

WHITMAN AND PHYSIQUE

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I

At the meeting of the Fellowship in Boston two years ago I referred to Whitman's habit of making notes and collecting scraps on a special topic and placing the same in a small scrap book or tying them up in a package by themselves. Among his literary property in my possession I find a package marked "Physique," somewhat similar to the one marked "Oratory" which I used in the preparation of my paper on Whitman and Oratory. The latter paper excited so much interest at the time that I have determined upon making a similar use of this other material. The notes date back of the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and many of them were made in Whitman's early youth and are interesting in explaining his "long foreground somewhere," which Emerson insisted he must have had for such a book as appeared in 1855. These notes are voluminous. I shall use such parts of them, taken almost at random, as I may deem interesting—confining myself almost wholly to the notes themselves. Almost a text book could thus be compiled on the subject of diet, abstinence, exercise, clothing, and everything bearing upon the question of physical culture and development.

Whitman very early in life gave much attention to what was and is known as the Temperance cause. It is fair to

assume that at one time he must have been a total abstainer. In 1842 he wrote and published a temperance novel called *Franklin Evans, the Inebriate*, which at the time had a large circulation. Strange to say, no copy of it could be obtained anywhere after Whitman became famous. We told him we were scouring the earth for it, and he said he "hoped to God" we "would never find one." About two years ago I got a copy through a party who had been searching for it for years. It is a curio, fearfully and wonderfully made, of no literary or other value, and full of preaching and tragedy, and altogether the best argument extant that Whitman's illumination, as Dr. Bucke calls it, was sudden—a new birth into a condition of cosmic consciousness—and not a slow growth.

But Whitman did think much and wisely on the drink question. He classified the causes of intemperance as Physical, Mental and Moral. I am always glad to dwell upon this phase of Whitman's life because it has been so much misrepresented. Many today believe that he was a drunkard and debauchee—and some very kind and charitable persons attribute his long paralysis to this cause. We who were near him and can speak from actual knowledge know better. Whitman was extremely moderate in eating and drinking, and had none of the bad habits which some have attributed to him. This is why we provided for a thorough post mortem, the report of the surgeons making which has set this question at rest forever. But let me give you some of Whitman's early views.

1. Among the physical causes may be mentioned first, a weak, unstrung, and feeble organization, which, wanting the stimulus of warm blood, of a free circulation, and of quick transmissions of nervous energy, predisposes the individual to desire artificial excitements. What pity may we well feel for the flabby, lymphatic, half-grown, puny creatures, called men and women, of whom earth is full!

What wonder that such morbid abortions are tempted to kindle within their sluggish systems some sparkles of genial life, by transient exhilaration !

Next to a state of half-health, may prevalent habits of life be spoken of, as a predisposing cause of intemperance. Foul miasms from dirty streets, ill-ventilated and ill-lighted houses, deficient and bad food, absence of baths, irregular hours, producing alternate feverishness and torpor, which all but force the sufferers from these abuses to periodical stimulation.

Overwork and idleness come next in the enumeration of the physical causes of intemperance. Incessant, monotonous drudgery, produces an exhaustion of the muscular and nervous system, from which the natural cure is some powerful excitant. The sense of weariness which follows excessive labor, is almost insufferable. And blame for the drunkenness so common among the working classes of all countries, may fairly be referred back to the task-masters, who compel this violation of natural laws, by the repugnant toil they impose.

Closely connected with this cause, is the last which can now be mentioned. It is the want of sufficient rest and relaxation. How much that word Recreation means ! Can we not learn from the observation of children, what a surplus of bodily vigor joy can give ? Had men more play, they would be too full from within of animal spirits ever to feel the need of external excitement.

God's elixir of life is wondrously compounded of sunlight, and pure air and water ; of the perfume of flowers, of music, and the continual change of hours and seasons.

We drive each other to quaff the fiery mountain which bubbles up from hell, by robbing one another of the exhaustless animal joy, which our Creator would pour upon us from all living and moving things. To drink to fulness of the nectar which Nature distills, is to be intoxicated with health. Drunkenness is the exact opposite of this.

2. Among the mental causes of Intemperance, may be placed first, the want of habits of observation and reflection. The active brain sends forth along the nerves of motion, a constant, invigorating impulse, and gathers up from the sensitive nerves ever-varying impressions. But a dull brain makes the body heavy and inelastic. An uneasy sense of latent mental power makes the uncultivated man struggle against the brutal lethargy which he finds creeping over him. He delights in the quickening of his thoughts, which stimulants for the moment produce.

Closely connected with this cause, a second may be found in the mechanical nature of most kinds of labor. A slight effort of mind is required to gain skill in a branch of industry; but afterwards, there follows but a series of repeated experiences. No new lessons are learned, no new volitions made. Nature, gently, by her living laws, would stimulate the mind to ever-fresh discoveries, and fresh inventions, which bring serene delight. But routine baffles the powers of thought; attention flags amidst unvarying toil; and reason is dizzied by the perpetual recurrence of the same petty details. Is it wonderful, that men so gladly escape from their noisy workshop, on to the high grounds of fancy and wit? Exciting drinks seem to set free their prisoned talents, open wide prospects, and break up the plodding crowd of common thoughts. Sad is it to be obliged to confess, that in our present modes of labor, multitudes find their only hours of anything like a poetic or ideal state of mind, when met to talk with boon companions.

