



THE

GOOD GRAY POET.

*A VINDICATION.*

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NEW YORK:

BUNCE & HUNTINGTON, 459, BROOME STREET.

1866.



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*Title:* The Good Gray Poet. A Vindication.

*Date of first publication:* 1866

*Author:* William Douglas O'Connor (1832-1889)

*Date first posted:* Jan. 23, 2016

*Date last updated:* Jan. 23, 2016

Faded Page eBook #20160129

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# THE GOOD GRAY POET.

## A VINDICATION.

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WASHINGTON, D. C., *September 2, 1865.*

Nine weeks have elapsed since the commission of an outrage, to which I have not till now been able to give my attention, but which, in the interest of the sacred cause of free letters, and in that alone, I never meant should pass without its proper and enduring brand.

For years past, thousands of people in New York, in Brooklyn, in Boston, in New Orleans, and latterly in Washington, have seen, even as I saw two hours ago, tallying, one might say, the streets of our American cities, and fit to have for his background and accessories, their streaming populations and ample and rich façades, a man of striking masculine beauty—a poet—powerful and venerable in appearance; large, calm, superbly formed; oftenest clad in the careless, rough, and always picturesque costume of the common people; resembling, and generally taken by strangers for, some great mechanic, or stevedore, or seaman, or grand laborer of one kind or another; and passing slowly in this guise, with nonchalant and haughty step along the pavement, with the sunlight and shadows falling around him. The dark sombrero he usually wears was, when I saw him just now, the day being warm, held for the moment in his hand; rich light an artist would have chosen, lay upon his uncovered head, majestic, large, Homeric, and set upon his strong shoulders with the grandeur of ancient sculpture; I marked the countenance, serene, proud, cheerful, florid, grave; the brow seamed with noble wrinkles; the features, massive and handsome, with firm blue eyes; the eyebrows and eyelids especially showing that fullness of arch seldom seen save in the antique busts; the flowing hair and fleecy beard, both very gray, and tempering with a look of age the youthful aspect of one who is but forty-five; the simplicity and purity of his dress, cheap and plain, but spotless, from snowy falling collar to burnished boot, and exhaling faint fragrance; the whole form surrounded with manliness, as with a nimbus, and breathing, in its perfect health and vigor, the august charm of the strong. We who have looked upon this figure, or listened to that clear, cheerful, vibrating voice, might thrill to think, could we but transcend our age, that we had been thus near to one of the greatest of the sons of men. But Dante stirs no deep pulse, unless it be of hate, as he walks the streets of Florence; that shabby, one-armed soldier, just out of jail and hardly noticed, though he has amused Europe, is Michael Cervantes; that son of a vine-dresser, whom Athens laughs at as an eccentric genius, before it is thought worth while to roar him into exile, is the century-shaking Æschylus; that phantom whom the wits of the seventeenth century think not worth extraordinary notice, and the wits of the eighteenth century, spluttering with laughter, call a barbarian, is Shakespeare; that earth-soiled, vice-stained ploughman, with the noble heart and sweet, bright eyes, whom the good abominate and the gentry patronize—subject now of anniversary banquets by gentlemen who, could they wander backward from those annual hiccups into Time, would never help his life or keep his company—is Robert Burns; and this man, whose grave, perhaps, the next century will cover with passionate and splendid honors, goes regarded with careless curiosity or phlegmatic composure by his own age. Yet, perhaps, in a few hearts he has waked that deep thrill due to the passage of the

sublime. I heard lately, with sad pleasure, of the letter introducing a friend, filled with noble courtesy, and dictated by the reverence for genius, which a distinguished English nobleman, a stranger, sent to this American bard. Nothing deepens my respect for the beautiful intellect of the scholar Alcott, like the bold sentence, "Greater than Plato," which he once uttered upon him. I hold it the surest proof of Thoreau's insight, that after a conversation, seeing how he incarnated the immense and new spirit of the age, and was the compend of America, he came away to speak the electric sentence, "He is Democracy!" I treasure to my latest hour, with swelling heart and springing tears, the remembrance that Abraham Lincoln, seeing him for the first time from the window of the East Room of the White House as he passed slowly by, and gazing at him long with that deep eye which read men, said, in the quaint, sweet tone which those who have spoken with him will remember, and with a significant emphasis which the type can hardly convey—"Well, *he* looks like A MAN!" Sublime tributes, great words; but none too high for their object, the author of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman, of Brooklyn.

On the 30th of June last, this true American man and author was dismissed, under circumstances of peculiar wrong, from a clerkship he had held for six months in the Department of the Interior. His dismissal was the act of the Hon. James Harlan, the Secretary of the Department, formerly a Methodist clergyman, and President of a Western college.

Upon the interrogation of an eminent officer of the Government, at whose instance the appointment had, under a former Secretary, been made, Mr. Harlan averred that Walt Whitman had been in no way remiss in the discharge of his duties, but that, on the contrary, so far as he could learn, his conduct had been most exemplary. Indeed, during the few months of his tenure of office, he had been promoted. The sole and only cause of his dismissal, Mr. Harlan said, was that he had written the book of poetry entitled *Leaves of Grass*. This book Mr. Harlan characterized as "full of indecent passages." The author, he said, was "a very bad man," a "Free-Lover." Argument being had upon these propositions, Mr. Harlan was, as regards the book, utterly unable to maintain his assertions; and, as regards the author, was forced to own that his opinion of him had been changed. Nevertheless, after this substantial admission of his injustice, he absolutely refused to revoke his action. Of course, under no circumstances would Walt Whitman, the proudest man that lives, have consented to again enter into office under Mr. Harlan: but the demand for his reinstatement was as honorable to the gentleman who made it, as the refusal to accede to it was discredit to the Secretary.

The closing feature of this transaction, and one which was a direct consequence of Mr. Harlan's course, was its remission to the scurrilous, and in some instances libellous, comment of a portion of the press. To sum up, an author, solely and only for the publication, ten years ago, of an honest book, which no intelligent and candid person can regard as hurtful to morality, was expelled from office by the Secretary, and held up to public contumely by the newspapers. It remains only to be added here, that the Hon. James Harlan is the gentleman who, upon assuming the control of the Department, published a manifesto, announcing that it was thenceforth to be governed upon the principles of Christian civilization.

This act of expulsion, and all that it encloses, is the outrage to which I referred in the opening sentence of this letter.

I have had the honor, which I esteem a very high one, to know Walt Whitman intimately for several years, and am perfectly conversant with the details of his life and history. Scores and scores of persons, who know him well, can confirm my own report of him, and I have therefore no hesitation in saying that the scandalous assertions of Mr. Harlan, derived from whom I know not, as to his being a bad man, a Free-Lover, &c., belong to the category of those calumnies at

which, as Napoleon said, innocence itself is confounded. A better man in all respects, or one more irreproachable in his relations to the other sex, lives not upon this earth. His is the great goodness, the great chastity of spiritual strength and sanity. I do not believe that from the hour of his infancy, when Lafayette held him in his arms, to the present hour, in which he bends over the last wounded and dying of the war, that any one can say aught of him that does not consort with the largest and truest manliness. I am perfectly aware of the miserable lies which have been put into circulation respecting him, of which the story of his dishonoring an invitation to dine with Emerson, by appearing at the table of the Astor House in a red shirt, and with the manners of a rowdy, is a mild specimen. I know, too, the inferences drawn by wretched fools, who, because they have seen him riding upon the top of an omnibus; or at Pfaff's restaurant; or dressed in rough clothes suitable for his purposes, and only remarkable because the wearer was a man of genius; or mixing freely and lovingly, like Lucretius, like Rabelais, like Francis Bacon, like Rembrandt, like all great students of the world, with low and equivocal and dissolute persons, as well as with those of a different character, must needs set him down as a brute, a scallawag, and a criminal. Mr. Harlan's allegations are of a piece with these. If I could associate the title with a really great person, or if the name of man were not radically superior, I should say that for solid nobleness of character, for native elegance and delicacy of soul, for a courtesy which is the very passion of thoughtful kindness and forbearance, for his tender and paternal respect and manly honor for woman, for love and heroism carried into the pettiest details of life, and for a large and homely beauty of manners, which makes the civilities of parlors fantastic and puerile in comparison, Walt Whitman deserves to be considered the grandest gentleman that treads this continent. I know well the habits and tendencies of his life. They are all simple, sane, domestic; worthy of him as one of an estimable family and a member of society. He is a tender and faithful son, a good brother, a loyal friend, an ardent and devoted citizen. He has been a laborer, working successively as a farmer, a carpenter, a printer. He has been a stalwart editor of the Republican party, and often, in that powerful and nervous prose of which he is master, done yeoman's service for the great cause of human liberty and the imperial conception of the indivisible Union. He has been a visitor of prisons; a protector of fugitive slaves; a constant voluntary nurse, night and day, at the hospitals, from the beginning of the war to the present time; a brother and friend through life to the neglected and the forgotten, the poor, the degraded, the criminal, the outcast; turning away from no man for his guilt, nor woman for her vileness. His is the strongest and truest compassion I have ever known. I remember here the anecdote told me by a witness, of his meeting in a by-street in Boston a poor ruffian, one whom he had known well as an innocent child, now a full-grown youth, vicious far beyond his years, flying to Canada from the pursuit of the police, his sin-trampled features bearing marks of the recent bloody brawl in New York in which, as he supposed, he had killed some one; and having heard his hurried story, freely confided to him, Walt Whitman, separated not from the bad even by his own goodness, with well I know what tender and tranquil feeling for this ruined being, and with a love which makes me think of that love of God which deserts not any creature, quietly at parting, after assisting him from his means, held him for a moment, with his arm around his neck, and, bending to the face, horrible and battered and prematurely old, kissed him on the cheek; and the poor hunted wretch, perhaps for the first time in his low life, receiving a token of love and compassion like a touch from beyond the sun, hastened away in deep dejection, sobbing and in tears. It reminds me of the anecdotes Victor Hugo, in his portraiture of Bishop Myriel, tells, under a thin veil of fiction, of Charles Miolles, the good Bishop of Rennes.—I know not what talisman Walt Whitman carries, unless it be an

