimized. It must be remembered that Whitman had also said of Evangeline, "But a thing of beauty is a joy forever'; and we may thank Mr. Longfellow for some hours of pure religious, living tranquility of soul."[119] Again Whitman's criticism seemed contradictory, and again he was inconsistent, but he did go so far as to place Longfellow fourth among American poets.[120]

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116 Johnson, op. cit., p. 64.

117 Gathering of the Forces, II, 297.

118 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 134.

119 Ibid.

120 Traubel, op. cit., II, 372.

In an editorial for the Brooklyn Daily Eagle in 1846, Whitman wrote, "We have called Bryant one of the best poets in the world."[121] In 1888, forty-two years later, he ranked Bryant as the best of all American poets.[122] Norman Foerster found it difficult to understand this consistent judgment. Whitman, in contrasting the merits of Bryant and Emerson came to the conclusion that Bryant was more significant for his patriotism, Americanism, love of external nature, the woods, the sea, the skies, the rivers; and this at times, the objective features of it especially, seemed to outweigh Emerson's urgent intelligence and psychic depth.[123] In the essay, "Old Poets", Whitman asked who could expect more magnificent poems than Bryant's "The Battlefield" and "A Forest Hymn." In the same essay, he admitted, "Years ago I thought Emerson pre-eminent (and as to the last polish and intellectual cuteness, maybe I think so still) - but for reasons, I have been gradually tending to give the file-leading place for American native poesy to W.C.B."[124] Recognizing the wide difference between Bryant's work and his own, he once wondered what his own Leaves of Grass would have been like written in "Thana-

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121 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 129.

122 Traubel, op. cit., II, 532.

123 Ibid., I, 56.

124 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 496.

topsian Verse." However, there were reservations in his praise, even of Bryant. That Bryant was too formal for Whitman was shown by the latter's comments to Traubel. On one occasion, for example, he said, "Bryant was built up of the Pope and Dryden school."[125] But Whitman's affection and respect for Bryant remained steadfast, even to the point of excusing the inferior work of the poet's late years.[126]

Whittier, the fourth among the first four poets, was forgiven his morality on the basis of its being "incalculably valuable as a genuine utterance."[127] Whitman saw some excellence in Whittier's verse which he compared to the "measur'd step of Cromwell's old veterans."[128] He rated Whittier as a rather "grand figure, but pretty lean and ascetic - no Greek - not universal and composite enough (don't try - don't wish to be) for ideal Americanism."[129]

In addition to the first four, Whitman commented on many other American writers. His relationship to Poe

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125 Traubel, op. cit., III, 551.

126 Ibid., I, 69.

127 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 296.

128 Ibid., p. 180.

129 Ibid., p. 296.

has already been mentioned.[130] In the essay "Edgar Poe's Significance," he wrote that Poe's verses probably belonged among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling, but with no heat.[131] His final judgment on Poe was spoken to Horace Traubel in 1888, when he said:

> Poe was morbid, shadowy, lugubrious--he seemed to suggest dark nights, horrors, specialists. I could not originally stomach him at all. But today I see more of him than that--much more. If that was all there was to him he would have died long ago.[132]

This is certainly definite proof that Whitman admired the artistic ability of Poe, particularly the musical quality, which Whitman strove to attain in his own verse.

For Whitman, Hawthorne was also too morbid, though he did call him the "Elia of America." He referred to Irving's Knickerbocker History of New York as "some shallow burlesque full of clown's wit", and said to Traubel, "I never enthused over him."[133] But Cooper, Whitman regarded as an important writer, recommending particularly the novels; The Prairie, The Wept of Wish-ton, Wish, and The Pilot. Cooper's works were "all racy, of America, vigorous, belong to the Constitution of things--have es-

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130 See p. 25.

131 Complete Poetry and Prose, II, 156.

132 Traubel, op. cit., I, 138.

133 Ibid., p. 151.

tablished their standard."[134] Whitman had little to say of Holmes except to agree that Holmes' life of Emerson was a better life of Holmes than of Emerson, an opinion that was upheld by many later critics. Whitman expressed a liking for Melville, calling Omoo the "most readable sort of reading,"[135] but he seemed not to be acquainted with Moby Dick.

