

INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly Mrs. Gilchrist's "Estimate of Walt Whitman," published in the (Boston) Radical in May, 1870, was the finest, as it was the first, public tribute ever paid to the poet by a woman. Whitman himself so considered it--"the proudest word that ever came to me from a woman--if not the proudest word of all from any source." But a finer tribute was to follow, in the sacred privacy of the love-letters which are now made public forty years and more after they were written. The purpose of this Introduction is not to interpret those letters, but to sketch the story in the light of which they are to be read. And since both Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman have had sympathetic and painstaking biographers, it will not be necessary here to mention at length the already known facts of their respective lives.

The story naturally begins with Whitman. He was born at West Hills, Long Island, New York, on May 31, 1819. His father was of English descent, and came of a family of sailors and farmers. His mother, to whom he himself attributed most of his personal qualities, was of excellent Hollandic stock. Moving to Brooklyn while still in frocks, he there passed his boyhood and youth, but took many summer trips to visit relatives in the country. He early left the public school for the printing offices of local newspapers, picking enough general knowledge to enable him, when about seventeen years of age, to teach schools in the rural districts of his native island. Very early in life he became a writer, chiefly of short prose tales and essays, which were accepted by the best New York

magazines. His literary and journalistic work was not confined to the metropolis, but took him, for a few months in 1848, so far away from home as New Orleans. In 1851-54, besides writing for and editing newspapers, he was engaged in housebuilding, the trade of his father. Although this was, it is said, a profitable business, he gave it up to write poetry, and issued his first volume, "Leaves of Grass," in 1855. The book had been written with great pains, according to a preconceived plan of the author to be stated in the preface; and it was finally set up (by his own hands, for want of a publisher) only, as he tells us, after many "doings and undoings, leaving out the stock 'poetical' touches." Its publication was the occasion of probably the most voluminous controversy of American letters--mostly abuse, ridicule, and condemnation.

In 1862 Whitman's brother George, who had volunteered in the Union Army, was reported badly wounded in the Fredericksburg fight. Walt, going at once to the war front in Virginia, found that his brother's wound was not serious enough to require his ministrations, but gradually he became engaged in nursing other wounded soldiers, until this work, as a volunteer hospital missionary in Washington, engrossed the major part of his time. This continued until and for some years after the end of the war.

Whitman's own needs were supplied by occasional literary work and from his earnings as a clerk first in the Interior and later in the Attorney General's Department. He had gone to Washington a man of strong and majestic physique, but his untiring devotion, fidelity, and vigilance in nursing the sick and wounded soldiers in the army hospitals in and about Washington was soon to shatter that constitution which was ever a marvel to its possessor, and to condemn him to pass the last two decades of his

life in unaccustomed invalidism. The history of the Civil War in America presents no instance of nobler fulfilment of duty or of sublimer sacrifice.

Meanwhile his muse was not neglected. His book had gone through four editions, and, with the increment of the noble war poetry of "Drum Taps," had become a volume of size. At a very early period "Leaves of Grass" had been hailed as an important literary contribution by a few of the best thinkers in this country and in England but, generally speaking, nearly all literary persons received it with much criticism and many qualifications. In Washington devoted disciples like William Douglas O'Connor and John Burroughs never varied in their uncompromising adherence to the book and its author. This appreciation only by the few was likewise encountered in England. The book had made a stir among the literary classes, but its importance was not at all generally recognized. Men like John Addington Symonds, Edward Dowden, and William Michael Rossetti were, however, almost unrestricted in their praise.

It was William Rossetti who planned, in 1867, to bring out in England a volume of selections from Whitman's poetry, in the belief that it was better to leave out the poems that had provoked such adverse criticism, in order to get Whitman a foothold among those who might prefer to have an expurgated edition. Whitman's attitude toward the plan at the time is given in a letter which he wrote to Rossetti on December 3, 1867: "I cannot and will not consent of my own volition to countenance an expurgated edition of my pieces. I have steadily refused to do so under seductive offers, here in my own country, and must not do so in another

country." It appeared, however, that Rossetti had already advanced his project, and Whitman graciously added: "If, before the arrival of this letter, you have practically invested in, and accomplished, or partially accomplished, any plan, even contrary to this letter, I do not expect you to abandon it, at loss of outlay; but shall bona fide consider you blameless if you let it go on, and be carried out, as you may have arranged. It is the question of the authorization of an expurgated edition proceeding from me, that deepest engages me. The facts of the different ways, one way or another way, in which the book may appear in England, out of influences not under the shelter of my umbrage, are of much less importance to me. After making the foregoing explanation, I shall, I think, accept kindly whatever happens. For I feel, indeed know, that I am in the hands of a friend, and that my pieces will receive that truest, brightest of light and perception coming from love. In that, all other and lesser requisites become pale...." The Rossetti "Selections" duly appeared--with what momentous influence upon the two persons whose friendship we are tracing will presently be shown.

