

W A L T   W H I T M A N

By

CLARENCE DARROW

1924

VERBATIM REPORT

By

Ethel M. Maclaskey

NOTE: Clarence Darrow spoke at Whitman dinners since their inception. An advertisement that he would speak brought a large audience. It was usually a large affair; comrades looked forward to meeting annually to renew friendships.

To Morris J. Lychenheim, D. O., belongs the credit for the survival of this Whitman anniversary. A short time before May 31st he is on the job getting out notices and preparing the way for the yearly banquet. At first, he gathered together a group of workers who met at one of their homes or offices to perform the manual task of folding, addressing and stamping the notices personally. In these later days, though, the Group has progressed to the point of employing an addressing company to send out its notices.

Dr. Lychenheim is still busier than ever because three years ago the Whitman Fellowship merged with the national society as the Chicago Unit and holds a monthly meeting. He is very modest and never attempts to dominate the speaking, yet his quiet, poised personality is felt and appreciated.

Horace Traubel, Whitman's Literary Executor, was related to Mrs. Lychenheim. After Traubel died, Dr. Lychenheim took up the banner of "the dear love of comrades" and keeps it unfurled in Chicago in the name of the Good Gray Poet.

Ethel M. MacClaskey.

MR DARROW SAID: I had a very chance escape tonight, I intended to go to the prize fight. I hesitated in coming to this show because I like to see Democracy functioning,--the only place I know of where it does.

I wonder a good deal of late why it is that, in spite of my better judgment, in spite of my ideas of art, of literature, science or philosophy, I still like Walt Whitman. I have, of course, explained to you in the past that none of his ideas on these things are sure, but, still I like him. I will try to state in a few words why I do still like Walt Whitman.

As a rule, I think, a real Walt Whitman disciple never reads any other book; not many, anyhow. I have noted that about them. Of course, to pick out the smartest man is as fatal as to pick out the most beautiful woman. You may be all right one day and all wrong the next, you can not tell anything about it. And, to say that Walt Whitman or anybody else excels all of them in everything, is to me---well, I do not do it, that is all. But, still I like him. It is not for his poetry; I never thought he was a poet, but a man does not need to be a poet. The only thing I object to is calling prose poetry, that is all. I do not say which is Best; it depends upon one's mood.

Let us compare Walt Whitman, for instance, with something that to me is poetry by A. E. Housemann, called "The Culprit".

The night my father got me  
His mind was not on me;  
He did not plague his fancy  
To muse if I should be  
The son you see.

The day my mother bore me  
She was a fool and glad,  
For all the pain I cost her,  
That she had borne the lad  
That borne she had.

My mother and my father  
Out of the light they lie;  
The warrant would not find them,  
And here 'tis only I  
Shall hang so high.

Oh let not man remember  
The soul that God forgot  
But fetch the county kerchief  
And noose me in the knot,  
And I will rot.

For so the game is ended  
That should not have begun.  
My father and my mother  
They had a likely son,  
And I have none.

To me that is poetry. It is thought, it is poetry and  
it is music. I cannot say it is better than something  
else, but to me it is poetry.

I find a great many things in Whitman that I like;  
some that I do not care for; and still I care for Walt  
Whitman. He had an optimism that makes me ill; a sort  
of an exclamatory optimism that goes with much faith and  
little thought; and it was more pronounced in days when  
he was getting older. Well, a bluff is good in its place,  
but it is still a bluff. I prefer my some poet on that.

When first my way to fair I took  
Few pence in purse had I,  
And long I used to stand and look  
At things I could not buy.

Now times are altered; if I care  
To buy a thing, I can;  
The pence are here and here's the fair,  
But where's the lost young man?

To think that two and two are four  
And neither five nor three  
The heart of man has long been sore  
And long 'tis like to be.

If one can deceive himself, well and good, whether it is philosophy or religion or common drugstore dope, but if he must take the world as it is, and take it cheerfully, and make the most of it, he must recognize the facts of life sooner or later, as all must do.

I like Walt Whitman for what he said about the criminal; that everything is in himself that is in the criminal, and again that if he had to live his life over again, he would spend more time with him, go to prison oftener. He understood them and cared for them, as he grew older; he didn't love them because he pitied them, but he felt that kinship to them which every honest, understanding man feels to every other human being that lives. For there is nothing in any human being that is not in every human being. It is only a different tip of the balance one way or the other; a little change in the elements that may develop, but we are all alike. Walt Whitman spoke truth better than almost any other man I have ever known upon that subject which sometime will interest the world.

They first thought Walt Whitman was obscene, which always attracts attention. He would not be called obscene today because others have outdone him. He never was obscene, if the word has a definite meaning, and it depends upon the language and the purpose as to whether it would be classified as obscene or not. A great deal has been said and much left unsaid as to the great facts of sex. Most men never care to speak about them for the reason that they are subjects of doubt and there are different shades of propriety, that it always raises a question. But, Walt Whitman approached them as a man of science, as an honest man should approach any honest subject. He said: If anything is sacred, the human body is sacred, and every part of the human body is sacred and fitted for its work. He approached it almost as a religious man would approach an altar, without any thought of the obscenity that is mentioned by obscene books. He approached a question that is ignored and still which is the most vital question in life, for, after all, sex is the most vital question in life, for it means life. The

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(Verbatim Report by Ethel M. MacLachlan)

human race is perpetuated by the diversity of sex which affords the greatest interest and most of the excitement of life. It is the strongest and the deepest emotion of life excepting possibly one; and, its very strength and its very depth and its very eternity, makes it one that often goes awry, and thinking, understanding people know it.

The truth cannot be reached by closing our eyes; it can only be reached by open discussion and fair understanding, and, Walt Whitman did more than any other man of his age, and perhaps more than any man has since, to have an honest, fair understanding of the most important thing in life.

But, quite aside from all this, I can tell in a minute why I still like Whitman. It is not a question of his perfections, perhaps they are not there. We all necessarily judge other people's art and life by our own which we must assume perfect, or we would change it; that is incidental to us and we cannot help it. I love the man for his broad tolerance, in this day of prohibition and inhibition, most of which is sham and hypocrisy, in this day of what we call social control; in this day of meddling with human life; in this day of magnifying the petty, which at the best is small. Man ought to be left to enjoy life as he can. In this day of intolerance it is fine that we can know a tolerant man; one who can live and let live; one who can have opinions and convictions of his own but will still fight for the right of every man to enjoy his convictions no matter how they may differ.

And, I find in these Whitman meetings a broad tolerance which I find nowhere else. And, when I find a tolerant man or woman, one who is really tolerant, I almost universally find that that person has been a student of Whitman. I need not pick out this or that, but I know his whole life and his whole work leads to a tolerant attitude of men and women for each other. And may be that is the greatest thing we can find in life. Whitman says, in effect, over all our cities, great and small, the dear love of comrades. If we can follow that one line of Whitman, we could banish a very large part of the suffering and misery from the earth!

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