



Ode to Walt Whitman

(May 31, 1819—March 26, 1892)

BY STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

NOW comes Fourth Month and the early buds on the trees.
By the roads of Long Island, the forsythia has flowered,
In the North, the cold will be breaking; even in Maine
The cold will be breaking soon; the young, bull-voiced freshets
Roar from green mountains, gorging the chilly brooks
With the brown, trout-feeding waters, the unlocked springs;
Now Mississippi stretches with the Spring rains. . . .

It is forty years and more,
The time of the ripeness and withering of a man,
Since you lay in the house in Camden and heard, at last,
The great, slow, footstep, splashing the Third Month snow
In the little, commonplace street
—Town snow, already trampled and growing old,
Soot-flecked and dingy, patterned with passing feet,
The bullet-pocks of rain, the strong urine of horses,
The slashing, bright steel runners of small boys' sleds
Hitching on behind the fast cutters.
They dragged their sleds to the tops of the hills and yelled
The Indian yell of all boyhood, for pure joy
Of the cold and the last gold light and the swift rush down
Belly-flopping into darkness, into bedtime.
You saw them come home, late, hungry and burning-cheeked,
The boys and girls, the strong children,
Dusty with snow, their mittens wet with the silver drops of
thawed snow.

All winter long, you had heard their sharp footsteps passing,
The skating crunch of their runners,
An old man, tied to a house, after many years,
An old man with his rivery, clean white hair,
His bright eyes, his majestic poverty,
His fresh pink skin like the first strawberry-bloom,
His innocent, large, easy old man's clothes
—Brown splotches on the hands of clean old men
At County Farms or sitting on warm park-benches
Like patient flies, talking of their good sons,
"Yes, my son's good to me"—
An old man, poor, without sons, waiting achingly
For Spring to warm his lameness,
For Spring to flourish,
And yet, when the eyes glowed, neither old nor tied.

All winter long there had been footsteps passing,
Steps of postmen and neighbors, quick steps of friends,
All winter long you had waited that great, snow-treading step,
The enemy, the vast comrade,
The step behind, in the wards, when the low lamp flickered
And the sick boy gasped for breath,
"Lean on me! Lean upon my shoulder! By God, you shall not die!"

The step ahead, on the long, wave-thundering beaches of Pau-
manok,
Invisible, printless, weighty,
The shape half-seen through the wet, sweet sea-fog of youth,
Night's angel and the dark Sea's,
The grand, remorseless treader,
Magnificent Death.

"Let me taste all, my flesh and my fat are sweet,
My body hardy as lilac, the strong flower.
I have tasted the calamus; I can taste the nightbane."

Always the water about you since you were born,
The endless lapping of water, the strong motion,
The gulls by the ferries knew you, and the wild sea-birds,
The sandpiper, printing the beach with delicate prints.
At last, old, wheeled to the wharf, you still watched the water,
The tanned boys, flat-bodied, diving, the passage of ships,
The proud port, distant, the people, the work of harbors. . . .

"I have picked out a bit of hill with a southern exposure.
I like to be near the trees. I like to be near
The water-sound of the trees."

Now, all was the same in the cluttered, three-windowed room,
Low-ceiled, getting the sun like a schooner's cabin,
The crowding photos hiding the ugly wall-paper.
The floor-litter, the strong chair, timbered like a ship,
The hairy black-and-silver of the old wolfskin;
In the back-yard, neither lilac nor pear yet bloomed
But the branch of the lilac swelling with first sap;
And there, in the house, the figures, the nurse, the woman,
The passing doctor, the friends, the little clan,
The disciple with the notebook who's always there.

All these and the pain and the water-bed to ease you
And you said it rustled of oceans and were glad
And the pain shut and relaxed and shut once more.

"Old body, counsellor, why do you thus torment me?
Have we not been friends from our youth?"

