

A FEW NOTES ON WHITMAN AND THE NEW ENGLAND WRITERS

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From New England came the first appreciative recognition of *Leaves of Grass*, and today, after a half century has elapsed, if the sales of the book are taken as evidence, New England furnishes a greater number of Whitman readers than any other part of the country. But these facts cannot be interpreted as evidence of a continuous appreciation of Whitman on the part of New England during the whole period of intervening years.

When amid the storm of obloquy which greeted the first publication of the "*Gospel of Democracy*" the voice of Emerson, then the chief literary figure of the United States, was heard acclaiming the book as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed," the people of New England, unable to understand what their literary idol saw in this "strange monster with buffalo strength and terrible eyes," attempted to read in the judgment so deliberately expressed a case of the heart's triumph over the head. In later years no less a person than Emerson's own son, with strange ignorance of the recorded facts of his father's friendship for Whitman, attempted to apologize for this evidence of Emerson's clear vision by a statement as false as its truth would have been humiliating. In a patronizing tone Edward Emerson admits his father's

kindly interest in the "young workingman" who wrote *Leaves of Grass*, but says that after the unauthorized publication of his letter of congratulation Emerson dropped his acquaintance and had nothing more to do with him. It is not necessary that I should attempt to prove the incorrectness of this statement. It has been sufficiently disproved by published evidence already. But in the history of Whitman's relations with the New England writers his friendship with Emerson is the most significant episode, and as such it may perhaps be dwelt upon even to the extent of repetition.

New England today is reaching the height of outlook upon which its prophet viewed the literary horizon a half century ago. Today its writers and its readers take pride in the fact that from New England came this magnificent greeting of Whitman:

CONCORD, Massts., 21 July, 1855.

DEAR SIR:

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of *Leaves of Grass*. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork—too much lymph in the temperament—were making our Western wits fat and mean. I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire. I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging. I did not know until I last night saw the book advertised in a newspaper that I could trust the name as real and available for a post-office. I wish to see my benefactor, and have felt much like

striking my tasks, and visiting New York to pay you my respects.

R. W. EMERSON.

Mr. Walter Whitman.

And visit New York he did (after, according to Edward Emerson, he had dropped Whitman's acquaintance), and from that day whenever their paths crossed it was always Emerson who sought out Whitman, and he never missed an opportunity to meet him. Up and down under the elms on Boston Common walked these titans arguing over the Children of Adam—not because Emerson did not appreciate their motive and purpose but because he feared that from the bitter opposition which these passages would excite, the whole book, with its salutary lesson of democracy, might be prevented from reaching the hearts of the readers of the world. In Boston twenty years later Whitman wrote:

Up and down this breadth by Beacon street, between these same old elms, I walk'd for two hours, of a bright sharp February mid-day twenty-one years ago, with Emerson, then in his prime, keen, physically and morally magnetic, arm'd at every point, and when he chose, wielding the emotional just as well as the intellectual. During these two hours he was the talker and I the listener. It was an argument-statement, reconnoitring, review, attack, and pressing home, (like an army corps in order, artillery, cavalry, infantry,) of all that could be said against that part (and a main part) in the construction of my poems, Children of Adam. More precious than gold to me that dissertation—it afforded me, ever after, this strange and paradoxical lesson: each point of E.'s statement was unanswerable, no judge's charge ever more complete or convincing, I could never hear the points better put—and then I felt down in my soul the clear and unmistakable conviction to disobey all, and pursue my own way. "What have you to say then to such things?" said E., pausing in conclusion. "Only that while I can't answer them at all, I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory, and exemplify it," was my candid response. Whereupon we went and had a good dinner at the American House. And thenceforward I never waver'd or was touch'd

with qualms, (as I confess I had been two or three times before.)

Later, just before Emerson's death, quoting again from Whitman's published writings, (which doubtless Edward Emerson has never read):

Several hours at E.'s house, and dinner there. . . . Of course the best of the occasion (Sunday, September 18, '81) was the sight of E. himself. . . . Besides Emerson himself, Mrs. E., with their daughter Ellen, the son Edward and his wife, with my friend F. S. and Mrs. S., and others, relatives and intimates.

And lastly these words from a letter written by Whitman to William Sloane Kennedy:

I welcomed him deepest and always—yet it began and continued on his part, quite entirely—He always sought ME. We probably had a dozen (possibly twenty) of these meetings, talks, walks, etc.—Some 5 or 6 times (sometimes New York, sometimes Boston) . . . That visit to me at Sanborn's by E. and his family (see pp. 189-90 Spec. Days.) and the splendid formal informal family dinner to me next day, Sunday, Sept. 18, 81, by E., Mrs. E. and all) I consider not only a victor-event in my life, but it is an after-explanation of so much and offered as an apology, peace offering, justification of much the world knows not of.

