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SHORT READING COURSE IN WHITMAN

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We have been asked by several of our subscribers to prepare a plan for a course of Whitman reading which will give representative idea of his matter and manner.

"Starting from Paumanok" (p. 18) is a sort of itinerary of "Leaves of Grass," and may well be read first. In it the poet says:

The following chants each for its kind I sing.

My comrade!

For you to share with me two greatneses and a third one rising inclusive and more resplendent,

The greatness of Love and Democracy, and the greatness of Religion."

These three themes, then, are his chief motives, and our aim must be to trace through his work his conception and expression of them.

His treatment of love as a personal feeling between men and women recognizes fully the physical element which science seeks to reveal, and apotheosizes it, placing it in its right relation to the soul; for his intention is, as he says, "to earn for the body" as well as the mind "whatever adorns and goes forward and is not dropt by death," because giving "look'd at the objects of the universe," he finds there is no one nor any particle of one but has reference to the soul."

The tendency of much modern science in tracing the of love between men and women to a merely physical origin, the result more of a blind instinct than of conscious choice, has been to ignore the spiritual element, or any possibility of growth toward the spiritual. In this respect science only confirmed the attitude of the ascetic—asceticism particular, insisting on the inferiority of the woman.

On the other hand, Whitman perceives the spiritual element, which is the forward tending part, "Whatever adorns and goes forward and is not dropt by death," in the crude forms of love; and therefore he determines to sing of love in all its phases; therefore he shows of "male and female" either is but the equal of the other; therefore he summons sexual organs and acts to "concentrate in me, for I am termin'd to tell you with courageous clear voice, to prove you illustrious."

The division of "Leaves of Grass" which deals with the subject "with courageous clear voice" is called "Childre Adam," the name itself being a symbol of the beginning of man in his earliest Eden of the body from whence he is driven to wider realms. To assure yourself of this symbolism, read the prologue, "To the Garden the World" (p. 79); the epilogue, "As Adam Early in the Morning" (p. 95); and the verses just before that—"Facing West from California Shores" (p. 75)—which picture him turning toward the East, the land of the Mother of the Nations, from the western shore furthest and yet nearest to it, and toward which he turns back again joyous, but restless still, searching for what is "yet unfound." This Adam is not merely a poet, but evolving man, whom he represents, or, as he calls himself, "the soul of the man I speak for." Read then "Sing the Body Electric" (p. 81).

In "Calamus," the next division of the "Leaves," Whitman seems to have found what he had not found in "Childre Adam:" he sings the need of comrades, and places the love of comrades above that between man and woman. Read "Calamus."

Anchor'd Eternal O Love" (p. 111), as an example of this. That there should be an element of constancy in this love of comrades, he indicates in the poem, "When I peruse the Conquer'd Fame" (p. 107). To show the ideal which might be developed through this love of comrades, read "I dream'd a Dream" (p. 109) and "To the East and to the West" (p. 110). It is a curious fact, that might possibly strike only the woman reader, that in all his singing of comradeship and friendship he makes no direct reference to comradeship between women, which is fast becoming one of the most marked characteristics of modern civilization. But though Whitman does not expressly state it, it is none the less evident that the manly love of comrades must include the womanly love of comrades, and also its superiority over the love of a husband. In declaring this superiority of the love of comrades, he does not recognize the possibility of an ideal of marriage in which the love of the man and woman for each other is raised to that plane of high and equal companionship resulting from a perfect union of mind and heart, which is the distinguishing attribute of the love of comrades.

In our guiding poem, "Paumanok," he says that his "evangel poem of comrades" shows what alone must connect contemporary lands and cities and employments, and that is, "the ideal of manly love." That is the bond which binds towards democracy, as his "For you O Democracy" (p. 99), witnesses, which read next as belonging here, and also as forging a connecting link between his first theme, love, and his second theme, Democracy.

Democracy, according to Whitman, is divisible into reverence for self and reverence for others, as he says in his opening Inscription (p. 9): "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person, Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse;" and, according to Whitman, reverence for self and reverence for others are identical, so that "whoever degrades another degrades me, and whatever is done or said returns at last to me." Read "To You" (p. 186) as an expression of this

reverence for self; and for his exaltation of personality read "To a Pupil" (p. 302). On the other hand, as an expression of the collective, of "the word *En-Masse*," read "Salut a Monde" (p. 112), the poem of universal peoples. In that as he says in "Paumanok," he acknowledges contemporaneous lands, and "salutes courteously every city large and small" for his democracy is not limited to the America he loves. He recognizes all precedent and accompanying civilization. "In the name of these States," he exclaims, "shall I scorn the antique? Why these are the children of the antique of justify it." The breadth of his inclusion of the past, in leading up to the present and the personal, and as showing the kinship between his idea of democracy and the doctrine of evolution, may be seen in "With Antecedents" (p. 194). Read "Years of the Modern" (p. 370) and "The Song of the Open Road" (p. 120), as re-enforcing his application of the doctrine of evolution to human development through the future.