unexcluding friendliness and goodness which is felt upon his approach like magnetism; but I know that in the subterranean life of cities, among the worst roughs, he goes safely; and I could recite instances where hands that, in mere wantonness of ferocity, assault anybody, raised against him, have of their own accord been lowered almost as quickly, or, in some cases, been dragged promptly down by others; this, too, I mean, when he and the assaulting gang were mutual strangers. I have seen singular evidence of the mysterious quality which not only guards him, but draws to him with intuition, rapid as light, simple and rude people, as to their natural mate and friend. I remember, as I passed the White House with him one evening, the startled feeling with which I saw the soldier on guard there—a stranger to us both, and with something in his action that curiously proved that he was a stranger—suddenly bring his musket to the “present,” in military salute to him, quickly mingling with this respect due to his colonel, a gesture of greeting with the right hand as to a comrade; grinning, meanwhile, good fellow, with shy, spontaneous affection and deference; his ruddy, broad face glowing in the flare of the lampions. I remember, on another occasion, as I crossed the street with him, the driver of a street car, a stranger, stopping the conveyance, and inviting him to get on and ride with him. Adventures of this kind are frequent, and, “I took a fancy to you,” or, “You look like one of my style,” is the common explanation he gets upon their occurrence. It would be impossible to exaggerate the personal adhesion and strong, simple affection given him, in numerous instances on sight, by multitudes of plain persons—sailors, mechanics, drivers, soldiers, farmers, sempstresses, old people of the past generation, mothers of families—those powerful, unlettered persons, among whom, as he says in his book, he has gone freely, and who never in most cases even suspect as an author him whom they love as a man, and who loves them in return.—His intellectual influence upon many young men and women—spirits of the morning sort, not willing to belong to that intellectual colony of Great Britain which our literary classes compose, nor helplessly tied like them to the old forms—I note as kindred to that of Socrates upon the youth of ancient Attica, or Raleigh upon the gallant young England of his day. It is a power at once liberating, instructing, and inspiring.—His conversation is a university. Those who have heard him in some roused hour, when the full afflatus of his spirit moved him, will agree with me that the grandeur of talk was accomplished. He is known as a passionate lover and powerful critic of the great music and of art. He is deeply cultured by some of the best books, especially the Bible, which he prefers above all other great literature; but principally by contact and communion with things themselves, which literature can only mirror and celebrate. He has travelled through most of the United States, intent on comprehending and absorbing the genius and meaning of his country, that he might do his best to start a literature worthy of her, sprung from her own polity, and tallying her own unexampled magnificence among the nations. To the same end, he has been a long, patient, and laborious student of life, mixing intimately with all varieties of experience and men, with curiosity and with love. He has given his thought, his life, to this beautiful ambition, and, still young, he has grown gray in its service. He has never married; like Giordano Bruno, he has made Thought in the service of his fellow-creatures his *bella donna*, his best beloved, his bride. His patriotism is boundless. It is no intellectual sentiment; it is a personal passion. He performs with scrupulous fidelity and zeal, the duties of a citizen. For eighteen years, not missing once, his ballot has dropped on every national and local election day, and his influence has been ardently given, for the good cause. Of all men I know, his life is most in the life of the nation. I remember, when the first draft was ordered, at a time when he was already performing an arduous and perilous duty as a volunteer attendant upon the wounded in the field—a duty which cost him the only illness

he ever had in his life, and a very severe and dangerous illness it was, the result of poison absorbed in his devotion to the worst cases of the hospital gangrene; and when it would have been the easiest thing in the world to evade duty, for though then only forty-two or three years old, and subject to the draft, he looked a hale sixty, and no enrolling officer would have paused for an instant before his gray hair—I remember, I say, how anxious and careful he was to get his name put on the enrollment lists, that he might stand his chance for martial service. This, too, at a time when so many gentlemen were skulking, dodging, agonizing for substitutes, and practising every conceivable device to escape military duty. What music of speech, though Cicero's own—what scarlet and gold superlatives could adorn or dignify this simple antique trait of private heroism?—I recall his love for little children, for the young, and for very old persons, as if the dawn and the evening twilight of life awakened his deepest tenderness. I recall the affection for him of numbers of young men, and invariably of all good women. Who, knowing him, does not regard him as a man of the highest spiritual culture? I have never known one of greater and deeper religious feeling. To call one like him good, seems an impertinence. In our sweet country phrase, he is one of God's men. And as I write these hurried and broken memoranda—as his strength and sweetness of nature, his moral health, his rich humor, his gentleness, his serenity, his charity, his simple-heartedness, his courage, his deep and varied knowledge of life and men, his calm wisdom, his singular and beautiful boy-innocence, his personal majesty, his rough scorn of mean actions, his magnetic and exterminating anger on due occasions—all that I have seen and heard of him, the testimony of associates, the anecdotes of friends, the remembrance of hours with him that should be immortal, the traits, lineaments, incidents of his life and being—as they come crowding into memory—his seems to me a character which only the heroic pen of Plutarch could record, and which Socrates himself might emulate or envy.

This is the man whom Mr. Harlan charges with having written a bad book. I might ask, How long is it since bad books have been the flower of good lives? How long is it since grape-vines produced thorns or fig-trees thistles? But Mr. Harlan says the book is bad because it is “full of indecent passages.” This allegation has been brought against *Leaves of Grass* before. It has been sounded loud and strong by many of the literary journals of both continents. As criticism it is legitimate. I may condemn the mind or deplore the moral life in which such a criticism has its source; still, as criticism it has a right to existence. But Mr. Harlan, passing the limits of opinion, inaugurates punishment. He joins the band of the hostile verdict; he incarnates their judgment; then, detaching himself, he proceeds to a solitary and signal vengeance. As far as he can have it so, this author, for having written his book shall starve. He shall starve, and his name shall receive a brand. This is the essence of Mr. Harlan's action. It is a dark and serious step to take. Upon what grounds is it taken?

I have carefully counted out from Walt Whitman's poetry the lines, perfectly moral to me, whether viewed in themselves or in the light of their sublime intentions and purport, but upon which ignorant and indecent persons of respectability base their sweeping condemnation of the whole work. Taking *Leaves of Grass*, and the recent small volume, *Drum-Taps* (which was in Mr. Harlan's possession), there are in the whole about nine thousand lines or verses. From these, including matter which I can hardly imagine objectionable to any one, but counting every thing which the most malignant virtue could shrink from, I have culled eighty lines. Eighty lines out of nine thousand! It is a less proportion than one finds in Shakespeare. Upon this so slender basis, rests the whole crazy fabric of American and European slander, and the brutal lever of the Secretary.



Now, what by competent authority is the admitted character of the book in which these lines occur? For, though it is more than probable that Mr. Harlan never heard of the work till the hour of his explorations in the Department, the intellectual hemispheres of Great Britain and America have rung with it from side to side. It has received as extensive a critical notice, I suppose, as has ever been given to a volume. Had it been received only with indifference or derision, I should not have been surprised. In an age in which few breathe the atmosphere of the grand literature—which forgets the superb books and thinks Bulwer moral, and Dickens great, and Thackeray a real satirist—which gives to Macaulay the laurel due to Herodotus, and to Tennyson the crown reserved for Homer, and in which the chairs of criticism seem abandoned to squirts and pedagogues and monks—a mighty poet has little to expect from the literary press save unconcern and mockery. But even under these hard conditions, the tremendous force of this poet has achieved a relative conquest, and the tone of the press denotes his book as not merely great, but illustrious. Even the copious torrents of abuse which have been lavished upon it, have in numerous instances taken the form of tribute to its august and mysterious power, being in fact identical with that still vomited upon Montaigne and Juvenal. On the other hand, eulogy, very lofty and from the highest sources, has spanned it with sunbows. Emerson, our noblest scholar, a name to which Christendom does reverence, a critic of piercing insight and full comprehension, has pronounced it “the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.” How that austere and rare spirit, Thoreau, regarded it, may be partly seen by his last posthumous volume. He thought of it, I have heard, with measureless esteem, ranking it with the vast and gorgeous conceptions of the Oriental bards. It has been reported to me, that unpublished letters, received in this country from some of Europe’s greatest, announce a similar verdict. The *North American Quarterly Review*, unquestionably the highest organ of American letters, in the course of a eulogistic notice of the work, remarking upon the passages which Mr. Harlan has treated as if they were novel in literature, observes: “There is not anything, perhaps (in the book), which modern usage would stamp as more indelicate than are some passages in Homer. There is not a word in it meant to attract readers by its grossness, as there is in half the literature of the last century, which holds its place unchallenged on the tables of our drawing-rooms.” The *London Dispatch*, in a review written by the Rev. W. J. Fox, one of the most distinguished clergymen in England, after commending the poems for “their strength of expression, their fervor, their hearty wholesomeness, their originality and freshness, their singular harmony,” &c., says that, “in the unhesitating frankness of a man who dares to call simplest things by their plain names, conveying also a large sense of the beautiful,” there is involved “a clearer conception of what manly modesty really is, than in any thing we have in all conventional forms of word, deed, or act, so far known of;” and concludes by declaring that “the author will soon make his way into the confidence of his readers, and his poems in time will become a pregnant text-book, from which quotations as sterling as the minted gold will be taken and applied to every form of the inner and the outer life.” The *London Leader*, one of the foremost of the British literary journals, in a review which more nearly approaches perception of the true character and purport of the book, than any I have seen, has the following sentences: “Mr. Emerson recognized the first issue of the *Leaves*, and hastened to welcome the author, then totally unknown. Among other things, said Emerson to the new avatar, ‘I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet *must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start.*’ The last clause was, however, overlooked entirely by the critics, who treated the new author as one self-educated, yet in the rough, unpolished, and owing nothing to instruction. The authority for so treating

the author was derived from himself, who thus described, in one of his poems, his person, character, and name, having omitted the last from the title-page:—

‘Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,  
Disorderly, fleshly, and sensual,’—

and in various other passages, confessed to all the vices, as well as the virtues of man. All this, with intentional wrong-headedness, was attributed by the sapient reviewers to the individual writer, and not to the subjective-hero supposed to be writing. Notwithstanding the word ‘kosmos,’ the writer was taken to be an ignorant man. Emerson perceived at once that there had been a long foreground somewhere or somehow;—not so they. Every page teems with knowledge, with information; but they saw it not, because it did not answer their purpose to see it. . . . . The poem in which the word ‘kosmos’ appears explains in fact the whole mystery—nay, the word itself explains it. The poem is nominally upon himself, but really includes everybody. It begins:—

‘I celebrate myself  
And what I assume, you shall assume;  
For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.’

