

WALT WHITMAN AND THEOSOPHY

Dudley W. Barr

PREFACE

The following talk by Dudley W. Barr, transcribed from a tape recording, was given at public meetings of the Toronto and Hamilton Theosophical Societies in 1957. On those occasions he spoke without notes, aided only by his well-thumbed copy of *Leaves of Grass* from which to quote. However, in preparing the transcription, hardly any editing has been necessary.

Dudley Barr joined the Toronto Theosophical Society as a young man in 1918. From then until his death in 1975 on his 80th birthday, he was an active member of that organization as well as the Canadian national body. He edited the *Toronto Theosophical News* for many years, as well as *The Canadian Theosophist* from 1947 to 1964. He was also General Secretary of The Theosophical Society in Canada from 1960 to 1968. A collection of his short articles, entitled *Theosophy, An Attitude Toward Life*, is published by the Blavatsky Institute of Canada.

Walt Whitman's poetry was highly prized by early Canadian Theosophists – students of Theosophy, as they preferred to be called. Several of them were instrumental in founding the Canadian branch of the Walt Whitman Fellowship in 1916. Among these were such Theosophical stalwarts as Flora Macdonald Denison, Fred B. Housser, Roy Mitchell, Henry S. Saunders and Albert E.S. Smythe. Their activities on behalf of the Fellowship are reported in *Walt Whitman's Canada*, compiled by Cyril Greenland and John Robert Colombo. Their enthusiasm for Whitman was caught by Theosophists of the following generation, of whom Dudley Barr was an inspiring example.

Ted G. Davy

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This unusual oil painting on wood, of the celebrated American poet, essayist and journalist was painted to commemorate Walt Whitman's fifty-sixth birthday. It was exhibited at his residence at 330 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey.

The title, “Walt Whitman and Theosophy”, is not an attempt on my part to associate Whitman in any way with the Theosophical Society as such. Whitman died in 1892, and the Society was founded in 1875, so there was a period of about 16 years when theosophical activities were in the world but as far as I am aware, neither he nor any of his friends came directly into touch with the Theosophical Society.

Rather it is an attempt to discover in Whitman those principles and attitudes toward life which are called Theosophical – not because they are the products of the Society but because they have that one note of universalism which is always identified with a theosophical movement whenever or wherever it is founded. Theosophical Societies can be traced back through the history of Europe and Eastern countries for many hundreds of years. There always is a theosophy in the world finding expression in different modes according to the time and place in which it appears. So we will bear that in mind as we go along. It is not an attempt to identify Whitman with the Theosophical Society; nor is it an attempt to explain Whitman, because that is one thing which Whitman himself especially asked all his friends not to do. In “Myself and Mine” he said:

I call to the world to distrust the accounts of my friends, but
listen to my enemies – as I myself do;
I charge you, too, forever, reject those who would expound
me – for I cannot expound myself;
I charge that there be no theory or school founded out of me;
I charge you to leave all free, as I have left all free.

The hundredth anniversary of the first publishing of Whitman's great book, *Leaves of Grass*, was celebrated in 1955. March 26 is the anniversary of his death in 1892. We find that as the years go on Whitman is becoming ever more recognized as *the* great poet of America. As a matter of fact, one of *the* great sons of Earth. Much that he says in his poetry is very familiar to those who have had any approach to the Theosophical Society and whose nature it is to respond to these universals because Whitman was a universalist and it is very difficult to summarize in a few phrases for those who are uninitiated into his spirit the peculiar qualities of heart and mind which gained him recognition not only as a poet but as a great seer, one who foresees and who sets examples: the essential dignity of every man; the inner and divine self of every man ever seeking more and more complete expression through the body and personality here on earth; the concept of man as a pilgrim being on a long pilgrimage which takes him through repeated incarnations toward perfect freedom and beauty and goodness; the sympathy with and a complete understanding of the many mistakes which happen in life, which happen to every one of us and which arise through misunderstandings and misdirections and failures on our part; and then there is also to be found in Whitman an undeviating faith in the power of the human soul to rise triumphant over all temporal conditions. To become, as he said in one of his poems, “Song of Myself”:

. . . tenon'd and mortised in granite;
And . . . know the amplitude of time.