This much of Emerson, but what of the other New England writers of that day? Those who stood closest to Emerson accorded with him in tribute to Whitman's genius. Thoreau, after a visit, in company with A. Bonson Alcott, to Whitman in Brooklyn, says in a letter to H. G. O. Blake:

That Walt Whitman of whom I wrote to you is the most interesting fact to me at present. I have just read his second edition which he gave me, and it has done me more good than any reading for a long time. I have found his poem exhilarating, encouraging. As for its sensuality, and it may turn out to be less sensual than it appears, I do not so

much wish that those parts were not written, as that men and women were so pure that they could read them without harm. . . .

On the whole it sounds to me very brave and very American, after whatever deductions. I do not believe that all the sermons, so-called, that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching. We ought to rejoice greatly in him. He occasionally suggests something a little more than human. . . . He is awfully good. Since I have seen him, I find I am not disturbed by any brag or egoism in his book. He may turn out the least of a braggart of all, having a better right to be confident. He is a great fellow.

And again, in another communication, Thoreau summed the poet up in the epigrammatic phrase: "He *is* Democracy."

Alcott and Sanborn were also his admirers and friends, the latter writing, in 1889, to Whitman's birthday:

At no time since Emerson directed my attention to his *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 have I failed to notice what he was saying or doing. . . . The voyage of Whitman has been a bold and forward one, guided by the stars, and not by winds and currents. He has tugged manfully at his oars, and has had his own compass to steer by. I lament that it is now so nearly over, and that my little boat must apparently run on a few years without having his noble barge in hail.

Among the other great names of New England's older literary men the recognition to Whitman was scanty and unwilling. I have been particularly impressed with the fineness of Whitman's attitude toward one—James Russell Lowell—who had assumed to consider him as a New York rowdy whom no one in the country took any notice of: Lowell, remarking to a friend as he pointed out a grotesque grocer's sign with its letters stretched higgledy piggedly over the side of a store, "That is Whitman's poetry;" Lowell, urging an English nobleman not to present his letters of introduction to Whitman; Lowell, sinking below a

noble opportunity, when entrusted with the task of furnishing the list of names to be inscribed upon the Boston Public Library, and though with room for a handful of minor poets finding none for the great American bard—and then Whitman, great with the magnanimity of the true gentleman, writing to the Boston Herald on Lowell's death:

Let me add my little word to J. R. Lowell's memory. His was the true American's and humanity's heart, in the light of his own convictions, and he wrought it out faithfully.

Concerning Longfellow's attitude I have found no record except Whitman's own testimony to some friendly interchange of greetings in 1881:

A short but pleasant visit to Longfellow. I am not one of the calling kind, but as the author of *Evangeline* kindly took the trouble to come and see me three years ago in Camden, where I was ill, I felt not only the impulse of my own pleasure on that occasion, but a duty. He was the only particular eminence I called on in Boston, and I shall not soon forget his lit-up face and glowing warmth and courtesy, in the modes of what is called the old school.

Holmes, who, with all reverence for his good qualities and great ability, showed sometimes a trace of what in one less kindly and less able would be designated as snobbishness (and if this phrase seems too severe, read once more in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table* his comparison of a self-made man with the old Irishman's self-built house). Holmes has put his views on Whitman on record in a jocular comparison of the poet with Lord Timothy Dexter, who published his autobiography unpunctuated but with a page of assorted marks at the end, that the reader might "pepper and *solt* the book as he choose."

Whittier, of course, could not comprehend the true meaning of *Leaves of Grass*, but he could not fail to appreciate the noble heart which made Whitman "the wound dresser." With relentness hand he is said to have burned the presenta-

tion copy sent him of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, but with willing hand he contributed to the testimonial to the poet in his declining years and sent messages of good cheer to him "who so faithfully nursed the sick and suffering soldiers during the Civil War."