In a word, WALT WHITMAN represents the *Kosmical man*—he is the ADAMUS of the nineteenth century—not an individual, but MANKIND. AS such, in celebrating himself, he proceeds to celebrate universal humanity in its attributes, and accordingly commences his dithyramb with the five senses, beginning with that of smell. Afterwards, he deals with the intellectual, rational, and moral powers, showing throughout his treatment an intimate acquaintance with Kant’s transcendental method, and perhaps including in his development the whole of the German school, down to Hegel—at any rate, as interpreted by Cousin and others in France, and Emerson in the United States. He certainly includes Fichte, for he mentions the Egotist as the only true philosopher, and consistently identifies himself not only with every man, but with the universe and its Maker; and it is in doing so that the strength of his description consists. It is from such an ideal elevation that he looks down on Good and Evil, regards them as equal, and extends to them the like measure of equity. . . . . Instead, therefore, of regarding these *Leaves of Grass* as a marvel, they seem to us as the most natural product of the American soil. They are certainly filled with an American spirit, breathe the American air, and assert the fullest American freedom.” The passages characterized by the Secretary as “indecent” are, adds the *Leader*, “only so many instances adduced in support of a philosophical principle; not meant for obscenity, but for scientific examples, introduced as they might be in any legal, medical, or philosophical book, for the purpose of instruction.”

I could multiply these excerpts; but here are sufficient specimens of the competent judgments of eminent scholars and divines, testifying to the intellectual and moral grandeur of this work. Let it be remembered that there is nothing in the book that in one form or another is not contained in all great poetic or universal literature. It has nothing either in quantity or quality so offensive as everybody knows is in Shakespeare. All that this poet has done is to mention, without levity, without low language, very seriously, often devoutly, always simply, certain facts in the natural history of man and of life; and sometimes, assuming their sanctity, to use them in illustration or imagery. Far more questionable mention and use of these facts are common to the greatest literature. Shall the presence in a book of eighty lines, similar in character to what every great and noble poetic book contains, be sufficient to shove it below

even the lewd writings of Petronius Arbitrator, the dirty dramas of Shirley, or the scrofulous fiction of Louvet de Couvray—to lump it in with the anonymous lascivious trash spawned in holes and sold in corners, too witless and disgusting for any notice but that of the police—and to entitle its author to treatment such as only the nameless wretches of the very sewers of authorship ought to receive?

If, rising to the utmost cruelty of conception, I can dare add to the calamities of genius a misery so degrading and extreme as to imagine the great authors of the world condemned to clerkships under Mr. Harlan, I can at least mitigate that dream of wretchedness and insult by adding the fancy of their fate under the action of his principles. Let me suppose them there, and he still magnifying the calling of the Secretary into that of the literary headsman. He opens the great book of *Genesis*. Everywhere “indecent passages.” The mother hushes the child, and bids him skip as he reads aloud that first great history. It cannot be read aloud in “drawing-rooms” by “gentlemen” and “ladies.” The freest use of language, the plainest terms, frank mention of forbidden subjects; the story of Onan; of Hagar and Sarai; of Lot and his daughters; of Isaac, Rebekah, and Abimelech; of Jacob and Leah; of Reuben and Bilhah; of Potiphar’s wife and Joseph; tabooed allusion and statement everywhere; no veils, no euphemism, no delicacy, no meal in the mouth anywhere. Out with Moses! The cloven splendor on that awful brow shall not save him.—Mr. Harlan takes up the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The loves of Jupiter and Juno; the dalliance of Achilles and Patroclus with their women; the perfectly frank, undraped reality of Greek life and manners naïvely shown without regard to the feelings of Christian civilizees—horrible! Out with Homer!—Here is Lucretius: Mr. Harlan opens the *De Rerum Natura*, and reads the vast, benign, majestic lines, sad with the shadow of the unintelligible universe upon them; sublime with the tragic problems of the Infinite; august with their noble love and compassion for mankind. But what is this? “*Ut quasi transactis sæpe omnibus rebus,*” &c. And this: “*Morè ferarum, quadrupedumque magis ritu,*” &c. And this: “*Nam mulier prohibet se concipere atque repugnat,*” &c. And this: “*Quod petiere, premunt arcte, faciuntque dolorem,*” &c. Enough. Fine language, fine illustrations, fine precepts, pretty decency! Out with Lucretius! Out with the chief poet of the Tiber side!—Here is Æschylus: a dark magnificence of cloud, all rough with burning gold, which thunders and drips blood! The Greek Shakespeare. The gorgeous and terrible Æschylus! What is this in the *Prometheus* about Jove and Iö? What sort of detail is that which, at the distance of ten years, I remember amazed Mr. Buckley as he translated the *Agamemnon*? What kind of talk is this in the *Chæphori*, in *The Suppliants*, and in the fragments of the comic drama of *The Argians*? Out with Æschylus!—Here is the sublime book of Ezekiel. All the Hebrew grandeur at its fullest is there. But look at this blurt of coarse words, hurled direct as the prophet-mouth can hurl them—this familiar reference to functions and organs voted out of language—this bread for human lips baked with ordure—these details of the scortatory loves of Aholah and Aholibamah. Enough. Dismiss this dreadful majesty of Hebrew poetry. He has no “taste.” He is “indecent.” Out with Ezekiel!—Here is Dante. Open the tremendous pages of the *Inferno*. What is this about the she-wolf Can Grande will kill? What picture is this of strumpet Thais?—ending with the lines—

“Taida è, la puttana che rispose  
Al drudo suo, quando disse: Ho io grazie  
Grandi appo te? Anzi meravigliose.”

What is this, also, in the eighteenth canto?—

“Quivi venimmo, e quindi giù nel fòsso  
Vidi gente attuffata in uno sterco,  
Che dagli uman privati pareo mosso:  
E mentre ch’ io là giù con l’occhio cerco,  
Vidi un col capo sì di merda lordo,  
Che non pareo s’era laico o cherco.”

What is this line at the end of the twenty-first canto, which even John Carlyle flinches from translating, but which Dante did not flinch from writing?—

“Ed egli avea del cul fatto trombetta.”

And look at these lines in the twenty-eighth canto:—

“Già reggia, per mezzul perdere o lulla  
Com’ io vidi un, così non si pertugia,  
Rotto dal mento insin dove si trulla.”

That will do. Dante, too, has “indecent passages.” Out with Dante!—Here is the book of Job: the vast Arabian landscape, the picturesque pastoral details of Arabian life, the last tragic immensity of Oriental sorrow, the whole overarching sky of Oriental piety, are here. But here also the inevitable “indecency.” Instead of the virtuous fiction of the tansy-bed, Job actually has the indelicacy to state how man is born—even mentions the belly; talks about the gendering of bulls and the miscarriage of cows; uses rank idioms; and in the thirty-first chapter especially, indulges in a strain of thought and expression which it is amazing does not bring down upon him, even at this late date, the avalanches of our lofty and pure Reviews. Here is certainly “an immoral poet.” Out with Job!—Here is Plutarch, prince of biographers, and Herodotus, flower of historians. What have we now? Traits of character not to be mentioned, incidents of conduct, accounts of manners, minute details of customs, which our modern historical dandies would never venture upon recording. Out with Plutarch and Herodotus!—Here is Tacitus. What statement of crimes that ought not to be hinted! Does the man gloat over such things? What dreadful kisses are these of Agrippina to Nero—the mother to the son! Out with Tacitus!—and since there are books that ought to be publicly burned, by all means let the stern grandeur of that rhetoric be lost in flame.—Here is Shakespeare: “indecent passages” everywhere—every drama, every poem thickly inlaid with them; all that men do displayed; sexual acts treated lightly, jested about, mentioned obscenely; the language never bolted; slang, gross puns, lewd words, in profusion. Out with Shakespeare!—Here is the *Canticle of Canticles*: beautiful, voluptuous poem of love literally, whatever be its mystic significance; glowing with the color, odorous with the spices, melodious with the voices of the East; sacred and exquisite and pure with the burning chastity of passion which completes and exceeds the snowy chastity of virgins. This to me, but what to the Secretary? Can he endure that the female form should stand thus in a poem, disrobed, unveiled, bathed in erotic splendor? Look at these voluptuous details, this expression of desire, this amorous tone and glow, this consecration and perfume lavished upon the sensual. No! Out with Solomon!—Here is Isaiah. The grand thunder-roll of that righteousness, like the eternal roar of God above the guilty world, utters coarse words. Amidst the bolted lightnings of that sublime denunciation, coarse thoughts, indelicate figures, indecent allusion, flash upon the sight, like gross imagery in a midnight landscape. Out with Isaiah!—Here is Montaigne. Open those great, those virtuous pages of the unflinching reporter of Man; the soul all truth and daylight, all candor, probity, sincerity, reality,

