

✻LITERARY.✻

WALT WHITMAN.

IN the work of most poets a division can be made between what came red-hot from their experience and what was the result of a theory. Perhaps this difference is most conspicuous in Wordsworth, but it is easily detected in Shelley and Browning, and it is not far from the surface in Walt Whitman. Shakspeare in the first scene of *Timon of Athens* is somewhat sarcastic with the poet who comes to Lord Timon with a poem said by its author to be "a thing slipped idly from him." This expression indicates that the poetry which is the mere accident of life, the product of a sunny day or a casual encounter, is not poetry of a high order. The highest poetry must be moulded in the steady seven-times-heated flame of a long continued experience. The ideas are then so familiar to and so much at home in the poet's mind that they come from it not as the sequel of a painful cogitation, but full-formed and vital, clad in the rich panoply of imagination. Therefore the characterization of a poem as a thing slipped idly from the poet is so far true as it indicates that the poem must come as naturally from the life of the poet as roses grow upon a bush, or as beauty attends upon the motions of a graceful woman. A perfect poem like a perfect statue should bear no traces of the chisel.

Now it can scarcely be denied that Whitman's democratic chants betray as a rule the process of their formation, and cannot therefore be ranked as in any sense ultimate in the sphere of song. Admittedly everything he has done breaths forth the contagion of enthusiasm. But enthusiasm though akin to is not identical with imagination. Enthusiasm is self-assertive and recognizes but one point of view, while imagination, though tingling with the tumult of life, yet slumbers and is calm. A subject may possess for the enthusiast even a palpitating interest, but it is still something distinct from himself; a subject for the poet becomes bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. We may admire enthusiasm, but when we enter the dwelling-place of a true poem, we should take our shoes from our feet, for the place whereon we stand is holy ground; and some of the poems of Whitman, which embody his connection with his fellow-men are poems of this kind.

A few passages, which indicate Whitman's faith in the possibilities of each separate person, and his belief in the splendour of a full individuality, may prepare the way for his more perfect work. He exclaims:

"O, I could sing such grandeurs and glories about you!
You have not known who you are—you have slumbered
upon yourself all your life;"

and again,

"Whoever you are! claim your own at any hazard!
These shows of the east and west are tame compared to you;
These immense meadows—these interminable rivers—
you are immense and interminable as they;

These furies, elements, storms, motions of Nature, throes
of apparent dissolution—you are he or she who is
master or mistress over them,

Master or mistress in your own right over Nature, elements, pain, passion, dissolution."

Once more he says:

"I absolve you from all except yourself, spiritual, bodily
—that is eternal,"

and

"You are not thrown to the winds—you gather certainly
and safely around yourself;

Yourself! Yourself! Yourself, for ever and ever!"

We may take one step nearer the sanctuary of the poet's heart:

"Whoever you are, now I place my hand upon you, that
you be my poem;

I whisper with my lips close to your ear,

I have loved many women and men, but I love none better than you.

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Painters have painted their swarming groups, and the
centre figure of all,

From the head of the centre spreading a nimbus of gold-
coloured light;

But I paint myriads of heads, but paint no head without
its nimbus of gold-coloured light;

From my hand, from the brain of every man and woman,
it streams, effulgently flowing for ever."

And now we may lift the veil from the face of the true poet. In his poem entitled *The Poet*, in which he naturally tells of himself, he writes:

"He says indifferently and alike, '*How are you, friend?*'
to the President at his levee,

And he says, '*Good-day, my brother!*' to Cudge that hoes
in the sugar-field,

And both understand him, and know that his speech is
right."

In spontaneous obedience to this breadth of interest Whitman sings his threnody for President Lincoln, kisses the lips of the dead prostitute, the "tenement of a soul," as she lay "unclaimed, avoided" in the city dead-house, watches all night by the body of a brother soldier on the field of battle, and "with hinged knees and steady hand" dresses the wounds of comrades as they lie in the hospital at camp. No extract could furnish any just conception of the soft melody and majestic march of *President Lincoln's Funeral Hymn*, but a verse of another poem may be given to show Whitman's love and admiration for the President. The poet pictures the state as a ship and Lincoln as its captain fallen dead upon the deck. He asks:

"Is it some dream that on the deck
You've fallen cold and dead?"

And replies,

"My captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still;
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor
will.