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Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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Walt Whitman

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“DEMOCRATIC VISTAS.”

BY JAMES N. WOOD.

JUDGMENT on national and world questions is astray, because a popular criterion does not harmonize with sound deduction. It is unfortunate that prosperity in a material sense is the prevalent standard of right opinion. An uncertain quantity at best, it sometimes accompanies a nation for a space on a downward path; it may be the very precursor of a ruin the imminence of which it effectually conceals. The nineteenth century suffices to confirm these reflections. It looms like a golden epoch in the life of man, yet under its spell more was done to lower the morale of the race than was accomplished during many prior centuries, though the latter are now popularly referred to in a derogatory sense. Compare modern policies with those of Europe, as late as the seventeenth century. Going on to the middle ages, the contrast is even more striking. The type of man then guiding administrative affairs was sharply distinct from his prototype of the present. It is true that Science groped in almost impenetrable darkness, and Philosophy saved itself from extinction only by recourse to the mask of scholasticism. None the less, there was a spirit abroad that compensated for misfortune so direful. Men were not afraid of life. Resolution was nurtured by ardor, uncertainty and risk. If the colossal industrial fabric reared by the modern was unknown, ignorance was balanced by sublime faith in craftsmanship. Even this was esteemed secondary to the development of manhood. The stress of life compelled it. Men recognized definite principles which, although reaffirmed by later science, have been made almost impossible of execution by the pressure of democracy. The breeding of superior men. What antagonism the expression now gives

rise to! From the conscious and the unconscious there ascends the spontaneous envy of trivial minds. Derision meets it in the political world.

Why, then, were peoples so handicapped by lack of the material discoveries that subsequently altered man's very relation to nature? Why, it may well be asked, were they of the past able to survive the sacrifices incident to the struggles that history tells of them? After all, the late war was not the greatest ever waged, unless numerically. Consider Germany at the end of the Thirty Years War. Devastated and more than decimated—even tottering on the verge of barbarism—it found a force within itself too vital to weaken, and that carried it through shadow undismayed, to stand again among the nations, even though it had faced the apparently irretrievable. The more picturesque Crusades—superficially so futile. How astounding was the persistence with which Europe sent host after host to certain destruction. Conceive the same races, in an equal space of time, patiently plodding on, satisfied to accumulate riches. Is it believable that their chronicle would be the vista it now is to those who prefer to think of man as something more than a peasant, peacefully tilling his fields? That which was great in the past was achieved when life was difficult; when fortitude and independence refused to shrink from reality.

Yet even then Europe was moving downward, checked in the descent by the steadfast resistance of a few, reluctant to compromise with destiny. The deep psychology of that tragedy is not to be written here, it is noted as a manifestation of that prepotence that sustained the guardian of civilization throughout her bitter periods. What is it that lifts sublimely from the mists of war and ruin that have mingled so often beneath her sun and sky? What else but wounds healed quickly, daring renewed at secret springs; faith, mocking at time. Is the meaning obscure? It is to those minds only that have surrendered to what is least in the modern outlook. Europe is great by reason of her past, and this greatness maintains because she still has within her breast the qualities that live wherever the will is in flower. Throughout her stormy life there have been at hand sons of her own troubled existence, born of generations undaunted by fate. The implication is one far from a popular diction, one that speaks lightly of attributes not akin to service, sacrifice, humanitarianism. Why, humanitarianism is something brought forth by man's very weakness. It is the confession of descent from heights once nobly scaled. Civilization nurtures this master fallacy,

that the struggle of life is to attain common comfort. It longs for regions where no mountains are, but only the dreary wastes of a flower-swept expanse, and its fatuity has led it to worship strange demons, in place of the august genius of a fairer time. These dreary shades accompany it as it plods on towards an ever-receding morrow, listening to plaintive melodies unknown to Pan. All that is noble is evil—and joy is sin! To escape the torment of a mind beset by jeering phantoms, it literally tears its soul asunder, a sacrifice given for a moment's respite from gloomy inhibitions, whispered from highest heaven and wailed from deepest hell.

