
SALUT AU MONDE: A FRIEND REMEMBERS WHITMAN

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A FRIEND REMEMBERS WHITMAN

By SADAKICHI HARTMANN

TOWARDS the middle of the eighties Walt Whitman was still a familiar figure in the streets of Philadelphia. He easily attracted attention. His gray suit, slouch hat and yellow walking stick, his flowing white beard and pink complexion were unmistakable characteristics, the more so as he had to walk very slowly, dragging his left foot behind him. A few years later he was obliged to give up all pedestrian excursions and only occasionally took cross-country rides. A buggy and a horse, old enough to make one think of Don Quixote's Rosinante, had been presented to him; but the maintenance of a stable, no matter how small, apparently does not lie within the reach of great poets, and the harmless recreation had soon to be abandoned. The last four or five years he hardly ever left his ramshackle home in Mickie Street, Camden.

It was there I met Whitman most frequently. The whole day he would sit at one of the windows in the little front room, which served as parlor, dining room, study, and reception hall all in one. It was difficult to visit the sanctum, not because there was anybody to refuse admittance, but because the visitor was actually at loss to find a place where he could sit down with any degree of comfort. The entire floor was covered with several layers of newspapers and magazines, flung down open, crumpled up and liberally intermixed with pamphlets and books. It looked like an editorial office that had not been swept for months, a sea of tattered paper that crept into the corners and beat with its waves

against the walls of the room. In one corner large stacks of his unsold books loomed up like rocks. There were two windows in the room, and between them was a half-circular table littered with all sorts of things. Most conspicuous, however, was a row of books, his favorite books which he never tired of perusing, among them the Bible, Homer, Milton, Hugo, Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, Bryant's poems, and Turgenev's *A Lear of the Steppes*. Also a big demijohn filled with well-water stood within easy reach. For a long time I entertained the suspicion that it contained something else, but I do not remember that I ever indulged in anything but red wine with "the good grey poet." He was called the good grey poet, as John Burroughs explained to me, "because he always looked grey, even in his Washington days before the Civil War. His beard and hair were already grey and he invariably dressed in grey."

The poet was usually seated, if not by chance on the doorsteps or on a dusty sofa in the kitchen, in a huge yellow armchair at the right-hand window, a chair which has played a most important part in the Whitman bibliography as the donor (ex-Congressman Donaldson) apparently never could forget that he had given it to the poet. The Whitman admirers are a curious lot. Just like the lady who thought she knew Browning because she had seen him look out of a window in Florence, some Whitmaniacs, as Swinburne called them, considered themselves the most intimate friends of Whitman because they once entertained him or rode down Fifth Avenue on a bus with him.

Well, there America's prophet-poet sat, all day long, dreaming, reading, scribbling a stray thought on a piece of paper or staring absent-mindedly out of the window,

raising his hand involuntarily now and then to an imaginary salutation, his famous *salut au monde*, just a movement of the fingers from the wrist sideways. The funny part of it was that hardly anybody ever passed through Mickle Street to receive or respond to the greeting. The iceman, letter carrier, grocery boy, a woman on a shopping errand, or a peddler were the only visitors. Even children were scarce. Mickle Street was at all times silent and forsaken like a country lane, and leaves of grass had ample opportunity to grow among the cobblestones.

It must have been a lonesome and monotonous life the poet led during the latter part of his existence. True enough, many people called out of curiosity and sympathy, but Whitman was not given much to conversation. He would listen quite interestedly but would scarcely answer, a peculiarity which Max Nordau considered a proof of the poet's insanity. Of course, such a statement is absurd. Whitman acted merely as he felt. He was tolerant to all, even to autograph collectors. I have seen him sign a dozen or more books and photographs at a time. His habit, however, of answering long harangues and arguments with his favorite exclamation, a long-drawn "Oy! Oy!" drove many interviewers to exasperation. A professor from Oxford who had come especially to see him and who, after hours of talking, had obtained nothing but an occasional Oy! Oy! as response, ran away like a madman, in utter disgust. No doubt the English gentleman had stroked W. W. the wrong way, for right after his departure we had quite a pleasant chat together—not about college professors, however, but about American literature.

