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MENTOR

SEPTEMBER 1923

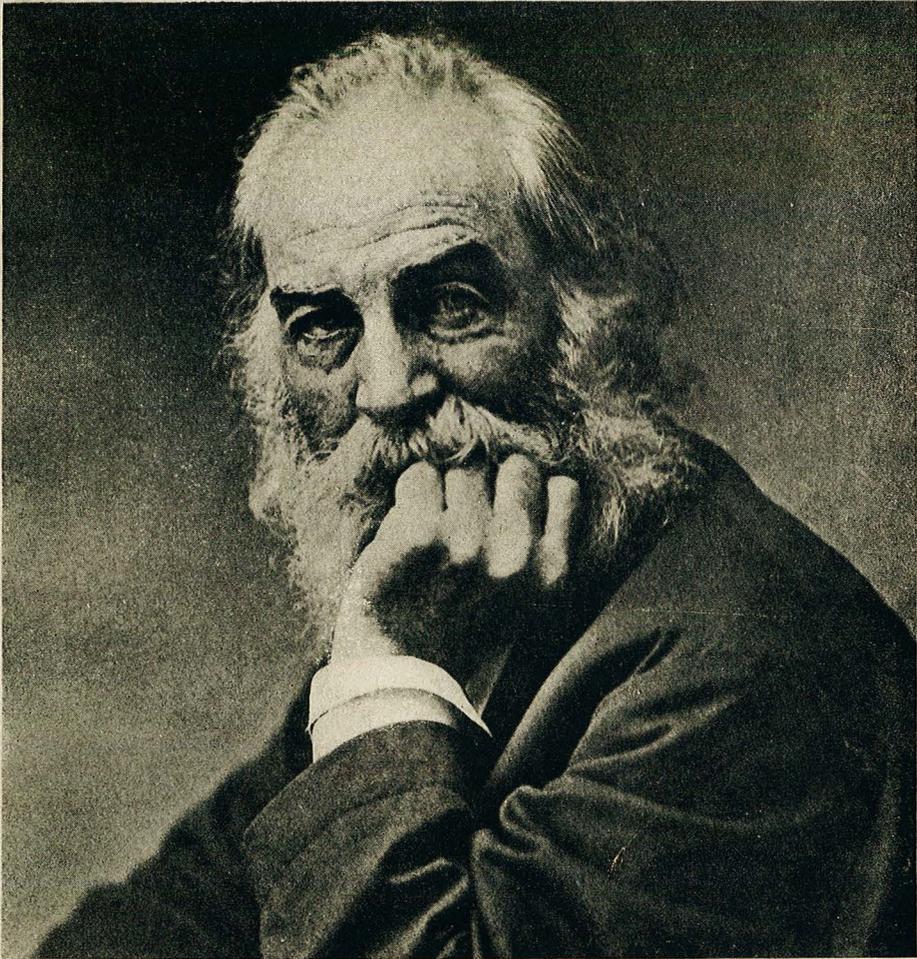


Photo by Frank Pearsall

WHITMAN AT THE AGE OF FIFTY-TWO

Courtesy of Alfred F. Goldsmith

WALT WHITMAN—POET OF DEMOCRACY
REAL PLACES IN FICTION PICTURED

TRAVEL

HISTORY

SCIENCE

LITERATURE

WALT WHITMAN

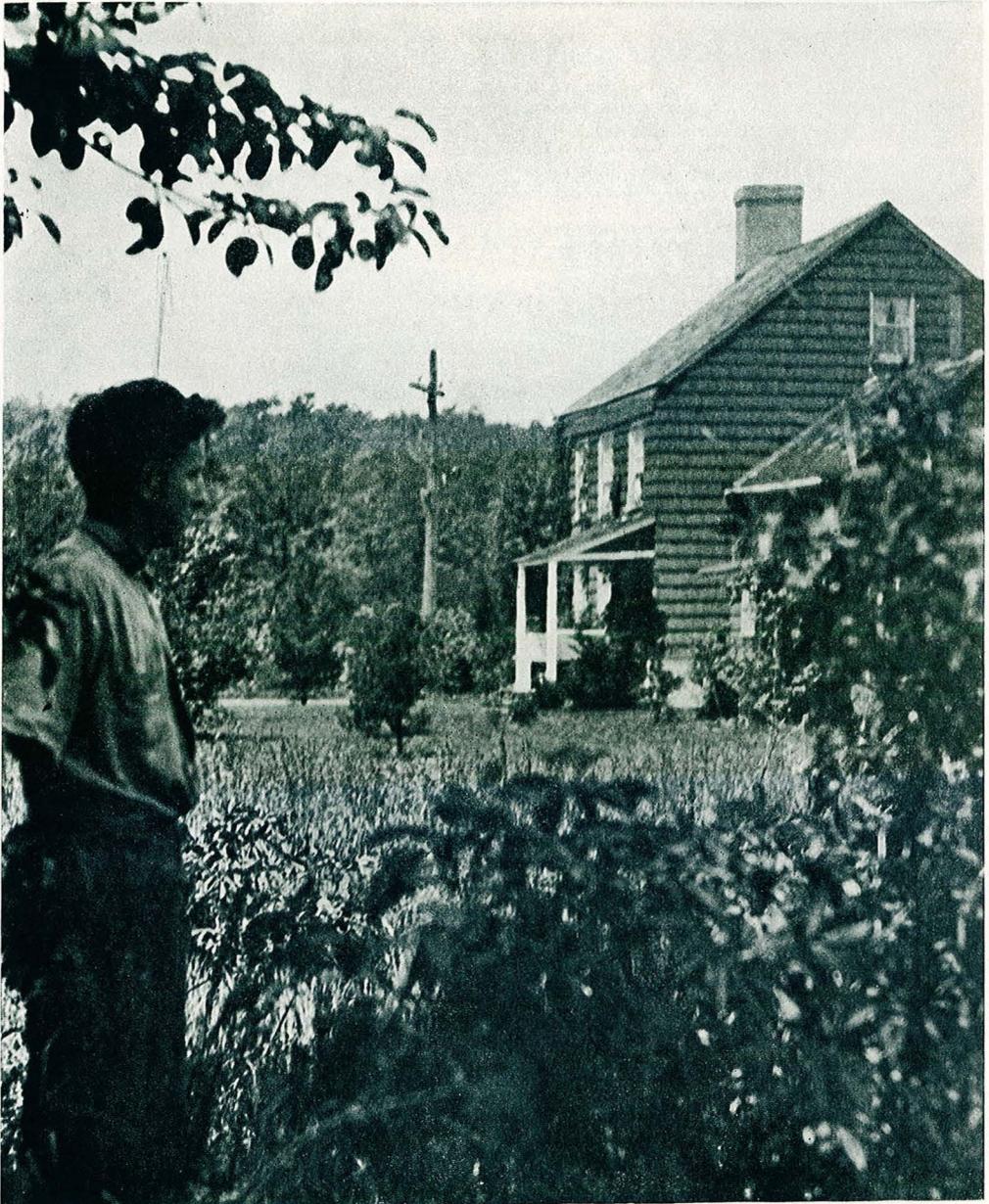
THE POET OF DEMOCRACY

BY CLEVELAND RODGERS



From a bronze plaque by R. Tait McKenzie

THE day was when men tried to ignore Whitman. Emerson saw him aright and hailed him as a seer, but many called him a "ruffian rhymester." He shocked the literary sensibilities of his time—and the flutter of the proprieties persisted for years. To-day he stands among the representative poets of America. He sang, without reserve, the *Song of the Natural Man*, and he celebrated the *Spirit of Democracy* in trumpet tones. Toward the whole world he sounded his salute. He waved a signal torch to all mankind. His torch is now held high by many hands.



From a photograph taken for The Mentor by Sherrill Schell

❖ ❖ ❖
A SHRINE OF SHRINES FOR
❖ WHITMAN LOVERS ❖
THE HOUSE OF HIS BIRTH,
WEST HILLS, LONG ISLAND

❖ ❖ ❖

"On the broad and beautiful farmlands" of his fathers, at West Hills, near Huntington, Long Island, Walt Whitman was born a century and four years ago. His father, a wood-cutter and carpenter, brought the buxom daughter of a Dutch-American neighbor as a bride to this comfortable clapboarded farmhouse in 1816. Near by is the original Whitman homestead, settled in 1660 by a New England ancestor. Not many miles away rolls the sea, whose "mystic surf-beat" always had power to soothe and inspire Whitman, man and poet. When he was four years old the family moved to Brooklyn, but he often returned to his childhood haunt, and visited at his grandfather's home. Especially he loved to wander in the shade of the black-walnut grove that crowned High Hill



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WALT WHITMAN POET OF DEMOCRACY

BY CLEVELAND RODGERS

ASSOCIATE EDITOR OF THE "BROOKLYN EAGLE;" AUTHOR OF
"WALT WHITMAN'S LIFE AND WORK"

