

## WALT WHITMAN'S COMRADESHIP

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John Addington Symonds has said that "speaking of Walt Whitman is like speaking of the universe," and the epigram rings true to all who know the immortal *Leaves of Grass*. But we may sound in one word the keynote not only of Walt Whitman's writings and life but of the universe as well. That word is Love. Love dominated Whitman's life, love breathes in every page of Whitman's book. Not the love which, attaching itself to one object, may become only a species of selfishness, but love for all mankind expressed in varied symbols and permeating the whole body of his poems, until finally, as though with the thought that, despite its all-pervading presence, its importance might not be sufficiently emphasized, he sums up

As base and finale too for all metaphysics . . . underneath  
Socrates . . . and underneath Christ the divine I see,  
The dear love of man for his comrade, the attraction of  
friend to friend,  
Of the well-married husband and wife, of children and  
parents,  
Of city for city, and land for land.

It was not until the third edition (1860-61), five years after the original publication of *Leaves of Grass*, that there appeared the remarkable group of poems entitled *Calamus*, which especially celebrates the love of comrades and emphasizes its necessity as a basic element of true democracy.

But it has been well said that the successive editions of *Leaves of Grass* can be likened to a perfect and symmetrical tree in its various shapes of growth, beginning as a slender sapling with a few limbs of sparse foliage, and ending with the sturdy forest giant, its main limbs amplified with the ramifications of many branches all filled with living leaves, but from first to last each complete in itself. We are, therefore, not surprised to find that the earliest edition contained the outlines of the thoughts which later crystallized into a separate section, to many of us the most important section of the book.

Long before the publication of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman had perceived the necessity of the mutual love of comrades, and in its earliest pages he announces himself as an

Extoler of amies and those that sleep in each other's arms—  
and he had discovered that

There is something in staying close to men and women, and  
looking on them, and in the contact and odor of them,  
that pleases the soul well—

and that

The spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers and the  
women my sisters and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love.

And while he announces

I am eternally in love with you and with all my fellows  
upon the earth,

he also realizes the inadequacy of printed words for his  
message.

I pass so poorly with paper and types—I must pass with  
the contact of bodies and souls.

He was accustomed to

Wandering with my face turned up to the clouds,  
My right and left arm around the sides of two friends and I  
in the middle.

And neither learning, nor culture, nor any attainments were requisites of his companionship. On the contrary

I am enamored . . .

Of men that live among cattle or taste of the ocean or woods,  
Of the builders and steerers of ships, of the wielders of axes  
and mauls, of the drivers of horses,

I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out.

He indicated then and throughout what was clearly illustrated in the concrete examples of his comradeship :

I do not ask who you are—that is not important to me,  
You can do nothing or be nothing but what I will infold  
you.

And in another passage, which many a philosopher might write as a theoretical expression of his belief in the common people and spend his life in practically disregarding, we know that Whitman stated the actual preference of his soul in the search for fit comrades.

No shutter'd room or school can commune with me,  
But roughs and little children better than they.  
The young mechanic is closest to me, he knows me pretty  
well.

Not that these passages have only these interpretations. Like so many of his expressions they may be found to contain one meaning within or blended with another. But looking from this standpoint these meanings may be seen.

Although the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* is our starting point, yet, as Emerson said, it "must have had a long foreground somewhere for such a start," and this is true in regard to such utterances on comradeship. Whitman's acceptance of the concept of the brotherhood of man did not flash upon him in an instant to be written down in its place in the volume. It was the formulation of his life habit. The earliest glimpses which we are able to catch of Whitman show him in terms of loving intimacy with his fellows. And here let us note that his friendship was never confined alone to the "powerful uneducated persons" whose com-

pany he so often sought. Throughout Whitman's life, in early days as well as in his later years, he numbered among his comrades some of the most intellectual and cultivated men of the day. In fact, mere lack of culture never gave any *entre* into Whitman's friendship. Quite the reverse: his charity welcomed all mankind and his love included the absolute giving of himself. The wounded soldier who needed his ministrations received full measure of loving service, regardless of what manner of man or half-man he might be. But in the bestowal of personal comradeship Whitman never cast his pearls before swine. He simply never made a fetich of education or culture or technical refinement. If we could look through the list of those whom he admitted to the sacred precincts of his love and companionship, I am positive we could find them all sane and large-souled men or women, with at least elementary nobility of character well defined. The stage drivers and pilots with whom he associated were the sturdy American workingmen of half a century ago—men who knew well their rights and duties as good citizens—one might almost say primitive men in the simplicity of their lives and the rugged honesty of their natures.

