

## WHITMAN AND THE RADICALS AS POETS OF DEMOCRACY.

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**T**HAT the oratorical young radicals are the literary offspring of Walt Whitman is frequently claimed by themselves or their friends, yet their verse diverges considerably in its national aspects from his. Most of the bitter-end radical poets are of foreign origin or have expatriated themselves, which may account in part for their out-of-tuneness with race and national solidarity. They differ from Whitman in their theories of government and consequently in their attitude toward Democracy and Reconstruction. Whitman was no pacifist. His verse is the song of a renewed Democracy which he believed was to arise like a Phoenix from the devastating flames of the Civil War—

“A new brood, native, athletic, continental.”

He passed through the ordeal of the Civil War; he summoned America to the conflict—

“Long, too long, America,  
Traveling roads all even and peaceful, you learned from joys and  
prosperity only;  
But now to learn from cries of anguish, advancing, grappling with  
direst fate and recoiling not.”

The radical poets may pride themselves on their red blood, but they have not been as a group especially martial. In quite un-Whitmanesque vein are Ezra Pound's lines:

“Sing we for love and idleness,  
Naught else is worth the having.

“Though I have been in many a land,  
There is naught else in living,

“And I would rather have my sweet  
Though rose leaves die of grieving

“Than do high deeds in Hungary  
To pass all men’s believing.”

Whitman’s voluntary sacrifice and suffering gave him the right to speak with authority. Both as an active force and as a sensitive poet he wove into the tissue of his own life the agony and triumph of the Civil War. His unstinted labors among the wounded permanently affected his health and exhausted his financial resources:

“The fractured thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,  
These and more I dress with impassive hand (yet deep in my breast  
a fire, a burning flame)—  
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,  
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad.”

Yet as the strong man and the lover of life he responded to the mighty panorama of war:

“To hear the crash of artillery—to see the glistening of bayonets  
and musket barrels in the sun!  
To see men fall and die and not complain!”

The young radicals, however, did not seize with avidity the opportunity offered by the recent world conflict for displaying their virile manhood. Although Carl Sandburg sympathized in the down-with-the-Kaiser angle of the war, these lines show him viewing the scene not amid the din of battle, not at the bedside of dying warriors, but from behind a newspaper.

“I sit in a chair and read the newspapers.  
Millions of men go to war, acres of them are buried, guns and ships  
broken, cities burned, villages sent up in smoke, and children  
where cows are killed off amid hoarse barbecues vanish  
like finger-rings of smoke in a north wind.  
I sit in a chair and read the newspapers.”

Whitman’s profound feeling for Lincoln was one of the main-springs of his poetic destiny. It breathes in the following forward looking tribute:

“This dust was once the man,  
Gentle, plain, just and resolute, under whose cautious hand  
Against the foulest crime in history known in any land or age,  
Was saved the union of these States.”

But with scant ceremony Sandburg shovels Lincoln and Grant into the tombs along with all the rest of us and leaves us these:

“When Abraham Lincoln was shoveled into the tombs, he forgot the copperheads and the assassin—in the dust, in the cool tombs. And Ulysses Grant lost all thought of con men, and Wall Street, cash and collateral turned ashes—in the dust, in the cool tombs.

Take any streetful of people buying clothes and groceries, cheering a hero or throwing confetti and blowing tin horns—tell me if the lovers are losers—tell me if any get any more than the lovers—in the dust—in the cool tombs.”

To the old-fashioned patriot that was Whitman, the battle flag was a glorious symbol:

“——— for the soul of man one flag above all the rest,  
Token of all brave captains and all intrepid sailors and mates,  
And all that went down doing their duty.”

But Vachel Lindsey, the modernist, makes the battle flag stand for perdition rather than the passion of patriotism:

“All in the name of this or that grim flag,  
No angel-flag in all the rag-array.

“Banners the demons love, and all Hell sings  
And plays with harps. Those flags march forth today!”

After a great crisis nations are confronted by problems which put to the test every ounce of force and wisdom which they possess. This herculean task of reconstruction—the gathering in of the aftermath of war was Whitman’s theme. He was no advocate of easy makeshifts:

“Now understand me well—it is provided in the essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.”

But there was no pessimism in his idea of the forward march of history:

“Roaming in thought over the universe, I saw the little that is good steadily hastening toward immortality,  
And the vast all that is call'd Evil, I saw hastening to merge itself and become lost and dead.”

T. S. Eliot's song of history has a quite different timbre. With the extinguishing pessimism often characteristic of the radical school in literature, he snuffs out the spiritual meaning of the past and gives us fate mocking the human race.

“History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,  
Guides us by vanities.  
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions  
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late  
What's not believed in, or if still believed,  
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon  
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with  
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think  
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices  
Are flattered by our heroism. Virtues  
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.  
These tears are shaken from the wrath bearing tree.”

Whitman believed in the progress of the race through the travail of a just war into the fruition of free institutions. The strong full current of his verse is the song of Democracy:

“To thee, old cause,  
Thou peerless, passionate, good cause,  
Thou stern, remorseless, sweet idea,  
Deathless throughout the ages, races, lands,  
After a strange, sad war, great war for thee

(I think all war through time was really fought, and ever will be  
really fought, for thee),  
These chants for thee, the eternal march of thee."

