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WALT WHITMAN

POEM OF MANY IN ONE

A nation announcing itself,
I myself make the only growth by which I can be appreciated,
I reject none, accept all, reproduce all in my own forms.
A breed whose testimony is behaviour,
What we are, we are – nativity is answer enough to objections;
We wield ourselves as a weapon is wielded,
We are powerful and tremendous in ourselves,
We are executive in ourselves – we are sufficient in the variety of ourselves,
We are the most beautiful to ourselves and in ourselves,
Nothing is sinful to us outside of ourselves,
Whatever appears, whatever does not appear, we are beautiful or sinful in ourselves.
Have you thought there could be but a single Supreme?
There can be any number of Supremes – one does not countervail another any more than one eye-sight countervails another,
or one life countervails another.
All is eligible to all,
All is for individuals – all is for you,
No condition is prohibited, not God’s or any,
If one is lost, you are inevitably lost.
All comes by the body – only health puts you rapport with the universe.
Produce great persons, the rest follows.
How dare a sick man, or an obedient man, write poems?
Which is the theory or book that is not diseased?
Piety and conformity to them that like!
Peace, obesity, allegiance, to them that like!
I am he who tauntingly compels men, women, nations, to leap from their seats and contend for their lives!
I am he who goes through the streets with a barbed tongue, questioning every one I meet – questioning you up there now,
Who are you, that wanted only to be told what you knew before?
Who are you, that wanted only a book to join you in your nonsense?
Are you, or would you be, better than all that has ever been before?
If you would be better than all that has ever been before, come listen to me, and I will to you.
Fear grace! Fear delicatesse!

Fear the mellow sweet, the sucking of honey-juice!
Beware the advancing mortal ripening of nature!
Beware what precedes the decay of the ruggedness of states and men!
Ages, precedents, poems, have long been accumulating undirected materials,
America brings builders, and brings its own styles.
Mighty bards have done their work, and passed to other spheres,
One work forever remains, the work of surpassing all they have done.
America, curious toward foreign characters, stands sternly by its own,
Stands removed, spacious, composite, sound,
Sees itself promulger of men and women, initiates the true use of precedents,
Does not repel them or the past, or what they have produced under their forms, or amid other politics, or amid the idea of castes, or the old religions,
Takes the lesson with calmness, perceives the corpse slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house,
Perceives that it waits a little while in the door, that it was fittest for its days, that its life has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches, and that he shall be fittes
t for his days.
Any period, one nation must lead,
One land must be the promise and reliance of the future.
These States are the amplest poem,
Here is not merely a nation, but a teeming nation of nations,
Here the doings of men correspond with the broadcast doings of the day and night,
Here is what moves in magnificent masses, carelessly faithful of particulars,
Here are the roughs, beards, friendliness, combativeness, the soul loves,
Here the flowing trains, here the crowds, equality, diversity, the soul loves.
Race of races, and bards to corroborate!
Of them, standing among them, one lifts to the light his west-bred face,
To him the hereditary countenance bequeathed, both mother’s and father’s,
His first parts substances, earth, water, animals, trees,
Built of the common stock, having room for far and near,
Used to dispense with other lands, incarnating this land,
Attracting it body and soul to himself, hanging on its neck with incomparable love,

Plunging his semitic muscle into its merits and demerits,
Making its geography, cities, beginnings, events, glories, defections, diversities, vocal in him,
Making its rivers, lakes, bays, embouchure in him,
Mississippi with yearly freshets and changing chutes, Missouri, Columbia, Ohio, St. Lawrence, Hudson, spending themselves lovingly in him,
The blue breadth over the sea off Massachusetts and Maine, or over the Virginia and Maryland sea, or over inland Champlain, Ontario, Erie, Huron, Michigan, Superior, or over the Texan, Mexican, Cuban, Floridian seas, or over the seas off California and Oregon, not tallying the breadth of the waters below, more than the breadth of above and below is tallied in him,
If the Atlantic coast stretch, or the Pacific coast stretch, he stretching with them north or south,
Spanning between them east and west, and touching whatever is between them,
Growths growing from him to offset the growth of pine, cedar, hemlock, live-oak, locust, chestnut, cypress, hickory, lime-tree, cotton-wood, tulip-tree, cactus, tamarind, orange, magnolia, persimmon,
Tangles as tangled in him as any cane-brake or swamp,
He likening sides and peaks of mountains, forests coated with transparent ice, and icicles hanging from the boughs,
Off him pasturage sweet and natural as savannah, upland, prairie,
Through him flights, songs, screams, answering those of the wild-pigeon, high-hold, orchard-oriole, coot, surf-duck, red-shouldered-hawk, fish-hawk, white-ibis, indian-hen, cat-owl, water-pheasant, qua-bird, pied-sheldrake, mocking-bird, buzzard, condor, night-heron, eagle;
His spirit surrounding his country’s spirit, unclosed to good and evil,
Surrounding the essences of real things, old times and present times,
Surrounding just found shores, islands, tribes of red aborigines,
Weather-beaten vessels, landings, settlements, the rapid stature and muscle,
The haughty defiance of the Year – war, peace, the formation of the Constitution,
The separate States, the simple, elastic scheme, the immigrants,
The Union, always swarming with blatherers, and always calm and impregnable,
The unsurveyed interior, log-houses, clearings, wild animals, hunters, trappers;
Surrounding the multiform agriculture, mines, temperature, the gestation of new States,

