

by Stuart Merrill  
*Les Gammes* (1887)  
*Pastels in Prose* (1890)  
*Les Fastes* (1891)  
*Petits Poèmes d'automne* (1895)  
*Poèmes: 1887-1897*, including  
*Le Jeu des épées* (1897)  
*Les Quatre Saisons* (1900)  
*Une Voix dans la foule* (1909)  
*Prose et vers: œuvres posthumes* (1925)  
  
with Octave Mirbeau and others,  
*Auguste Rodin et son œuvre* (1900)

# STUART MERRILL

# THE WHITE

# TOMB

## SELECTED WRITINGS

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY EDWARD FOSTER  
AND TRANSLATIONS BY "AEON," JETHRO BITHELL,  
ELAINE L. CORTS, HOLLY HAAHR, JOHN HAY,  
ANSELM HOLLO, JOHN PORTER HOUSTON,  
MONA TOBIN HOUSTON, LAIRD HUNT, JACK LEWIS,  
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JOHN PAYNE, CATHERINE PERRY,  
THOMAS R. RUDMOSE-BROWN, AND  
HENRY WEINFELD



Talisman House, Publishers  
Jersey City, New Jersey

1999

make a professional pornographer blush. As proof I need cite only those innumerable treatises on sexual anomalies that adorn the windows of our bookshops. How many of them can be considered truly scientific? Still, the police don't dare touch a book bearing the stamp of the academy. But just let an artist, one full of compassion like Baudelaire or Georges Eckhard, turn his attention, his eyes filled with tears, to the small sicknesses of love, and an entire horde will stand up, scream foul, denounce him to the vindictive public, not stopping until they have utterly dishonored him.

Oscar Wilde, who fought his entire life against his sickness, died of victim of those moralists. He had, even so, written some beautiful poetry, like his *Poems* and *The Sphinx*; criticism, *Intentions*; tales, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* and *A House of Pomegranates*; a novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; and plays, *Salome* and *Lady Windemere's Fan*. Of course, that matters little to the shopkeepers and the sacristans. Nothing counts when you've spent two years in prison.

For my part, faced with the death of the most unhappy man of our time, I cry out for pity and forgetfulness. He who was prisoner C.3.3. is now a prisoner of the great Jailer. Henceforth, let the work of Oscar Wilde appear to us in the serene beauty of anonymity. Let us be at least as compassionate as the grave.

## WALT WHITMAN

(à Léon Bazalgette)\*

translated by "Aeon"

**I** met Walt Whitman in New York four or five years before his death. He had come, according to his touching custom, on the day of the anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, to deliver a lecture on the great president, who had paid with his life for his vigilant defense of the "government of the people by the people and for the people."

I took three tickets for the lecture, and I went in search of two friends to accompany me: Jonathan Sturges, the first translator of Maupassant into English, and Clarence McIlvaine, who is today one of the directors of the famous publishing house of Harper Brothers.

We were at that happy age, (and for my part I have not gone beyond it), where literary respect carries all the force of a religious emotion.

The advertisement stated that the lecture would take place early in the afternoon; they wished to thus spare the strength of "Old Walt," as his

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\*The title page identifies the work as "From "Le Masque" / Series II, Numbers 9 and 10 / Brussels, 1912. / Pages 303-307 / With two Portraits." The publisher is given as "HENRY S. SAUNDERS / 9 Neville Park Boulevard / Toronto, Canada," and the publication date is 1922.

The following appears on the verso:

"This translation was dictated by my friend 'Aeon,' January 8, 1922.

"One hundred [inserted in script 'and fifteen'] copies printed. Numbered, bound and signed by [signature of Henry S. Saunders]

"This is number [with the appropriate number entered in script]

"The picture of Stuart Merrill, drawn by Albert C. Sterner, is from 'French Portraits', by Vance Thompson, and is used by kind permission of Mr. Richard C. Badger, publisher, Boston.

"The Whitman picture, is an unpublished one, by Brady, New York.

The Merrill drawing appears is on p. 55 of the present book.

A translation of this essay by John J. Espey was published in the *Walt Whitman Newsletter* 3.4 (1957): 55-7.

intimate friends called him. I will never forget our long wait in the huge, cold theatre, dimly lighted, musty smelling, a thinly scattered audience of devotees whose whispering made more perceptible the silence inside, and the deafening hubbub without.