It is this hidden strength that America does not reckon with, unable to comprehend its basis. Europe has gulped her share of modern folly, and paid more dearly for the indulgence than has America, guarded by sea and circumstance. In spite of it the power to resist has lingered, replenished by a blood more virile and austere. From it has come an ever-verdant youth, the indomitable intrepidity that sustains her in trial, and the everlasting fortitude that still assures her supremacy in the world. For the mind capable of balanced judgment the span of American history, as brief as it has been, contains a record that reveals innate weaknesses and the force of tendencies that add to the difficulty of future liberation from the thrall of a galling pettiness. There is a contradiction, too, that cannot be overlooked. The western world is an outpost of European civilization, and still far from having one of her own creation. This outpost is composed of lesser units than those assuring the integrity of the Continent.

In the search for evidences of will-strength on this side of the water there is discoverable only one struggle worthy of consideration, the Civil War. In it American met American, and if method was naive, if action lacked technique, it showed both hardihood and tenacity. It was a contest that had laurels for both, marred only by a spirit of malignant littleness which made clear the presence of deep-rooted disease. But after the subjugation of the South, what remained of the conquered? A single war, apparently, had swept its best components into the limbo of the forgotten. Nearly sixty years have passed since that tragedy, but no sign comes forth that the stricken region has even begun to rise from the stroke of a single defeat. Those who gave it distinction and, on field and in cabinet, for a spell rivetted the gaze of the world, have gone. In their place parade a sorry crowd of itinerant politicians and babbling messiahs who lash fantastic flocks into frenzy over maudlin

issues. Groups they are so devoid of self-control that society, to protect itself from their murder lust, has had to take from them everything that stimulates imagination. In prior days the profound influence of a superior caste was enough to hold in check this yearning of a poltroon to run amuck. Imagine Caucasians so doubtful of themselves that they are seriously jealous of an inferior race, the latter made confident by the ascendancy of a residuum, the origin of which it comprehends. This unlucky insight inspires reliance in an overcast future. In reality, there would be some basis for their illusion if they were faced by no other than the degenerate offsprings of the overseers, but time has already marked the empire they covet for an heritage to other races, more ably equipped. The evidence is on every side, to be observed by those who can perceive and reflect without passion.

Chattel slavery, to the extent that it can be instanced as a probable cause of southern decline, offers little to one seeking to be its apologist, nor is this because of any ill effect the system had on slaves. It must be admitted, rather, that they had much the best of it. Contrary to the flamboyant tales once popular in the north, their lives were idyllic. The sounder basis for criticism lies in their influence on the white race, for their presence encouraged a fatal languor. Only supreme greatness can endure slavery. Then, the negative mental sphere of the lower orders of the whites. It is hard now to make clear the extent of the distance that separated superior and inferior. The southern aristocrat must be viewed as a kind of exile, conscious of better antecedents, but whose aids and environments were leagued against him. The puzzle that faces the man of thought is the lack of intellectual vigor during this slave epoch. This phase has been neglected by critics, too deeply absorbed by economic aspects. The plea of climate must be dismissed, peremptorily. The tropics have shared in the upbuilding of the masterpieces of genius. Slavery was always present. To extend the range of vision, but only parenthetically, the relations of the sexes in the south did not even effect the production of erotic poetry, so prevalent under different skies and similar conditions. Evidently there was a fundamental error here, but of this more presently.

It remains true, even though the truth is sinister, that the slave owner had that treasure, leisure, in abundance. Many were highly educated—and along classical lines. Latin and Greek writers were read in the originals. European literature was favored. The basis of their intellectual outlook was sounder than that of the north. Yet

they languished. Only one poet to be taken seriously, Lanier. Poe was southern only in name. Richmond looked on him as a weird sort of evil genius. There is something uncanny about the attitude towards him there, even yet. Nevertheless, he was read and admired. Groping through much shadow, it is hard to escape believing that, in some way, he had violated a secret unwritten law, the nature of which is unknown to this day.

