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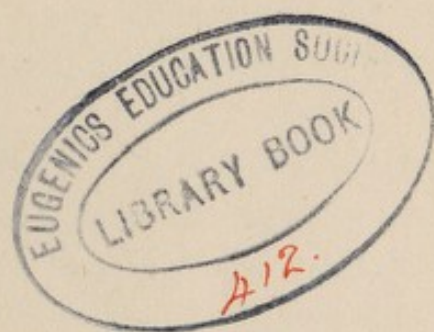
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## WHITMAN AS THE POET OF GOOD BREEDING

By HENRY BRYAN BINNS

HOWEVER dangerous it may be, it is both easy and convenient to consider any universal fact in one of its special aspects; and having once acknowledged that in so doing we can only render a partial account of our fact, the danger need not deter us. Whitman, was not, of course, "the Poet of Good Breeding": criticise him as you will and must, Whitman continues to defy definition: nevertheless in this paper I shall consider him and his *Leaves of Grass*, as far as I can from the eugenist's point of view. And I do so with the less compunction because he himself laid special emphasis on all matters relating to the nativity and breeding of his ideal race.

From whatever page or standpoint we begin a reading of the *Leaves* we are certain to be almost immediately confronted with "Walt" himself, "well-begotten and rais'd by a perfect mother," singing "the body electric," proclaiming "an athletic democracy," "the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon," a "race of passion and the storm," "one hundred millions of superb persons," "a larger, saner brood"—and declaring with all the authority his genius and assurance could summons

"Produce great persons, the rest follows,"—

in a word, you cannot begin to read Whitman without recognising his preoccupation with this problem of right begetting and right birth.

Nor is this first impression set aside later. It is in a sense symbolical of his message as it continues to unfold itself year after year in the mind of the sympathetic reader who recognises something deeper in Whitman's thought than mere adoration of "the strong man." I shall not here discuss his rank as a poet: I fear the brief extracts which I am using will not be calculated



to advance his literary fame, since they are deliberately cut away from their context, and chosen for a didactic purpose. But Whitman himself often disclaimed purely literary pretensions in order that he might with better grace assert what he knew to be his prophetic or inspirational gift. Whatever his *Leaves* might be as poems he never doubted their immense spiritual significance not only for America but for the cause of Liberty itself, that is to say for the future of the whole human race. *Leaves of Grass* was essentially an oracular utterance out of the life of the Race through the lips and brain of a typical ("average") man, who was also a pioneer of the new social order. The book was, according to its writer, the gospel of the Modern Man, a Bible for America; and its purpose was to inspire a race capable of freedom. The manifesto of Democracy, it was to give impulse and spiritual nourishment to a people, in order that having become filled with its spirit, they might have the faith required if they would confront their own future and destiny, and resist, if need were, the combined attack of the rest of the world.

It is evident then that Whitman had undertaken the responsibility of Race-building. It is also clear that he was singularly conscious of the immense importance of a sound physical basis for the whole superstructure of his "nonchalant breed." Singularly conscious, I say, for the oftener I read his pages, the more am I startlingly convinced of the man's vision into the inward meanings and essential forms of outward things. For Whitman, more perhaps than for any poet of his time or ours, the body was the actual mould of an eternal and indestructible Form: and though defects in the body might ultimately be mastered and remedied, yet so long as they remained, they were the sign and substance of spiritual disabilities. The body was, for him, a definite and defining part of the personality; and physical health was, to his mind, the foundation for the religious and ethical life of the future. I do not mean that Whitman subscribed to the common and wide-spread intellectual heresy of his age which denied the possibility of personal consciousness after life has left the body. Whitman's clear-seeing eyes perceived a more permanent body being formed within the mould of the body of flesh and blood, and



he consistently held that at death this interior body was (if I may use the expression) born from the other body. But this mysticism of his only enhanced the value to be set upon the actual physical body in its many-sided relation to personality. He saw in it the medium of perception and expression and the storehouse not only of experience but also of those "magnetic" personal forces whose possession gives power, influence and distinction.

Thus he writes To a Pupil:

"Is reform needed? is it through you?

The greater the reform needed, the greater the Personality you need to accomplish it.

You!—do you not see how it would serve to have eyes, blood, complexion, clean and sweet?

Do you not see how it would serve to have such a body and soul that when you enter the crowd an atmosphere of desire and command enters with you, and everyone is impressed with your Personality?

O the magnet! the flesh over and over! . . ."

It is not without deliberate intention that the poem following on the same page is the one of maternity beginning

"Unfolded out of the folds of the woman man comes unfolded, and is always to come unfolded,

Unfolded only out of the superbest woman of the earth is to come the superbest man of the earth,

Unfolded out of the friendliest woman is to come the friendliest man,

Unfolded only out of the perfect body of a woman can a man be form'd of perfect body."

Again, turning over three pages, the reader is confronted with the doubtful question of America's future:

"With all thy gifts America, . . .

What if one gift thou lackest? (the ultimate human problem never solving),

The gift of perfect women fit for thee—. . .

The mothers fit for thee?"

In these three short poems is thus briefly indicated Whitman's attitude towards Eugenics:—In any reform the agent needed is a great Personality; and that must include a magnetic body. But such can be born only of a perfect woman: the future of the race lies with her.