All those ideas are to be found in Whitman. They are also to be found in the great scriptures of the world. They are to be found in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, one of the eastern scriptures with which Whitman was quite familiar. He accepted apparently the idea of karma, although the word karma does not appear in his writings. He said for example – this is from “Song of Prudence”:

Not a move can a man or woman make, that affects him or
her in a day, month, any part of the direct lifetime, or
the hour of death,
But the same affects him or her onward afterward through
the indirect lifetime.

Now Whitman was one who combined in his vision a concept of the inner perfection of the divine self within man, but at the same time he laid considerable emphasis on the fact that this divine self must eventually evolve for itself or produce from within its own being a perfect body, mind and emotional nature which will more adequately reflect the divinity which is within. In “Song of Myself” he said:

I am the poet of the Body;
And I am the poet of the Soul.
The pleasures of heaven are with me, and the pains
of hell are with me:
The first I graft and increase upon myself – the latter
I translate into a new tongue.

One of the problems, even if one wanted to go against Whitman’s explicit instructions and endeavour to supply an explanation of him, is that there is nothing in his outer life which would give any indication of the source of his genius. He was born on a farm on Long Island in 1819 and he had a very nice boyhood, that is, he was familiar with nature, close to the sea, bathing, fishing, household chores and chores around the farm which he had to do, and a good body was developed. He left home and drifted into newspaper work, wrote a few short stories, wrote a few short poems, but nothing that would indicate the latent powers within his being. And then there happened to him that inexplicable thing which Dr. R.M. Bucke calls a touch of Cosmic Consciousness.

You will find if you read Bucke’s great source book on that subject, *Cosmic Consciousness*, that there are individuals all over the world who suddenly and apparently without any previous expectation or any discipline to develop it – perhaps beyond the fact that they might hold their souls open to such a visitation – who suddenly seem to be caught up in a wider consciousness, a more comprehensive understanding of life, and the universe, and God, and the nature of man, and the way the universe works, and a sense of the unity of all nature. Whitman himself said that he had been “simmering, simmering, simmering, simmering” for a long time, and then something suddenly brought him to the boil, and that inner turbulence eventually overflowed the confines of what was merely personal.

Bucke was a great admirer of Whitman and he devotes a great deal of space in his book to him. In fact, Dr. Bucke is a little too eulogistic of him because he elevates him to a position which I think Whitman himself would certainly reject and I think any of his present day pupils, or disciples, or admirers would not accept either. But Dr. Bucke’s book is a classical reference on the subject and he included a great deal about Whitman, and quoted from one of the poems, where Whitman attempted to give some hint of the nature of that inclusive consciousness which suddenly came upon him. In “Song of Myself” Whitman said:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge
that pass all the argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,

And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own;
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the
women my sisters and lovers . . .

Now that experience of transcending the personality and entering into this peace and knowledge that pass all the wisdom, all the arguments of earth, apparently came to Whitman somewhere around his 34th year. It expressed itself immediately through his poetry, and for the fitting expression of this new vision which had come to him, he abandoned the ordinary poetic style of rhymed and regular verse and wrote rhythmic but unrhymed poems of great beauty and profound wisdom.