Whitman's relationship to Lowell has also been discussed. Two years after Leaves of Grass first appeared, Whitman spoke of Lowell as "one of the truest of our poets."[136] But in later years, to Horace Traubel he called Lowell one of his "real enemies." "He not only objected to my book," he said, "but objected to me."[137]

Whitman had little to say about the younger American writers, perhaps because he became less and less able to read them with pleasure. He expressed a liking for Sidney Lanier which indicated his own sensitivity to music. He felt, however, that Lanier's choice of words was often fit rather for sound than for sense, that his ear was oversensitive, that the extreme deference paid to oral nicety reduced the majesty and solid worth of his rhythms.[138]

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134 Ibid., III, 138.

135 Uncollected Poetry and Prose, I, 134.

136 I Sit and Look Out, p. 63.

137 Johnson, op. cit., p. 32.

138 Traubel, op. cit., I, 170.

We could examine Whitman's comments on many more writers, but those I have listed are sufficient to indicate the nature of his criticism. Generally his criticism was expressed in casual comments. Many of his judgments were wise, such as that on Burns. Many, too, were colored by desire for a democratic literature which he recommended so urgently in Democratic Vistas, "Poetry To-day in America", "British Literature", and elsewhere. It is evident that he, at least at times, judged by a double standard of artistic excellence and democratic thought as Maurice Johnson pointed out.[139] It would seem that he placed the major emphasis on democratic thought, yet his own notation "make this more musical" and his constant revising of his own poems indicate the great importance he placed upon literary excellence.

Whitman's reminiscences, given as they were late in life when the poet's memory was failing, should be viewed with some understanding. Some of these inconsistencies we have noticed or hinted at may be due to faulty memory. But in 1888 Whitman was at times (as was perfectly human) likely to allow personal animosity to color his judgments, even though he tried not to do so. Then, too, he would frequently hedge, expressing two inconsistent attitudes.

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139 Johnson, op. cit., Introduction.

Despite failing memory, hesitancy, or occasional peevishness, however, it is remarkable that these later comments were as balanced and detached as they were.

CONCLUSION

While Whitman based his criticism on literary excellence and democratic thought, an adequate appraisal does not consist solely of a discussion of these elements. What Whitman considered the requirements for great literature can be determined only by his criticism. In addition to the above essentials, he required originality, purpose, optimism, universality, concern with nature, and interest in contemporary life. He required that the poet absorb himself in the average, the bodily, the concrete, the popular, and the democratic.[1] Whitman gave to no writer all the required characteristics; he pronounced no one the complete artist. We might infer from this that the poet who was to combine these virtues was Whitman himself. It cannot be doubted that he attempted to be the democratic writer; yet he declared that he wrote "one or two indicative words for the future, leaving the poets to come...to prove and define it."[2]

The final conclusion, then, must be that while Whitman did not gain the critical distinction attained by Poe, Emerson, or Lowell, his position as a prophetic critic cannot be denied. We have seen that, although Whitman over-

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1 Bernard Smith, Forces in American Criticism, p. 151.

2 See p. 46.

stated his doctrines for the purpose of emphasis, he possessed many ideas in common with his contemporaries. Critics generally agree that while Whitman was not a professional critic like Poe and Lowell, nor a scholarly one like Emerson; he was important in that he "predicted the future while he consummated the past,"[3] that he was the link between the idealism of the past and the realism of the present. F. C. Matthiessen declared that Whitman bridged the gap between the ideal and the material in a way that even Emerson could not.[4] One can see his realistic tendencies in his innovations in diction and verse form and in his frankness of statement. The realist, however, derived truth from the material, while Whitman believed that truth was whatever satisfied the soul. Had he lived to observe it, he would not have been pleased with the pessimism and lack of spirituality of later realism.

We must agree, I think, with Bliss Perry, well-known Whitman scholar and biographer, that certain of Whitman's judgments on Shakespeare, Burns, Tennyson, Poe, Emerson, Bryant, and Longfellow, "reveal a critical tact, a fineness of both perception and phrasing, which has surprised many readers who knew him only as a chanter of 'barbaric yawps'."[5]

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3 Smith, op. cit., p. 144.

4 F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, p. 517.

5 Bliss Perry, Whitman, p. 235.

Yet he was neither a good nor a poor judge of esthetic achievement, nor a guide to good reading, nor an interpreter of the values of others' works. Though he had more ability as a critic than is ordinarily believed, his real importance was that of a prophet. There is no danger of underestimating his love of the people, the masses. There is no way to minimize the fact that he made sexual frankness a principle of criticism as well as of poetry. Gentility was thereafter on the defensive. There is no disagreement about his liberalizing influence on esthetic form. He insisted that when there were new facts and messages, new expression was inevitable. All these developed to an extent he could not have anticipated. And surely this is enough to place him as an important force in the study of American criticism.

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