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## *Whitman's Self-Reliance*

It is over sixty years since Goethe said that to be a German author was to be a German martyr. I presume things have changed in Germany since those times, and that the Goethe of to-day does not encounter the jealousy and hatred the great poet and critic of Weimar seemed to have called forth. But we in America have known an American author who was an American martyr in a more literal sense than any of the men named by the great German. More than Heine, or Rousseau, or Moliere, or Byron, was Walt Whitman a victim of the literary Philistinism of his country and times; but, fortunately for himself, his was a nature so large, tolerant and self-sufficing that his martyrdom sat lightly upon him. His unpopularity was rather a tonic to him than otherwise. He said he

was more resolute because all had denied him than he ever could have been had all accepted him, and he added :

*"I heed not and have never heeded cautions, majorities or ridicule."*

There are no more precious and tonic pages in history than the records of men who have faced unpopularity, odium, hatred, ridicule, detraction, in obedience to an inward voice, and never lost courage or good nature. Whitman's is the most striking case in our literary annals — probably the most striking one in our century outside of politics and religion. The inward voice alone was the oracle he obeyed : "My commission obeying, to question it never daring."

The bitter-sweet cup of unpopularity he drained to its dregs, and drained it cheerfully, as one knowing beforehand that it is preparing for him and cannot be avoided.

*"Have you learn'd lessons only of those who admired you and were tender with you and stood aside for you ?*

*Have you not learn'd great lessons from those who reject you, and brace themselves against you ? or who treat you with contempt, or dispute the passage with you ?"*

Every man is a partaker in the triumph of him who is always true to himself and makes no compromises with customs, schools or opinions. Whitman's life, underneath its easy tolerance and cheerful good-will, was heroic. He fought his battle against great odds and he conquered; he had his own way, he yielded not a hair to the enemy.

The pressure brought to bear upon him by the press, by many of his friends, or by such a man as Emerson, whom he deeply revered, to change or omit certain passages from his poems, seems only to have served as the opposing hammer that clinches the nail. The louder the outcry the more deeply he felt it his duty to stand by his first convictions. The fierce and scornful opposition to his sex poems, and to his methods and aims

generally, was probably more confirmatory than any approval could have been. It went to the quick. During a dark period of his life, when no publisher would touch his book, and when its exclusion from the mails was threatened, and poverty and paralysis were upon him, a wealthy Philadelphian offered to furnish means for its publication if he would omit certain poems; but the poet does not seem to have been tempted for one moment by the offer. He cheerfully chose the heroic part, as he always did.

Emerson reasoned and remonstrated with him for hours, walking up and down Boston Common, and after he had finished his argument, says Whitman, which was unanswerable, “I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey all, and pursue my own way.” He told Emerson so; whereupon they went and dined together. The independence of the poet probably impressed Emerson more than his yielding would have done, for, had not he preached the adamant doctrine of self-trust? “To believe your own thought,” he says, “to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true of all men — that is genius.”

In many ways was Whitman, quite unconsciously to himself, the man Emerson invoked and prayed for — the absolutely self-reliant man; the man who should find his own day and land sufficient; who had no desire to be Greek, or Italian, or French, or English, but only himself; who should not whine, or apologize, or go abroad; who should not duck, or deprecate, or borrow, and who could see through the many disguises or debasements of our times the lineaments of the same gods that so ravished the bards of old.

The moment a man “acts for himself,” says Emerson, “tossing the laws, the

books, idolatries and customs out of the window, we pity him no more, but thank and revere him.”

Whitman took the philosopher at his word. “Greatness once and forever has done with opinion,” even the opinion of the good Emerson. “Heroism works in contradiction to the voice of mankind, and in contradiction, for a time, to the voice of the great and good.” “Every heroic act measures itself by its contempt of some external good” — popularity, for instance. “The characteristic of heroism is persistency.” “When you have chosen your part abide by it, and do not weakly try to reconcile yourself with the world.” “Adhere to your act and congratulate yourself if you have done something strange and extravagant, and broken the monotony of a decorous age. “Heroism is the avowal of the unschooled man that he finds a quality in him that is negligent of expense, of health, of life, of danger, of hatred, of reproach, and knows that his will is higher and more excellent than all actual and all possible antagonists.” “A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition as if everything were titular and ephemeral but he.” “Great works of art,” he again says, “teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-natured inflexibility, the more when the whole cry of voices is on the other side.” These brave sayings of Emerson were all illustrated and confirmed by Whitman's course. The spectacle of this man sitting there by the window of his little house in Camden, poor and partially paralyzed, and looking out upon the trite and commonplace scenes and people, or looking athwart the years and seeing only detraction and denial, yet always serene, cheerful, charitable, his wisdom and tolerance ripening and mellowing with time, is something to treasure and profit by. He was a man who needed no assurances. He had the patience and the leisure of nature. He welcomed your friendly and sympathetic word, or

with equal composure he did without it.

I remember calling upon him shortly after Swinburne's fierce onslaught upon him had been published, some time in the latter part of the eighties. I was curious to see how Whitman took it, but I could not discover either in word or look that he was disturbed a particle by it. He spoke as kindly of Swinburne as ever. If he was pained at all it was on Swinburne's account and not on his own. It was a sad sight to see a man retreat upon himself as Swinburne had done. In fact, I think hostile criticism, fiercely hostile, gave Whitman nearly as much comfort as any other. Did it not attest reality? Men do not brace themselves against shadows. Swinburne's polysyllabic rage showed the force of the current he was trying to stem. As for Swinburne's hydrocephalous muse, I do not think Whitman took any interest in it from the first.

Self-reliance, or self-trust, is one of the principles Whitman announces in his "Laws for Creations." He saw that no first-class work is possible except it issue from a man's deepest, most radical self.