But now it came,
Slow, perceived by no others,
The splashing step through the grey, soft, Saturday rain,
Inexorable footstep of the huge friend.
"Are you there at last, fine enemy?
Ah haste, friend, hasten, come closer!
Breathe upon me with your grave, your releasing lips!
I have heard and spoken; watched the bodies of boys

Flash in the copper sun and dive to green waters,
 Seen the fine ships and the strong matrons and the tall axemen,
 The young girls, free, athletic; the drunkard, retching
 In his poor dream; the thief taken by officers;
 The President, calm, grave, advising the nation;
 The infant, with milk-wet lips in his bee-like slumber.
 They are mine; all, all are mine; must I leave them, truly?
 I have cherished them in my veins like milk and fruit.
 I have warmed them at my bare breast like the eggs of pigeons.
 The great plains of the buffalo are mine, the towns, the hills, the
 ship-bearing waters.
 These States are my wandering sons.
 I had them in my youth; I cannot desert them.
 The green leaf of America is printed on my heart forever."

Now it entered the house, it marched upon the stair.
 By the bedside the faces dimmed, the huge shoulder blotting them,
 —It is so they die on the plains, the great, old buffalo,
 The herd-leaders, the beasts with the kingly eyes,
 Innocent, curly-browed,
 They sink to the earth like mountains, hairy and silent,
 And their tongues are cut by the hunter.

Oh, singing tongue!

Great tongue of bronze and salt and the free grasses,
 Tongue of America, speaking for the first time,
 Must the hunter have you at last?

Now, face to face, you saw him
 And lifted the right arm once, as a pilot lifts it,
 Signalling with the bell,
 In the passage at night, on the river known yet unknown,
 —Perhaps to touch his shoulder, perhaps in pain—
 Then the rain fell on the roof and the twilight darkened
 And they said that in death you looked like a marvelous old, wise
 child.

2

It is Fourth Month now and Spring in another century,
 Let us go to the hillside and ask; he will like to hear us;
 "Is it good, the sleep?"

"It is good, the sleep and the waking.

I have picked out a bit of hill where the south sun warms me.
 I like to be near the trees."

Nay, let him ask, rather.

"Is it well with you, comrades?

The cities great, portentous, humming with action?
 The bridges mightily spanning wide-breasted rivers?
 The great plains growing the wheat, the old lilac hardy, well-
 budded?
 Is it well with these States?"

"The cities are great, portentous, a world-marvel,
 The bridges arched like the necks of beautiful horses.
 We have made the dry land bloom and the dead land blossom."

"Is it well with these States?"

"The old wound of your war is healed and we are one nation.
 We have linked the whole land with the steel and the hard high-
 ways.

We have fought new wars and won them. In the French field
 There are bones of Texarkana and Little Falls,
 Aliens, our own; in the low-lying Belgian ground;
 In the cold sea of the English; in dark-faced islands.
 Men speak of them well or ill; they themselves are silent."

"Is it well with these States?"

"We have made many, fine new toys.

We—

There is a rust on the land.

A rust and a creeping blight and a scaled evil,
 For six years growing, yet deeper than those six years,

Men labor to master it but it is not mastered.

There is the soft, grey, foul tent of the hatching worm

Shrouding the elm, the chestnut, the Southern cypress.

There is shadow in the bright sun, there is shadow upon the
 streets.

They burn the grain in the furnace while men go hungry.

They pile the cloth of the looms while men go ragged.

We walk naked in our plenty."

"My tan-faced children?"

"These are your tan-faced children.

These skilled men, idle, with the holes in their shoes.

These drifters from State to State, these wolfish, bewildered boys

Who ride the blinds and the box-cars from jail to jail,

Burnt in their youth like cinders of hot smokestacks,

Learning the thief's crouch and the cadger's whine,

Dishonored, abandoned, disinherited.

These, dying in the bright sunlight they cannot eat,

Or the strong men, sitting at home, their hands clasping nothing,

Looking at their lost hands.

These are your tan-faced children, the parched young,

The old man rooting in waste-heaps, the family rotting

In the flat, before eviction,

With the toys of plenty about them,

The shiny toys making ice and music and light,

But no price for the shiny toys and the last can empty.

The sleepers in blind corners of the night.

The women with dry breasts and phantom eyes.

The walkers upon nothing, the four million.

These are your tan-faced children."

"But the land?"

"Over the great plains of the buffalo-land,

The dust-storm blows, the choking, sifting, small dust.