It was in political fields that intellectual capacity preferred to display itself. This was not illogical. The south was always on the defensive. Its record as a home of statesmen is high. Their acumen more than matched the talent of New England, and for a long while, but statesmanship involves war. Here, the southerner found his hands more often tied. Surrounded by enemies in territory of his own, another era might have dawned for him. He yielded to temptation and necessity, accepting a property contest which finally destroyed him. The odds were beyond all reason. He was faced by the world. The modern demanded the extirpation of every trace of the past.

The loss to American blood, to that fundamental principle of superior descent without which no nation can be great, was the real disaster of the conflict, for the obvious reason that there was little of it to lose. The carnival of blatant illiteracy that followed includes a blurred page in the public archives, doubly so because its significance escaped even the few intelligent among the victors. To the south, the consequences were evil beyond description. To replace the gentleman, there appeared a generation who aped recollection, the ass regnant in the lion's skin. There was an utter lack of comprehension of the basic differentiating quality that marks the superior man, boldness of attitude towards the difficult. The new custodians resorted to the most ignoble expedients to maintain a position thrust upon them by event. From this plague the south has never recovered. The condition grows worse instead of better. It is now the favored land of any fanatic who prates of slave morality. An eager populace responds to propaganda superficially puerile, but so insidious in effect on meager intellects that the influence of the few remnants of brighter days is effectually paralyzed. In a fool's paradise the wise are silent.

Suppose the south had not lost, what then? Once, this possibility was held up as an awful example of what fiendish scheming might have led to. There was a popular tale to the effect that the object really behind foreign sympathy was a baleful plan to divide

the Union, for the purpose of weakening it, and by such means eventually securing possession. It does not sound altogether improbable, although ignoring the importance of rivalry among the very powers in question. The breaking away of Dixie would have been followed by other schisms, with little doubt, but whether this would have involved evil in the long run is quite another matter. The American is so accustomed to thinking of his country in terms of territorial bigness that his idea of merit has come to be linked with the concept of size, the result being hopeless materialism. It is a foregone conclusion, therefore, that he will not relish some observations on what might happen if division ever broke up the ill-balanced hegemony in which he exists.

The reason why Europe has been so fruitful of strong, individualistic types is, in part, due to her national alignments. It is true that these have persisted by reason of ultra masculine units among her populations, but nationalism has reacted favorably to the influence. Americans often lament that war has accompanied this status, both in past and present, but the viewpoint is at once shallow and insincere. Europe has been the fecund source of powerful blood lines, and these have fortified the descent of other and inferior races. The direct origin of the eagle strain among men is a mystery, both to science and psychology, the latter being included after due reflection over the progress of a novel and subtle analysis. In a minor degree, the principle works among all peoples. Without it, decline to barbarism, or to that slavery signified by fear and submission to standardization, follows swiftly. Those who rejoice over the weakening of this force are blind to the conclusions of history. The unity of Europe would be a calamity unparalleled in human annals.

The appearance of new instrumentalities in war, the scope of modern conflicts, furnish the possibilities of many things on the American continent that another generation would have refused to admit as even conjectural. After all, cut off from a few states along the Atlantic seaboard, and perhaps including the lake region, what would the rest of the United States amount to? Nothing. And this will be the foundation of any aggressive military policy on the part of future external enemies.

It does not seem likely, at least within any reasonable period of time, that division would threaten the United States from any internal source. The character of the population is favorable to long-continued national integrity. It is impossible to conceive an

individual strong enough to coalesce a following with the object of disrupting the confederation of states. It is true that, on occasion, threats are made—but these never rise beyond veiled hints. Such mutterings have come from the West during agrarian uprisings, but no one takes them seriously. The American system of welding recalcitrant will forces operates admirably. The population, as a whole, is composed of docile classes, and the few capable of ill find fortune so easy of attainment that they are satisfied to leave the state alone. The conspiracies spoken of at times by the police in connection with socialist agitation are, of course, intended solely for the large part of the population that made Barnum famous.