Walt Whitman's admonition to Horace Traubel, "Do not attempt to explain me; I cannot explain myself," has been generally ignored. Yet Whitman remains a mystery. No other great American poet is so lacking in popular appreciation, and there is no other great American poet about whom so much buncombe has been written. Some misguided enthusiasts have praised the very faults of the poet, while other writers have misinterpreted Whitman as many commentators have Shakespeare, by reading into his text much that Whitman never intended and probably would have scorned. He has suffered both from admirers and from those that despised him. While he lived he was simultaneously worshiped and reviled. He was called genius and imbecile, prophet and charlatan; his work was extolled as an inspired revelation and as strenuously denounced as inane drivel—or worse.

Whitman called himself the "Poet of Democracy." His message was for the masses of the people. It has not yet been delivered to them. Professorial dissectors have mulled over it in their studies; wild-eyed radicals have seized upon parts of it and tried to make it serve their anarchistic purposes; the half-baked intelligentsia and free-verse poets have used the Whitman trademark on spurious goods; immature, prurient minds sometimes dip into "Children of Adam;" beyond that Walt Whitman is hardly more than a name.

Surely it is time for this to end! Whitman should be rescued from the cliques and coteries and given his rightful place in American literature. His message should be handed on to the multitudes for whom it was written. This is all the more urgent since the message has more force to-day than ever before. In fact, the real America, the real world democracy, visioned by Whitman, is only now emerging.

Why should Walt Whitman be anything of a mystery? He was one of the simplest of men. Simplicity was the keynote of his existence. A physician who attended him during his tragic years of affliction in Camden said that Whitman was the most natural, normal man he had ever examined. John Burroughs, who knew something of animals, as well as of men, and was one of

WALT WHITMAN



From a daguerreotype made at the age of sixty

LOUISA VAN VELSOR WHITMAN

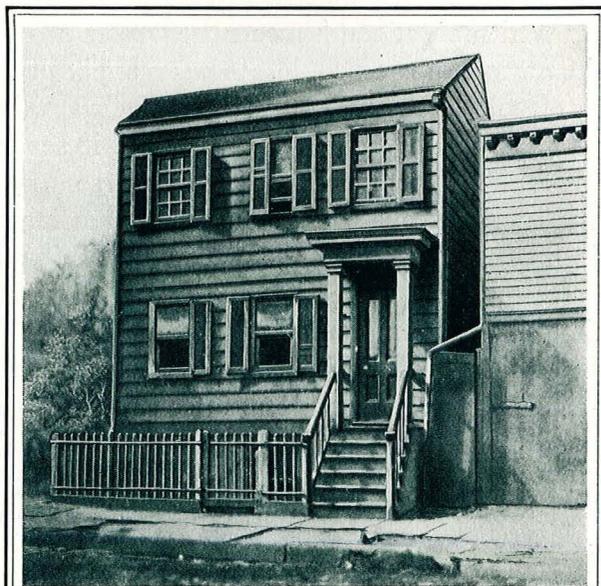
Mother of Walt. "He never speaks of her," said his friend John Burroughs, "without love and passion flooding his face." "An ample woman," she bore nine children. Many sturdy traits were reflected in her illustrious son

