

SELF-PRIMACY IN WHITMAN

By GUSTAV P. WIKSELL

[Spoken at the afternoon session, annual meeting, May 31st, 1897.]

What can I say upon such an occasion as this? Why should I say anything? And yet I feel like adding a word to what has already been spoken, doing so rather to free my heart than because anything I may utter will seem important to any of you here present. Whitman seems rather to inspire silence than speech. He compels one to great love, such love to be expressed in deeds, not words. And he lets us see, those of us who doubt it, that in each person is a reservoir, a depository, personal, sacred, of the divine power which so unquestionably found a protagonist in him. The divine power to create comradeship in the world. The divine power to summon men from their hostilities to their affections. The divine power to cement in social union all individuated faculties, so that each may serve all and all may potently serve each. The divine power, male or female, feminine and masculine blended, no severances, a symmetrical system, love its corner-stone, the emotional nature proudly in command of things at last.

No one could ever feel that Whitman despised him. Whatever failure should come to the weak and sorry soul above all is the comfort of Whitman's "try again." Whitman helps us to be patient with others and with ourselves. He has built the most enduring shrine to the love of comrades.

In our intellectual age, in the intellectual splendor of a generation given to criticism, Whitman asserted the primacy

of the emotions, of the affectional nature of man, and counselled us not to fear those who carped when men and women gave themselves over to the sentiments. Whitman mystically poured all streams of human affection into one heart—his, yours: streams East and West, American and Asian. He saw all the way back to common sources and all the way forward to common reunions. I confess that when I read his book sense seems to depart and reality is throned—body is transformed and spirit is shaped to all the desires of existence. No doubt that is why I am here today, why we are here together, why I make this confession, and why, now that I am done, I shall yield this place to another.