I cannot believe that the full import of Calamus is realized by those who read in these poems only a celebration of the comradeship of man with man, even although, as has been suggested in the Short Reading Course in Whitman (by Miss Porter and Miss Clarke), the meaning be extended to include comradeship between women. Although in a few of these utterances it seems clear that Whitman sings a relation thus limited, I cannot but feel that the comradeship indicated in a majority of the poems might exist between man and woman. I believe that Whitman fully recognized this fact and that his relations toward those women with whom his friendship was closest were of the same essential nature as his comradeship with John Burroughs, William O'Connor, Peter Doyle, or any of the friends of his soul, as

he designates them. I am also compelled to disagree with the statement contained in the same paper that,

in declaring this superiority of the love of comrades, he does not recognize the possibility of an ideal 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—

for I cannot doubt that Whitman considered it perfectly possible for true comradely love to exist between husband and wife, independent of or growing out of the sex-love which originally brought them together.

If in his celebration of the love of comrades, carried away by the nobility of the passion which he chants, Whitman seems to give it the highest award, in other places he has given at least equal praise to the love "of the well married husband and wife," and he has once for all answered those who would find contradictions here or elsewhere in *Leaves of Grass* :

Do I contradict myself?

Very well, then, I contradict myself,

I am large, I contain multitudes.

Peter Doyle, speaking of Whitman's habits, says, after emphasizing the cleanliness of his life and relations :

Toward women generally Walt had a good way. He very easily attracted them. But he did that with men too. He had an easy, gentle way—the same for all, no matter who they were or what their sex.

Still more important in this connection are Whitman's own words in a conversation with Horace L. Traubel :

Calamus will never be understood until we have developed a race of men and women whose love is capable of crossing, at times obliterating, all boundaries of sex.

The position of Calamus in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, placed as it is between the *Children of Adam* and *Salut au Monde*, seems significant, not only in its apparent

division of love into three kinds—<sup>self</sup>self love, the love of comrade, and love for all mankind—but because herein we may perhaps find a reason for the fact that Whitman seems to have assigned to the love of comrades a higher place than that given to the love between man and woman. The Children of Adam poems celebrate sex-love justified by the need of perfect offspring, but sex-love may contain elements of selfishness which are largely absent from the love of comrades and wholly lacking in the love for humanity in general:

My spirit has passed in compassion and determination  
 around the whole earth,  
 I have looked for equals and lovers and found them ready  
 for me in all lands,  
 I think some divine rapport has equalized them with me.

From the prominence given to love and comradeship in Whitman's poems may be plainly read our duty as a Fellowship. With Whitman love was not only a necessity to the soul, as breath to the life of the body. It was also a solvent for all the evils of our civilization to-day and the hope of the true and ideal democracy of the future. In so far as we can aid in the establishment of this spirit of fraternity in Whitman's name to this extent is our Fellowship justified. May it not have been in some such hope that Whitman wrote these lines,\* which in the 1860 edition precluded the hymn "For you, O Democracy," and which I, for one, regret have ever been omitted from that poem?

There shall be from me a new friendship—it shall be called  
 after my name,  
 It shall circulate through The States, indifferent of space,  
 It shall twist and intertwist then through and around—compact shall they be showing new signs,  
 Affection shall solve every one of the problems of freedom.  
 Those who love each other shall be invincible,

\* A portion of the prelude is now included in *Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice, Leaves of Grass*, p. 247.

They shall finally make America completely victorious in my name.

It shall be customary in all directions in the houses and streets to see manly affection.

The most dauntless and rude shall touch face to face lightly.

The dependence of liberty shall be lovers.

The continuance of equality shall be comrades.