The greater part of my talk will consist of quotations from those various poems. Incidentally, there are no love poems in Whitman as love poems in the sense we ordinarily understand them. There are no sonnets to a mistress. But there are many poems of love, because love, the dear love of man for his comrade, the sweet affection of friend for friend, is one of the predominating notes that flows all the way through. Rather his poetry is concerned with one thing only. He said "I am the poet of the body and I am the poet of the soul," but he was dealing with the one theme which is of interest to all the great artists, to all the great seers wherever they are – and that is the human soul and its relationship to the cosmos. There is only one story that is worth telling, some famous writer has said: all the adventure stories in the world, all the love stories and all the novels are one phase or another of the eternal quest of the human soul. All tragedies are examples of that. You take Shakespeare's tragedies, how the concept of karma runs all the way through. His *Measure for Measure*, for example, is a wonderful study of the great law of compensation. But the one story in the world, the one theme that is worth speaking about is this story about the world. In the beginning of his book is a poem "As I Ponder'd in Silence," where in his imagination a spirit came to him and said he should speak of war and the fortunes of war, the making of perfect soldiers and so on, and Whitman said:

"Be it so," then I answer'd,
"I too, haughty Shade also sing war – and a longer and
greater one than any,
Waged in my book with varying fortune – with flight,
advance and retreat – Victory deferr'd and wavering,
(Yet methinks certain, or as good as certain, at the last,) –
the field the world;
For life and death – for the Body, and for the eternal Soul,
Lo! I too am come, chanting the chant of battles,
I, above all, promote brave soldiers.

And so this war, longer and greater than any, the story of man's conflict with his environment, the necessity for the soul of man to keep on advancing on the long pilgrimage of universals on which he has started out. That is the central theme of Whitman's poetry. He also speaks a great deal about brotherhood. He speaks about the divine powers that are latent within man – Whitman saw everybody as divine. Rather a strange concept at the time he was writing: new and startling. The idea that man was divine was something that would be mentioned only by some of the obscure sects that existed at that time. But Whitman writes quite boldly, fluently, and nobly sets out his own belief in the innate divinity in man, and in the powers that are latent within man. In one of his poems, "The Song of the Universal" that acts as an excellent introduction to the reading of some of Whitman's poems, he says:

Come, said the Muse,
Sing me a song no poet yet has chanted,
Sing me the Universal.

In this broad Earth of ours.
Amid the measureless grossness and the slag,

Enclosed and safe within its central heart,
Nestles the seed Perfection.

By every life a share, or more or less,
None born but it is born – conceal'd or unconceal'd the seed is waiting.

[. . .]

All, all for Immortality!
Love, like the light, silently wrapping all!
Nature's amelioration blessing all!
The blossoms, fruits of ages – orchards divine and certain;
Forms, objects, growths, humanities, to Spiritual Images ripening.

Give me, O God, to sing that thought!
Give me – give him or her I love this quenchless faith,
In Thy ensemble – whatever else withheld, withhold not from us,
Belief in universal plan of Thee enclosed in Time and Space,
Health, peace, salvation universal.

Is it a dream?
Nay, but the lack of it the dream,
And, failing it, life's lore and wealth a dream,
And all the world a dream.

So that "Song of the Universal," that seed perfection nestling in everything that comes into manifestation, was the great background, I think, of all Whitman's poems, and in many of his poems he speaks of his identification with it. In those oft-quoted lines from "Song of Myself":

This day before dawn I ascended a hill, and look'd at the crowded heaven,
And I said to my Spirit, "When we become the enfolders of those orbs, and the pleasure
and knowledge of everything in them, shall we be fill'd and satisfied then?"
And my Spirit said, "No. we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond."

So all the stars in space, and galaxies, the great Milky Way and all planets that swing around their own suns, this whole universe is spread out. These are but places through which the human soul – the divine within man, the divine life – is constantly using, mastering, passing on to the ultimate perfection which is nestled deep in the heart of every being.

Identifying man with that one life in a shorter poem, "Laws for Creations", he said:

What do you suppose Creation is?
What do you suppose will satisfy the Soul, except to walk free,
and own no superior?
What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a hundred
ways, but that man or woman is as good as God?
And that there is no God any more divine than Yourself?
And that that is what the oldest and newest myths finally mean?
And that you or any one must approach Creations through such laws?