Outside! Under the sparkling of the sun, we fancied that ephemeral man ran to his business affairs, with the telephone and telegraph vibrating madly: that the kings of finance and of industry, their offices covered with rugs, disturbed or pacified the life of the world. We heard, dominating the noise of the crowd, the impatient clanging of the tramcars, the rumbling thunder of the Metropolitan rolling upon its framework of iron: in the distance the great roaring of steamboats which stir up the muddy water of the Hudson and the East River. Vain noises! absurd agitation, concern of a day! We knew that in this cold theatre, silent and obscure, we were going to hear the poor, weak, trembling voice of an old man, a voice that the crowd would not hear, because it would not take the trouble to listen to it. The voice of a prophet, who moved in advance of his race and beyond his own time. We were, in short, going to hear the word which enclosed in its rhythm the history of the future, the lyric song of holy democracy.

Walt Whitman! Here he is, half paralyzed, hardly able to walk, leaning with his right hand upon a cane, and heavily with his left arm on that of the poet Stedman. With the aid of his friend he was installed in a great arm chair, before papers which he scarcely used, allowing himself to slowly improvise. And how affecting this was! He related the death of Abraham Lincoln quite simply, as though the event had taken place the evening before. Not a gesticulation, no raising of the voice. I was there, everything happened to me. His address was as gripping as the reports of the messengers in the tragedies of Aeschylus. Nothing has proved to me more plainly the fact that eloquence consists only in the emotion and sincerity of the orator.

At the end of the lecture, some one asked that Walt Whitman should recite "O Captain! My Captain!" the ode, dedicated by him to the memory of Lincoln. The poor voice of the old man exerted itself anew, a little before sunset, sobbing, rather than chanting, the funeral verses. I was in the

presence of the sublime and I could only weep, listening to this threnody, which Francis Vielé-Griffin has so admirably translated into French.

When the voice died in the noise of applause, which appeared to me an outrage to the grief of the poet, Stedman came forward on the stage, and told us Walt Whitman would be happy to receive his friends, that evening, known and unknown, at the hotel where he was staying, the name of which I have forgotten.

Timid, in spite of the invitation, my two friends and I sought for some pretext to be presented, blending our homage to the master with a small gathering of the faithful. I remember, in this connection, I had just received from Paris several numbers of *Vogue*, one of which contained a translation of "Children of Adam" by Jules Laforgue. I hurried to my lodgings, and, armed with the precious magazine, went with my friends to see Walt Whitman.

We were ushered into a large parlour, already dim, where the poet, seated, was receiving the visitors, whose names Stedman was announcing to him. While waiting for our turn I was able, for a long time, to study him at close range. I believe that never has so fine or beautiful an old man appeared among men. Certainly Tennyson, Longfellow, Tolstoy, were beautiful, but with a beauty spiritual rather than plastic, while with Walt Whitman the physical harmony was equal to that of the soul. The face was of perfect proportions, the brow rounded, domelike, recalled that of Shakespeare; under the noble arch of his eyebrows his eyes, candid and blue, as those of a little child, sparkled with mischief and goodness; the full red lips described an arc with charming delicacy. This face, the sweetness of which tempered its majesty, was framed with a head of hair and a beard still abundant in spite of the extreme age of the poet. His complexion suggested exactly that of a fair young man a little excited from exertion. The shoulders were broad, the neck round and very graceful, his linen exquisite. Never have I seen a man so fresh, so clean, so immaculate. A young woman would have liked him for a lover, this old man was so inviting she would have said. He seemed to be nourished by the purest substances of the earth. I took pleasure in imagining that his flesh should smell of the sun and sea spray. He wore, on this day a loose jacket of black

velvet, and a large turn-down collar of unstarched linen, — for he was very stylish in his own fashion.

When my turn came to be presented to him, I held out to him, stammeringly, my copy of *Vogue*. I do not know how I succeeded in making him understand that it contained a translation of one of his poems by a young French poet, Jules Laforgue. A sudden light in his glance, a smile spreading over his face, and a sudden animation of interest proved to me that my offering had given him pleasure.

“Ah! how happy I am that they are translating me into French,” he cried.

And I recalled the magnificent poem that he had addressed to France after the terrible year.

He asked me for information about Jules Laforgue, of whose genius he had otherwise no knowledge.

“And what poems of mine has he translated?” he asked.

The “Children of Adam,” I answered.

It is in this section of *Leaves of Grass* that are found the passages that most shock American modesty, and which caused the masterpiece of Walt Whitman to be ranked, by I do not know how many postmasters, “drunk with virtue,” among the obscene writings, the sending of which through the post, exposes the sender to the worst rigors of the law.