eyesight. A few glances will suffice. Cant and vice and snuffle have groaned over these pages before. Out with Montaigne!—Here is Hafiz, the Anacreon of Persia, but more: a banquet of wine in a garden of roses, the nightingales singing, the laughing revellers high with festal joy; but a heavenly flame burns on every brow; a tone not of this sphere is in all the music, all the laughter, all the songs; a light of the Infinite trembles over every chalice and rests on every flower; and all the garden is divine. Still, when Hafiz cries out, “Bring me wine, and bring the famed veiled beauty, the Princess of the brothel,” &c., or issues similar orders, Mr. Harlan, whose virtue does not understand or endure such metaphors, must deal sternly with this cosmic man of Persia. Out with Hafiz!—Here is Virgil, ornate and splendid poet of old Rome; a master with a greater pupil, Alighieri! a bard above whose ashes Boccaccio kneels a trader, and arises a soldier of mankind; but he must lose those fadeless chaplets, the undying green of a noble fame; for here in the *Æneid* is “*Dixerat; et niveis hinc atque hinc Diva lacertis,*” &c., and here in the *Georgics* is “*Quo rapiat sitiens Venerem, interiusque recondat,*” &c., and there are other verses like these. Out with Virgil!—Here is Swedenborg. Open this poem in prose, the *Conjugal Love*—to me, a temple, though in ruins; the sacred fane, clothed in mist, filled with moonlight, of a great though broken mind. What spittle of critic epithets stains all here? “Lewd,” “sensual,” “lecherous,” “coarse,” “licentious,” &c. Of course these judgments are final. There is no appeal from the tobacco-juice of an expectorating and disdainful virtue. Out with Swedenborg!—Here is Goethe: the horrified squealing of prudes is not yet silent over pages of *Wilhelm Meister*; that high and chaste hook, the *Elective Affinities*, still pumps up oaths from clergymen; Walpurgis has hardly ceased its uproar over *Faust*. Out with Goethe!—Here is Byron: grand, dark poet; a great spirit—a soul like the ocean; generous lover of America; fiery trumpet of liberty; a sword for the human cause in Greece; a torch for the human mind in *Cain*; a life that redeemed its every fault by taking a side, which was the human side; tempest of scorn in his first poem, tempest of scorn and laughter in his last poem, only against the things that wrong man; vast bud of the Infinite that Death alone prevented from its vaster flower; immense, seminal, electrical, dazzling Byron.—But *Beppo*—O! But *Don Juan*—O fie! Not to mention the Countess Guiccioli—ah, me! Prepare quickly the yellow envelope, and out with Byron!—Here is Cervantes: open *Don Quixote*, paragon of romances, highest result of Spain, best and sufficient reason for her life among the nations, a laughing novel which is a weeping poem. But talk such as this of Sancho Panza and Tummas Cecial under the cork-trees, and these coarse stories and bawdy words and this free and gross comedy—is it to be endured? Out with Cervantes!—Here is another, a sun of literature, moving in a vast orbit with dazzling plenitudes of power and beauty; the one only modern European poet and novelist worthy to rank with the first; permanent among the fleeting; a demigod of letters among the pigmies; a soul of the antique strength and sadness, worthy to stand as the representative of the high thought and hopes of the nineteenth century—Victor Hugo! Now open *Les Misérables*. See the great passages which the American translator softens and the English translator tears away. Open this other book of his, *William Shakespeare*, a book with only one grave fault, the omission of the words “A Poem” from the title-page; a book which is the courageous arch, the comprehending sky of criticism, but which no American publisher will dare to issue, or, if he does, will expurgate. Out with Hugo, of course!—Here is Juvenal, terrible and splendid fountain of all satire; inspiration of all just censure; exemplar of all noble rage at baseness; satirist and moralist sublimed into the poet; the scowl of the unclouded noon above the low streets of folly and of sin. But what he withers, he also shows. The sun-stroke of his poetry reveals what it kills. Juvenal tells all. His fidelity of exposure is frightful. Mr. Harlan

would make short work of him. Out with Juvenal!—Open the divine *Apocalypse*. What words are these among the thunderings and lightnings and voices? Is this a poem to be read aloud in parlors (for such appears to be the test of propriety and purity)? At least, John might have been a little more choice in language. Some of these texts are “indecent.” Yes, indeed! John must go.—Here is Spenser. Encyclopædic poet of the visioned chivalry. It is all there. Amadis, Esplandian, Tirante the White, Palmerin of England, all those Paladin romances were but the leaves: this is the flower. A lost dream of valor, chastity, courtesy, glory—a dream that marks an age of human history—glimmers here, far in these depths, and makes this unexplored obscurity divine. “But is the *Faëry Queen* such a book as you would wish to put into the hands of a lady?” What a question! Has it not been expurgated? Out with Spenser!—Here is another, a true soldier of the human emancipation; one who smites amidst uproars of laughter; the master of Titanic farce; a whirlwind and earthquake of derision—Rabelais. A nice one for Mr. Harlan! One glimpse at the chapter which explains why the miles lengthen as you leave Paris, or at the details of the birth and nurture of Gargantua, will suffice. Out with Rabelais—out with the great jester of France, as Lord Bacon calls him!—And here is Lord Bacon himself, in one of whose pages you may read, done from the Latin by Spedding into a magnificent golden thunder of English, the absolute defence of the free spirit of the great authors, coupled with stern rebuke to the spirit that would pick and choose, as dastard and effeminate. Out with Lord Bacon! Not him only, not these only, not only the writers are under the ban. Here is Phidias, gorgeous sculptor in gold and ivory, giant dreamer of the Infinite in marble; but he will not use the fig-leaf. Here is Rembrandt, who paints the Holland landscape, the Jew, the beggar, the burgher, in lights and glooms of Eternity; and his pictures have been called “indecent.” Here is Mozart, his music rich with the sumptuous color of all sunsets; and it has been called “sensual.” Here is Michael Angelo, who makes art tremble with a new and strange afflatus, and gives Europe novel and sublime forms that tower above the centuries, and accost the Greek; and his works have been called “bestial.” Out with them all!—Now, except Virgil for vassalage to literary models, and for grave and sad falsehood to liberty; except Goethe for his lack of the final ecstasy of self-surrender which completes a poet, and for coldness to the great mother—one’s country; except Spenser for his remoteness, and Byron for his immaturity, and there is not one of those I have named that does not belong to the first order of human intellect. But no need to make discriminations here; they are all great; they have all striven; they have all served. Moses, Homer, Lucretius, Æschylus, Ezekiel, Dante, Job, Plutarch, Herodotus, Tacitus, Shakespeare, Solomon, Isaiah, Montaigne, Hafiz, Virgil, Swedenborg, Goethe, Byron, Cervantes, Hugo, Juvenal, John, Spenser, Rabelais, Bacon, Phidias, Rembrandt, Mozart, Angelo:—these are among the demi-gods of human thought; the souls that have loved and suffered for the race; the light-bringers, the teachers, the lawgivers, the consolers, the liberators, the inspired inspirers of mankind; the noble and gracious beings who, in the service of humanity, have borne every cross and earned every crown. There is not one of them that is not sacred in the eyes of thoughtful men. But not one of them does the rotten taste and morals of the nineteenth century spare! Not one of them is qualified to render work for bread under this Secretary! Do I err? Do I exaggerate? I write without access to the books I mention—(it is fitting that this piece of insolent barbarism should have been committed in almost the only important American city which is without a public library!)—with the exception of three or four volumes which I happen to have by me, I am obliged to rely for my statements on the memory of youthful readings, eight or ten years ago; but name me one book of the first order in which such passages as I refer to do not occur! Tell me who can—what poet of the first grade escapes this brand, “immoral,” or

this spittle, “indecent”! If the great books are not, in the point under consideration, in the same moral category as *Leaves of Grass*, then why, either in translation or in the originals, either by a bold softening which dissolves the author’s meaning, or by absolute excision, are they nearly all expurgated? Answer me that. By one process or the other, Brizeux, Cary, Wright, Cayley, Carlyle, everybody, expurgates Dante; Langhorne and others expurgate Plutarch; Potter and others expurgate Æschylus; Gifford, Anthon, and others expurgate Juvenal; Creech, Watson, and others expurgate Lucretius; Bowdler and others expurgate Shakespeare; Nott (I believe it is) expurgates Hafiz; Wraxall and Wilbour expurgate Hugo; Kirkland, Hart, and others expurgate Spenser; somebody expurgates Virgil; somebody expurgates Byron; the Oxford scholars dilute Tacitus; Lord Derby expurgates Homer, besides making him as ridiculous as the plucked cock of Diogenes in translation; several hands expurgate Goethe; and Archbishop Tillotson in design expurgates Moses, Ezekiel, Solomon, Isaiah, St. John, and all the others—a job which Dr. Noah Webster executes, but, thank God, cannot popularize. What book is spared? Nothing but a chain of circumstance, which seems divinely ordained, saves us the unmutated Bible. Nearly every other great book bleeds. When one is not expurgated, the balance is restored by its being cordially abused. Thanks to the splendid conscience and courage of Mr. Wight, we can read Montaigne in English without the omission of a single word! Thanks also to Motteux and others, Cervantes has gone untouched, and we have not as yet a family Rabelais. Neither have we as yet a family Mankind nor a family Universe; but this is an oversight which will, doubtless, be repaired in time. God will also, doubtless, be expurgated whenever it is possible. Why not? One step to this end is taken in the expurgation of genius, which is His second manifestation, as Nature is His first! Go on, gentlemen! You will yet have things as “moral” as you desire!

