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WHITMAN AND THE FUTURE

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Again we are assembled on Walt Whitman's birthday. e who knew the man and met him face to face so many nes, gladly come with loving remembrance of his lofty na- re and kindly personal qualities. As an organization the Walt Whitman Fellowship" celebrates this annual occa- n, and justifies its own existence, on broader grounds than ose of mere personal admiration of the departed dead. nd my purpose in speaking to-day is briefly to discuss hitman and his relations to the future, because in the dis- ssion of that question I can find justification of the purpo- and meaning of this coming together more satisfying than usually received in conventional birthday observances.

Will humanity ever absorb Whitman as affectionately as has absorbed it? Or will he only receive an intermittent erary remembrance, revived from time to time by those o seek only for curious treasures in the literature of the st? Will he ever be a living force in the world—a source acknowledged inspiration? Was he an epoch-maker, and ll his epoch arrive?

This opens a wide field for thought, possibly largely specu- ive. That Walt Whitman believed that he had a message the world and dedicated his life to its delivery there can no doubt. This assumption has been ridiculed by the ny and accepted by a very few. That he has as yet been understood and rejected argues nothing against his fu-

ture. Men who are fully understood and accepted by their own age do not live beyond the age which accepts them.

I have neither time nor intention to discuss this question in detail. It has opened no end of controversy. I am moved on this occasion to repeat very briefly what may be regarded as the salient proofs of the genuineness of his mission, and the certainty of his ultimate universal acceptance.

I never think of Whitman as a mere literary man. He is a mighty spiritual force. The essential unity of "Leaves of Grass" must never be forgotten. This book is the slow growth of a profound plan original in its conception and adhered to with rigid consistency. It is a psalm of life. It is an idealistic philosophy recognizing the essential identity of the spiritual and material worlds. Its subject is man, the "acme of things accomplish'd, and the encloser of things to be." When we catch its inspiration we can say, "here are the ways of man to God fully justified." It is the greatest declaration of freedom yet pronounced. We are on the threshold of freedom. Our democracy has not reached its realization. "Leaves of Grass" is the Bible of democracy, voicing the highest notes of freedom and fellowship.

What is there in the modern world that has any real value unless the spirit of democracy pervades it? The models in our literature, as we get them from other lands, have had their birth in courts, and basked and grown in castle shine. Whitman insists that our poets must be singers of democracy—bold, modern, cosmical. His influence on younger writers has already been felt. That this influence will greatly extend cannot be doubted. Art for art's sake will be less and less the basis of literature.

Whitman's nature is essentially religious. Of course I use this term in the larger sense. There never has been a man more profoundly merged in nature and nature's God. In mother nature he resigns himself with sacred ecstasy. God is in all and everywhere, and he accepts everything because it comes from God. This optimism is difficult of accept-

cause we lack that absolute faith that he has in all men as anifestations of the eternal thought. While he has the ealist's love of the good, the true and the beautiful, he es not fail to love equally the suffering, the weak, and the llen. All is divine, and unless we accept all as from a uni- rsal source, we must accept that narrow dualism which stroys any true conception of the universe. He believes at all our functions are well made and divinely appointed. o those who picture the inherent vileness of sex, Whitman a great offender. I believe that he has settled for all time at there is no more reason for excluding sex from the orks and treatment of the poet than there would be for ex- uding it from the works of the surgeon. Whitman is the ly poet who declares, in a vigorous and heroic way, the solute equality of the sexes. When our social conditions e recast on this basis of equality, and when the race ac- pts the truth that it "is as great to be a woman as to be a an," we will have a civilization advanced far beyond that which we are now living.

Whitman knew that the world was yet young. He knew at other civilizations would succeed our own and that in e process of race development new social conditions would rise. His whole thought in life was engaged upon the epest and most essential problems affecting our relations ith the universal powers and with one another. His con- ption of the universe is consistent with modern science. e grasps this conception with wonderful completeness. o man brings us nearer to the immanent God. No man aches more profoundly that we are each part of the eternal heme, and that our immortal life now is and ever will be. hose who have realized that the old theologies do not satisfy, nd who also fail to receive comfort in the prevalent agnosti- ism, can find in "Leaves of Grass" a religion to live by nd to die by. Every hope and aspiration can here be an- vered and every fear calmed. That this was Whitman's fe purpose there can be no doubt, and he must be accepted

as a religious teacher or not at all. The church of his day may reject and revile him, and it has exhausted every opprobrious term in so doing, but mankind will ultimately acknowledge the tenableness and sanity of his philosophy. Pessimism breeds doubt and leads inevitably to destruction. All must be accepted and accounted for or our philosophy is a thing of shreds and patches. In the economy of nature there can be no exclusion. Every man or woman, however lowly—the drunkard, the debauchee, the criminal—is in the procession which leads through darkness up to God.

I spoke of the epic consistency of "Leaves of Grass." The whole man and woman live in every page, unfolding from the question of the child, who asked, "what of the grass?" to the swan song of the dying prophet. We may search literature for words of courage in the face of death, and we will find that Whitman has struck the highest note yet—not a note of resignation merely, but of glad welcome; not of traditional hope, but of an absolute knowledge that all are safe in the divine hands.

Does the world need a new gospel? In the rapid changes that are going on around us, does any existing theological system answer to the necessities of the higher civilization toward which we are moving? That Whitman appreciated this is unquestionable. He preached a philosophy entirely consistent with modern science and the new world. He lived his message. He lived democracy. He lived comradeship. He lived philanthropy. He lived his sublime faith, and in the face of death his calmness was divine. He labored here for humanity—he set an incarnated example here of life and death—and his message and his example remain for us and for the ages.