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Walt Whitman

Benjamin De Casseres

1926

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No great man arrives until after his departure. No seer is accepted as a seer until the things he saw beyond the threshold of his time have woven themselves, by the easy processes of evolution, into the warp and woof of matter.

In spite of the fact that matter does not exist—the simplest of demonstrable truths—men will believe only those things that “come true.” To the great masses, no theory of life is true until it is practical. No doctrine is of importance until it is appraised in the market-place or weighed in the counting-room. Ideals are good, but what are they good for? Can the midnight oil of the thinker be used to grease the wheels of progress? Can a prophet tell me the price of stocks next week? If not, he is a loafer, a swindler, a charlatan.

Stupidity and vulgarity are unchangeable quantities. Their devotees accept a man with the same routine placidity with which they reject him. Only a dead seer is a great seer.

Emerson took the universe of thought and moulded it into a thousand gleaming sentences; he took the hollow tubes of abstract conceptions and filled them with blood.

Thoreau took the universe of thought and, moulded it to gleaming arrow-darts tipped with acid: he filled his fennel-rod with ichor.

Nietzsche took the universe of thought and alembecized it in the retorts of hatred to a poisonous spittle which he blew full in the face of humanity.

Whitman took the universe of thought and made it walk and talk and act and live. He made of spirit matter and retranslated matter into spirit again. He gave to philosophy a local habitation and a name. He took the protean Ideas of Plato that the Greek philosopher declared to be living, transcendental beings in his athletic fist, and on the iron anvil of life he pounded them into shape and use.

Walt Whitman taught no philosophy, taught no metaphysics, taught no creed. Walt Whitman was philosophy, he was metaphysics, he was a creed.

Men came to hear Emerson talk; men came to see Whitman. Men came to Emerson to hear the truth; men came to Whitman to see the truth.

In Emerson the heroic life found a tongue; in Whitman the heroic life found a body.

Whitman was greater than Emerson or Nietzsche or Ibsen. He must be classed with Heraclitus of Ephesus, Jesus, Epicurus, St. Francis of Assisi, Napoleon—with the men who acted their thought and thought little of their act. He flew into the face of his age; but that did not constitute his greatness. He walked brusquely into the scented presence of respectability and deftly pulled a handful of straw out of the dummy; but that did not constitute his greatness. He violated the conventions; but that did not constitute his splendor.

He was great because he was a rebel; because he was sincere, because he lived sublimely, decently—that is, naturally—and taught with the supreme nonchalance of easy example the egocentricity of the universe and the ineffable dignity of simplicity.

Time is the Miraculous Day. Eternity is the annus mirabilis of the Creator. Poets are because the universe exists to be wondered at. Who shall say “little” or “big” in a universe of infinitely large and infinitely small magnitudes? Where the ultimate origin of all things must forever be an enigma to man who shall construct an hierarchy of miracles? Christ who walked the water and a housefly that walks the window-pane—one is no less inexplicable than another. When we explain how a thing is done we merely add hypothesis to ignorance.

Walt Whitman looked on the world with the eyes of an infant staring at the marvel of a brass button. He could conceive of no greater miracle than the hair on the back of his hand. He flung the word commonplace from his vocabulary, for what was “common” in the average man was to Walt Whitman the persistent repetition of a miracle. What through endless, repetition and elbow familiarity dulled the sense of the matter-of-fact man caused a steady enhancement of the sense of wonder in that soul fresh from its mother-mystery. Merely to live overwhelmed him; this sudden adventure of Intelligence in matter kept him agape. Wonder enough to see a man cross the street; wonder of wonders that there should be a street, or a man, or locomotion, or perception.

So he clothed compost and all manner of ugliness with this wonderlight that fell from him all his days. So he wrought in his cosmic astonishment a divine world out of the stale miracles we call commonplace.

As Cæsar Augustus found a Rome of brick and left it a Rome of marble, so Walt Whitman found the everyday world around us a world of familiar substance and he left it a world aureoled in mystery.

His years of composition on “Leaves of Grass” was one long majestic gesture which translated a knowable universe into an unknowable fourth dimension that must forevermore claim our amaze.

Walt Whitman's democracy was the democracy of the spirit, a clear perception that not only were all men his brothers, but that the animals and flowers were as well. "That thou art," says the Hindu teacher in the "Dhama-Pada" to his disciple, pointing to a beggar. "That am I," said Walt Whitman looking at the drunkard arrested in the street.

Democracy is a spiritual concept. Christ was a democrat, Buddha was a democrat, Marcus Aurelius was a democrat. Democracy is the perception of the relations that exist between differences. It traces the thread of affinity through all forms of unlikeness. It finds in that affinity the fundamental oneness of man.

The only legitimate aristocracy is the aristocracy of character. Room for character! room for the Self—that is the essence of Walt Whitman's democracy. Wherever there is a man there is a democrat.