I am aware that so far as his opinion, not his act, is concerned, Mr. Harlan, however unintelligently, represents to some extent the shallow conclusions of his age; and I know it will be said, that if the great books contain these passages, they ought to be expurgated. It is not my design to endeavor to put a quart into people who only hold a gill, nor would I waste time in endeavoring to convert a large class of persons whom I once heard Walt Whitman describe, with his usual Titanic richness and strength of phrase, as “the immutable granitic pudding-heads of the world.” But there is a better class than these; and I am filled with measureless amazement, that persons of high intelligence, living to the age of maturity, do not perceive, at least, the immense and priceless scientific and human *uses* of such passages, and the consequent necessity, transcending and quashing all minor considerations, of having them where they are. But look at these sad sentences—a complete and felicitous statement of the whole modern doctrine—in the pages of a man I love and revere: “The literature of three centuries ago is not decent to be read; we expurgate it. Within a hundred years, woman has become a reader, and for that reason, as much or more than any thing else, literature has sprung to a higher level. No need now to expurgate all you read.” He goes on to argue that literature in the next century will be richer than in the classic epochs, because woman will contribute to it as an author—her contribution, I infer, to be of the kind that will not need expurgating. These, I repeat, are sad sentences. If they are true, Bowdler is right to expurgate Shakespeare, and Noah Webster the Bible. But no, they are not true! I welcome woman into art; but when she comes there grandly, she will not come either as expurgator or creator of emasculate or partial forms. Woman, grand in art, is Rosa Bonheur, painting with fearless pencil the surly, sublime Jovian bull, equipped for masculine use; painting the powerful, ramping stallion in his amorous pride; not weakly or meanly flinching from the full celebration of what God has made. Woman, grand

in art, will come creating in forms, however novel, the absolute, the permanent, the real, the evil and the good, as Æschylus, as Cervantes, as Shakespeare before her; with sex, with truth, with universality, without omissions or concealments. And woman, as the ideal reader of literature, is not the indelicate prude, flushing and squealing over some frank page; it is that high and beautiful soul, Marie de Gournay, devoutly absorbing the work of her master, Montaigne; finding it all great; greatly comprehending, greatly accepting it all; fronting its license and grossness without any of the livid shuddering of Puritans; and looking on the book in the same universal and kindly spirit as its author looked upon the world. Woman reading otherwise than thus—shrinking from Apuleius, from Rabelais, from Aristophanes, from Shakespeare, from even Wycherley, or Petronius, or Aretin, or Shirley—is less than man, is not ideal, not strong, not nobly good, but petty, and effeminate, and mean. And not for her, nor by her, nor by man, do I assent to the expurgation of the great books. Literature cannot spring to a higher level than theirs. Alas! it has sprung to a lower. The level of the great books is the Infinite, the Absolute. To contain all, by containing the premise, the truth, the idea and feeling of all; to tally the universe by profusion, variety, reality, mystery, enclosure, power, terror, beauty, service; to be great to the utmost conceivability of greatness—what higher level than this can literature spring to? Up, on the highest summit, stand such works, never to be surpassed, never to be supplanted. Their indecency is not that of the vulgar; their vulgarity is not that of the low. Their evil, if it be evil, is not there for nothing—it serves; at the base of it is Love.—Every poet of the highest quality is, in the masterly coinage of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, a kosmos. His work, like himself, is a second world, full of contrarities, strangely harmonized, and moral indeed, but only as the world is moral. Shakespeare is all good, Rabelais is all good, Montaigne is all good; not because all the thoughts, the words, the manifestations are so, but because at the core, and permeating all, is an ethic intention—a love which, through mysterious, indirect, subtle, seemingly absurd, often terrible and repulsive means, seeks to uplift, and never to degrade. It is the spirit in which authorship is pursued, as Augustus Schlegel has said, that makes it either an infamy or a virtue; and the spirit of the great authors, no matter what their letter, is one with that which pervades the creation. In mighty love, with implements of pain and pleasure, of good and evil, Nature develops man; genius also, in mighty love, with implements of pain and pleasure, of good and evil, develops man; no matter what the means, that is the end. Tell me not, then, of the indecent passages of the great poets! The world, which is the poem of God, is full of indecent passages! “Shall there be evil in a city and the Lord hath not done it?” shouts Amos. “I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I, the Lord, do all these things,” thunders Isaiah. “This,” says Coleridge, “is the deep abyss of the mystery of God.” Yes, and it is the profound of the mystery of genius also! Evil is part of the economy of genius, as it is part of the economy of God.—Gentle reviewers endeavor to find excuses for the freedoms of geniuses. “It is to prove that they were above conventionalities.” “It is referable to the age.” “The age permitted a degree of coarseness,” &c. “Shakespeare’s indecencies are the result of his age.” O Ossa on Pelion, mount piled on mount, of error and folly! What has genius, spirit of the absolute and the eternal, to do with definitions of position, or conventionalities, or the age? Genius puts indecencies into its works, because God puts them into His world. Whatever the special reason in each case, this is the general reason in all cases. They are here, because they are there. That is the eternal why.—No; Alphonso of Castile thought, that if he had been consulted at the Creation, he could have given a few hints to the Almighty. Not I. I play Alphonso neither to genius nor to God.



—What is this poem, for the giving of which to America and the world, and for that alone, its author has been dismissed with ignominy from a Government office? It is a poem which Schiller might have hailed as the noblest specimen of naïve literature, worthy of a place beside Homer. It is, in the first place, a work purely and entirely American, autochthonic, sprung from our own soil; no savor of Europe nor of the past, nor of any other literature in it; a vast carol of our own land, and of its Present and Future; the strong and haughty psalm of the Republic. There is not one other book, I care not whose, of which this can be said. I weigh my words, and have considered well. Every other book by an American author implies, both in form and substance, I cannot even say the European, but the British mind. The shadow of Temple Bar and Arthur's Seat lies dark on all our letters. Intellectually, we are still a dependency of Great Britain, and one word—colonial—comprehends and stamps our literature. In no literary form, except our newspapers, has there been any thing distinctively American. I note our best books—the works of Jefferson, the romances of Brockden Brown, the speeches of Webster, Everett's rhetoric, the divinity of Channing, some of Cooper's novels, the writings of Theodore Parker, the poetry of Bryant, the masterly law arguments of Lysander Spooner, the miscellanies of Margaret Fuller, the histories of Hildreth, Bancroft and Motley, Ticknor's *History of Spanish Literature*, Judd's *Margaret*, the political treatises of Calhoun, the rich, benignant poems of Longfellow, the ballads of Whittier, the delicate songs of Philip Pendleton Cooke, the weird poetry of Edgar Poe, the wizard tales of Hawthorne, Irving's *Knickerbocker*, Delia Bacon's splendid sibyllic book on Shakespeare, the political economy of Carey, the prison letters and immortal speech of John Brown, the lofty patrician eloquence of Wendell Phillips, and those diamonds of the first water, the great clear essays and greater poems of Emerson. This literature has often commanding merits, and much of it is very precious to me; but in respect to its national character, all that can be said is that it is tinged, more or less deeply, with America; and the foreign model, the foreign standards, the foreign culture, the foreign ideas, dominate over it all. At most, our best books were but struggling beams; behold in *Leaves of Grass* the immense and absolute sunrise! It is all our own! The nation is in it! In form a series of chants, in substance it is an epic of America. It is distinctively and utterly American. Without model, without imitation, without reminiscence, it is evolved entirely from our own polity and popular life. Look at what it celebrates and contains!—hardly to be enumerated without sometimes using the powerful, wondrous phrases of its author, so indissoluble are they with the things described. The essences, the events, the objects of America; the myriad varied landscapes; the teeming and giant cities; the generous and turbulent populations; the prairie solitudes; the vast pastoral plateaus; the Mississippi; the land dense with villages and farms; the habits, manners, customs; the enormous diversity of temperatures; the immense geography; the red aborigines passing away, "charging the water and the land with names;" the early settlements; the sudden uprising and defiance of the Revolution; the august figure of Washington; the formation and sacredness of the Constitution; the pouring in of the emigrants; the million-masted harbors; the general opulence and comfort; the fisheries, and whaling, and gold-digging, and manufactures, and agriculture; the dazzling movement of new States, rushing to be great; Nevada rising, Dakota rising, Colorado rising; the tumultuous civilization around and beyond the Rocky Mountains thundering and spreading; the Union impregnable; feudalism in all its forms forever tracked and assaulted; liberty deathless on these shores; the noble and free character of the people; the equality of male and female; the ardor, the fierceness, the friendship, the dignity, the enterprise, the affection, the courage, the love of music, the passion for personal freedom; the mercy and justice and compassion of the people; the popular faults and vices and crimes; the

deference of the President to the private citizen; the image of Christ forever deepening in the public mind as the brother of despised and rejected persons; the promise and wild song of the future; the vision of the Federal mother, seated with more than antique majesty in the midst of her many children; the pouring glories of the hereafter; the vistas of splendor, incessant and branching; the tremendous elements, breeds, adjustments of America—with all these, with more, with every thing transcendent, amazing, and new, undimmed by the pale cast of thought, and with the very color and brawn of actual life, the whole gigantic epic of our continental being unwinds in all its magnificent reality in these pages. To understand Greece, study the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; study *Leaves of Grass* to understand America. Her Democracy is there. Would you have a text-book of Democracy? The writings of Jefferson are good; De Tocqueville is better; but the great poet always contains historian and philosopher—and to know the comprehending spirit of this country, you shall question these insulted pages. Yet this vast and patriotic celebration and presentation of all that is our own, is but a part of this tremendous volume. Here in addition is thrown in poetic form, a philosophy of life, rich, subtle, composite, ample, adequate to these great shores. Here are presented superb types of models of manly and womanly character for the future of this country, athletic, large, naïve, free, dauntless, haughty, loving, nobly carnal, nobly spiritual, equal in body and soul, acceptive and tolerant as Nature, generous, cosmopolitan, above all, religious. Here are erected standards, drawn from the circumstances of our case, by which not merely our literature, but all our performance, our politics, art, behavior, love, conversation, dress, society, every thing belonging to our lives and their conduct, will be shaped and recreated. A powerful afflatus from the Infinite has given this book life. A voice which is the manliest of human voices sounds through it all. In it is the strong spirit which will surely mould our future. Mark my words: its sentences will yet clinch the arguments of statesmen; its precepts will be the laws of the people! From the beams of this seminal sun will be generated, with tropical luxuriance, the myriad new forms of thought and life in America. And in view of the national character and national purpose of this work—in view of its vigorous re-enforcement and service to all that we hold most precious—I make the claim here, that so far from defaming and persecuting its author, the attitude of an American statesman or public officer toward him should be to the highest degree friendly and sustaining.

