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A CONVERT TO WHITMAN

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I confess myself a new convert to Whitmanism, or *Whitmania*, as its opponents might call it. I can boast no heroic record of having stood by its great apostle from the first against the storm of opposition and denunciation with which he was received. I knew of him then only from the introduction which the critics gave him, as a white-bearded, vulgar old sensualist; and, like many others, I was offended and repelled by the isolated extracts they gave us of his poems. If he really wrote those things, I said, I don't want to read any more of him. Not that I set up any special claim to saintship. I hope there is nothing of the Pharisee in me. But when we witness an exhibition that is designed for the eyes of all—men, women, and children alike—or when we read that which is to be placed upon the table of the family library, we naturally see with the general, impersonal eye, a censor entirely independent of our own particular moral status. We set up a standard for our fellow men which may be, or may not be, higher than that we set up for ourselves. As it happened, however, one of my most intimate friends* was a staunch disciple of Walt Whitman, and he persisted in forcing him upon my attention, until I finally saw that the critics had shown me only the mud from which beautiful, fragrant lilies grew—that they had copied only the misshapen gargoyles which project from the eaves

and gables of a magnificent cathedral. Since then I have seen clearly that the mud is good, honest, American mud, at least, and not sugar-coated French poison; that the gargoyles are hideous only when removed from their proper environment—that when restored to their appropriate places they supply an esthetic element absolutely necessary to the ideal completeness which alone could satisfy Whitman, and, that, whatever else they do, they bring into stronger relief the seraphim that spread their wings from the lofty pinnacles above them.

At first, too, I did not like Whitman's versification. I missed the jingle to which the other poets have accustomed our ears. But it has grown upon me that our natural taste for that jingle is very like the uncultured taste which prefers the music of "catchy" popular songs to the music of classical opera and oratorio. I am afraid Whitman's sonorous, virile cadences have spoiled me for even the melodious jingles of Tennyson and Longfellow. Is there not something almost pitifully incongruous in the nursery-like rhyme and rhythm of

"Tell me not in mournful numbers
Life is but an empty dream,"

and the grand thoughts embodied in the "Psalm of Life?" Is it not as if some majestic old emperor should be seen skipping along with the gait of Little Lord Fauntleroy? It does well enough for Watts's Hymns, but how would "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," sound in the rhyme and meter of, "Let Dogs Delight to Bark and Bite"? Does anyone nowadays think the Psalms of David were improved by being tortured into the straight jacket of the Old Scottish Hymnal? How would the sublime chapters of the Book of Job sound in "long" or "short" or "common" meter? Take, for example, some such version as this:

"Answer how to these inquiries,
If an answer thou can'st find:
Can'st thou the sweet influences
Of the Seven Sisters bind?—

“Loose the bands of bright Orion,
Hast Leviathan e’er brought
From the waves with hook of iron;
Who makes the sea boil like a pot?”

This is not Watts, I’ll allow; but I submit that it is fully up to the average of versified scripture. Whitman’s aerial flights could not have been taken with such little butterfly’s wings. He sailed aloft on broad pinions. One of these was his deep human sympathy, and the other his marvelous intuition. In this latter faculty he seems to me like that old demigod of Athens, Socrates, who possessed his intuition without his poetry. I have tried to picture it in the following sonnet:

“Once Socrates thus mused upon a star
That shone from out the ether crystalline,
With mellow radiance steadfast and serene:
‘Tis Zeus, they say, within his golden car,
Coursing along the Zodiac so far
Beyond the airy waves that roll between
That only glories meaningless are seen.
Oh, would that I might see them as they are!”

Was it the mighty yearning of his soul
That gave him then a telescopic eye?
He saw no chariot speeding to its goal,
No fiery steeds with proud necks arching high—
He saw a giant world, athwart whose sky
Its future oceans in thick vapors roll!”

So Whitman saw in the heavens no petty trumpery gods and chariots, but giant worlds. He saw in human life no mere conventional poetic fancies, but great, significant realities. He takes you with him into the clouds and shows you beneath, not a mere Helicon with nymphs and dryads, but vast continents peopled with living men and women, vast oceans with their ebbing and flowing tides of human joys and sorrows.