He had a great concept too of the fact that the human race on this continent is on a pilgrimage. In his "Facing West from California Shores" he deals with one of the old legends to be found in Theosophical circles concerning the human race on its journey as it passes around the earth. Starting out from India, which Whitman calls the mother of nations; passing on to Greece and to Europe on into America and now facing west from California's shore, looking over to Asia, perhaps the life cycle has taken a great leap and Asia

becomes revived and goes through a great renaissance because if one traces that westward drift of the Aryan spirit, or the theosophic spirit, you find one after another of the centres lighting up. There is a lighting up for a long period in Greece: a Golden Age was there for hundreds of years. There is a lighting up in Persia, in Baghdad; there is a lighting up in the renaissance in Europe, with the return to the study of Eastern scriptures, of the Platonists and so on; and then the great leap across the Atlantic, the birth of transcendentalism that one finds on the New England shores, and one could say too the establishing of the Theosophical Society there, and the sudden and abrupt letting down of barriers which has gone on since the establishing of the Society. Today, in America and elsewhere, one may speak freely of various matters relating to the soul of man, to man's divinity and the divine powers within man which only a few hundred years ago would have meant we would be sent to prison or to the stake.

I mentioned the idea of karma which was so persistent throughout Whitman's writings. There is a good example of it in his poem, "Carol of Words":

Each man to himself, and each woman to herself, such is the word
of the past and present, and the word of immortality;
No one can acquire for another – not one!
Not one can grow for another – not one!

The song is to the singer, and comes back most to him;
The teaching is to the teacher, and comes back most to him;
The murder is to the murderer, and comes back most to him;
The theft is to the thief, and comes back most to him;
The love is to the lover, and comes back most to him;
The gift is to the giver, and comes back most to him – it cannot fail;
The oration is to the orator, the acting is to the actor and actress,
not to the audience;
And no man understands any greatness or goodness but his own,
or the indication of his own.

Now those things that Whitman has said there are all examples of what is called the Law of Karma, or the Law of Compensation. The things that one projects out of one's self return to one's self. Those who make the poems, who make the songs of the nation are the ones who come back in future incarnations with greater capacity. Those who are the artists, those who have appreciations, those who fail, those who commit errors, those who steal, "The theft is to the thief, and comes back most to him" – he must in some life undergo some kind of experience which will indicate to him that one must not steal. The murder is to the murderer, he must come back in another life and the results of the murder which he committed in the past stare him in the face. It doesn't necessarily mean that because he murdered, he must be murdered in turn; that doesn't balance the account. Somebody else would have to do more murdering, etc., indefinitely. But in some way or another he must learn that human life is sacred, that when a soul comes into incarnation it is a sacred event, and the things that the soul does here in life in terms of the larger life, universal life, are all sacred events, things that can be of service to the soul, to the self, in accomplishing its divine purpose and those things must not be abruptly interfered with by the slaying of the body.

There is another item indicative of Whitman's attitude on karma. This deals with the idea of the accumulation of karmas and is from "Song of Prudence":

All the grandeur and good of ancient nations whose
fragments we inherit,
All the good of the dozens of ancient nations unknown to us
by name, date, location,
All that was ever manfully begun, whether it succeeded or no,

All suggestions of the divine mind of man or the divinity
of his mouth, or the shaping of his great hands,
All that is well thought or said this day on any part of the globe,
or on any of the wandering stars, or on any of the fix'd stars,
by those there as we are here,
All that is henceforth to be thought or done by you whoever you
are, or by any one,
These inure, have inured, shall inure, to the identities from which
they sprang, or shall spring.

Everything that is set in motion by the human soul belongs to that soul and comes back most to him in blessings or in trials and tribulations.