Beyond his country, too, this poet serves the world. He refutes by his example the saying of Goethe, one of those which stain that noble fame with baseness, that a great poet cannot be patriotic; and he dilates to a universal use which redoubles the splendors of his volume, and makes it dear to all that is human. I am not its authorized interpreter, and can only state, at the risk of imperfect expression, and perhaps error, what its meanings and purpose seem to me. But I see that, in his general intention, the author has aimed to express that most common but wondrous thing—that strange assemblage of soul, body, intellect—beautiful, mystical, terrible, limited, boundless, ill-assorted, contradictory, yet singularly harmonized—a Human Being, a single separate Identity, a Man,—himself; but himself typically, and in his universal being. This he has done with perfect candor, including the bodily attributes and organs, as necessary component parts of the creation. Every thinking person should see the value and use of such a presentation of human nature as this. I also see—and it is from these parts of the book that much of the misunderstanding and offence arises—that this poet seeks in subtle ways to rescue from the keeping of blackguards and debauchees, to which it has been abandoned, and to redeem to noble thought and use, the great element of amativeness or sexuality, with all its acts and organs. Sometimes by direct assertion, sometimes by implication, he rejects the prevailing admission that this element is vile; declares its natural or normal manifestation to be

sacred and unworthy shame; awards it an equal but not superior sanctity with the other elements that compose man; and illustrates his doctrine and sets his example, by applying this element, with all that appertains to it, to use as part of the imagery of poetry. Then, besides, diffused like an atmosphere throughout the poem, tincturing all its quality, and giving it that sacerdotal and prophetic character which makes it a sort of American Bible, is the pronounced and ever-recurring assertion of the divinity of all things. In a spirit like that of the Egyptian priesthood, who wore the dung-beetle in gold on their crests, perhaps as a symbol of the sacredness of even the lowest forms of life, the poet celebrates all the creation as noble and holy—the meanest and lowest parts of it, as well as the most lofty; all equally projections of the Infinite; all emanations of the creative life of God. Perpetual hymns break from him in praise of the divineness of the universe: he sees a halo around every shape, however low; and life in all its forms inspires a rapture of worship.

How some persons can think a book of this sort bad, is clearer to me than it used to be. Swedenborg says that to the devils, perfumes are stinks. I happen to know that some of the vilest abuse that it has received, has come from men of the lowest possible moral life. It is not so easy to understand how some persons of culture and judgment can fail to perceive its literary greatness. Making fair allowance for faults, which no great work, from *Hamlet* to the world itself, is perhaps without, the book, in form as in substance, seems to me a masterpiece. Never in literature has there been more absolute conceptive or presentative power. The forms and shows of things are bodied forth so that one may say they become visible, and are alive. Here, in its grandest, freest use, is the English language, from its lowest compass to the top of the key; from the powerful, rank idiom of the streets and fields, to the last subtlety of academic speech—ample, various, telling, luxuriant, pictorial, final, conquering; absorbing from other languages to its own purposes their choicest terms; its rich and daring composite defying grammar; its most incontestable and splendid triumphs achieved, as Jefferson notes of the superb Latin of Tacitus, in haughty scorn of the rules of grammarians. Another singular excellence is the metre—entirely novel, free, flexible, melodious, corresponsive to the thought; its noble proportions and cadences reminding of winds and waves, and the vast elemental sounds and motions of Nature, and having an equal variety and liberty. I have heard this brought into disparaging comparison with the metres of Tennyson; the poetry also disparaged in the same connection. I hardly know what to think of people who can talk in this way. To say nothing of the preference, the mere parallel is only less ludicrous and arbitrary than would be one between Moore and Isaiah. Tennyson is an exquisite and sumptuous poet of the third, perhaps the fourth order; as certainly below Milton and Virgil as Milton and Virgil are certainly below Æschylus and Homer. His full-fluted verbal music, which is one of his chief merits, is of an extraordinary beauty. But in this respect the comparison between him and Walt Whitman is that between melody and harmony—between a song by Franz Abt or Schubert and a symphony by Beethoven. Speaking generally, and not with exact justice to either, the words of Tennyson, irrespective of their sense, make music to the ear; while the sense of Walt Whitman's words makes a loftier music in the mind. For a music, perfect and vast, subtle and more than auricular—woven not alone from the verbal sounds and rhythmic cadences, but educed by the thought and feeling of the verse from the reader's soul, by the power of a spell few hold—I know of nothing superior to “By the bivouac's fitful flame,” the “Hymn of Dead Soldiers,” the “Spirit whose work is done,” the “Arming of Mannahatta,” or that most mournful and noble of all love songs, “Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd,” in *Drum-Taps*; or the “Word out of the Sea,” the “Elemental Drifts,” the entire section entitled “Walt Whitman,” the hymn

commencing "Splendor of falling day," or the great salute to the French Revolution of '93, entitled "France," in *Leaves of Grass*. If these are not examples of great structural harmony as well as of the highest poetry, there are none in literature. And if all these were wanting, there is a single poem in the late volume, *Drum-Taps*, which, if the author had never written another line, would be sufficient to place him among the chief poets of the world. I do not refer to "Chanting the Square Deific"—though that also would be sufficient, in its incomparable breadth and grandeur of conception and execution, to establish the highest poetic reputation—but to the strain commemorating the death of the beloved President, commencing, "When lilacs last in the door-yard bloomed"—a poem whose rich and sacred beauty and rapture of tender religious passion, spreading aloft into the sublime, leave it unique and solitary in literature, and will make it the chosen and immortal hymn of Death forever. Emperors might well elect to die, could their memories be surrounded with such a requiem, which, next to the grief and love of the people, is the grandest and the only grand funeral music poured around Lincoln's bier. In the face of works like these, testimony of the presence on earth of a mighty soul, I am thunderstruck at the low tone of the current criticism. Even from eminent persons, who ought to know how to measure literature, and who are friendly to this author, I hear, mingled with inadequate praise, the self-same censures—the very epithets, even, which Voltaire, not more ridiculously, passed upon Shakespeare. Take care, gentlemen! What you, like Voltaire, take for rudeness, chaos, barbarism, lack of form, may be the sacred and magnificent wildness of a virgin world of poetry, all unlike these fine and ordered Tennysonian rose-gardens which are your ideal, but excelling these as the globe excels the parterre. I, at any rate, am not deceived. I see how swiftly the smart, bright, conventional standards of modern criticism would assign Isaiah or Ezekiel to the limbo of abortions. I see of how limited worth are the wit and scholarship of these *Saturday Reviews* and *London Examiners*, with their *doppelgangers* on this side of the Atlantic, by the treatment some poetic masterpiece of China or Hindustan receives when it falls into their hands for judgment. Any thing not cast in modern conventional forms, any novel or amazing beauty, strikes them as comic. Read Mr. Buckley's notes, even at this late day, on a poet so incredibly great as Æschylus. Read an Æschylus illustrated by reference to Nicholas Nickleby, Mrs. Bombazine, and Mantalini, and censured in contemptuous, jocular, or flippant annotations—this, too, by an Oxford scholar of rank and merit! No wonder *Leaves of Grass* goes underrated or unperceived. Modern criticism is Voltaire estimating the *Apocalypse* as "dirt" and roaring with laughter over the leaves of Ezekiel. Why? Because this poetry has not the court tread, the perfume, the royal purple of Racine—only its own wild and formless incomparable sublimity. Voltaire was an immense and noble person; only it was not part of his greatness to be able to see that other greatness which transcends common-sense as the Infinite transcends the Finite. These children of Voltaire, also, who make the choirs of modern criticism, have great merits. But to justly estimate poetry of the first order, is not one of them. "Shakespeare's *Tempest*, or the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or any such damned nonsense as that," said one of this school to me a month ago. "Look at that perpendicular grocery sign-board: the letters all fantastic and reading from top to bottom: a mere oddity; that is *Leaves of Grass*," said another, a person of eminence. No, gentlemen! you and I differ. I see, very clearly, the nature of a work like this, the warmest praise of which, not to mention your blame, has been meagre and insufficient to the last degree, and which centuries must ponder before they can sufficiently honor. You have had your say; let me have at least the beginning of mine: Nothing that America had before in literature, rose above construction: this is a creation. Idle, and worse than idle, is any attempt to place this author either among or below the poets of the day. They

are but singers; he is a bard. In him you have one of that mighty brotherhood who, more than statesmen, mould the future: who, as Fletcher of Saltoun said, when they make the songs of a nation, it matters not who make the laws. I class him boldly, and the future will confirm my judgment, among the great creative minds of the world. By a quality almost incommunicable, which makes its possessor, no matter what his diversity or imperfections, equal with the Supremes of art, and by the very structure of his mind, he belongs there. His place is beside Shakespeare, Æschylus, Cervantes, Dante, Homer, Isaiah—the bards of the last ascent, the brothers of the radiant summit. And if any man think this estimate extravagant, I leave him, as Lord Bacon says, to the gravity of that judgment and pass on. Enough for me to pronounce this book grandly good and supremely great. Clamor, on the score of its morality, is nothing but a form of turpitude; denial of its greatness is nothing but an insanity; and the roar of Sodom and the laughter of Bedlam shall not, by a hair's breadth, swerve my verdict.

As for those passages which have been so strangely interpreted, I have to say that nothing but the horrible inanity of prudery, to which civilization has become subject, and which affects even many good persons, could cloud and distort their palpable innocence and nobleness. What chance has an author to a reasonable interpretation of such utterances in an age when squeamishness, the Siamese twin-brother of indelicacy, is throned as the censor of all life? Look at the nearest, the commonest and homeliest evidences of the abyss into which we have fallen! Here in my knowledge is an estimable family which, when the baby playing on the floor kicked up its skirts, I have repeatedly seen rush *en masse* to pull down the immodest petticoat. Here is a lady whose shame of her body is such, that she will not disrobe in the presence of one of her own sex, and thinks it horrible to sleep at night without being swaddled in half her garments. Everywhere you see women perpetually glancing to be sure their skirts are quite down; twisting their heads over their shoulders, like some of the damned in Dante, to get a rear view; drawing in their feet if so much as the toe happens to protrude beyond the hem of the gown, and in various ways betraying a morbid consciousness which is more offensive than positive immodesty. When I went to the hospital, I saw one of those pretty and good girls, who in muslin and ribbons ornament the wards, and are called nurses, pick up her skirts and skurry away, flushing hectic, with averted face, because as she passed a cot the poor fellow who lay there happened, in his uneasy turnings, to thrust part of a manly leg from beneath the coverlid. I once heard Emerson severely censured in a private company, five or six persons present, and I the only dissenting voice, because in one of his essays he had used the word "spermiatic." When Tennyson published the *Idyls of the King*, some of the journals in both America and England, and several persons in my own hearing, censured the weird and magnificent *Vivien*, one of his finest poems, as "immoral" and "vulgar." When Charles Sumner, in the debate on Louisiana, characterized the new-formed State as "a seven months' child begotten by the bayonet, in criminal conjunction with the spirit of caste"—a stroke of absolute genius—he was censured by the public prints, and reminded that there were ladies in the gallery! Lately the London *Observer*, one of the most eminent of the British journals, in a long and labored editorial on the bathing at Margate, denounced the British wives and matrons in the severest terms for sitting on the beach when men were bathing in "slight bathing-dresses" (it was not even pretended that the men were nude)—and even went the length of demanding of the civil authorities that they should invoke the interference of Parliament to stop this scandal! These are fair minor specimens of the prudery, worse than vice, but also the concomitant of the most shocking vice, which prevails everywhere. Its travesty is the dressing in pantalettes the "limbs" of the piano; its insolent tragi-comedy is the expulsion of Shakespeare from office because he

writes “indecent passages;” its tragedy is the myriad results of wrong and crime and ruin, carried into all the details of every relation of life.