Walt Whitman wore a smile half pleased and half roguish, in answering me:

“I was certain that a Frenchman would hit upon those poems.”

The day declined; the old man was weary; we took no further advantage of his patience, and went out quietly, touched by his good, patriarchal reception.

The streets. The electric lights. The noise and hubbub of the crowd. Useless gestures. The vain, vain words. . . .

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“O Star of France” [Ed. Note]

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## APPENDIX

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## GUILLAUME AND WALT\*

by *Anselm Hollo*

 In April Fool's Day, 1913, readers of the Parisian weekly *Mercure de France* ("French Mercury") were treated to a remarkable "eyewitness account" of American poet Walt Whitman's funeral, twenty-one years after the event. It appeared in the weekly column penned by Guillaume Apollinaire, the great French poet, journalist, playwright, and promoter of the new century's new visual arts. This is what they read, under Apollinaire's byline:

### WALT WHITMAN'S FUNERAL AS DESCRIBED BY AN EYEWITNESS

The following detailed account of Walt Whitman's funeral was given to me by a participant. I took it down verbatim and have not added anything to it. This is, to my knowledge, the first detailed report ever published on this tremendously festive popular event.

"Walt Whitman, 'the good gray [poet],' had planned his own funeral ceremony. He had secretly saved up enough money to pay for a rather ugly mausoleum, undoubtedly of his own design, at the expense, I believe, of twenty thousand francs. After his death, his mourners rented a fair-ground mostly used by traveling circuses. The field was enclosed by a tall green fence. Three pavilions were built: one for Whitman's body lying in state; another for the barbecue (a popular American feast consisting of whole roasted cows and sheep); and a third for drinks: huge barrels of whiskey, beer, lemonade, and water.

"Three thousand five hundred people, men, women, and children, arrived at this funerary celebration. No formal invitations were required.

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"Guillaume and Walt" was written for the Whitman celebration at the Naropa Institute on 3 April 1997 and is reprinted from *Gare du Nord* 3 (1998).

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"All of this, it should be noted, took place near Camden (New Jersey).

"Music was provided by three big brass bands taking turns to play. Everybody Walt had ever known was there: poets, scholars, journalists from New York, politicians from Washington, old soldiers, war invalids from both the North and the South, farmers, oyster fishermen from his native county, stage drivers, drivers of Broadway's horse-drawn buses, Negroes, his old mistresses and *camerados* (a word he imagined was Spanish and used as a designation of the young men he had loved in his old age, never one to disguise his taste for philopedia), army surgeons, nurses male and female, parents of those wounded or killed in the war, all the people who had known Whitman and with whom he had corresponded.

"Pederasts had turned out *en masse*, the most admired among them a young man of twenty or twenty-two, celebrated for his looks, Peter Connelly, an Irish horse-car conductor in Washington and, later, Philadelphia, the one Whitman had loved the most.

"People were reminiscing how they had often seen Walt and Peter sitting on the curb eating slices of water melon.

"At this great party, or funeral ceremony, the public was also treated to great mounds of water melons.

"Speeches had not been scheduled in advance. Everyone was at liberty to speak whenever they were ready. Speakers simply climbed up on a chair or a table, and there were several orators in full night at the same time.

"A great number of telegrams and cablegrams sent by the poets of America and Europe were read out loud.

"Several of these messages had been composed in verse.

"The majority of the harangues were addressed to Whitman's detractors.

"The free booze proved enormously popular with the assembled crowd. There were sixty fistfights, and the police arrested fifty persons.

"The party lasted from dawn to dusk. Several orators who made their speeches next to the casket punctuated their discourse by pounding the coffin lid with their fists.

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"It was assumed, but not certain, that several of Whitman's children were among the guests, accompanied by their mothers, black or white.

"Whitman used to say that he had known six of his children but that he didn't doubt there were many others.

"At sundown a huge cortege formed with a ragtime band in the lead. Whitman's coffin followed, carried by six drunken pallbearers, and after it the crowd. The procession then moved from the fairground to the cemetery where Whitman's tomb stood on top of a hill. During the entire ceremony, the music never stopped.

"When it was time for the pallbearers to carry the coffin into the mausoleum, the door into it tuned out to be too low, so the pallbearers went down on all fours: the coffin was then placed on their backs, and they carried it, crawling, into the tomb. Thus the greatest poet of democracy entered his final resting place, and the crowd, still singing, kissing and fondling, staggged off to the trolley-car station to return to Philadelphia."