And so he saw in the cab-driver, the deckhand, the illiterate pioneer an endless duplication of his miraculous Self. They were no less than he. They were his brother links in that marvellous process that has spun man out of the nebula: that cohered in the monstrous abysses of space, that coiled Force, insulated in matter, that has been unwinding its infinite length throughout an eternal time. He recognized the democracy of instinct, the democracy of origin, the democracy of aspiration in all men.

He was only an accidental variant of the thief, a murderer accidentally shunted from the track of blood, a scavenger who had evolved.

He comprehended all differences of circumstance, and in comprehending them he blended them and resolved them into their originals.

He saluted all men reverently because they were Walt Whitman differentiated, he saluted himself because he was all men integrated.

He was the universal man, the law-giving anarchist. Anarchists believe in law more than any other men; for that reason they oppose those gross perversions of law called the State and Church. Law is instinct regulated by intelligence. It is the inner urge that aims at the procreation of an individual in its own image.

Instinct seeks autonomy, spurns vassalage, grips reality, which if it be not within a man is surely nowhere. My desire is my law—your desire is your law. It seeks to cast from itself all external trammels and flings itself in the direction of its immanent destiny. The disciples of the inner law are bound by rigid rules, iron regulations, are subject to macerating penalties and tend to the center of spiritual gravity. Sun or satellite? Law-giver or law-receiver?—which comes nearer the core of power?

"I celebrate myself and sing myself"—that is the opening line of that great epic of the ego, "Song of Myself."

In singing himself he sang of the Whole. In celebrating himself he celebrated not Walt Whitman, of Mickle Street, Camden, New Jersey, but Walt Whitman, the vitalized epitome of an eternal past; Walt Whitman the summation and recapitulation of an endlessly diffused nature; Walt Whitman the encloser of ghosts of the gone-by and the protagonist of his future incalculable incarnations.

The egotism of little men is ridiculous. The egotism of supreme minds that apprehend the Infinite and the Eternal passes over into godship. It is the egoity that describes its parabola in the superphysical. The boldness of Whitman's claims spring from the profundity of his insight. In the moral life he drives us back to spiritual Ptolemaicism. He makes the soul of man the center of the universe, around which swing all forces, all matter, all potencies, all that the eye greets or the imagination limns.

Only Shelley passed so completely into the world external to him. His astral imagination—his "cosmic conceit" he called

it—was his passport beyond all the barriers erected for lesser men. His vitality, welling up in an unbroken stream throughout a period of forty years, passed over into the leaves of grass, the light of stars, the souls of children, the thief in his cell and the cat on its porch.

So everything impinged on that spirit. Everything was part of Walt Whitman—abet is, part of you, part of me, part of any one who has come to realize that the universe of visible and invisible objects is but a creation out of the exfoliating Unconscious within man; that the soul of the individual is the great thaumaturgist; that, literally, the Kingdom of God is within us.

And that was the egotism of Walt Whitman that astounded a whole world—nothing more than his perception of the relation of all things to the one thing that supports and gives significance to the external universe—the soul of man. And in this celebration of this transcendent truth Walt Whitman selected his own soul to be the object of his poetic fervor, for that soul was not less than the others.

In evolution he found the secret of immortality. Man is what he was. Each of us literally existed in the primordial gas and each of us has been paleozoic ooze, rock, beetle, flying fish, sea water and rain.

Afar down I see the first huge nothing, I know
I was even there, I waited unseen and always,
and
slept through the lethargic mist.
Cycles ferried my cradle, rowing and rowing like
cheerful boatmen,
For room for me stars kept aside in their own
rings,
They sent influences to look after what was to
hold
me.

Change viewed scientifically is called evolution. Change looked at imaginatively is called reincarnation. Both measure the same facts.

Walt Whitman identified himself so completely with the world-spirit that he took as the definition of his own immortality the immortality of God. Personal immortality is the dream of little minds. It springs from the love of the flesh. It is the unspiritual dream, because it shrinks from change and from the infinite; hence is without faith.

Death to Whitman was absurd. What we call death is evanescence, vanishing. When the boat is out of sight of land does it follow that the land is no more?

“I shall come again upon the earth after five thousand years,” he boldly asserted. But not as Walt Whitman. Nature never repeats her phenomena; she only repeats the spirit of phenomena; the electric current that passes through the atmosphere and that which passes through the telegraph wire are the same, but the expression of activity is different.

His faith was organic; it was superimposed on no stratum of doubt. It was like the breath of his body, his very life. Death is really only a form of readaptation. Death is the equal of life—the best part of it. Life has made provision for all contingencies, and do you not think death has done as much? The project out down in its inception by death, the passionate desire balked of attainment by the arrow shot out of the dark—do you think they are lost? How can they be? Who can conceive of the annihilation of a force? Life outlasts its moulds; fire outlasts the furnace in which it glows; the ashes in the grate liberate forces which pass into newer centers of activity along the line of their innate characters.

What is democracy? The right to vote, one man will say. Equality of privilege, another will say. The doctrine that all men are created equal will be the assertion of a third.

Democracy is none of these things. It is the cosmic fraternal spirit.