A civilization in which such things as I have mentioned can be thought or done, is guilty to the core. It is not purity, it is impurity, and of the shallowest kind, which calls clothes more decent than the naked body—thus inane conferring upon the work of the tailor or milliner a modesty denied to the work of God. It is not innocent but guilty thought which attaches shame, secrecy, baseness, and horror to great and august parts and functions of humanity. The tacit admission everywhere prevalent that portions of the human physiology are base; that the amative feelings and acts of the sexes, even when hallowed by marriage, are connected with a low sensuality; and that these, with such subjects or occurrences as the conception and birth of children, are to be absconded from, blushed at, concealed, ignored, withheld from education, and in every way treated as if they belonged to the category of sins against Nature, is not only in itself a contemptible insanity, but a main source of unspeakable personal and social evil. From the morbid state of mind which such a theory and practice must induce, are spawned a thousand guilty actions of every description and degree. There is no occurrence in the whole vast and diversified range of sexual evil, from the first lewd thought in the mind of the budding child, the very suspicion of which makes the parent tremble, down to the last ghastly and bloody spasm of lust which rends its hapless victim in some rusurban woodland, that is not fed mainly from this mystery and mother of abominations to whose care civilization has remitted the entire subject. The poet who, in the spirit of that divine utility which marked the first great bards and will mark the last, seeks to make literature remediate to an estate like this, works in the best interests of his country and his fellow-beings, and deserves their gratitude. This is what Walt Whitman has done. Directly and indirectly, in forms as various as the minds he seeks to influence; in frank opposition to the great sexual falsehood by which we are ruled and ruined, he has thrown into civilization a conception intended to be slowly and insensibly absorbed, and to ultimately appear in results of good—the conception of the individual as a divine democracy of essences, powers, attributes, functions, organs—all equal, all sacred, all consecrate to noble use; the sexual part, the same as the rest; no more a subject for mystery or shame or secrecy than the intellectual or the manual or the alimentary or the locomotive part—divinely common-place as head, or hand, or stomach, or foot; and, though sacred, to be regarded as so ordinary that it shall be employed, the same as any other part, for the purposes of literature—an idea which he exemplifies in his poetry by a metaphorical use which it is a deep disgrace to any intellect to misunderstand. This is his lesson. This is one of the central ideas which rule the myriad teeming play of his volume, and interpret it as a law of Nature interprets the complex play of facts which proceeds from it. This, then, is not license, but thought. It may be erroneous, it may be chimerical, it may be ineffectual; but it is thought, serious and solemn thought, on a most difficult and deeply immersed question—thought emanating from the deep source of a great love and care for men, and seeking nothing but a pure human welfare. When, therefore, any persons undertake to outrage and injure its author for having given it to the world, it is not merely as the pigmy incarnations of the depraved modesty, the surface morality, the filthy and libidinous decency of the age, but it is as the persecutors of thought that they stand before us. It is no excuse for them to say, that such treatment of Walt Whitman is justifiable, because his book appears to them bad. Waiving every other consideration, I have to inform them that on this subject they should not permit themselves the immodesty of a judgment. It is not for such as they to attempt to prison in the poor cell of their opinion the vast journey and illumination of the human mind. No matter what the book seems to them, they

should remember that an author deserves to be tried by his peers, and that a book may easily seem to some persons quite another thing from what it really is to others. Here is Rabelais, a writer who wears all the crowns; but even Mr. Harlan would consider Walt Whitman white as purity beside him. "Filth," "zanyism," "grossness," "profligacy," "licentiousness," "sensuality," "beastliness"—these are samples of the epithets which have fallen, like a rain of excrement, on Rabelais for three hundred years. And yet it is of him that the holy-hearted Coleridge—an authority of the first order on all purely literary or ethical questions—it is of him that Coleridge says, and says justly: "I could write a treatise in praise of *the moral elevation* of Rabelais' work which would make the Church stare, and the Conventicle groan, and yet would be the truth, and nothing but the truth." The moral elevation of Rabelais! A great criticism, a needed word. It is just. No matter for seeming—Rabelais is good to the very core. Rabelais' book, viewed with reference to ensemble, viewed in relation, viewed in its own proper quality by other than cockney standards, is righteous to the uttermost extreme. So is the work of Walt Whitman, far other in character, and far less obnoxious to criticism than that of Rabelais, but which demands at least as liberal a judgment, and which it is not for any deputy, however high in office, to assign to shame. I know not what further vicissitude of insult and outrage is in store for this great man. It may be that the devotees of a castrated literature, the earthworms that call themselves authors, the confectioners that pass for poets, the flies that are recognized as critics, the bigots, the dilettanti, the prudes and the fools, are more potent than I dream to mar the fortunes of his earthly hours; but above and beyond them uprises a more majestic civilization in the immense and sane serenities of futurity; and the man who has achieved that sublime thing, a genuine book; who has written to make his land greater, her citizens better, his race nobler; who has striven to serve men by communicating to them that which they least know—their own experience; who has thrown into living verse a philosophy designed to exalt life to a higher level of sincerity, reality, religion; who has torn away disguises and illusions, and restored to commonest things, and the simplest and roughest people, their divine significance and natural, antique dignity; and who has wrapped his country and all created things as with splendors of sunrise, in the beams of a powerful and gorgeous poetry—that man, whatever be the clouds that close around his fame, is assured illustrious; and when every face lowers, when every hand is raised against him, turning his back upon his day and generation, he may write upon his book, with all the pride and grief of the calumniated Æschylus, the haughty dedication that poet graved upon his hundred dramas: TO TIME!

And Time will remember him. He holds upon the future this supreme claim of all high poets—behind the book, a life loyal to humanity! Never, if I can help it, shall be forgotten those immense and divine labors in the hospitals of Washington, among the wounded of the war, to which he voluntarily devoted himself, as the best service he could render to his struggling country, and which illustrate that boundless love which is at once the dominant element of his character, and the central source of his genius. How can I tell the nature and extent of that sublime ministration! During those years, Washington was a city in whose unbuilt places and around whose borders were thickly planted dense white clusters of barracks. These were the hospitals—neat, orderly, rectangular, strange towns, whose every citizen lay drained with sickness or wrung with pain. There, in those long wards, in rows of cots on either side, were stretched, in all attitudes and aspects of mutilation, of pale repose, of contorted anguish, of death, the martyrs of the war; and among them, with a soul that tenderly remembered the little children in many a dwelling mournful for those fathers, the worn and anxious wives, haggard with thinking of those husbands, the girls weeping their spirits from their eyes for those lovers,

the mothers who from afar yearned to the bedsides of those sons, walked Walt Whitman in the spirit of Christ, soothing, healing, consoling, restoring, night and day, for years; never failing, never tiring, constant, vigilant, faithful; performing, without fee or reward, his self-imposed duty; giving to the task all his time and means, and doing every thing that it is possible for one unaided human being to do. Others fail, others flag; good souls that came often and did their best, yield and drop away; he remains. Winter and summer, night and day, every day in the week, every day in the year, all the time, till the winter of '65, when for a few hours daily, during six months, his duties to the Government detain him; after that, all the time he can spare, he visits the hospitals. What does he do? See! At the red aceldama of Fredericksburg, in '62, he is in a hospital on the banks of the Rappahannock; it is a large brick house, full of wounded and dying; in the yard, at the foot of a tree, is a cart-load of amputated legs, arms, hands, feet, fingers; dead bodies shrouded in brown woollen blankets are near; there are fresh graves in the yard: he is at work in the house among the officers and men, lying, unclean and bloody, in their old clothes; he is up stairs and down; he is poor, he has nothing to give this time, but he writes letters for the wounded; he cheers up the desponding; he gives love. Some of the men, war-sad, passionately cling to him; they weep; he will sit for hours with them if it will give them comfort. Here he is in Washington, after Chancellorsville, at night, on the wharf: two boat-loads of wounded (and oh, such wounded!) have been landed; they lie scattered about on the landing, in the rain, drenched, livid, lying on the ground, on old quilts, on blankets; their heads, their limbs bound in bloody rags; a few torches light the scene; the ambulances, the callous drivers are here; groans, sometimes a scream, resound through the flickering light and the darkness. He is there, moving around; he soothes, he comforts, he consoles; he assists to lift the wounded into the ambulances; he helps to place the worst cases on the stretchers; his kiss is warm upon the pallid lips of those who yearn to him, often mere children; his tears drop upon the faces of the dying. Here he is in the hospitals of Washington—the Campbell, the Patent Office, the Eighth street, the Judiciary, the Carver, the Douglas, the Armory Square. He writes letters; he writes to fathers, mothers, brothers, wives, sweethearts; some of the soldiers are poor penmen; some cannot get paper and envelopes; some fear to write lest they should worry the folks at home: he writes for them all; he uses that genius which shall endure to the latest generation, to say the felicitous, the consoling, the cheering, the prudent, the best word. He goes through the wards; he talks cheerfully, he distributes amusing reading-matter; at night or by day, when the horrible monotony of the hospital weighs like lead on every soul, he reads to the men; he is careful to sit away from the cot of any poor fellow so sick or wounded as to be easily disturbed, but he gathers into a large group as many as he can, and amuses them with some story or enlivening game, like that of Twenty Questions, or starts some discussion, or with some device dispels the gloom. For his daily occupation, he goes from ward to ward, doing all he can to hearten and revive the spirits of the sufferers, and keep the balance in favor of their recovery. Usually, his plan is to pass, with haversack strapped across his shoulder, from cot to cot, distributing small gifts; his theory is that these men, far from home, lonely, sick at heart, need more than any thing some practical token that they are not forsaken, that some one feels a fatherly or brotherly interest in them; hence, he gives them what he can; to particular cases, entirely penniless, he distributes small sums of money, fifteen cents, twenty cents, thirty cents, fifty cents, not much to each, for there are many, but under the circumstances these little sums are and mean a great deal. He also distributes and directs envelopes, gives letter-paper, postage-stamps, tobacco, apples, figs, sweet biscuit, preserves, blackberries; gets delicate food for special cases; sometimes a dish of oysters or a dainty piece of meat, or some savory morsel