Now in his “Song of the Open Road” Whitman speaks of that great pilgrimage which every soul is on, that is, the inner soul, the inner path or the way or the road, which does not relate to outside things but to the journeying of the soul from ignorance to wisdom, from littleness to greatness, from narrowness to a complete comprehension, from isolation to an awareness that the universe is our home. To feel at home in the universe is all part of our being. Remember Thoreau, the American philosopher who took an axe and went into the woods at Walden Pond and built himself a little hut, lived far away from the village, and went into the village once in a while to purchase his food and the good people of the village would say, “Aren’t you lonely there?” And Thoreau said, “Lonely? Why should I be lonely? Does not my planet swim in the Milky Way?” The whole cosmos was part of Whitman’s being; he was in a friendly universe which could be stern and exacting towards him but he felt it was part of his being. So he is speaking here in the “Song of the Open Road” of that pilgrimage which man goes through from that isolation to that cosmic awareness. He wrote:

You road I enter upon and look around! I believe you are
not all that is here;
I believe that much unseen is also here.

Here the profound lesson of reception, nor preference nor denial;
The black with his woolly head, the felon, the diseas'd, the
illiterate person, are not denied;
The birth, the hasting after the physician, the beggar’s tramp, the
drunkard’s stagger, the laughing party of mechanics,
The escaped youth, the rich person’s carriage, the fop,
the eloping couple,
The early market-man, the hearse, the moving of furniture
into the town, the return back from the town,
They pass, I also pass, anything passes, none can be interdicted;
None but are accepted, none but shall be dear to me.

So there is that attitude of acceptance of all things as being part of his own being. From the same poem he says:

Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!
Traveling with me you find what never tires.

Now whenever Whitman is speaking about “me” and “I” – there is a great deal of “I” and “me” in the poems – he is not meaning Whitman the personality, he is speaking of himself as a combination of the divine and the physical, and as a symbol of the cosmic life. Whoever travels with me, whoever identifies himself with that cosmic life. And if you read Whitman with that in mind then I think a good deal of misunderstanding can be avoided. Continuing:

The earth never tires;
The earth is rude. silent, incomprehensible at first – Nature
is rude and incomprehensible at first . . .

(How those lines remind one of Lao Tze's *Tao Te King!* One of his expressions could almost be translated that way.)

Be not discouraged – keep on – there are divine things well envelop'd,
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell.

Allons! we must not stop here!
However sweet these laid-up stores – however convenient
this dwelling, we cannot remain here;
However shelter'd this port, and however calm these waters,
we must not anchor here,
However welcome the hospitality that surrounds us, we are
permitted to receive it but a little while.

And he said:

I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes,
We convince by our presence.

Again, you see, it could be thought of as an expression of the egotism of Whitman, but it is not that. “We convince by our presence” – it is the presence of that Divine thing within man, just as a speaker on Theosophy will say, “We convince by our presence.” It is the presence of the Theosophical element in any argument that makes it valid and strong and searching and of use to the people to whom the speaker is speaking. The presence of it, and it is the presence of Whitman in that sense of the divine thing within him, that convince us. Not arguments, not similes, and not rhymes. He goes on:

Listen! I will be honest with you,
I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you:

You shall not heap up what is call'd riches,
You shall scatter with lavish hand all that you earn or achieve,

You but arrive at the city to which you were destin'd –
you hardly settle yourself to satisfaction before you
are call'd by an irresistible call to depart,
You shall be treated to the ironical smiles and mockings of those
who remain behind you;
What beckonings of love you receive you shall only answer
with passionate kisses of parting,
You shall not allow the hold of those who spread their
reach'd hands toward you.

Allons! after the great Companions! and to belong to them!
They too are on the road! they are the swift and majestic men,
they are the greatest women.

That last bit there, the “great Companions”, I think is a fair introduction to the concept of the Masters of the Way. All those souls who have been looked upon by the human race as the saviours, the exemplars of humanity, which in the Theosophical Society are called the Masters, the Adepts, Whitman called the Great Companions, those who travel with one.

You know there is so much of Whitman I should like to quote – perhaps I am quoting too much, but we are dealing with Whitman and trying to show how some of his ideas are theosophical in spirit, and quotations are perhaps necessary. Here is another one for example,

The Soul travels;
The body does not travel as much as the soul;
The body has just as great a work as the soul, and parts away
at last for the journeys of the soul.