This attitude was gradually modified, and by the time he died the "Good Gray Poet" had become accepted and was internationally famous. As E. C. Stedman remarks, he is now "in very good society and has been so for a long while." But the battle over his work had been fought on a field apart, and largely by partisans for whom Whitman felt no special concern. He was without literary pretensions and actually disliked so-called "literary" people. In a way he disliked literature itself when it was taken to mean something separate and apart from the life of ordinary humanity. Because of this unusual relationship, Whitman stands unique among literary figures.

Whitman should be con-

Whitman's intimates, gave like testimony. His life was almost an open book, and there is nothing particularly baffling in his writings. Yet the fact persists that this dynamic figure in American letters is to-day almost as much of a question mark as he was when "Leaves of Grass" first appeared in 1855.

This was the beginning of the contagion of confusion over Whitman. Emerson, head and front of our literature and culture, instantly hailed the obscure Brooklyn printer-poet as a genius. A few other critics and "high-brows" followed Emerson, but in the main the "literary crowd" took another line. Of the two forces, the latter was the stronger, and for years Whitman and his book were condemned by the dominant element in American literary circles.



THE CARPENTER'S COTTAGE

In Brooklyn, where Whitman lived when working on "Leaves of Grass," his first book of poems

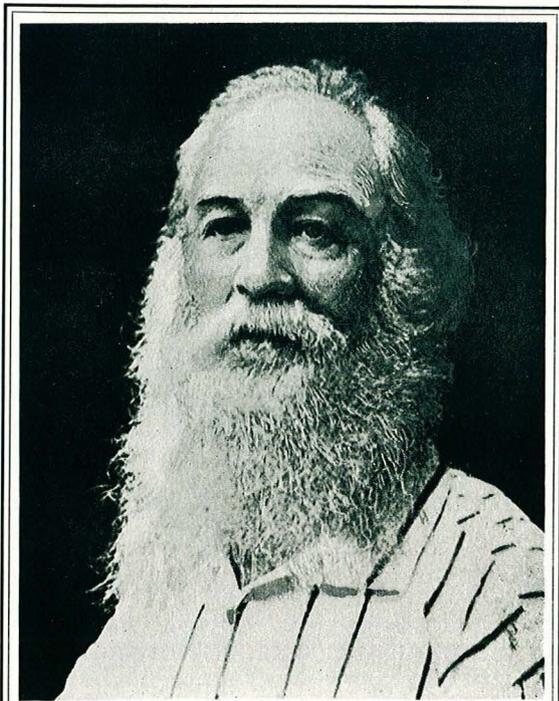
WALT WHITMAN

sidered primarily in his relation to the time in which he lived. He was born on May 31, 1819. The date is important because it was early enough for Whitman to reach maturity before the critical historical decades of the last century. It was close enough to the Revolutionary era for him to snatch some of its fire, to be used in illuminating the next great period in our national history. Too much emphasis cannot be placed upon the fact that Whitman, as well as Lincoln, was born at the right time. Because of that they became vital links in the development of American democracy.

Walter Whitman, as he was known as a boy and young man, came of good stock, blending English, Dutch, and Welsh blood. He was one of several children, and his family, while poor, was not direfully so. Walt secured sufficient elementary schooling to enable him to teach school, but he began work as a boy of eleven, and left home at an early age to make his own way. This, too, is perhaps significant. It threw him upon his own mental and material resources, and encouraged initiative and independent thinking. Before he was twenty Whitman had been a printer, school teacher, writer, and editor of a country newspaper. His adolescence was somewhat crowded with activity, and his mind matured rapidly—perhaps too rapidly, for at one stage he was a moody, rather morbid dreamer, much given to introspection and unwholesome speculation. His early writings also reveal something of his deeply religious, mystical nature.

A dominant factor in those formative years was his intense patriotism. He took an unusual interest in public affairs. From boyhood, almost, Whitman seems to have been keenly alive to the great public questions of the day. The fact is not generally known, but for ten or twelve years of his life Walt Whitman was absorbed in politics. He was a politician in every sense of the word, and any estimate of his later life and work that leaves this out of account fails to give a comprehensive picture of the man, or to explain his motives during the decisive periods in his career.

The young Whitman was an intense patriot. He had been inspired by the



WHITMAN THE WOUND DRESSER

A striking portrait made during his service as a volunteer nurse in the Civil War. When doctors despaired of a patient, frequently they would say, "Turn him over to Whitman. Perhaps he will save him." He counted those three years the most profound lesson of his life

WALT WHITMAN

stories of the Revolution which came to him first hand from veterans who had taken the "saintly Washington" by the hand. His religious nature caused him to exalt the heroes of those days into veritable gods. Washington, Jefferson, Lafayette (who held the boy in his arms while on a visit to Brooklyn) were idols whom he worshiped with almost fanatical reverence.