Roger Shattuck, one of Apollinaire's most distinguished translators and biographers (in a volume titled *The Banquet Years*), comments that "[T]hrough the preceding fifteen years a group of admiring European critics had distorted Whitman's exotic figure beyond recognition." Among these admirers were Alfred Lord Tennyson and Algernon Swinburne in England and Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue in France, and Whitman had, through their good offices, attained a status somewhat similar to that of, say, Rumi in the contemporary U.S. — that of a great lovable exotic sage from far distant lands, a provider of optimistic antidotes to a threatened and threatening socioeconomic universe. "With this one facetious chronicle," Shattuck writes, "Apollinaire exploded the legend. The international polemic he provoked over Whitman's respectability and sexual mores spiced the pages of the *Mercure* for a year to come and tended to replace one misapprehension with another. Apollinaire coolly extricated himself from the free-for-all once it was well under way." As follows:

16 December 1913

## CONCERNING WALT WHITMAN

My little article on Walt Whitman has met with an emotional reaction I did not anticipate.

I reported the details of Walt Whitman's funeral as they had been told to me in the presence of a young talented poet, M. Blaise Cendrars. I did not add or subtract anything from this account, believing that these were facts of common knowledge in America. Now that they have been contested, I regret my transmission of them. Unable to name a name that I am not at liberty to disclose, I ask you to dismiss the anecdote.

While the description of Whitman's self-designed tomb in the "eyewitness" piece is not entirely inaccurate, and the references to his sexual orientation, hotly contested at the time, seem relatively tame in the light of current research and mores, his actual funeral, somewhat eccentric in its own way, was nothing like the celebratory orgy Apollinaire and Cendrars concocted. While there were ivy and laurel wreaths from some New York literati, there were no huge barrels of whiskey and beer, no fistfights, and probably not a great deal of public fondling and kissing. Whitman's lover, horse-car conductor Peter *Doyle*, not "Connelly" (to those French ears, one Irish name most have sounded as good as another) was nearly turned away from the door of the funeral parlor. At the mausoleum, Whitman's biographer Justin Kaplan tells us, there were "readings from Confucius, Buddha, Plato, the Koran, the Bible, and *Leaves of Grass*."

But in the poets' parallel universe, there remains the memory of the less high-toned, even farcical Utopian revels the readers of the *Mercure de France* vicariously enjoyed on April Fool's Day, 1913.

# A LETTER FROM MR. STUART MERRILL CONCERNING WALT WHITMAN\*

translated by *Anselm Hollo*

Forest-Joz-Bruxelles, 5 April 1913

**M**y Dear Vallette,

In the latest issue of the *Mercure* I have read, with astonishment, an account of Walt Whitman's funeral which our excellent friend Guillaume Apollinaire has compiled taking dictation from a so-called witness of that event. I am aware that Apollinaire is one of our best straight-faced jokers, and that the issue in which his article appears is dated the first of April. This jest, however, is in questionable taste, and Apollinaire never does anything questionable. Therefore, I have to assume that his good faith has been abused. Why has he, who is ordinarily so shrewd, not observed the elementary rules of historical criticism before publishing a text that can only discredit the *Mercure*?

If Walt Whitman's burial had been a public scandal, the American press, ever keen on scandal, would not have hesitated to announce this with great fanfare, especially since Walt Whitman always had enemies. However, it did nothing of the kind. Despite the pietism that prevails in the United States, his civil obsequies were respectfully reported, the main newspapers even printing the eloquent funeral oration given by Robert Ingersoll, at that time the uncontested leader of Free Thought in America.

Now we are asked to believe that Walt Whitman spent all his time with drunkards and pederasts. The public record, however, speaks of his consistent and remarkable sobriety. Even in the Bohemian circle that used to gather at the Cafe Plaff in New York he always distinguished himself by

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\*"Une lettre de M. Stuart Merrill à propos de Walt Whitman" from the *Mercure de France* 16 May 1913: 890-92.

his temperance. As for the philopedia attributed to him, we may admit that certain poems of his, grouped under the general heading of *Calamus*, may lend themselves to equivocal interpretation, but there was never anything equivocal about the poet's private life. It is true that our hothead homunculi in Berlin, London, and Paris have claimed him as one of their own. It is also true that they go on to claim Wagner, Goethe, and why not, Jesus Christ as one of their number, and that they, despite Aristophanes' scathing treatment of their ilk, interpret Greek morality on the basis of the Palatine anthology, a work of decadence.