That is, the body itself must not act as an obstruction when the time comes that the body must be laid aside. The body “parts away . . . for the journeys of the soul”; all bodies do that, and the soul goes on after the body has been laid aside.

All parts away for the progress of souls;
All religion, all solid things, arts, governments – all that was or is
apparent upon this globe or any globe, falls into niches and corners
before the procession of souls along the grand roads of the universe.

Of the progress of the souls of men and women along the
grand roads of the universe, all other progress is the
needed emblem and sustenance.

There is another favorite quotation of mine in that same poem, “The Song of the Open Road” which has to do with wisdom. He says:

Here is the test of wisdom;
Wisdom is not finally tested in schools;
Wisdom cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it;
Wisdom is of the soul, is not susceptible of proof, is its own proof,
Applies to all stages and objects and qualities and is content,
Is the certainty of the reality and immortality of things, and
the excellence of things;
Something there is in the float of the sight of things that
provokes it out of the soul.

Again, you see, wisdom is something within man, arising from and connected with that Divinity latent within. And as wisdom it “cannot be pass'd from one having it to another not having it.” In other words all esotericism relates to one’s comprehension. All the secret wisdom is secret only to the extent that one has not comprehended it or is incapable of understanding it. He deals with that point in another short poem entitled “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now In Hand”. This is the most complete statement of that point that I have found in Whitman. He said:

Whoever you are, holding me now in hand,
Without one thing, all will be useless,
I give you fair warning, before you attempt me further,
I am not what you supposed, but far different.

Who is he that would become my follower?
Who would sign himself a candidate for my affections?

The way is suspicious – the result uncertain, perhaps destructive;
You would have to give up all else – I alone would expect
to be your God, sole and exclusive,
Your novitiate would even then be long and exhausting,

The whole past theory of your life, and all conformity to
the lives around you, would have to be abandon'd;
Therefore release me now, before troubling yourself any
further – Let go your hand from my shoulders,
Put me down, and depart on your way.

Or else, by stealth, in some wood, for trial.
Or back of a rock, in the open air,
(For in any roof'd room of a house I emerge not – nor in company,
And in libraries lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, or dead,)
But just possibly with you on a high hill – first watching lest any person,
for miles around, approach unawares,
Or possibly with you sailing at sea, or on the beach of the sea,
or some quiet island,
Here to put your lips upon mine I permit you,
With the comrade's long-dwelling kiss, or the new husband's kiss,
For I am the new husband, and I am the comrade.

Or, if you will, thrusting me beneath your clothing,
Where I may feel the throbs of your heart, or rest upon your hip,
Carry me when you go forth over land or sea;
For thus, merely touching you, is enough – is best,
And thus, touching you, would I silently sleep and be carried eternally.

But these leaves conning, you con at peril,
For these leaves, and me, you will not understand,
They will elude you at first, and still more afterward – I will
certainly elude you,
Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!
Already you see I have escaped from you.

For it is not what I have put into it that I have written this book,
Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it,
Nor do those know me best who admire me. and vauntingly praise me,
Nor will the candidates for my love, (unless at most a very few,)
prove victorious,
Nor will my poems do good only – they will do just as much evil,
perhaps more;
For all is useless without that which you may guess at many times
and not hit – that which I hinted at;
Therefore release me, and depart on your way.

Now the idea of that is, you see, there is an esotericism in Whitman as there is in every great religion, in every philosophy, and the thing cannot be communicated. It is what it means within, what it stirs of the Ancient Wisdom within.

Whitman naturally also deals with religion. Many poems of his speak about the universality of religion. “The whole world is for religion’s sake, and no man has ever been divine enough. . .” ; “I do not despise you priests. . .” and so on.