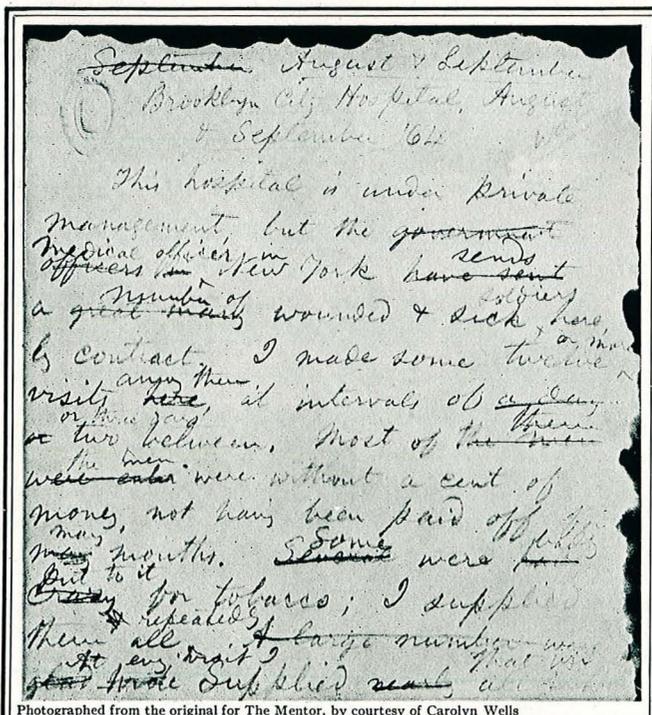
From Jefferson, Whitman received his doctrine of political democracy. Andrew Jackson he regarded as the inheritor of Jefferson's mantle. When Jackson's mantle passed to the shoulders of Martin Van Buren, Whitman accepted the new leader of democracy without question. And for Whitman acceptance meant dedicating himself to the cause of the leader. By this process he was led into active participation in practical politics in 1840.

Politics had a different meaning in those days. The Democratic-Republican Party was new. The Whigs were just forming their organization. Many vital issues were being hotly debated, and the great moral question of slavery was being brought forward. The leading poets and preachers, as well as the great lawyers and scholars, were all intense partisans. Newspapers were merely political organs, and editors were primarily politicians.

Whitman was a radical of radicals. He threw himself into the "Loco-Foco," or Democratic-Republican, movement with the ardor of a crusader.

He attacked Whiggery in all its forms, and with his pen and on the stump denounced special privilege, monopoly, and everything that failed to measure up to the radical conception of the Jeffersonian principles of equality.

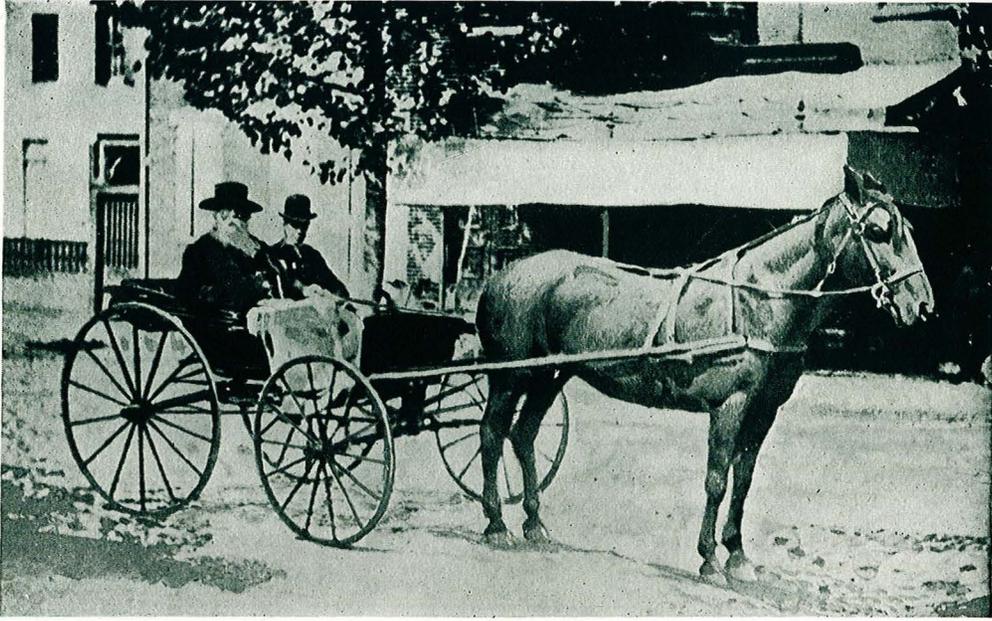
During the Harrison-Van Buren campaign of 1840 Whitman electioneered in Queens County, Long Island, where he had been teaching school. Shortly afterward he went to New York, where he became a full-fledged politician. He joined Tammany Hall and soon established a reputation as a political writer and speaker. He held several positions on different



Photographed from the original for The Mentor, by courtesy of Carolyn Wells

A PAGE FROM A WAR NOTEBOOK

One of a dozen that Whitman filled with notes at the bedside of patients from every part of the continent—records of names, invalid wants, accounts of battles. "I never knew what young Americans were," he wrote, "till I had been in the hospitals." Here the great poet of the people said he "discovered America"