And this brings up to view a third mental cause of intemperance. It is the want of constant, free intercourse with other minds. Conversation is one of the most delicious stimulants which life affords. A new mind opened to us, is better than a novel. Our own familiar thoughts, reflected from one another's experience, seem to gain a new gloss and brightness. Images and echoes multiply the charm of sights and sounds. But how little opportunity,

life, as now arranged, allows for habitual intercourse of mind with mind. Untaught, dull from drudgery, prejudiced and proud men meet in society, oppressed with false shame and taciturn habits. Drink breaks down the barriers, brings them to an intellectual level and quickens self confidence, while disarming criticism. Men filled with facts and suggestions, have a conscious wealth of mind; it is a delight to them; and they feel small temptation to seek the feverish visions of intemperance, which mock their less cultivated fellows with a show of thought. They drink too often of living springs to be deceived by a mirage.

3. Among the moral causes of Intemperance comes first, that most prolific one, unhappy homes. How many a woman has been led to drown the degrading consciousness, that she has given her life to one unworthy of her, in the delirium of intoxication! Disappointment and despair in heartless marriage are too intolerable. And how many a man is driven to the club or the hotel, by the sneer, and the scowl, and petty usurpations of a wife. The dreariness of a home where the indifference and hate are the Penates, may well account for, though they cannot excuse, a resort to temporary self-forgetfulness. Deprived of the most longed-for sources of constant excitement in reciprocated love, how easy is the surrender to a transient joy. When home, too, is merely the place, as it too often is among the poor, where the weary partners come to pour out upon each other, or upon their children, the hoarded spleen of the day, and to aggravate by recriminations, care and anxiety already too oppressive, how tempting seems the careless revelry of the gin-shop and bar-room.

A second, and a very common moral source of intemperance, is the want of pure and ennobling public amusement. Even the savage shows in his passion for festive meetings, how strong is our instinct to seek social pleasures amidst a multitude. The civilized man manifests this tendency yet

more. The mere presence of a crowd, gathered to behold a spectacle, is a powerful excitement, no matter how trifling is the occasion that summons them together, nor how wanting in genius and grace are the people. But most of our public gatherings are of a kind that leave a feeling of vacuity. The show and treat are pure. It is no wonder, then, that artificial stimulants are brought in to waken an enthusiasm, which the scene itself cannot give. There is a rude address to the senses in our amusements, rather than a delicate appeal to the imagination and taste, and through them to the judgment and heart. We jostle each other in selfish scramble, because unaccustomed to refined joy. There is so little in the modes of the meeting to call out courtesy and high bred disinterestedness, that the chief thought is of selfish indulgence. The fit accompaniment of our holidays is the booth. And it need excite no surprise, that at the end of a day of pleasure, the heels of many are lighter than their heads.

II

I shall now transcribe Whitman's more fragmentary notes. Let it be remembered as I proceed that I depart from his verbalism practically nowhere, except to supply certain obvious connecting phrases required to impart to the notes some semblance of order. Indeed, Whitman's style is so evident that such an explanation would not seem necessary but for the absence of the conventional quotation marks.

Whitman gave some attention to the study of vegetarianism, although there is no evidence that he ever adopted it. He notes that Sir Isaac Newton, when composing his celebrated treatise upon optics, confined himself to water and a vegetable diet, to which abstemious mode of living may be ascribed the great age, eighty-five, to which he attained. John Locke is instanced as another case of intellectual activity under like conditions. Never eat or drink, says Walt

Whitman, to gratify the varieties of appetite, but merely to support nature. Nature created our bodies hardy and robust and capable of resisting the common influences of cold and the fatigues necessary in the ordinary duties of life. Most of the diseases arise from effeminate life, or too great indulgence of the Passions. We enervate, and render ourselves inadequate for our duties, by a soft, inactive, luxurious mode of life. The man surrounded by plenty or superfluity, and by all the delights of existence, falls in the midst of them. Too close rooms by day and night—too much nightly clothing—too little bodily exercise—and that not in the rustic air.

This subject of exercise is given great emphasis. Whitman did not believe much in gymnasiums. To sedentary persons, violent, sudden and fitful exercise is always injurious, and such are gymnastic performances. The exercise of the student should be regular, gentle, deliberate, always stopping short of fatigue. One hour's joyous walk with a cheerful friend, in street or field or woodland, will never fail to do a greater or more unmixed good, than double the time in the most scientifically conducted gymnasium in the world. There are individual cases where the gymnasium is of the most undeniable benefit, but the masses would be better for having nothing to do with them. A better receipt than the gymnasium is given—eat moderately and regularly of plain, nourishing food, well prepared; spend two or three hours every day in the open air regardless of all weathers, in moderate, untiring activities. Everyone knows that exercise of the body increases circulation of the blood. The violent exercises in gymnasiums, as almost if not universally conducted hitherto, produce a violent flow of blood, of nutrient particles, to the various muscles which are brought into most active exercise, and being carried thither faster than they can be taken up, unmixed harm is the result. Hence the lifelong disablements and even deaths which have resulted from gymnastic performances and other violent exercises. Thus it is that the sudden, violent, fitful, exhaustive