The skin of that land is ploughed by the dry, fierce wind

And blown away, like a torrent;

It drifts foot-high above the young sprouts of grain

And the water fouls, the horses stumble and sicken,

The washboard cattle stagger and die of drought.

We tore the buffalo's pasture with the steel blade.

We made the waste land blossom and it has blossomed.

That was our fate; now that land takes its own revenge,

And the giant dust-flower blooms above five States."

"But the gains of the years, who got them?"

"Many, great gains.

Many, yet few; they robbed us in the broad daylight,

Saying, 'Give us this and that; we are kings and titans;

We know the ropes; we are solid; we are hard-headed;

We will build you cities and railroads.'—as if *they* built them!

They, the preying men, the men whose hearts were like engines,

Gouging the hills for gold, laying waste the timber,

The men like band-saws, moving over the land.

And, after them, the others,

Soft-bodied, lacking even the pirate's candor,

Men of paper, robbing by paper, with paper faces,

Rustling like frightened paper when the storm broke.

The men with the jaws of moth and aphid and beetle,

Boring the dusty, secret hole in the corn,

Fixed, sucking the land, with neither wish nor pride

But the wish to suck and continue.

They have been sprayed, a little.

But they say they will have the land back again, these men."

"There were many such in my time.

I have seen the rich arrogant and the poor oppressed.

I have seen democracy, also. I have seen

The good man slain, the knave and the fool in power,

The democratic vista botched by the people,

Yet not despaired, loving the giant land,

Though I prophesied to these States."

"Now they say we must have one tyranny or another
And a dark bell rings in our hearts."

"Was the blood spilt for nothing, then?"

3

Under dry winter
Arbutus grows.
It is careless of man.
It is careless of man.

Man can tear it,
Crush it, destroy it,
Uproot the trailers,
The thumb-shaped leafings.

A man in gray clothes
May come there also,
Lie all day there
In weak Spring sunlight.

White, firm-muscled,
The flesh of his body;
Wind, sun, earth
In him, possessing him.

In his heart
A flock of birds crying.
In his belly
The new grass growing.

In his skull
Sunlight and silence,
Like a vast room
Full of sunlight and silence.

In the lines of his palms
The roads of America,
In the knot of his hands
The anger of America.

In the sweat of his flesh
The sorrows of America,
In the seed of his loins
The glory of America.

The sap of the birch-tree
Is in his pelt,
The maple, the red-bud
Are his nails and parings.

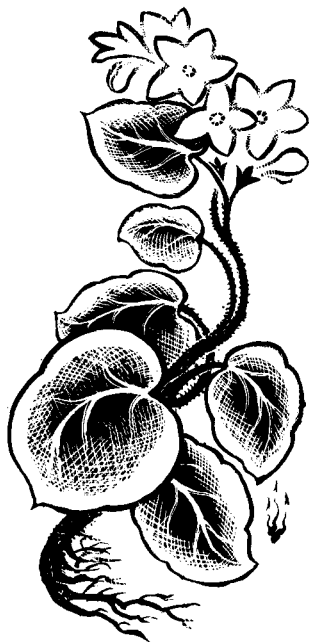
He grows through the earth and is part of it like the roots of new
grass.

Little arbutus,
Delicate, tinted,
Tiny, tender,
Fragile, immortal.

If you can grow,
A man can grow
Not like others
But like a man.

Man is a bull,
But he has not slain you.
And this man lies
Like a lover beside you.

Beside the arbutus,
The green-leaved Spring,
He lies like a lover
By his young bride,
In the white hour,
The white, first waking.



4

They say, they say, they say and let them say.
Call you a revolutionist—you were one—
A nationalist—you were one—a man of peace,
A man describing battles, an old fraud,
A Charlus, an adept self-advertiser,
A "good, gray poet"—oh, God save us all!
God save us from the memoirs and the memories!
And yet, they count. They have to. If they didn't
There'd be no Ph.Ds. And each disciple
Jealously guards his own particular store
Of acorns fallen from the oak's abundance
And spits and scratches at the other gatherers.
"I was there when he died!"

"He was not there when he died!"

"It was me he trusted, me! X got on his nerves!
He couldn't stand X in the room!"