HIS FRIENDS ❖ ❖
BOUGHT HIM A HORSE
AND BUGGY ❖ ❖

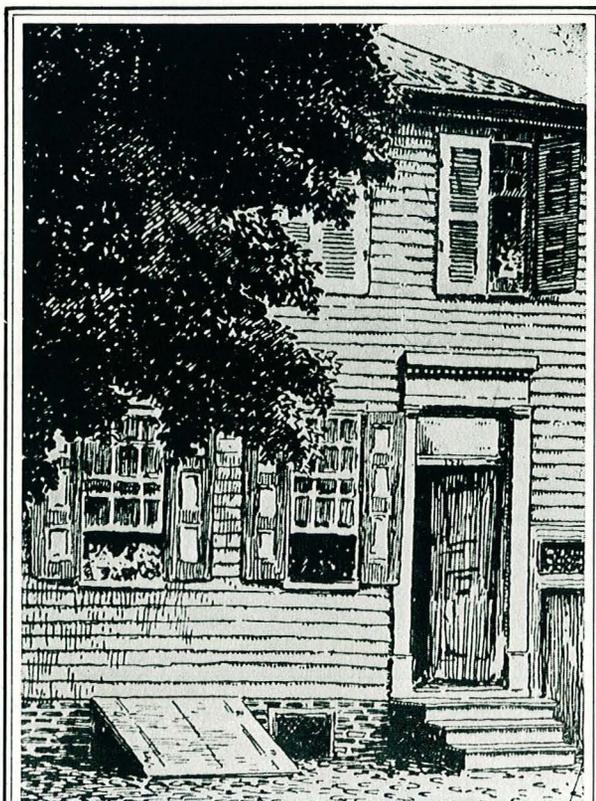
To give him an opportunity to enjoy the open air, thirty-two friends, including Whittier, Mark Twain, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Edwin Booth, and Charles Dudley Warner, subscribed \$10 each toward the gift. For three years, 1885 to 1888, the poet used to go out every day, sometimes alone, sometimes with his little friend Bill Duckett, driving at a brisk pace and saluting all he met. Finally he was unable to go any longer, and sold the horse and buggy

newspapers, and finally became editor of the "Brooklyn Eagle" in 1846.

This was the most important job Whitman ever held. The "Eagle" was the organ of the Brooklyn Loco-Focos, and as its editor Whitman played a leading part in local politics. He was secretary of the Kings County organization, and otherwise served the party. The story of Whitman's life at this time and the climax that developed in 1848 are interesting and important. It was the turning point in his career, and goes far toward explaining the mystery of Whitman's transformation from a mediocre prose writer into a poet of outstanding force and originality.

For two years Whitman enjoyed the utmost freedom as editor of the "Eagle." Then came a rude awakening. The Mexican War brought up the question of the extension of slavery in the new territory. The Democratic-Republican Party divided on this issue, and Whitman, refusing to compromise with his principles, lost his position. He left Brooklyn and took a job in New Orleans, where he remained only a few weeks. On his return to Brooklyn he became editor of the "Freeman," a newspaper started by the Free Soil Democrats, who supported Martin Van Buren. As everyone knows, the Free Soilers were badly beaten.

This was the end of Whitman's activity in politics, although he never lost interest in the great issues that remained unsettled. What had happened was



From a drawing by Earl Horter

THE MICKLE STREET HOUSE, CAMDEN

Whitman at the age of sixty-five became the delighted possessor of a two-story "shanty" of his own. George W. Childs, the Philadelphia philanthropist, lent him the money, which he repaid little by little. Here came friends humble and great to pay him homage. In the back yard of the modest premises he sat for many of the portraits made of him in later life. The house has been bought by the city of Camden as a permanent memorial. Whitman died here in March, 1892

simply that he became convinced that his dominant ideas could not be realized through politics. He had gone through the game and had come out completely disillusioned. His experience served to drive him back upon his inner self, and to force him to cast about for some other way in which to express his ideas and his personality.

As a result, the politician turned poet. It should be emphasized, however, that Whitman merely changed his form of expression. The ideas and convictions he had held remained firmly fixed in his mind, and his poetry, from beginning to end, is dominated by a political and sociological background. Furthermore, the deep reformatory religious note that pervaded his political utterances became stronger as the poet found himself freer and working in a more suitable medium.

Although the passion for politics was paramount during the first ten years of Whitman's manhood, it was by no means his only interest. As a boy he had resolved to become a writer, and he neglected no opportunity to equip himself for his life work. Before composing "Leaves of Grass" he had experimented with nearly every form of writing. He tried and abandoned conventional forms of verse, wrote essays and numerous short stories, as well as one long temperance novel. As a journalist he wrote news articles, travel sketches, editorials, book criticisms, dramatic reviews, music notices, and even blazed the way for modern columnists by turning paragrapher on occasions. He was also the author of a history of Brooklyn that received newspaper publication.

By way of preparing himself for literary endeavor, Whitman read extensively. His early writings show an easy familiarity with the classics, and we have from his own pen voluminous reviews and estimates of his contemporaries. Furthermore, Whitman knew personally many of the leading writers

WALT WHITMAN

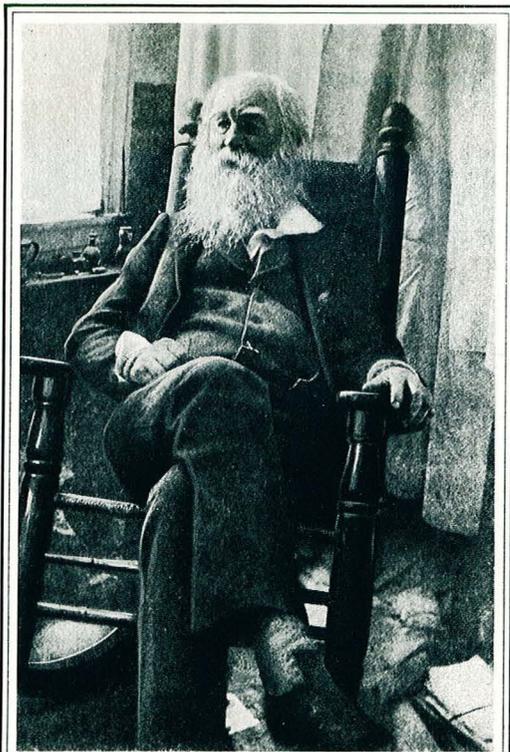
and editors of the day. He contributed to some twenty-five newspapers and magazines, and there is no reason why, with the start he had secured, he could not have attained success by following a more conventional course.

That he did not follow such a course must be attributed to those inherent qualities which make Whitman unique. As we have seen, he did not sound his "barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world" because he was a barbarian and could do nothing but yawp. He learned to conform to conventional standards before he began "yawping." This seems to be important. It proves that his subsequent departures from convention were deliberate and carefully considered. Whitman's peculiar achievement was in making his book the complete expression of his personality:

This is no book;
Who touches this, touches a man.