The truth of the matter is that Walt Whitman like many Anglo-Saxons and Germans had a somewhat overly sentimental view of friendship, of what is called camaraderie. Furthermore, he adored physical perfection to the point of ecstasy, and sang the beauty of both men and women with an equal lack of restraint. What need is there to attribute other vices to him who sang of himself? His supposed immodesty was merely a sign of perfect innocence. I myself have looked into the eyes of the old Walt Whitman, and whoever has seen these marvelous and marveling childlike eyes knows that "the good gray poet" surely was the most normal man in the world, that he was pure like nature itself, and that he abhorred with his entire being the petty perversities of the sick and deranged.

Would you like a decisive instance of proof of how distorted a view M. Guillaume Apollinaire's "witness" provides of the funeral, if he even ever attended it? He has the audacity to write: "Pederasts had turned out en masse, the most admired among them a young man of twenty or twenty-two, celebrated for his looks, Peter Connelly, an Irish horse-car conductor in Washington and, later, Philadelphia, the one Whitman had loved the most."

Now listen: Walt Whitman left Washington for good in 1873 in order to move to Camden where he died in 1892. He made the acquaintance of Connelly in Washington, soon after the War of Secession, most likely in 1866. At that time, Connelly, in order to be a conductor, had to be at least twenty years old, and thus he would have been at least forty-six in 1892. Now, my dear Vallette, we "old gents" of the *Mercure* know only too well how hard it is to be taken for a young beau when one is approaching fifty.

And should we doubt that, Rouveyre the implacable will surely recall us to reality.

Let us add that Whitman always had a particular liking for the company of tram and omnibus conductors. Very childlike, even in his old age, he loved the tumult of the streets, the hazardous progress through traffic, the skill and jargon of the teamsters. In New York, he knew personally all the omnibus drivers of the Broadway-Fifth Avenue line. I have seen them, those stout fellows, rubicund, gutsy, foulmouthed. No, never did Walt Whitman burn for them with an impure flame! One might as well assume that Victor Hugo succumbed to the advances of his coachman Moore.

I have said enough here to demolish all the calumnies that M. Guillaume Apollinaire's "witness" has tried to launch against the memory of Walt Whitman in the guise of a tale of fantasy. I recommend, to all who are interested in the person of the "good gray poet," the admirable biography by N. Léon Bazalguette who has collected, examined, and refuted all the accusations leveled at his hero. His book remains a masterpiece of veracity, insight, and enthusiasm, and affords solace from the procedures of modern criticism, which, when it cannot discover flaws in a great man, goes on to invent them. One will find in it an exact description of the funeral, derived from the newspapers of the day, and one will see that it was a perfectly dignified, solemn, and respectable occasion.

Yours truly, Stuart Merrill

## A LETTER ON STUART MERRILL FROM FRANCIS VIELÉ-GRIFFIN\*

**I**n the first letter I ever had from Stuart Merrill, dated New York, April 13, 1887, he expresses his aesthetic dream of the young poet: "I am not the only American who is trying to endow the French alexandrine with a little of the enchanting music of English verse; for you are, are you not? a disciple of Swinburne. Ah! don't deny it, for you need not be ashamed to admit that you are the disciple of that incomparable master, just as you might avow your being the disciple of Wagner, without losing any of your own proper genius. To express the idea by words, to suggest emotion by the music of these words, — such are, I think, the alpha and the omega of our doctrine."

From the start, Stuart Merrill was, to use his own words, "the poet of sonorities and splendors." It is in his volume, *Les Fastes*, that he merits this title. In the works which followed, he showed himself, without losing any of his verbal virtuosity, to be the landscapist of the horizons of Fontainebleau, Grez, and Marlotte, where he often spent his summers. His gorgeous music leant itself to the sincerities of the popular song, and in *Les Quatre Saisons* it is the triumph of life, at once calm and passionate, of the laborious poet whose window opens on the grand highway of France. Although Merrill had travelled much, he translated, like the painters of Barbizon, like Manet and Corot, only the landscape and atmosphere of the valley of the Seine. He is a true French poet.

The generosity and nobility of Merrill's nature necessarily inclined him towards human suffering, and he lived in the hope of seeing the dawn of justice and fraternity, when the horrible butchery of the present hour surprised him in the midst of his dream. He was suffering from heart-disease, and still hopeful, he died from the terrible emotions in the midst

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\*From Theodore Stanton, "A French-American Poet," *The Dial* January 1916.