Congress convening every December, the members duly coming up from the uttermost parts;
Surrounding the noble character of mechanics and farmers, especially the young men,
Responding their manners, speech, dress, friendships – the gait they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors,
The freshness and candor of their physiognomy, the copiousness and decision of their phrenology,
The picturesque looseness of their carriage, their deathless attachment to freedom, their fierceness when wronged,
The fluency of their speech, their delight in music, their curiosity, good-temper, open-handedness,
The prevailing ardor and enterprise, the large amativeness,
The perfect equality of the female with the male, the fluid movement of the population,
The superior marine, free commerce, fisheries, whaling, gold-digging,
Wharf-hemm’d cities, railroad and steamboat lines, intersecting all points,
Factories, mercantile life, labor-saving machinery, the north-east, north-west, south-west,
Manhattan firemen, the Yankee swap, southern plantation life,
Slavery, the tremulous spreading of hands to shelter it – the stern op position to it, which ceases only when it ceases.
For these, and the like, their own voices! For these, space ahead!
Others take finish, but the republic is ever constructive, and ever keeps vista;
Others adorn the past – but you, O, days of the present, I adorn you!
O days of the future, I believe in you!
O America, because you build for mankind, I build for you!
O well-beloved stone-cutters! I lead them who plan with decision and science,
I lead the present with friendly hand toward the future.
Bravas to states whose semitic impulses send wholesome children to the next age!
But damn that which spends itself on flaunters and dallyers, with no thought of the stains, pains, dismay, feebleness, it is bequeathing!
By great bards only can series of peoples and States be fused into the compact organism of one nation.
To hold men together by paper and seal, or by compulsion, is no account,
That only holds men together which is living principles, as the hold of

the limbs of the body, or the fibres of plants.
Of all races and eras, These States, with veins full of poetical stuff,
most need poets, and are to have the greatest, and use them
the greatest,
Their Presidents shall not be their common referee so much as their
poets shall.
Of mankind, the poet is the equable man,
Not in him, but off from him, things are grotesque, eccentric, fail of
their full returns,
Nothing out of its place is good, nothing in its place is bad,
He bestows on every object or quality its fit proportions, neither more
nor less,
He is the arbiter of the diverse, he is the key,
He is the equalizer of his age and land
He supplies what wants supplying – he checks what wants checking,
In peace, out of him speaks the spirit of peace, large, rich, thrifty,
building populous towns, encouraging agriculture, arts,
commerce, lighting the study of man, the soul, health,
immortality, government,
In war he is the best backer of the war – he fetches artillery as good
as the engineer's, he can make every word he speaks draw blood;
The years straying toward infidelity he withholds by his steady faith,
He is no arguer, he is judgment,
He judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling round a
helpless thing,
As he sees the farthest he has the most faith,
His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things,
In the dispute on God and eternity he is silent,
He sees eternity less like a play with a prologue and denouement,
He sees eternity in men and women – he does not see men and
women as dreams or dots.
An American literat fills his own place,
He justifies science – did you think the demonstrable less divine than
the mythical?
He stands by liberty according to the compact of the first day of the
first year of These States,
He concentres in the real body and soul, and in the pleasure of
things,
He possesses the superiority of genuineness over fiction and
romance;
As he emits himself, facts are showered over with light,
The day-light is lit with more volatile light – the deep between the
setting and rising sun goes deeper many fold,
Each precise object, condition, combination, process, exhibits a