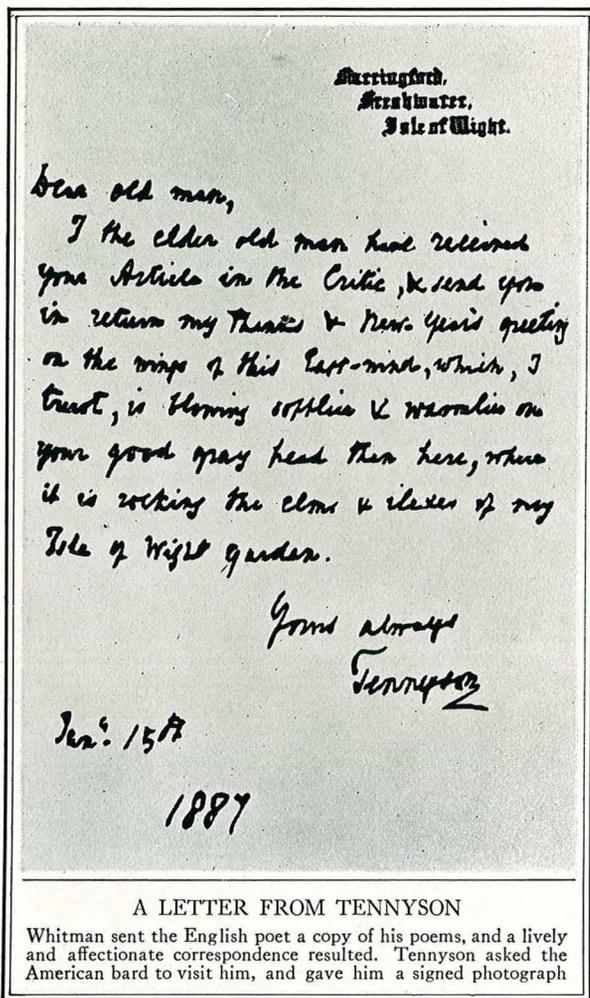
He went about his task of making such a book by identifying himself with everything about him. The external world he considered always in its relation to himself. Every expression was fused with *personalism*. It is only natural that this should cause superficial readers to set Whitman down as a colossal egoist. Professor Stuart P. Sherman has recently disposed of such caviling: Whitman, Professor Sherman says, "has been described as a noisy braggart about himself and his country; but he is complacent with hope, not fulfillment. What he is bragging about is God; that power, not ourselves, working through man and nature and mysteriously bringing vast designs to pass in spite of all that the almost infinite wickedness and ignorance of man can do to thwart Him."

Walt would perhaps subscribe to most of this, but he would doubtless amplify the definitions. Few writers have been more religious than Whitman, but his creed was his own. Democracy was his religion. In his creed, faith in the powers of the common man took the place of faith in the unknown. Democracy he regarded as something primarily of the spirit. It was his conviction that while government in a democ-



THE POET AT HOME

"There's a touch of oak about us both," he wrote of the sturdy armchair given him as a Christmas present. As strength declined, the patriarch passed most of his time near the window of his little house, "dressed in loose gray, cuffs of his shirt rolled back, disclosing his strong workman's hands always clean, lying on the arm of the chair or holding pencil and paper"



racy could not be linked with a single creed, it could not permanently be dissociated from things of the spirit. He believed that the more we exalt the state by making it the expression of the popular will the more necessary it is that what we call government shall correspond to the best in man.

This philosophy he evolved as the result of his experience in politics. When the poet in him revolted against the more sordid side of politics he turned to poetry, not with the idea of accomplishing through that means that which it is beyond the scope of politics to accomplish, but as the best way of expressing his ideas and himself. He saw, much more clearly than any of his contemporaries, the limitations of what we call political democracy. At the same time he sensed the fallacies in most of the doctrines of the extreme

radicals. He realized that equality is only possible on the spiritual plane.

There is no place in Whitman's creed for the popular notions of present-day radicals. No man could have been more intensely patriotic than he. He was first of all an American. He was the first real American propagandist. He was convinced that it was his duty to sell America to his compatriots, who seemed to be ignorant or blind to the tremendous wealth all about them. He wrote elaborate catalogues, setting forth in glamorous phrases the illimitable glories of the Republic. He is our most grandiloquent exponent of spreadeagleism. Yet Walt Whitman stands first among the poets of internationalism. No other approaches him in universality or in breadth of humanitarianism.

Another apparent contradiction is his simultaneous glorification of individualism and the "divine average." In the Whitman conception of society there are no classes and no "mob." He never lost sight of the individuals that form the crowd. To Whitman, democracy meant the fullest possible develop-

WALT WHITMAN

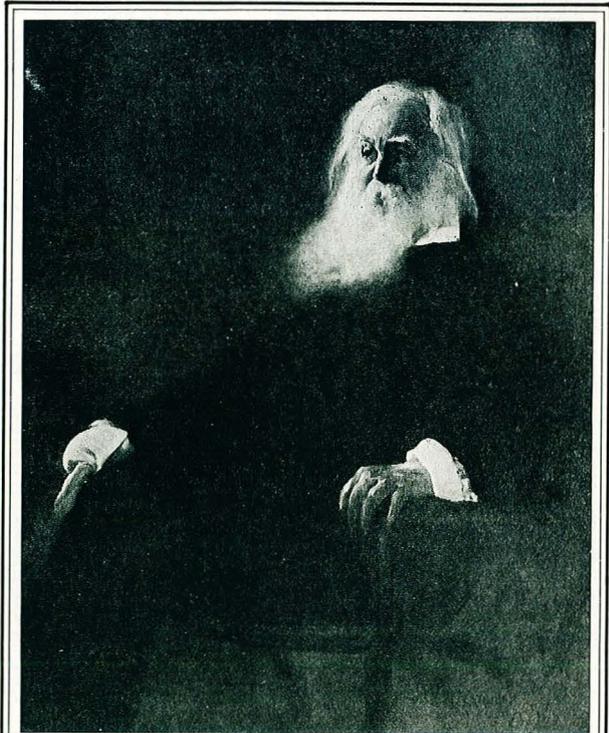
ment of the individual. That was its primary purpose. He visioned a world peopled with whole races of superior individuals. This he believed could be brought about by exalting the inherent nobility and infinite capacity of the common man. Government was to play a part in bringing about this result, but politics he regarded merely as the ways and means of getting things done. Government was the machine. Democracy was the spirit of the transaction that made it purposeful.