Whitman had no special admiration for either Poe,

Hawthorne, or Thoreau; he preferred Whittier and Bryant, particularly the latter. "Bryant had something big about him—a smack of the sea and mountains, of sunlight and trees—nothing puny and parlor-like about him. Bryant was a true poet, such as the States are most in need of." He had known most of them personally, in those Bohemian days when he wore a red flannel shirt open at the neck and frequented Pfaff's place on lower Broadway.

Whitman apparently was short of cash most of the time. Old Parke Godwin (for years the editor of the New York *Evening Post*) once referred to it in an amusing manner. Bryant and Poe, as well as Whitman, had done free-lance work for him, and he had frequently advanced and lent money to them. When I, in later days, successfully essayed the same, Godwin remarked laughingly, "Many things change, but poets always need money, it seems. You surely resemble Whitman in that quality—I hope also in others."

Whitman, a chronic invalid and "selling scarcely more than two hundred books a year, mostly to England," had to depend a good deal on patronage for a livelihood. He was exceedingly modest in his wants. His housekeeper in her humble way did her best to make him feel half-way comfortable, but her resources were limited and her New Jersey style of cooking, I fear, had no particular cheering influence. But he had always plenty to eat, whole trays-full, in little dishes served in cheap restaurant fashion. He had a good appetite and did not crave delicacies or better service. He was satisfied with conditions as they were. He lived in his mind and was immune to the shortcomings of his surroundings.

I recall coming to him one exceedingly cold winter

day when there was no fire in his stove. Not that fuel was lacking or that he could not afford to buy it (he had at that time two thousand dollars in some bank); it was merely a whim or neglect. He sat there unconcerned, huddled up in a red blanket, and with his white hair and beard looked very much like some patriarch painted by Rubens. His complexion was curiously soft and child-like, of the same color as the cupids of the Dutch painter.

If he longed for anything at all in those years it was for some more ideal companionship, for a woman who would not merely be his housekeeper, but who would also be able to appreciate his aims as a literary man. He once remarked to me, "I wish I had somebody around me like Montaigne and Heine and other authors had." And yet when Anne Gilchrist, who had written *A Woman's Estimate* of his work, came from England to share good or ill fortune with him, he greeted her merely with a "Hello, Anne; going to stay in America?" They became good friends, but he did not want her in his house.

Of his relations with women in earlier periods of his life little is known. He admitted in a letter to Carpenter that he had six children and even a grandchild, but "they had strayed away." It was impossible to make him talk on the subject. He would evade all queries (and I tried hard enough) with a final, "Well, I will tell you some day." But that day never came.

Slowly the poet became more and more enfeebled, and his interests in life became centered more and more upon himself. He was delighted when women admirers brought him a few wild flowers, and would place them carefully in a water-glass near him on the window sill. And nothing would rouse him more to a mild activity of thought than some foreign criticism of his work. I often

translated French and German reviews of his books to him. His fame was spreading steadily all over the world, and, he often spoke to me of his staunchest supporters and friends in the days of adversity, of the Rossettis, Tennyson, Henry Irving, of O'Connor, who made the now famous defense of his *Children of Adam*, and, most of all, of John Burroughs and Anne Gilchrist. He was loyal to the last to his friends and literary ideals. His admiration of Lincoln amounted to almost fanatic hero-worship, and his belief in the future greatness of the American remained unshaken.

One afternoon he dragged himself into the kitchen and asked me to take a bite with him. He sent me out to get a can of lobster and a bottle of California claret, and on my return, he busied himself over the stove to fry a few eggs. The pan sizzled, and plump! went in the first egg. "You see, Hartmann," he said, "the American nation at present is like an orchestra tuning its instruments." Plump! Plump! went in the second egg, and another. "There is a lot of commotion and noise, but it all settles down (and he jerked at the eggs with a fork), gradually—and then after a while, under some great leadership, like the spirit of Democracy, you will suddenly hear beautiful music. That is what the American nation is destined to do."