beauty – the multiplication-table its, old age its, the
carpenter’s trade its, the grand-opera its,
The huge-hulled clean-shaped Manhattan clipper at sea, under steam
or full sail, gleams with unmatched beauty,
The national circles and large harmonies of government gleam with
theirs,
The commonest definite intentions and actions with theirs.
Of the idea of perfect individuals, the idea of These States, their bards
walk in advance, leaders of leaders,
The attitudes of them cheer up slaves and horrify despots.
Without extinction is liberty! Without retrograde is equality!
They live in the feelings of young men, and the best women,
Not for nothing have the indomitable heads of the earth been always
ready to fall for liberty!
Language-using controls the rest;
Wonderful is language!
Wondrous the English language, language of live men,
Language of ensemble, powerful language of resistance,
Language of a proud and melancholy stock, and of all who aspire,
Language of growth, faith, self-esteem, rudeness, justice, friendliness,
amplitude, prudence, decision, exactitude, courage,
Language to well-nigh express the inexpressible,
Language for the modern, language for America.
Who would use language to America may well prepare himself, body
and mind,
He may well survey, ponder, arm, fortify, harden, make lithe, himself,
He shall surely be questioned beforehand by me with many and stern
questions.
Who are you that would talk to America?
Have you studied out my land, its idioms and men?
Have you learned the physiology, phrenology, politics, geography, pride,
freedom, friendship, of my land? its substratums and objects?
Have you considered the organic compact of the first day of the first
year of the independence of The States?
Have you possessed yourself of the Federal Constitution?
Do you acknowledge liberty with audible and absolute
acknowledgment, and set slavery at naught for life and death?
Do you see who have left described processes and poems behind
them, and assumed new ones?
Are you faithful to things? Do you teach whatever the land and sea,
the bodies of men, womanhood, amativeness, angers,
excesses, crimes, teach?
Have you sped through customs, laws, popularities?
Can you hold your hand against all seductions, follies, whirls, fierce

contentions?
Are you not of some coterie? some school or religion?
Are you done with reviews and criticisms of life? animating to life itself?
Have you possessed yourself with the spirit of the maternity of These States?
Have you sucked the nipples of the breasts of the mother of many children?
Have you too the old, ever-fresh, forbearance and impartiality?
Do you hold the like love for those hardening to maturity? for the last-born? little and big? and for the errant?
What is this you bring my America?
Is it uniform with my country?
Is it not something that has been better told or done before?
Have you imported this, or the spirit of it, in some ship?
Is it a mere tale? a rhyme? a prettiness?
Has it never dangled at the heels of the poets, politicians, literats, of enemies' lands?
Does it not assume that what is notoriously gone is still here?
Does it answer universal needs? Will it improve manners?
Can your performance face the open fields and the sea-side?
Will it absorb into me as I absorb food, air, nobility, meanness – to appear again in my strength, gait, face?
Have real employments contributed to it? original makers, not amanuenses?
Does it meet modern discoveries, calibers, facts, face to face?
Does it respect me? America? the soul? today?
What does it mean to me? to American persons, progresses, cities?
Chicago, Canada, Arkansas? the planter, Yankee, Georgian, native, immigrant, sailors, squatters, old States, new States?
Does it encompass all The States, and the unexceptional rights of all men and women, the genital impulse of The States?
Does it see behind the apparent custodians, the real custodians, standing, menacing, silent, the mechanics, Manhattanese, western men, southerners, significant alike in their apathy and in the promptness of their love?
Does it see what befals and has always befallen each temporiser, patcher, outsider, partialist, alarmist, infidel, who has ever asked anything of America?
What mocking and scornful negligence?
The track strewed with the dust of skeletons?
By the road-side others disdainfully tossed?
Rhymes and rhymers pass away – poems distilled from other poems pass away,