That Whitman was keenly alive to the limitations of government long before he wrote "Leaves of Grass" is proved by his early writings. To him government was, or should be, a simple process. The true office of government, as stated

by him in editorials in the "Eagle" in 1846, "is simply to preserve the rights of each citizen from spoliation; when it attempts to go beyond this, it is intrusive and does more harm than good." The great evil, as he saw it, was in the mania for management, the idea that everything can be regulated and made straight by statute. He repudiated the notion that virtue can be achieved by legislation, and insisted that while government can do little positive good it may easily do an "immense deal of harm."

Those who think of Walt Whitman merely as an excessively exuberant celebrator of democracy should read his prose. There have been few developments and tendencies in democratic government that he did not foresee long before the experiments were tried. "Democratic Vistas" is one of the most profound and keenly analytical dissertations on the subject to be found in the whole literature of political economy. This establishes quite definitely that Whitman was not a mere dreamer and theorist. He was an informed critic and a realist, but he did not permit his faith in democracy to be destroyed or his enthusiasm dampened by the failure of all manner of political expedients during the process of democracy's evolution.

Whitman's striking personality is explained in part by the simple fact that



From a portrait by John W. Alexander in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

THE SAGE OF CAMDEN

One who saw him at this period of his life described his magnetic presence, his head proudly set, his ruddy face and snowy beard, and the general impression "of the man's simple majesty, such as might be produced by an immense handsome tree"

O Captain! dearest Captain! ^{get} ~~wake~~ up
 & hear the bells;
 Wake up & see the ~~shining~~ ^{glorious} ~~son~~, & see the
 flags a-flying; ^{splendid} ~~son~~
 For you it is the Cities ^{west} ~~west~~ - for you the
 shores are crowded;
 For you the ^{red-rose} ~~roses~~ garlands, and the ^{electric} ~~glowing~~ eyes
 of women;

O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
 Rise up—for you the flag is flung, for you the bugle thrills,
 For you bouquets and ribboned wreaths, for you the shores a-crowding,
 For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;

THE SECOND STANZA OF ❖ ❖
 WHITMAN'S MOST POPULAR POEM,
 "O CAPTAIN! MY CAPTAIN!" ❖ ❖

As he wrote it first and as it finally appeared. A deathless chant to the memory of Lincoln, "the mighty Westerner," for whom he felt an admiration amounting to worship. In this "psalm of the dead" the poet expressed the grief of a nation: "he was the heart of America in tears, gathered at the grave of her great son"

he practiced what he preached. He proclaimed the need of the largest possible measure of freedom for the individual. Personally he achieved almost complete freedom. He early emancipated himself from all manner of restraints and hampering influence. He was too impervious, his ego far too robust, to be cribbed and confined by what passed for conventions in those formative years of American society. By the time his conception of "Leaves of Grass" had become fixed in his mind he was complete master of his environment, and he refused to be governed by artificial forms of any kind. He proclaimed himself a man and, recognizing that he held within himself all the bad as well as the good latent in the species, he was simultaneously *the supreme egoist and the most humble of persons*.

Whitman's freedom from conventional restraints has, of course, subjected him to severe criticism. Some of the facts concerning his private life, his love affairs, and his indifference to accepted moral codes, are indefensible from the conventional viewpoint, but genius has always claimed and received more freedom than is generally accorded ordinary individuals. Whitman's chief offending—if it be an offense—was in putting into his book the frankest possible record of his physical and emotional experiences. A storm of criticism has been raging over certain parts of "Leaves of Grass" ever since the first publication. In recent years the storm has abated somewhat.

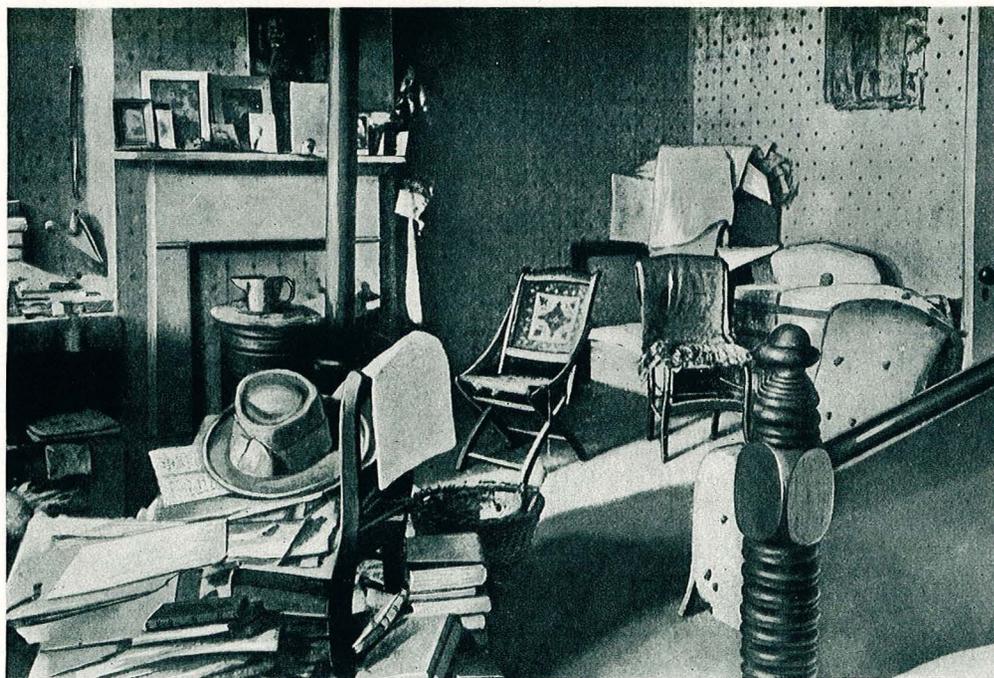
In judging this aspect of Whitman's life and work it should be remembered that he was writing a book that was to represent all phases of life and experience, and that he did not resort to extreme realism in treating sex in order to create a sensation.