To only one New England writer has been vouchsafed the undesirable fame of attacking Whitman's reputation as a lover of his fellows. *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman's so-called eccentricities were for years common property for the railer. But almost without exception the charity and kindness of Whitman's heart were regarded with admiration. Strange to say, this man is one who has been noted in the main for the liberality of his views and the gentleness of his disposition. An abolitionist, a supporter of John Brown, a champion of equal rights for women, and of civil and religious liberty, Thomas Wentworth Higginson might stand upon a noble if not lofty pedestal in the pantheon of New England's worthies. But so intemperate, so unjust, and so disgraceful, have been the attacks which (anonymously and over his signature) he has made upon the living and the dead Whitman, that it is quite possible he may some day be remembered as a Whitman assailant after his good has been interred with his bones. A dozen years ago, the late William Douglas O'Connor answered Mr. Higginson's strictures upon Whitman's war record in words which pierced like a rapier through the pretensions of the critic or crushed like a bludgeon the attack of his adversary. In view of the petty insinuations in the estimate of Whitman in Mr. Higginson's autobiographic volume, *Cheerful Yesterdays*, these words may not be unworthy of repetition, for they apply no less to the present than to the past attack:

Actually now, really, now, Mr. Higginson avers that Walt Whitman ought to become the focal point of million fingered scorn for having served in the hospitals! It appears that the old poet performed a pathetic, a sublime and immortal service. He tended the wounded and dying sol-

diers throughout the whole war, and for years afterward, until the last hospital disappeared. O, but this was infamous! Shame on such "unmanly manhood!" yells the Rev. Mr. Higginson. He should have personally "followed the drum," declares this soldier of the Army of the Lord, himself a volunteer colonel. In bald words, instead of volunteering for the ghastly, the mournful, the perilous labors of those swarming infernos, the hospitals, Walt Whitman should have enlisted in the rank and file. From all which I gather that Mr. Higginson should have cast a stone at Jean Valjean for going down without a musket into the barricades. I beg leave to tell this Reverend Militair that if Longfellow had gone from Cambridge to serve in the hospitals, as Walt Whitman served, the land would have rung from end to end, and there would have been no objurgations on his not enlisting in the army, from the pen of the Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson. I also beg leave to tell him, since he brings personalities into fashion, that Walt Whitman's work of comfort and charity beside the cots of the Union and Rebel soldiers, will last as long and stand as fair, as the military bungling and blundering which distinguished this clergyman turned colonel and evoked such agonized curses from his commanding officer at Port Royal. Better be a good nurse like Walt Whitman, than a nondescript warrior like the Rev. Col. Higginson.

But Mr. O'Connor is dead now, and without fear of another such counter-attack Mr. Higginson is safe to utter his last strictures upon the subject, which he does as follows :

The personal impression made on me by the poet was not so much of manliness as of *Boweriness*, if I may coin the phrase. . . . This passing impression did not hinder me from thinking of Whitman with hope and satisfaction at a later day when regiments were to be raised for the war, when the Bowery seemed the very place to enlist them and even Billy Wilson's Zouaves were hailed with delight. When, however, after waiting a year or more, Whitman decided that the proper post for him was hospital service, I confess to feeling a reaction, which was rather increased than diminished by his profuse celebration of his own labors in that direction. Hospital attendance is a fine thing no doubt, yet if all men, South and North, had taken the same view of

their duty that Whitman held, there would have been no occasion for hospitals on either side.

But no other reply is needed. This is the last dying flame of the old hatred, and, like Bunyan's Giant Pope, he who once did great damage to the cause can now only sit at the mouth of his cave and bite his nails at the passer by.

Relying upon the fragmentary suggestion of my title for justification I have chosen to consider in this paper only a few of the older New England writers. Of our younger authors much could be written and perhaps at another time this may be done. I know not of one, however, who represents the old spirit of hostility. Not all accept Whitman's writings in their entirety, but Whitman himself never asked nor expected this. Many of the younger generation have rendered the truest homage in confessing the influence of the poet in their life and their work, and this influence seems to be steadily increasing while that of some of the former heroes is unquestionably on the wane.

But it has remained for the past year to evidence the crowning triumph of Whitman in Boston. In the city where fifteen years ago *Leaves of Grass* was ignominiously cast out from the book stores; in the same city where a member of a prominent publishing firm once said, "from mere considerations of policy, I wouldn't put our names to a first edition of Byron or even the Bible. When Walt Whitman has become a standard book like them, as I suppose he will, any firm will be glad to publish him;" and in the very store where years ago Ticknor & Fields, probably at Emerson's suggestion, considered the publication of *Leaves of Grass* and rejected it, not from a conviction of its lack of merit but as being incompatible with their other publications, for two weeks the main windows on the most traveled corner down town were filled with a Whitman exhibition comprising every edition of the poet's works, with portraits, manuscripts, etc., and the crowds that pressed about the windows

from morning till night were evidence of the interest of the public in the book once rejected and despised. And it is significant of the development of public opinion that although the same persons who were responsible for its attempted suppression in 1882 were still occupying the same official positions, no word of opposition was heard to these works, which are once more published in Boston.