The swarms of reflectors and the polite pass, and leave ashes,
Admirers, importers, obedient persons, make the soil of literature;
America justifies itself, give it time – no disguise can deceive it or conceal from it – it is impassive enough,
Only toward the likes of itself will it advance to meet them,
If its poets appear, it will advance to meet them, there is no fear of mistake,
The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferred till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.
He masters whose spirit masters – he tastes sweetest who results sweetest,
The blood of the brawn beloved of time is unconstraint,
In the need of poems, philosophy, politics, manners, engineering, an appropriate native grand-opera, ship-craft, any craft, he or she is greatest who contributes the greatest original practical example.
Already a nonchalant breed silently fills the houses and streets,
People’s lips salute only doers, lovers, satisfiers, positive knowers;
There will shortly be no more priests – their work is done,
Death is without emergencies here, but life is perpetual emergencies here,
Are your body, days, manners, superb? after death you shall be superb,
Friendship, self-esteem, justice, health, clear the way with irresistible power.
Give me the pay I have served for!
Give me to speak beautiful words! take all the rest;
I have loved the earth, sun, animals – I have despised riches,
I have given alms to every one that asked, stood up for the stupid and crazy, devoted my income and labor to others,
I have hated tyrants, argued not concerning God, had patience and indulgence toward the people, taken off my hat to nothing known or unknown,
I have gone freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families,
I have read these leaves to myself in the open air, I have tried them by trees, stars, rivers,
I have dismissed whatever insulted my own soul or defiled my body,
I have claimed nothing to myself which I have not carefully claimed for others on the same terms,
I have studied my land, its idioms and men,
I am willing to wait to be understood by the growth of the taste of myself,
I reject none, I permit all,
Whom I have staid with once I have found longing for me ever

afterwards.
I swear I begin to see the meaning of these things!
It is not the earth, it is not America who is so great,
It is I who am great, or to be great – it is you, or any one,
It is to walk rapidly through civilizations, governments, theories,
nature, poems, shows, to individuals.
Underneath all are individuals,
I swear nothing is good that ignores individuals!
The American compact is with individuals,
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals.
Underneath all is nativity,
I swear I will stand by my own nativity – pious or impious, so be it!
I swear I am charmed with nothing except nativity!
Men, women, cities, nations, are only beautiful from nativity.
Underneath all is the need of the expression of love for men and
women,
I swear I have had enough of mean and impotent modes of expressing
love for men and women,
After this day I take my own modes of expressing love for men and
women.
I swear I will have each quality of my race in myself,
Talk as you like, he only suits These States whose manners favor the
audacity and sublime turbulence of These States.
Underneath the lessons of things, spirits, nature, governments,
ownerships, I swear I perceive other lessons,
Underneath all to me is myself – to you, yourself,
If all had not kernels for you and me, what were it to you and me?
O I see now that this America is only you and me,
Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
Its roughs, beards, haughtiness, ruggedness, are you and me,
Its ample geography, the sierras, the prairies, Mississippi, Huron,
Colorado, Boston, Toronto, Releigh, Nashville, Havana, are
you and me,
Its settlements, wars, the organic compact, peace, Washington, the
Federal Constitution, are you and me,
Its young men’s manners, speech, dress, friendships, are you and me,
Its crimes, lies, thefts, defections, slavery, are you and me,
Its Congress is you and me, the officers, capitols, armies, ships, are
you and me,
Its endless gestations of new States are you and me,
Its inventions, science, schools, are you and me,
Its deserts, forests, clearings, log-houses, hunters, are you and me,
The perpetual arrivals of immigrants are you and me,
Natural and artificial are you and me,

Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me,
Failures, successes, births, deaths, are you and me,
Past, present, future, are only you and me.
I swear I dare not shirk any part of myself,
Not America, nor any part of America,
Not my body, not friendship, hospitality, procreation,
Not my soul, not the last explanation of prudence,
Not the similitude that interlocks me with all identities that exist, or ever have existed,
Not faith, sin, defiance, nor any disposition or duty of myself,
Not the promulgation of liberty, not to cheer up slaves and horrify despots,
Not to build for that which builds for mankind,
Not to balance ranks, complexions, creeds, and the sexes,
Not to justify science, not the march of equality,
Not to feed the arrogant blood of the brawn beloved of time.
I swear I am for those that have never been mastered!
For men and women whose tempers have never been mastered,
For those whom laws, theories, conventions, can never master.
I swear I am for those who walk abreast with America and with the earth!
Who inaugurate one to inaugurate all.
I swear I will not be outfaced by irrational things!
I will penetrate what it is in them that is sarcastic upon me!
I will make cities and civilizations defer to me!
I will confront these shows of the day and night!
I will know if I am to be less than they!
I will see if I am not as majestic as they!
I will see if I am not as subtle and real as they!
I will see if I am to be less generous than they!
I will see if I have no meaning, and the houses and ships have meaning!
I will see if the fishes and birds are to be enough for themselves, and I am not to be enough for myself!
I match my spirit against yours, you orbs, growths, mountains, brutes,
I will learn why the earth is gross, tantalizing, wicked,
I take you to be mine, you beautiful, terrible, rude forms.