"The Song of the Open Road" chants the unceasing universal progress of souls, of which "all other progress is the needed emblem and sustenance." That which makes evolution—the subtle force which "provides in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter, why shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary"—that subtle force behind the process of evolution symbolized with Homeric strength in the "Song of the Broad Axe" (p. 148). The "axe leaps" in this song, "no solid forest gives fluid utterances" which take familiar shapes, but with strange significances. In reading it, notable especially stanza 11., in which arises a shape in whom all other shapes set free by the broad axe culminate; shattering whom is embodied a "law of Nature" than whom there is "no law stronger"—Woman.

These two poems closely link Whitman's democracy with his third theme, "inclusive and more resplendent," of which he says in "Paumanok":

"I say the whole earth and all the stars in the sky are for religion's sake,
I say no man has ever yet been half devout enough,
None has begun to think how divine he himself is, and how certain the
future is.
I say that the real and permanent grandeur of these States must be their
religion,
Otherwise there is no real and permanent grandeur ;
(Nor character nor life worthy the name without religion.)"

For a condensed and powerful expression of his belief that all religions are part of the truth, and that evil is also a part of truth, read "Chanting the Square Deific" (p. 339). The first and fundamental side of the four-square Idea is Law giving birth to such conceptions of deity as Jehovah, Brahma, Kronos, Earth ; the second conception is that of consolation, healing, affection, giving birth to deities like Christ, Hermes, Hercules ; the third is that of revolt, Satan. All these are eternal, but their seeming antagonism is harmonized by the fourth side of the square, the divine ethereal spirit which pervades all, fusing law, love and revolt, and which we make feminine, "Santa Spirita." As we see, however, this femineity of the pervading, abiding essence of religion connects the poem at once with "The Broad Axe." The culminating conception of physical development is there symbolized in a perfect woman, as spiritual development is more in a feminine essence. We may venture to suggest that in representing woman as the culminating symbol among physical forms, he means to point to a still farther progress born from her, as children are from a mother, and likewise that from the feminine spiritual essence shall be born future religious conceptions. The idea is somewhat akin to the old Pythagorean notion that the material of the universe is eternal and feminine, while the element of form, necessarily transient, is masculine. Whitman gives further credence to his supposition in the following lines from "Unfolded out of the Folds" (302) :

Unfolded out of the folds of a woman's brain come all the folds of the man's brain, duly obedient,

Unfolded out of the justice of the woman all justice is unfolded,
 Unfolded out of the sympathy of the woman is all sympathy,
 A man is a great thing upon the earth and through eternity, but every
 of the greatness of man is unfolded out of woman."

For the boundless aspiration of the Soul towards God, read the splendid poem, "Passage to India" (p. 315); for an expression of doubt as to immortality, read the poem called "Thought" (p. 345); for an expression of perfect trust that all affairs in the universe are ordered for good, read "Assurances" (p. 342); and for his firm conviction that all life for immortality, read "To think of Time" (p. 333). He accepts death as natural and beautiful, indicating birth in new realms of joy; and in no one of his poems is this attitude of perfect acceptance of it more beautifully illustrated than in his swan-song, "Good-bye My Fancy" (p. 422).

Whitman's domain is so spacious, we can but glimpse along its vistas here, yet a glance or two more should be directed, if a representative outline is to be secured, to his poems of nature, war, and poetry. None of them—though they are grouped here, at the close of this plan of reading by themselves—fall outside of the three-motived stem along which his "Leaves of Grass" spread their blades. In reading "As I ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" (p. 202), or the series, "You Tides with Ceaseless Swell," "By that long Scan of Waves," etc., entitled "Fancies at Navesink" (p. 389), we see that the poetic use of the sea is peculiarly his own. In them the cosmic element ministers to the human and spiritual, or it almost coincides with them. In "Unseasonable Buds" (p. 421), "The Voice of the Rain," and "Soon shall the Winter's Foil be Here" (p. 399), the meaning attached to the nature-analogies is of the same class; and "When Lilacs last in the Door Yard bloom'd" (p. 255), is a poem interwoven of many elements—the perennial perfume and shape of the lilac, the great star fallen in the West, and the love-song of the hidden thrush, chorded together in music to commemorate his hero, Lincoln.

That which he calls in his "Leaves" their "interstice of War" finds voice in "Beat! Beat! Drums!" (p. 222), and "Rise O Days from your Fathomless Deeps!" (p. 228); and the essence of all such trouble passed breathes in "The Mystic Trumpeter" (p. 356). The "Song of the Banner at Day-break" (p. 223) is an American flag-song of the most original and spiritual sort.

In reading "To Get the Final Lilt of Songs" (p. 394), "Old Chants" (p. 414), "When the Full-grown Poet came" (p. 416), and "The Unexpress'd" (p. 421), notice that Whitman finds it appropriate to utter his last words upon poetry. He accounts it the "last keen faculty of age" to encompass and truly understand it. He calls age, moreover, an *entrance-price*, for in his eyes poetry is undying, and the poetry of future evolution is as yet unexpressed.

The purport of his work as a whole he himself gives clearly. It is:

Not to exclude or demarcate, or pick out evils from their formidable masses (even to expose them),

But add, fuse, complete, extend—and celebrate the immortal and the good.

Haughty this song, its words and scope,

To span vast realms of space and time,

Evolution—the cumulative—growths and generations."