

Emerson's letter to Whitman

DEAR SIR--I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "LEAVES OF GRASS." I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean.

I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like striking my tasks, and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R.W. EMERSON

Concord, Massachusetts, 21 July, 1855

Without asking Emerson's permission, Whitman gave this private letter to Charles Dana for publication in the New York Tribune on October, 1855. Later Whitman printed "I greet you at the beginning of a great career. R.W. Emerson" on the spine of the book. Whitman replied with an open letter to Emerson, which was included as an appendix in the 1856 edition of Leaves of Grass. Here's an extract:

BROOKLYN, August, 1856

[...] Of course, we shall have a national character, an identity. As it ought to be, and as soon as it ought to be, it will be. That, with much else, takes care of itself, is a result, and the cause of greater results. With Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, Oregon -- with the states around the Mexican sea -- with cheerfully welcomed immigrants from Europe, Asia, Africa -- with Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island -- with all varied interests, facts, beliefs, parties, genesis -- there is being fused a determined character, fit for the broadest use for the freewomen and freemen of Tho States, accomplished and to be accomplished, without any exception whatever -- each indeed free, each idiomatic, as becomes live states and men, but each adhering to one enclosing general form of politics, manners, talk, personal style, as the plenteous varieties of the race adhere to one physical form. Such character is the brain and spine to all, including literature, including poems. Such character, strong, limber, just, open-mouthed, American-blooded, full of pride, full of ease, of passionate friendliness, is to stand compact upon that vast basis of the supremacy of Individuality -- that new moral American continent without which, I see, the physical continent remained incomplete, may-be a carcass, a bloat -- that newer America, answering face to face with The States, with ever-satisfying and ever-unsurveyable seas and shores.[...]