

## WALT WHITMAN'S UNSUNG SONGS

By CHARLOTTE ABBEY

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Walt Whitman says in *Specimen Days* :

One of my cherish'd themes for a never achiev'd poem has been the two impetuses of man and the universe—in the latter, creation's incessant unrest, exfoliation (Darwin's evolution, I suppose).

I do not think Darwin's evolutionary thought is Walt Whitman's. The magnificent evolutionary conception of the ancient East presents a closer parallel. Whitman's evolution is rather in the abiding inspirational force of the ages than the outcome of physical observation. I quote him again :

I meant, while in a sense continuing the theme of my first chants, to shift the slides, and exhibit the problem and paradox of the same ardent and fully appointed personality entering the sphere of the resistless gravitation of spiritual law, and with cheerful face estimating death, not at all as the cessation, but as somehow what I feel it must be, the entrance upon by far the greatest part of existence, and something that life is at least as much for, as it is for itself. But the full construction of such a book is beyond my powers, and must remain for some bard in the future.

The key to the continuation of Walt Whitman's songs lies in the East—not in the dogmatism of Brahmin or Buddhist speculation, but in a recognition of the relations subsisting between man and the universe as revealed by the study of cyclic phenomena with its ceaseless movement of races and

nations. These races and nations attain to states of consciousness in the course of evolution, but if in the attainment of such states of consciousness man fails to place himself in harmony with spiritual law, allowing himself instead to become involved and enslaved by temporal manifestations, then the effect is ruinous. The intellect of man produces inventions which serve to remove from labor some of its more ungrateful features, but as the human soul is still intent rather on the gratification of physical desires than on the unfolding of the soul's spiritual potentialities, the principle of communistic wealth is rejected, and that benefit which should have accrued to all is seized by the few.

In his *Sea Drift* poems Whitman frequently uses the terms "savage" and "fierce" when speaking typically of external nature. The ocean is "the savage old mother incessantly crying,"

To the boy's souls questions sullenly timing, some drown'd  
secret hissing,  
To the outsetting bard.

In the poem, *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, he says:

Cease not your moaning you fierce old mother,  
Endlessly cry for your castaways.

As simply applied to the ocean the meaning of this would be obvious. But to any one who is acquainted with the metaphysics of the East there appears in the lines a profound significance. That which is said to have proceeded from primordial essence, from which in its turn the universe was said to have issued, was in pre-Vedic history called the Spirit, or Holy Ghost—part of the primitive trinity of India. Everything ultimately returns to the Creator, but it cannot return until reconciliation has been effected, which can only be when the individual establishes himself in entire harmony with evolutionary consciousness. Whitman utters the soul's longing to find that to which it belongs. His boy in the *Sea Drift* poem cries:

Demon or bird,  
Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to  
me?  
For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I  
have heard you,  
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,  
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer,  
louder and more sorrowful than yours,  
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,  
never to die,  
O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,  
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetua-  
ting you,  
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,  
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me.

Never was the hunger of the soul more truly described. It is because this poem encloses the secret of evolution that it exercises an attraction so great. We feel that it is true though the full depth of its meaning is not immediately realized. The soul of man cries out for that to which it belongs, yet in its ignorance it acts as if it believed that it could be satisfied with that which is physically manifested. "What is nature," asks Walt Whitman, "but change in all its visible and still more its invisible processes, or what is humanity in its faith, love, heroism, poetry, even morals, but emotion?" We take light from the sacred flame and use it for self-satisfaction. We sell truth, love, mercy, in the marketplace. We compete in barbaric struggle for the necessities of existence. We call that natural which as human beings is no longer natural to us but the opposite. The "fierce old mother" chastises her children in order to bring them to her. She it is to whom each has to be reconciled before heaven is revealed—before the individual can come face to face with his own higher self, the elder brother. Not without reason has priestcraft made Mary the mother of God. Walt Whitman has thus laid the foundations for a purer social state. When this is won then will come the chants, the mighty chants, the songs, of the gods, for then

will men know that the highest love is not the love of material possessions, but the love of the soul—the great, ever onward moving, constant love—that which gives to the body an equality with the soul, proving it the temple of the spirit. These are not the songs of the human animal form but of the human form—that which out of its experience has realized the good. Walt Whitman's unsung songs will be the songs of his successors—singers yet to come who will sing in his spirit and to ends of which he has been prophetic. In conclusion let me quote him again :

Over the mountain growths disease and sorrow,  
An uncaught bird is ever hovering, hovering,  
High in the happier, purer air.

From imperfection's murkiest cloud,  
Darts always forth one ray of perfect light,  
One flash of heaven's glory.

To fashion's, custom's discord,  
To the mad Babel din, the deafening orgies,  
Soothing each lull a strain is heard, just heard,  
From some far shore the final chorus sounding.

O the blest eyes, the happy hearts,  
That see, that know the guiding thread so fine,  
Along the mighty labyrinth.