for some poor creature who loathes the hospital fare, but whose appetite may be tempted. In the hot weather he buys boxes of oranges and distributes them, grateful to lips baked with fever; he buys boxes of lemons, he buys sugar, to make lemonade for those parched throats of sick soldiers; he buys canned peaches, strawberries, pears; he buys in the market fresh fruit; he buys ice-cream and treats the whole hospital; he buys whatever delicacies and luxuries his limited resources will allow, and he makes them go as far as he can. Where does he get the means for this expenditure? For Walt Whitman is poor;—he is poor, and has a right to be proud of his poverty, for it is the sacred, the ancient, the immemorial poverty of goodness and genius. He gets the means by writing for newspapers; he expends all he gets upon his boys, his darlings, the sick and maimed soldiers—the young heroes of the land who saved their country, the laborers of America who fought for the hopes of the world. He adds to his own earnings the contributions of noble souls, often strangers, who, in Boston, in New York, in Providence, in Brooklyn, in Salem, in Washington and elsewhere, have heard that such a man walks the wards, and who volunteer to send him this assistance; when at last, he gets a place under Government, and till Mr. Harlan turns him out, he has a salary which he spends in the same way; sometimes his wrung heart gets the better of his prudence, and he spends till he himself is in difficulties. He gives all his money, he gives all his time, he gives all his love. To every inmate of the hospital something, if only a vital word, a cheering touch, a caress, a trifling gift; but always in his rounds he selects the special cases, the sorely wounded, the deeply despondent, the homesick, the dying: to these he devotes himself; he buoys them up with fond words, with caresses, with personal affection; he bends over them, strong, clean, cheerful, perfumed, loving, and his magnetic touch and love sustain them. He does not shrink from the smell of their sickening gangrene; he does not flinch from their bloody and rotten mutilations; he draws nigher for all that; he sticks closer; he dresses those wounds; he fans those burning temples; he moistens those parched lips; he washes those wasted bodies; he watches often and often in the dim ward by the sufferer's cot all night long; he reads, from the New Testament, the words sweeter than music to the sinking soul; he soothes with prayer the bedside of the dying; he sits, mournful and loving, by the wasted dead. How can I tell the story of his labors! How can I describe the scenes among which he moved with such endurance and devotion, watched by me, for years! Few know the spectacle presented by those grim wards. It was hideous. I have been there at night when it seemed that I should die with sympathy if I stayed;—when the horrible attitudes of anguish, the horizontal shapes of cadaver on the white cots, the quiet sleepers, the excruciated emaciations of men, the bloody bandages, the smell of plastered sores, the dim lamp-light, the long white ward, the shallow girl-nurse flirting with the wardmaster or surgeon, the tinkle of the ward piano mixed with the groans of some grisly wretch, half hidden behind a screen, naked, shorn of both arms, held by the assistant upon a stool, made up a scene whose well-compounded horror is unspeakable. Now realize a man without worldly inducement, without reward, without the mandate of official duty, voluntarily, from love and compassion only, giving up his life to scenes like these; foregoing pleasure and rest for vigils, as in chambers of torture, among the despairing, the mangled, the dying, the forms upon which shell and rifle and sabre had wrought every bizarre atrocity of mutilation; immuring himself in the air of their sighs, their moans, the mutter and scream of their delirium; breathing the stench of their putrid wounds; taking up his part and lot with them, living a life of privation and denial, and hoarding his scanty means for the relief and mitigation of their anguish. That man is Walt Whitman! I said his labors have been immense. The word is well chosen. I speak within bounds when I say that, during those years, he has been in contact with, and, in one form or another,

either in hospital or on the field, personally ministered to, upward of one hundred thousand sick and wounded men. You mothers of America, these were your sons! Faithfully and with a mother's love, he tended them for you! Many and many a life has he saved—many a time has he felt his heart grow great with that delicious triumph—many a home owes its best beloved to him. Sick and wounded, officers and privates, the black soldiers the same as the white, the teamsters, the poor creatures in the contraband camps, the rebel the same as the loyal—he did his best for them all; they were all sufferers, they were all men.—Let him pass. I note Thoreau's saying, that he suggests something more than human. It is true. I see it in his book and in his life. To that something more than human which is also in all men—to the hour of judgment, to the hour of sanity—let me resign him. Not for such as I to vindicate such as he. Not for him, perhaps, the recognition of his day and generation. But a life and deeds like his, lightly esteemed by men, sink deep into the memory of Man. Great is the stormy fight of Zutphen; it is the young lion of English Protestantism springing in haughty fury for the defence of the Netherlands from the bloody ravin of Spain; but Philip Sidney passing the flask of water from his own lips to the dying soldier looms gigantic, and makes all the foreground of its noble purpose and martial rage; and whatever be the verdict of the present, sure am I that hereafter and to the latest ages, when Bull Run and Shiloh and Port Hudson, when Vicksburg and Stone River and Fort Donelson, when Pea Ridge and Chancellorsville and Gettysburg and the Wilderness, and the great march from Atlanta to Savannah, and Richmond rolled in flame, and all the battles for the life of the Republic against her last internal foe, are gathered up in accumulated terraces of struggle upon the mountain of history, well relieved against those bright and bloody tumultuous giant tableaux, and all the dust and thunder of a noble war, the men and women of America will love to gaze upon the stalwart form of the good gray poet, bending to heal the hurts of their wounded and soothe the souls of their dying, and the deep and simple words of the last great martyr will be theirs—"Well, he looks like A MAN!"

So let me leave him. And if there be any who think this tribute in bad taste, even to a poet so great, a person so unusual, a man so heroic and loving, I answer, that when on grounds of taste foes withhold detraction, friends may withhold eulogy; and that at any rate I recognize no reason for keeping back just words of love and reverence when, as in this case, they must glow upon the sullen foil of the printed hatreds of ten years. To that long record of hostility, I am only glad and proud to be able to oppose this record of affection.—And, with respect to the crowning enmity of the Secretary of the Interior, let no person misjudge the motives upon which I denounce it. Personally, apart from this act, I have nothing against Mr. Harlan. He is of my own party; and my politics have been from my youth essentially the same as his own. I do not know him; I have never even seen him; I criticise no attitude nor action of his life but this; and I criticise this with as little personality as I can give to an action so personal. I withhold, too, as far as I can, every expression of resentment; and no one who knew all I know of this matter could fail to credit me with singular and great moderation. For, behind what I have related, there is another history, every incident of which I have recovered from the obscurity to which it was confided; and, as I think of it, it is with difficulty that I restrain my just indignation. Instead of my comparatively cold and sober treatment, this transaction deserves rather the pitiless exposure and the measureless, stern anger and red-hot steel scourge of Juvenal. But I leave untold its darkest details; and, waiving every other consideration, I rest solely and squarely on the general indignity and injury this action offers to intellectual liberty. I claim that to expel an author from a public office and subject him to public contumely, solely because he has published a book which no one can declare immoral without declaring all the grand books

immoral, is to affix a penalty to thought, and to obstruct the freedom of letters. I declare this act the audacious captain of a series of acts and a style of opinions whose tendency and effect throughout Christendom is to dwarf and degrade literature, and to make great books impossible, except under pains of martyrdom. As such, I arraign it before every liberal and thoughtful mind. I denounce it as a sinister precedent; as a ban upon the free action of genius; as a logical insult to all commanding literature; and as in every way a most serious and heinous wrong. Difference of opinion there may and must be upon the topics which in this letter I have grouped around it, but upon the act itself there can be none. As I drag it up here into the sight of the world, I call upon every scholar, every man of letters, every editor, every good fellow everywhere who wields the pen, to make common cause with me in rousing upon it the full tempest of reprobation it deserves. I remember Tennyson, a spirit of vengeance over the desecrated grave of Moore; I think of Scott rolling back the tide of obloquy from Byron; I see Addison gilding the blackening fame of Swift; I mark Southampton befriending Shakespeare; I recall Du Bellay enshielding Rabelais; I behold Hutten fortressing Luther; here is Boccaccio lifting the darkness from Dante, and scattering flame on his foes in Florence; this is Bembo protecting Pomponatius; that is Grostête enfolding Roger Bacon from the monkish fury; there, covered with light, is Aristophanes defending Æschylus: and if there lives aught of that old chivalry of letters, which in all ages has sprung to the succor and defence of genius, I summon it to act the part of honor and duty upon a wrong which, done to a single member of the great confraternity of literature, is done to all, and which flings insult and menace upon every immortal page that dares transcend the wicked heart or the constricted brain. I send this letter to Victor Hugo, for its passport through Europe; I send it to John Stuart Mill, to Newman, and Matthew Arnold, for England; I send it to Emerson and Wendell Phillips; to Charles Sumner; to every Senator and Representative in Congress; to all our journalists; to the whole American people; to every one who guards the freedom of letters and the liberty of thought throughout the civilized world. God grant that not in vain upon this outrage do I invoke the judgment of the mighty spirit of literature, and the fires of every honest heart!

WILLIAM DOUGLAS O'CONNOR,

Of Massachusetts.

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[The end of *The Good Gray Poet. A Vindication.* by William Douglas O'Connor]