"Y's well-intentioned

But a notorious liar—and, as for Z . . ."

So all disciples, always and forever.
—And the dire court at Longwood, those last years,
The skull of Sterne, grinning at the anatomists,
Poe's hospital-bed, the madness of the Dean,
The bright, coughing blood Keats wrote in to the girl,
The terrible corpse of France, shrunk, naked and solitary—
Oh yes, you were spared some things.
Though why did Mrs. Davis sue the estate
And what did you mean when you said—

And who cares?

You're still the giant lode we quarry
For gold, fools' gold and all the earthy metals,
The matchless mine.
Still the trail-breaker, still the rolling river.

You and your land, your turbulent, seeking land
Where anything can grow.

And they have wasted the pasture and the fresh valley,
Stunk the river, shot the ten thousand sky-darkening pigeon
To build sham castles for imitation Medici
And the rugged sons of the rugged sons of death.
The slum, the sharecropper's cabin, the senseless tower,
The factory town with the dirty stoops of twilight,
The yelling cheapness, the bitter want among plenty,
But never Monticello, never again.

And there are many years in the dust of America
And they are not ended yet.

Far North, far North are the sources of the great river,
The headwaters, the cold lakes,
By the little sweet-tasting brooks of the blond country,
The country of snow and wheat,
Or west among the black mountains, the glacial springs.
Far North and West they lie and few come to them, few taste
them,

But, day and night, they flow South,
By the French grave and the Indian, steadily flowing,
By the forgotten camps of the broken heart,
By the countries of black earth, fertile, and yellow earth and
red earth,

A growing, a swelling torrent:
Rivers meet it, and tiny rivulets,
Meet it, stain it,
Great rivers, rivers of pride, come bowing their watery heads
Like muddy gift-bearers, bringing their secret burdens,
Rivers from the high horse-plains and the deep, cow-fattening
pastures
Sink into it and are lost and rejoice and shout with it, shout
within it,
They and their secret gifts,

A fleck of gold from Montana, a sliver of steel from Pittsburgh,
 A wheat-grain from Minnesota, an apple-blossom from Tennessee,
 Roiled, mixed with the mud and earth of the changing bottoms
 In the vast, rending floods,
 But rolling, rolling from Arkansas, Kansas, Iowa,
 Rolling from Ohio, Wisconsin, Illinois,
 Rolling and shouting:
 Till, at last, it is Mississippi,
 The Father of Waters; the matchless; the great flood
 Dyed with the earth of States; with the dust and the sun and the
 seed of half the States;
 The huge heart-vein, pulsing and pulsing; gigantic; ever broader,
 ever mightier;
 It rolls past broken landings and camellia-smelling woods; strange
 birds fly over it;
 It rolls through the tropic magic, the almost-jungle, the warm
 darkness breeding the warm, enormous stars;
 It rolls to the blue Gulf; ocean; and the painted birds fly.

The grey moss mixes with it, the hawk's feather has fallen in it,
 The cardinal feather, the feather of the small thrush
 Singing Spring to New England,
 The apple-pip and the pepper-seed and the checkerberry,
 And always the water flowing, earthy, majestic,
 Fed with snow and heat, dew and moonlight,
 Always the wide, sure water,
 Over the rotted deer-horn
 The gold, Spanish money,
 The long-rusted iron of many undertakings,
 Over De Soto's bones and Joliet's wonder,
 And the long forest-years before them, the brief years after
 The broad flood, the eternal motion, the restless-hearted,
 Always, forever, Mississippi, the god.

The illustrations for "Ode to Walt Whitman" were drawn by Charles Child, who illustrated "A Book of Americans" by Stephen Vincent Benét and Rosemary Benét. An exhibition of Mr. Child's paintings was recently held at the Worcester Art Museum.

The Education of a Prig

YOUNG JOSEPH. By Thomas Mann. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1935. \$2.50.