He paints the ideal democratic community—the free city in a  
free land:

"Where the citizen is always the head and ideal, and  
President, Mayor, Governor, and what not, are agents for pay,  
Where children are taught to be laws to themselves and to depend  
on themselves,  
Where the city of the faithfulest friends stands,  
Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,  
Where the city of the healthiest father stands,  
Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,  
There the great city stands."

He realized that Democracy must have as its threefold basic  
support these pillars: Brotherhood, Good Government and Religion:

"My Comrade,  
For you to share with me two greatneses and a third one rising  
inclusive and more resplendent  
The greatness of Love and Democracy and the greatness of Re-  
ligion."

In contrast to Whitman's lofty conception we have Sandburg's  
jocular and rather simian hobnobbing with the masses:

"Oh, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie inside my ribs, under my bon,  
head, under my red-valve heart—and I got something else;  
it is a  
Man-child heart, a woman-child heart: it is a father and mother  
and lover: it came from God-Knows-Where: it is going to  
God-Knows-  
Where—For I am the keeper of the zoo: I say yes and no; I sing  
and kill and work: I am a pal of the world: I came from  
the wilderness."

Such posturing seems clownish in comparison with the surge  
of Whitman's verse, the sweep of his vision, for Whitman appar-

ently foresaw and comprehended the strange phase of history in which a later generation was to struggle. The measure and ultimate goal of the World War—through the Armageddon of 1914-1918 to the abolition of war, through a healthy nationalism to a sane internationalism—is here projected in lines which compass the possibilities of the present moment :

“Sail, sail thy best, ship of Democracy,  
 Of value is thy freight, 'tis not the present only,  
 The Past is also stored in thee,  
 Thou holdest not the venture of thyself alone, not of the Western  
 continent alone,  
 Earth's resumé entire floats on thy keel, O ship, is steadied by thy  
 spars,  
 With thee Time voyages in trust, the antecedent nations sink or  
 swim with thee,  
 With all their ancient struggles, martyrs, heroes, epics, wars, thou  
 bear'st the other continents,  
 Theirs, theirs as much as thine, the destination-port triumphant ;  
 Steer them with good, strong hand and wary eye, O helmsman,  
 thou carriest great companions,  
 Venerable, priestly Asia sails this day with thee,  
 And royal, feudal Europe sails this day with thee.”

It was given Walt Whitman to express the spiritual mission of America :

“The measured faiths of other lands, the grandeurs of the past  
 Are not for thee, but grandeurs of thine own  
 Deific faiths and amplitudes.”

There is more swagger in Alfred Kreymburg's flamboyant but rather uninspired picture of America :

“Up and down he goes  
 With terrible, reckless strides,  
 Flaunting great lamps  
 With joyous swings—  
 One to the East  
 And one to the West—  
 And flaunting two words

In a thunderous call  
 That thrills the hearts of all enemies:  
 All, One; All, One; All, One; All, One!  
 Beware that queer, wild, wonderful boy  
 And his playground—don't go near!  
 All, One; All, One; All, One; All, One;  
 Up and down he goes."

"Up and down," "up and down," whooping and gesticulating, "he goes," but is Mr. Kreymburg's lusty, symbolical youth getting anywhere?

In Whitman's verse we have not only that love of the soil and the masses which rather incoherently characterizes the humanitarian radicals, but also a wholesome patriotism constructively expressed. Whitman's conception of Democracy has scope and dignity: it does not boisterously slap the crowd on the back nor merely protest petulantly against economic evils. The kernel of his genius is health and will-power. There is nothing mean spirited or shoddy in his point of view. It is otherwise with the radical poets—although like a quagmire at night they occasionally dart phosphorescent beauty of thought and doctrine, yet do they on the whole express too much bad taste, futility and pessimism. We have Whitman's conception of practical Democracy over against the vague, sentimental socialism of the radical poets.

The feverish atmosphere of these confused songsters is not the medium in which our nation can best gird up its loins for the tremendous tasks of reconstruction and international co-operation. Here is Whitman's call:

"Poets to come! orators, singers, musicians to come,  
 Arouse, for you must justify me!"

Of course there are radicals and radicals—not all of them are perfected cynics like Ezra Pound, albeit quite a bit of their hurrahing for the masses veils the primping of the intellectual. Certainly Pound's lackadaisical coquetting with his own verse is no adequate response to Whitman's impassioned plea:

"Come, my songs, let us express our baser passions,  
 Let us express our envy for the man with a steady job and no  
 worry.

You are very idle, my songs;  
I fear you will come to a bad end.

“You stand about the streets, you loiter at the corners and bus tops.  
You do next to nothing at all.  
You do not even express our inner nobility.  
“You will come to a very bad end.

“But you, newest song of the lot,  
You are not old enough to have done much mischief.  
I will get you a green coat out of China  
With dragons worked on it.  
I will get you the scarlet silk trousers  
From the statue of the infant Christ at Santa Maria Novella,  
Lest they say we are lacking in taste  
Or that there is no caste in the family.”

If the radical poets are to voice the present reconstruction period with as much authority as did Whitman that of the sixties, they will accomplish it not by cynicism or ranting nor by a mere affectation of Whitmanism, but by getting down to the bedrock of a practical democracy based on past achievements and consecrated to future progress.