exercises of ordinary gymnasiums are unwise, hurtful, dangerous. To derive from muscular exertion a high degree of health and manly vigor, it should be moderate, continuous, regular, in the open air, and should be pleasantly remunerative beyond the mere benefits of the exercise itself. Whitman was very emphatic in his views about walking. Here is a verbatim manuscript note: "The persistent exercise for developing and strengthening them, of the lower legs and of the ankles and feet. No example is yet seen (not in modern times hereabouts at any rate) of the power of endurance and performance of the legs—walking, running, leaping, supporting, etc. The legs have a great deal to do even with the accomplishment of the work of the whole of the other parts of the body and give grace and impetus to it. Walking, perfect walking, in man or woman, is a rare accomplishment—more rare than fine dancing and more desirable than the finest dancing. Who ever sees a woman walk perfectly? Who ever sees a man?"

Whitman believed that the art of swimming was as natural to man as it is useful and in some cases necessary for the preservation of life. Cleanliness and exercise, both so necessary to health, are combined with a high degree of enjoyment in the practice of this art. The importance of frequent ablutions can scarce be overrated. He was almost a believer in water as a preventive of disease and in swimming as its most practical application. Swimming is an exercise which brings more muscles into action than any other, and the body being supported by an equal pressure on every part the action is harmonious. I could write an essay on the art of swimming from the notes which I find, but can give the subject but passing notice.

Walt Whitman believed that hard study and good health could go together. He says: "Hard study is generally thought to be adverse to health and conversely unhealthy students are thought or think themselves to be identical with hard students. Paleness of countenance, nervous

weakness and headache are cultivated or affected because they are supposed to indicate superior intellectual gifts. Dangerous fallacy which has cost many a good fellow his life! No man or woman either ever killed himself or herself with hard study. Not a bit of it. But many a lazy fellow, fond of intellectual occupation with physical inaction, has fallen a victim to disordered digestion and crazed nerves, all the time laboring under the grievous mistake that he was one of those favorites of the gods who die young, because they are of too ethereal a temperament to stand the rude shock of such a miserable world as this. Why, the world is a brave world—worthy to be the dwelling place of the noblest creatures God ever made. It is too good for the simpleton who does not know how to take care of himself, who mistakes neglect of body for culture of mind, who goes moping and moaning about because his breakfast sits uneasily on his weakened stomach, thinking it to be proof that he is too delicate or too refined for the hardships of human condition. Up, man, dreamer, fool—go plunge into the health giving, joy inspiring waves of yonder ocean, while summer lasts; take a cold shower bath in winter; walk long distances, if you have the time, swing dumb bells if you have not. Cold water, vigorous exercise, hard study—these are the conditions of moral, mental and bodily health. All kinds of devils, as well as the blue devils, flee before these mighty enchanters. Even the leader of them all, the old prince of darkness, fears dumb bells, cold water and an active brain more than he did Martin Luther's inkstand."

Whitman's youthful desire was, to use his own language, written in large letters as a preface to these notes: "To present a case of the condition of Perfect Health." A sound mind in a sound body ripening into perfect manhood. Longevity is but a law of nature. If we die early it is more likely to be our fault. "Between the years of forty and sixty a man who has properly regulated himself may be considered in the prime of life. His matured strength of con-

stitution renders him almost impervious to the attacks of disease and experience has given soundness to his judgment. His mind is resolute, firm and equal. All his functions are in the highest order. He assumes mastery over business, builds up a competence on the foundation he has formed in early manhood, and passes through a period attended by many gratifications. Having gone a year or two past sixty he reaches a viaduct call the 'Turn in Life,' which, if crossed in safety, leads to the valley of old age, round which the river winds. The system and powers having reached their utmost expansion, now begin to close like the flowers at sunset or break down at once. One injudicious stimulant, a single fatal excitement, may force it beyond its strength."

All that I have given you in this fragmentary paper is intensely interesting to the student of *Leaves of Grass*—that poem of the body and the soul. We can see how these early thoughts shaped Whitman's life work. The perfect man and the perfect woman was his dream of the ultimate end of creation. The man whom he aimed to put in his book was a perfect man—healthy—mentally and spiritually. That he lived his own life according to these practical views there can be no doubt. Let me close with a noble and significant note: "Between the ages of thirty-five and eighty may be the perfection and realization of moral life; rising above the previous periods in all that makes a person better, healthier, happier, more commanding, more beloved and more a realisee of love. The mind matured, the senses in full activity, the digestion even, the voice firm, the walk untired, the arms and chest sinewy and imposing, the hip joints flexible, the hands capable of many things, the complexion and blood pure, the breath sweet, the procreative power ever ready in man and the womb power in woman, the inward organs all sweetly performing their offices—during those years the universe presents its riches, its strengtli,

its beauty, to be parts of a man, a woman. Then the body is ripe, and the soul also and all the shows of nature attained and the production of thought in books.”