Reviewed by SAMUEL A. NOCK

A GOOD many of us, in our Sunday School days, got the story of Joseph pretty well into our heads, along with an interpretation that had the virtue of simplicity if not that of sense. Some of us have had opportunity since then to hear more or less theological interpretations of the story, which often enough had neither simplicity nor sense. Now that Thomas Mann has published his second volume of the trilogy on Joseph, it is no bad idea to turn back to the King James Version and find out just what the story is, after all. I have just read again the tale as it is told in Genesis—read it with considerable astonishment: for I had not remembered that it was the merest skeleton of a tale. But what Dr. Mann has made it is something else. He has taken the skeleton of a story and put flesh upon it, in such manner that not only Joseph and those about him are living persons, but also their conduct is intelligible.

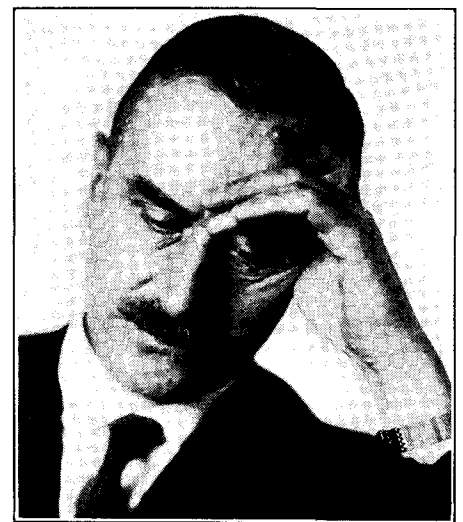
What made the brethren hate Joseph? Surely not the fact that his father gave him a gaudy coat. Why did they sell him into Egypt? Surely not merely because Jahveh had some plans up his sleeve. The motive, like the motive of all supreme drama, must have lain in conflict of human wills and human desires; and it is this motive that Dr. Mann makes clear. No one could hate a young man merely because he was set apart by God; but a good many people could get pretty well irritated with a young fellow who consistently did what he thought to be right, without consulting either expediency or the thoughts and beliefs of others with whom he was in daily contact. That is what Dr. Mann's Joseph did. He was a charming and lovable chap; but he never

considered other people and what was dear to them; sure of his superiority, he went his way, and treated with an unbearable if unwitting pride those whom he considered of less importance than himself. Even in his gentle dealings with Benjamin, Joseph assumed, utterly without malice, that he was superior to his brothers.

Joseph's brothers, quite aware of the fact that there was something in the youngster which they themselves did not possess, naturally felt grieved when the boy naively showed off. Ordinary men, finding an extraordinary man in their midst, the brothers could not endure the combination of Joseph and Jacob. They left home, silent because they could not speak, because they did not know just what it was that troubled them so much. And then Joseph came after them.

It was too much; even in voluntary exile their annoyance sought them out, and appeared in the coat, the sign and symbol of that superiority which had cost them all they desired and which made them afraid. And in wrath and terror they did away with that force that they could not meet; like many men after their time, they met intellectual power with physical violence. And then went back to Jacob, only to discover that intellectual power is not ever permanently done away with by brute force.

The brothers, as Dr. Mann portrays them, are men with whom one can have a great deal of sympathy—more, perhaps, than with Joseph. For in the otherwise somewhat tedious accounts of religions which Joseph gives to Benjamin we hear the voice of a prig; and this priggishness in Joseph is what must leave him before he can accomplish that which he must accomplish. During his three days of agony in the well Joseph at last understands his own nature, so that after his deliverance he will certainly be able to



THOMAS MANN

live with his fellow-men in peace and harmony, in spite of his superiority.

Joseph, in physical and mental anguish, overcame himself. But the brothers, unable to think, unable to understand, faced nothing, after their crime, but brute unhappiness, until the day when the whole business faded more or less into the past that seems as though it has never been. The brothers are worthy of sympathetic consideration, not only because of the results of their actions on themselves, but because of their very actions. Violence has once again defeated itself.

There is much psychological insight, much learning, much suggestion of the Christ story in Dr. Mann's handling of the theme he has taken. The attitude of the Jew towards God, fundamentally different from the attitude of other peoples, is made very clear. And yet all this does not detract from the story itself. Out of the bare tale as told in Genesis, Dr. Mann has made a full and moving drama of humanity; a drama complete in itself, but still continuing the drama that went before, and promising, in "Joseph in Egypt," a majestic ending to a powerful and eternally memorable conflict of human wills.