And there is a poem there where he says that he enters all the priestly ministrations and then stands apart from them, but the concept is there that all religions – this is a theosophical position – that all religions are valid ways to approach truth. Each are various ways of looking at truth. This from this side, from that angle, from the thousand and one facets of the central diamond of Truth. Religion is one way of looking at it; and all religions are equally divine, all bibles are equally divine. They are divine because they have arisen, not having

been sent down by any exterior god, but because they are expressions of the divinity within man. From “Carol of Occupations”:

We consider bibles and religions divine – I do not say they are not divine;
I say they have all grown out of you, and may grow out of you still;
It is not they who give the life – it is you who give the life;

Leaves are not more shed from the trees, or trees from the earth,
than they are shed out of you.

So man is the divine being on earth from whom all these divine messages, these divine examples come.

When the psalm sings instead of the singer;
When the script preaches instead of the preacher;
When the pulpit descends and goes, instead of the carver
that carved the supporting desk;
When I can touch the body of books, by night or by day, and when
they touch my body back again;
When a university course convinces, like a slumbering woman
and child convince;
When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the
night-watchman’s daughter;
When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite, and are
my friendly companions;
I intend to reach them my hand, and make as much of them
as I do of men and women like you.

The sum of all known reverence I add up in you, whoever you are.

So there is that great assurance within Whitman you see, that is quite theosophical in its approach: that all bibles, religions and philosophies emanate out of the Divine Soul of man, and those various bibles and expressions of ideas, divine ideas, are fitted to the time, the place, the psychology of the races to which they have come.

Along with the idea of the divinity of man, there is a short selection I would like to read you here from *Leaves of Grass* where he refuses to permit any external thing to interfere fundamentally and permanently with the divine march of souls along the universe. He said in “Faces”:

I saw the face of the most smear’d and slobbering idiot they
had at the asylum;
And I knew for my consolation what they knew not;
I knew of the agents that emptied and broke my brother,
The same wait to clear the rubbish from the fallen tenement;
And I shall look again in a score or two of ages,
And I shall meet the real landlord, perfect and unharmed, every
inch as good as myself.

Tonight I am trying to indicate to you that Whitman has within him so many of the elements which we now call theosophical. There is the idea of the one life, the universal life; the idea of the identification of every human being with that one life; the concept of reincarnation, life after life, comes out very clearly in several of his poems; the idea of karma that follows man from life to life and opens up ways and opportunities for him in every succeeding life; and finally there is the idea of the road or the path by which a man starting from now and here and now, travelling on an inward path, in toward comprehension of his own divine self may, after many journeys, after many “self-induced and self-devised efforts,” come to the point where he has direct

experience of the universal and will become touched with cosmic consciousness, superior to anything that he had heretofore experienced.

I want to end by reciting another writer, a theosophical writer. It is a little selection called “The Three Truths”. This is from *The Idyll of the White Lotus* by Mabel Collins.

The soul of man is immortal, and its future is the future
of a thing whose growth and splendor has no limit.
The principle which gives life dwells in us, and without us,
is undying and eternally beneficent, is not heard or seen or smelt,
but is perceived by the man who desires perception.
Each man is his own absolute lawgiver, the dispenser of glory or
gloom to himself; the decreer of his life, his reward, his punishment.
These truths, which are as great as is life itself, are as simple
as the simplest mind of man. Feed the hungry with them.

Now Whitman was talking about exactly those things. I think it is of tremendous significance today that more than one hundred years after the first publication of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman is a poet whose reputation is growing stronger and stronger, not only in his native land of America, but in many other countries in the world in which he has been translated. All the other poets of his generation have gone and have been forgotten. Longfellow, not forgotten of course, but by no means as significant as he used to be. Whittier – who reads him today? But Whitman is one man who has continued. I think his continuance is due to the fact that he did contain these universal elements, these truths that are “as great as is life itself,” and yet are “as simple as the simplest mind of man.” And Whitman in his poems certainly did “feed the hungry with them.”



Walt Whitman House, 330 Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey, where he spent his last years. It contained his furnishings and mementoes. (Postcard made by Dexter Press, West Nyack, New York)