

GOOD-BYE MY FANCY

AN OLD MAN'S REJOINDER

In the domain of Literature loftily consider'd (an accomplish'd and veteran critic in his just out work[44] now says,) 'the kingdom of the Father has pass'd; the kingdom of the Son is passing; the kingdom of the Spirit begins.' Leaving the reader to chew on and extract the juice and meaning of this, I will proceed to say in melanged form what I have had brought out by the English author's essay (he discusses the poetic art mostly) on my own, real, or by him supposed, views and purports. If I give any answers to him, or explanations of what my books intend, they will be not direct but indirect and derivative. Of course this brief jotting is personal. Something very like querulous egotism and growling may break through the narrative (for I have been and am rejected by all the great magazines, carry now my 72d annual burden, and have been a paralytic for 18 years.)

No great poem or other literary or artistic work of any scope, old or new, can be essentially consider'd without weighing first the age, politics (or want of politics) and aim, visible forms, unseen soul, and current times, out of the midst of which it rises and is formulated: as the Biblic canticles and their days and spirit--as the Homeric, or Dante's utterance, or Shakspeare's, or the old Scotch or

Irish ballads, or Ossian, or Omar Khayyam. So I have conceiv'd and launch'd, and work'd for years at, my 'Leaves of Grass'--personal emanations only at best, but with specialty of emergence and background--the ripening of the nineteenth century, the thought and fact and radiation of individuality, of America, the secession war, and showing the democratic conditions supplanting everything that insults them or impedes their aggregate way. Doubtless my poems illustrate (one of novel thousands to come for a long period) those conditions; but "democratic art" will have to wait long before it is satisfactorily formulated and defined--if it ever is.

I will now for one indicative moment lock horns with what many think the greatest thing, the question of art, so-call'd. I have not seen without learning something therefrom, how, with hardly an exception, the poets of this age devote themselves, always mainly, sometimes altogether, to fine rhyme, spicy verbalism, the fabric and cut of the garment, jewelry, conceits, style, art. To-day these adjuncts are certainly the effort, beyond all else, yet the lesson of Nature undoubtedly is, to proceed with single purpose toward the result necessitated, and for which the time has arrived, utterly regardless of the outputs of shape, appearance or criticism, which are always left to settle themselves. I have not only not bother'd much about style, form, art, etc., but confess to more or less apathy (I believe I have sometimes caught myself in decided aversion) toward them throughout, asking nothing of them but negative advantages--that they should never impede me, and never under any circumstances, or for

their own purposes only, assume any mastery over me.

From the beginning I have watch'd the sharp and sometimes heavy and deep-penetrating objections and reviews against my work, and I hope entertain'd and audited them; (for I have probably had an advantage in constructing from a central and unitary principle since the first, but at long intervals and stages--sometimes lapses of five or six years, or peace or war.) Ruskin, the Englishman, charges as a fearful and serious lack that my poems have no humor. A profound German critic complains that, compared with the luxuriant and well-accepted songs of the world, there is about my verse a certain coldness, severity, absence of spice, polish, or of consecutive meaning and plot. (The book is autobiographic at bottom, and may-be I do not exhibit and make ado about the stock passions: I am partly of Quaker stock.) Then E.C. Stedman finds (or found) mark'd fault with me because while celebrating the common people en masse, I do not allow enough heroism and moral merit and good intentions to the choicer classes, the college-bred, the etat-major. It is quite probable that S. is right in the matter. In the main I myself look, and have from the first look'd, to the bulky democratic torso of the United States even for esthetic and moral attributes of serious account--and refused to aim at or accept anything less. If America is only for the rule and fashion and small typicality of other lands (the rule of the etat-major) it is not the land I take it for, and should to-day feel that my literary aim and theory had been blanks and misdirections. Strictly judged, most modern poems are but larger or smaller lumps of

sugar, or slices of toothsome sweet cake--even the banqueters dwelling on those glucose flavors as a main part of the dish. Which perhaps leads to something: to have great heroic poetry we need great readers--a heroic appetite and audience. Have we at present any such?

Then the thought at the centre, never too often repeated. Boundless material wealth, free political organization, immense geographic area, and unprecedented "business" and products--even the most active intellect and "culture"--will not place this Commonwealth of ours on the topmost range of history and humanity--or any eminence of "democratic art"--to say nothing of its pinnacle. Only the production (and on the most copious scale) of loftiest moral, spiritual and heroic personal illustrations--a great native Literature headed with a Poetry stronger and sweeter than any yet. If there can be any such thing as a kosmic modern and original song, America needs it, and is worthy of it.

In my opinion to-day (bitter as it is to say so) the outputs through civilized nations everywhere from the great words Literature, Art, Religion, &c., with their conventional administerers, stand squarely in the way of what the vitalities of those great words signify, more than they really prepare the soil for them--or plant the seeds, or cultivate or garner the crop. My own opinion has long been, that for New World service our ideas of beauty (inherited from the Greeks, and so on to Shakspeare--query--perverted from them?) need to be radically changed, and made anew for to-day's purposes and finer

standards. But if so, it will all come in due time--the real change will be an autochthonic, interior, constitutional, even local one, from which our notions of beauty (lines and colors are wondrous lovely, but character is lovelier) will branch or offshoot.

So much have I now rattled off (old age's garrulity,) that there is not space for explaining the most important and pregnant principle of all, viz., that Art is one, is not partial, but includes all times and forms and sorts--is not exclusively aristocratic or democratic, or oriental or occidental. My favorite symbol would be a good font of type, where the impeccable long-primer rejects nothing. Or the old Dutch flour-miller who said, "I never bother myself what road the folks come--I only want good wheat and rye."

The font is about the same forever. Democratic art results of democratic development, from tinge, true nationality, belief, in the one setting up from it.

Note:

[44] Two new volumes, "Essays Speculative and Suggestive," by John Addington Symonds. One of the Essays is on "Democratic Art," in which I and my books are largely alluded to and cited and dissected. It is this part of the vols. that has caused the off-hand lines above--(first thanking Mr. S. for his invariable courtesy of personal

treatment).