Leaves of Grass in Claude Debussy's Prose

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Abstract
Tracks Whitman's previously unacknowledged influence on composer Claude Debussy and proposes that "Debussy could not have avoided knowledge of Whitman had he tried, and his well-known nature aesthetic owes some--though by no means all--of its inspiration to that poet."

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Leaves of Grass belongs to no particular accepted form of poetry. Whitman described its form as "a new and national declamatory expression." Whitman was a poet bubbling with energy and burdened with sensations, and his poetic utterances reveal his innovations. Conversely, another description of the grass in the same section of the same poem, where it is described as "the handkerchief of the Lord," is trivial. Whitman brought vitality and picturesqueness to his descriptions of the physical world. He was particularly sensitive to sounds and described them with acute awareness. Yet his work is composed in lines, not in sentences as prose would be. The line is the unit of sense in Whitman. Gay Wilson Allen has characterized Leaves as a "program poem" (Allen 120), meaning that the poet had a set of ideas to communicate. Though Allen quotes Whitman as saying that the poems were written out of "unconscious or mostly unconscious intentions", the poet was also not aiming at "art or aestheticism" (120) either, so the ideas presented within the poems may be analyzed in a light not only poetic, but philosophical. In the Socratic dialogues, a central thought that Plato puts forth is rather abstract, called in Greek anamnesis (Silverman, bibliography). It is in Leaves of Grass, crowded as it is with impressions, with the emotions of a burgeoning continent, we may truly rediscover America. Prose selections from the second part of this Whitman sampler. Dr. Babcock has selected writings that reveal Whitman's intense love of nature and his fascination with the American character. Through writings of enormous power, Leaves of Grass brings a vision of America as fresh as the day Whitman first conceived it. And within that grand sweep of vision appear dramatic close-ups of the seemingly minor moments of human emotion and experience. Thus Walt