But in war anything can happen, and, as ought to be evident now, to the most dense, it can happen fast. It would be from this direction that disaster might come. Successful invasion would make disruption not only possible but extremely probable. It is from this point of view that the subject is here considered. The result, however, might be far different, in the long run, from what the invader had expected.

Once set in motion, the impulse to divide would spread. This conclusion is based on the heterogeneous nature of the American population, and the antagonisms already existent between parts of it, antagonisms repressed by the overwhelming force of the collective state. A nation composed of New England, the Middle Atlantic states and, possibly, Virginia, would compose a formidable aggregation, one comparing favorably with the greatest of the Continental powers. Another might be built up from the states adjoining the Lake region and the headwaters of the Mississippi, while that river, itself, could become the line between a powerful group on the seaboard and an agricultural empire in the Middle West. A northwest power is conceivable on the Pacific coast, but whether or not this would include California is problematical. The latter state is extremely potent and might prove equal to maintaining her own independence. A Gulf Empire readily defines itself, but it would require alliances, at least for a time, by reason of the elementary character of the inhabitants of that section. Louisiana would necessarily constitute its head. As to the west in general, it must be borne in mind that vast stretches of it are worthless, and always will be. Irrigation is limited by the rainfall in the Rockies. The American Desert contains large areas that would not even respond to it. The labor required to make habitable important sections of the

west would built up half a dozen Hollands along the rich savannahs of South Carolina, Georgia and the Gulf States.

It is plain that a collection of nations is not beyond the scope of the imagination, and the American continent may be the scene of strange developments, some day. Independent nations may rise and fall; genius, ever alert, may build again a federation like that now existing, but under a more patent imperialism. It would be during the stress of differences brought about by the relations of such independencies that populations would become more distinctive and individualistic, the net effect being the development of races having stronger characteristics than those now dominating the American possessions. This is an observation worthy of a separate notation. The defect of the American system is the effectiveness with which it annihilates individuality. This is evident everywhere. There is not a fusion of races in a melting pot, as has been claimed, but a breaking down of spirit that levels all. This favors weak types, and it is the prevalence of these that strikes the intelligent foreigner when he travels among us. As a rule, he is much too clever to allude to it. Americans love praise, and they are surfeited with it. None the less, the possibility of a weakening tendency evidently worried the founders of the Republic, themselves men of remarkable foresight. The long discussion of federal powers as against those of the states, no doubt included verbal allusions to it. It was feared that the invasion of state boundaries would favor their disintegration, leading finally to Federal autocracy. That this apprehension was well founded events have abundantly confirmed. Absolute jurisdiction on the part of the national government is too near at hand to be disputed. Political strife, in the immediate future, will be between sections, each intent on supremacy.

While the outline hazzarded in this running glance at the probable, or improbable, future, has been confined to groupings in which specific states were named, it should be remembered that present nomenclature is adhered to to make more evident a general idea. In point of fact, the condition conjectured might follow lines entirely beyond the range of contemporary foresight. Names count for little, save where they link memory to splendor or sublimity. Athens spells intellect in culmination; Rome is another word for grandeur. Some humble American hamlet may be all that passes to immortality.

The great delusion is believing that man himself is less than the environment in which he acts. It is the individual who per-

sists. The glory of his deeds, his thoughts, it is these that live. Empires rise and fall, their memory is lost, but something has been added to the sum of human powers, a word here and there in the flight of time.

The progress of America is conceived as something that will efface many in a commingling, this leading to a novel race. Because progress and futurity are terms so commonly used, they have come to mean something near at hand. If it be true that a bizarre population is to some day merge into a racial type, the date must reach beyond the shadowland of present dreams. A thousand years would be a trifling interval with which to cover it. That such a race will never appear at all is infinitely more probable. The dominance of a cross which will include a limited number of strains, gradually fused into one, is more within the limits of anticipation, because more remote from the impossible. Vastness of empire has never, of itself, indicated greatness. It has been the means by which a relatively small part displayed its majesty. A race deficient in numbers, but intense in spirit. Transient though their cycles have been, it is their record that passes on from age to age, to daunt the little and inspire the bold.