"What do you suppose creation is ?

What do you suppose will satisfy the soul but to walk free and own no superior ?

What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a hundred ways, but that man or woman is as good as God?

And that there is no God any more divine than yourself?

And that that is what the oldest and newest myths finally mean ?

And that you or any one must approach creations through such laws ?"

"Leaves of Grass" is a monument to the faith of one man in himself, and in his essential purity and divinity inside and out. And this man's faith in himself is his faith in all men. What he claims for one he claims for all. "What I assume you shall assume, for

every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” In celebrating himself he celebrated humanity, and in identifying himself with criminals and offenders of all sorts he but declares his universal brotherhood with all men. He does not give us charity, and liberty, and fraternity, and equality, as sentiments; he gives us the reality, and the reality is more than most people can stand. The sentiment of these things is very pretty, and we all love it and admire it, but the flesh and blood reality puts us to flight.

I think it probable that Whitman anticipated a long period of comparative oblivion for himself and his works. He knew from the first that the public would not be with him; he knew that the censors of taste, the critics and literary professors, would not be with him; he knew the vast army of Philistia, the respectable, orthodox church-going crowd, would be against him, and that, as in the case of nearly all original, first-class men, he would have to wait to be understood for the growth of the taste of himself. None knew more clearly than he did how completely our people were under the illusion of the genteel and the conventional, and that even among the emancipated few the possession of anything like robust aesthetic perception was rare enough. America, so bold and original and independent in the world of practical politics and material endeavor, is, in spiritual and imaginative regions, timid, conforming, imitative. There is, perhaps, no civilized country in the world wherein the native, original man, the real critter, as Whitman loved to say, that underlies all our culture and conventions, crops out so little in manners, in literature and in social usages. The fear of being unconventional is greater with us than the fear of death. A certain evasiveness, polish, distrust of ourselves, amounting to insipidity and insincerity, is spoken of by observant foreigners. In other words, we are perhaps the least like children of any people in the world. In due time youth and manhood

meet; the greatest men are the most frank and simple; but, as a people, we have a long way yet to travel to reach this blessed state. All these things were against Whitman, and will continue to be against him for a long time. With the first stroke he broke through the conventional and took his stand upon the natural. With rude hands he tore away the veils and concealments from the body and from the soul. He ignored entirely all social and conventional usages and hypocrisies, not by revolt against them, but by choosing a point of view from which they disappeared. He embraced the unrefined and the savage as well as the tender and human. The illusions of the past, of the models and standards, he freed himself of at once, and declared for the beauty and the divinity of the now and the here. He did not hesitate to say that “what is nearest, cheapest, easiest is me.” Such an example of self-assertion, not only in behalf of himself but in behalf of his fellows and of his country, was never before seen in any recent literature. The arrogance and the assumptions of the work were astounding. But its boundless humanitarian spirit, its tremendous practical democracy, its grasp of the great spiritual forces and its pristine splendor and freshness, like the sea and the orbs, won for it a tardy recognition here and there; yet to say that the public taste was shocked, is not saying much: appreciative readers were often bewildered. Even Emerson's admiration, so strongly and eloquently expressed in his now famous letter to the poet, though never taken back, was apparently held in abeyance for years before his death.

Out of Whitman's absolute self-trust arose his prophetic egotism—the divine fervor and audacity of the simple ego. He shared the conviction of the old prophets that man is a part of God, and that there is nothing in the universe any more divine than the individual soul. “I, too,” he says, and this line is the key to much there is in his work—

"I, too, have felt the resistless call of myself."

With the old Biblical writers the motions of their own spirits, their thoughts, dreams, etc., was the voice of God. There is something of the same sort in Whitman. The voice of that inner self was final and authoritative with him. It was the voice of God. He could drive through and over all the conventions of the world in obedience to that voice. This call to him was as a voice from Sinai. One of his mastering thoughts was the thought of identity—that you are you, and I am I. This was the final meaning of things, and the meaning of immortality. "Yourself, *yourself*, YOURSELF," he says, with swelling vehemence, "forever and ever." To be compacted and riveted and fortified in yourself, so as to be a law unto yourself, is the final word of the past and of the present.

Whitman's egotism, colossal as it was, was not personal and ignoble. It was vicarious and all-embracing of humanity. He thought better of every man than that man thought of himself. Selfishness in any unworthy sense he had none. Vanity, arrogance, self-assertion in his life there was none. Fondness for praise, as such, which has been so often charged, I fail to detect.

A craving for sympathy and personal affection he certainly had; to be valued as a human being was more to him than to be valued as a poet. His strongest attachments were probably for persons who had no opinion, good or bad, of his poetry at all.

His egotism, if there is no better word, united him to his fellows rather than separated him from them. It was not that of a man who sets himself up above others, or who claims some special advantage or privilege, but that god-like quality that would make others share its great good fortune. Hence we are not at all shocked when the poet, in the fervor of his love for mankind, determinedly imputes to himself all the sins and

vices and follies of his fellow-men. We rather glory in it. This self-abasement is the seal of the authenticity of his egotism. Without those things there might be some ground for the complaint of a Boston critic of Whitman that his work was not noble, because it celebrated pride, and did not inculcate the virtues of humility and self-denial, etc. The great lesson of the "Leaves," flowing curiously out of its pride and egotism, is the lesson of charity, of self-surrender, and the free bestowal of yourself upon all hands.

The law of life of great art is the law of life in ethics, and was long ago announced.

He that would lose his life shall find it; he that gives himself the most freely shall the most freely receive. Whitman made himself the brother and equal of all, not in word, but in very deed; he was in himself a compend of the people for which he spoke, and this breadth of sympathy and free giving of himself has resulted in an unexpected accession of power.

*John Burroughs.*