WALT WHITMAN

Feeling as he did, having in mind the daring project of putting into a book all he felt and divined, and having first learned to conform to literary standards only to abandon them, it is not surprising that his writing should take on the rangeful freedom of the Whitman personality. What he had to say was something that had never before been said. It was so profoundly personal and so completely the expression of an individual that he naturally evolved an individual form, as striking in literature as the Whitman personality was impressive in life.

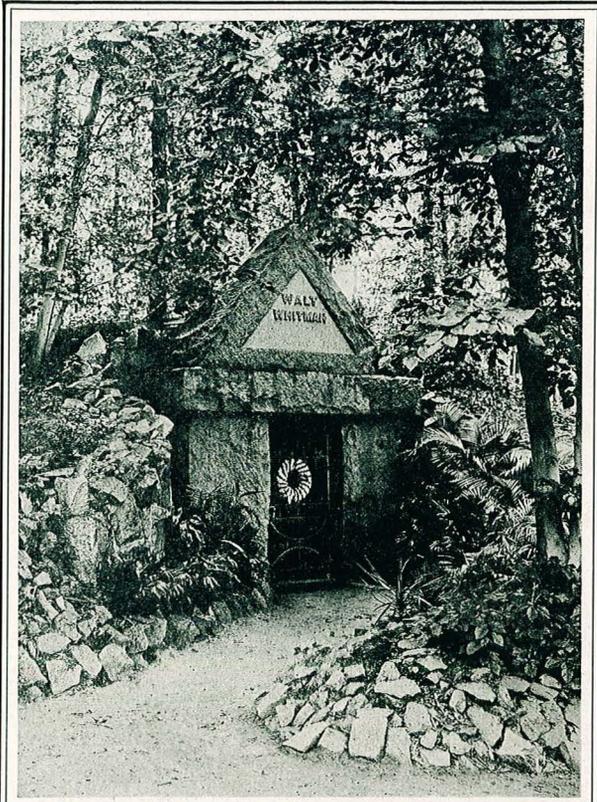
This is perhaps the greatest fault or drawback of "Leaves of Grass." The form renders the Whitman message unintelligible to those who come by knowledge of literature over familiar paths. Other poets may be learned piecemeal. Walt Whitman and "Leaves of Grass" are one and inseparable, and must be taken as a whole to be comprehensible. The only way around is for his message to be delivered by others. This is being done gradually. Whitman to-day is a great reservoir of inspiration for the poets and writers that have come after him. In this way he is serving succeeding generations as all the great poets and sages serve.

But this is not really satisfying, and a greater effort should be made to spread his message, which has tremendous political and social import to-day.



THE LITTERED CHAMBER
OF HIS LAST YEARS ❖

A visitor who made a pilgrimage to the Mickle Street house remarked the uncarpeted floor of Whitman's room where he worked and received friends, the cheap and rickety furniture, old-fashioned stove, flowers in the window, a canary in a cage, books and proofs piled in confusion; on the walls a few fine engravings, a photograph of parents and sisters, and of "another—not a sister"



THE TOMB IN HARLEIGH CEMETERY

For years Whitman the pagan had longed for "a home in the forest." A year before his death, he chose the site for his burial place near Camden, and there he rests at peace in the beloved arms of the one he called the "Dark Mother"

Whitman was a great pivot and force in our national evolution. He came upon the scene in time to gather up the torch that had been kindled in Revolutionary days, and he made a heroic effort to pass it on to the new generations of Americans. He stands with Lincoln as the exponent and prophet of the greater democracy.

Whitman, looking back, saw how far the Republic had come. He looked around and ahead and saw where the nation could go if it went along. He wove his dreams into a magnificent and moving pageant of words. He made himself the first authentic voice of America and democracy's great prophet.

But a shadow appeared on the horizon. The black blot of slavery blurred the picture.

The great problem for Whitman, as for the nation, was how to remove that blot without bringing on the unspeakable disaster of disunion.

What could Whitman do? What did he do? His attitude toward the war of secession was not unlike that of a loving parent compelled to watch two sons engaged in mortal combat. Loving both, abhorring strife, he could not take sides, or love one side and hate the other. Instead, he threw himself into the cataclysm, not as a combatant, but as a volunteer nurse, anxious to administer to the sufferers on both sides. And he fell a martyr to his self-sacrifices, for during that service he contracted the afflictions that made him an invalid for the rest of his life.

Broken in health, but with his mind unimpaired, he spent the declining years of his life in a little house on Mickle Street, in Camden, New Jersey. With the passing of years even the severest of his critics became more tolerant. Noted personages from all over the world came to see him. He continued to work, and brought out new editions of his book. His vision of the coming of a better world order are for the future, and must so remain until we fight our way to the distant frontiers of freedom where Walt Whitman planted his flag.