In order to suggest Whitman's further view of woman,



especially in this connection, I must quote again the often quoted lines in *The Song of the Broad-Axe* :

“ Her shape arises,  
She less guarded than ever, yet more guarded than ever,  
The gross and soil'd she moves among do not make her gross and soil'd,  
She knows the thoughts as she passes, nothing is concealed from her,  
She is none the less considerate or friendly therefor,  
She is best belov'd, it is without exception, she has no reason to fear and  
she does not fear,  
Oaths, quarrels, hiccupp'd songs, smutty expressions, are idle to her as  
she passes,  
She is silent, she is possess'd of herself, they do not offend her,  
She receives them as the laws of Nature receive them, she is strong,  
She too is a law of Nature—there is no law stronger than she is.”

It should be noted that this follows shortly after a passage in the same poem descriptive of the great city in which women have a place equal with men in all its public life :

“ Where the city of the cleanliness of the sexes stands,  
Where the city of the healthiest fathers stands,  
Where the city of the best-bodied mothers stands,  
There the great city stands.”

After this I need hardly add that Whitman's women are no more “mere mothers” than are his men mere fathers ; he does not so exaggerate the place of sex or of nativity. Yet in the race-life, and in that of the individual also, he sees that “sex contains all,” and—“underneath all, nativity.” Before going further, one ought really to try to render some account of the way in which Whitman uses this word “sex,” since one dare not take it for granted that so mystical a writer would be satisfied with the ordinary contents of the words he employs ; often, indeed, they come from his pen surcharged and overflowing with significance. No doubt Whitman uses the word “sex” to include much more than do most writers on such subjects ; and of course one must be careful not to take him too literally when he describes himself as the procreator of whole breeds of heroes and bards, remembering that he also says, “only the poet begets.” The principal matter is, however, that when Whitman writes of sex he always includes the physical and never evades it, as too many others are fain to do.



The man knew what he meant and meant what he said when he spoke of "the great chastity of paternity to match the great chastity of maternity," and of "the oath of procreation I have sworn." It is true he did not conform to social standards in his own sex relations—his children were born "out of wedlock"—but we have plentiful evidence of the cleanness and wholesomeness of the man. Those who were, or imagined themselves to be, wholly out of sympathy with his writings bore half reluctant witness to this obvious—one might almost say tangible—personal characteristic. I shall not apologise for Whitman's actions any more than for his poetry: and to attempt an "explanation" here would only be impertinent. But the facts are now public property and in this connection could not but be stated. At the same time, he never exposed them to public view himself, as though he wished others to follow his example. Neither, I am sure, was he ever ashamed of his secret. His quality and utterance belong no more to the repentant *roué* than they do to the emasculated theorist. He always gives the indubitable impression of a full-blooded, healthy, deliberate personality, whose attitude towards sex is perhaps best summarised in those two lines, more pregnant than elegant :

"Bravas to all impulses sending sane children to the next age,  
But damn that which spends itself with no thought of the stain, pains,  
dismay, feebleness it is bequeathing."

Whitman believed in the domestic institution of marriage, but he was not primarily concerned with institutions. His intensely vital personal and social morality would have been shocked at the suggestion of neglecting his own part in strengthening and vitalising his race, physically, mentally and spiritually to the utmost of his power: and his influence makes it more difficult for any who come into contact with his vigorous and robust personality as it expresses itself in *Leaves of Grass*, to escape the obligation and glory of parenthood. The obloquy which is supposed, in America, to attach to his work, attaches to it precisely because American society is hostile to all essential considerations of good-breeding; and abhors above all things that wholesome but irrepressible sexuality which Whitman



regarded as an essential quality of the people of the future ; at least this is my own view of the situation.

Whitman never suggested that the mere bringing to birth of a better race is the whole responsibility laid upon men and women of exceptional personality. In the *Calamus* poems and elsewhere he reiterates the tremendous force of comradeship and the value of every other vital form of inspiration. A sound body is a good foundation to work upon, but it must be fine too, and responsive to every living rhythm ; it must be capable of enthusiasm and heroism, it must be made of the very stuff of poems. Health is nothing to him unless it can be kindled into illumination : However prolific she may be in other births, America is but barren till she is the mother of bards that can arouse. So also in the relation of the sexes, he is not concerned with the child alone ; but—

“After the child is born of woman, man is born of woman”—

for manhood does not properly begin before the second birth of sex enfranchisement, that new consciousness into which womanhood alone can open the gate.



## EUGENICS AND SOCIALISM

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PROPOUNDERS of new theories are ever apt to over-emphasise what is new in their systems ; and still more is this the case with their ardent disciples, who often outrun their masters' discretion in the application of the principles enunciated.

We can observe this tendency in the adherents of both the above schools. Eugenists and Socialists, strange to say, are opposing each other, each party insisting on one of the fundamental factors of race-improvement, each advocating its own scheme to the exclusion of the other.

Whilst Marx, the founder of modern Socialism, declared that "the method of material production conditions the social, political and intellectual process of life," thus making the economic factor the basal foundation of society, his followers have thoughtlessly extended the meaning of this axiom by asserting that it is the "environmental" factor which is all-important, determining, as it does, man, his morals, character, and even his progeny. They have become Lamarckians, believers in the inheritance of acquired characters, on the ground of their political convictions. According to their idea it is only necessary to alter our present economic structure in order to effect a radical change in the physical, mental and moral condition of the people.

Such off-hand reasoning, ignoring as it does the whole order of biological facts, can of course easily be reduced *ad absurdum*. For it can be shown without much difficulty, as Dr. W. Schallmayer has done, that the Socialists, by insisting on the environmental factor as the only element in matters of race-improvement, land themselves in a *cul-de-sac*. For if the effects of good surroundings are *eo ipso* accumulated by inheritance in successive generations, the same must hold good for bad environments, which thus would lead to unavoidable racial degeneracy. Indeed,