On June 22, 1869, Anne Gilchrist, writing to Rossetti, said: "I was calling on Madox Brown a fortnight ago, and he put into my hands your edition of Walt Whitman's poems. I shall not cease to thank him for that. Since I have had it, I can read no other book: it holds me entirely spellbound, and I go through it again and again with deepening delight and wonder. How can one refrain from expressing gratitude to you for what you have so admirably done?..." To this Rossetti promptly responded: "Your letter has given me keen pleasure this morning. That glorious man Whitman will one day be known as one of the greatest sons of Earth, a few steps

below Shakespeare on the throne of immortality. What a tearing-away of the obscuring veil of use and wont from the visage of man and of life! I am doing myself the pleasure of at once ordering a copy of the "Selections" for you, which you will be so kind as to accept. Genuine--i. e., enthusiastic--appreciators are not so common, and must be cultivated when they appear.... Anybody who values Whitman as you do ought to read the whole of him...." At a later date Rossetti gave Mrs. Gilchrist a copy of the complete "Leaves of Grass," in acknowledging which she said, "The gift of yours I have not any words to tell you how priceless it will be to me...." This lengthy letter was later, at Rossetti's solicitation, worked over for publication as the "Estimate of Walt Whitman" to which reference has already been made.

Anne Gilchrist was primarily a woman of letters. Though her natural bent was toward science and philosophy, her marriage threw her into association with artists and writers of belles lettres. She was born in London on February 25, 1828. She came of excellent ancestry, and received a good education, particularly in music. She had a profoundly religious nature, although it appears that she was never a believer in many of the orthodox Christian doctrines. Very early in life she recognized the greatness of such men as Emerson and Comte. In 1851, at the age of twenty-three, she married Alexander Gilchrist, two months her junior. Though of limited means, he possessed literary ability and was then preparing for the bar. His early writings secured for him the friendship of Carlyle, who for years lived next door to the Gilchrists in Cheyne Row. This friendship led to others, and the Gilchrists were soon introduced into that supreme literary circle which included Ruskin, Herbert Spencer, George Eliot, the

Rossettis, Tennyson, and many another great mind of that illustrious age.

Within ten years of their marriage the Gilchrists had four children, in whom they were very happy. But in the year 1861, when Anne was thirty-three years of age, her husband died. It was a terrible blow, but she faced the future unflinchingly, and reared her children, giving to each of them a profession. At the time of her husband's death his life of William Blake was nearing completion. With the assistance of William and Gabriel Rossetti Mrs. Gilchrist finished the work on this excellent biography, and it was published by Macmillan. Whitman has paid a fitting tribute to the pluck exhibited in this achievement: "Do you know much of Blake?" said Whitman to Horace Traubel, who records the conversation in his remarkable book "With Walt Whitman in Camden." "You know, this is Mrs. Gilchrist's book--the book she completed. They had made up their minds to do the work--her husband had it well under way: he caught a fever and was carried off. Mrs. Gilchrist was left with four young children, alone: her perplexities were great. Have you noticed that the time to look for the best things in best people is the moment of their greatest need? Look at Lincoln: he is our proudest example: he proved to be big as, bigger than, any emergency--his grasp was a giant's grasp--made dark things light, made hard things easy.... (Mrs. Gilchrist) belonged to the same noble breed: seized the reins, was competent; her head was clear, her hand was firm."

The circumstances under which she first read Whitman's poetry have been narrated. When in 1869 Whitman became aware of the Rossetti correspondence, he felt greatly honoured, and through Rossetti he sent his portrait to the as yet anonymous lady. In acknowledging this communication

his English friend has a grateful word from "the lady" to return: "I gave your letter, and the second copy of your portrait, to the lady you refer to, and need scarcely say how truly delighted she was. She has asked me to say that you could not have devised for her a more welcome pleasure, and that she feels grateful to me for having sent to America the extracts from what she had written, since they have been a satisfaction to you...."

Early in 1870 the "Estimate" appeared in the Radical, still more than a year before Mrs. Gilchrist addressed her first letter to Whitman. He welcomed the essay, and its author as a new and peculiarly powerful champion of "Leaves of Grass." To Rossetti he wrote: "I am deeply touched by these sympathies and convictions, coming from a woman and from England, and am sure that if the lady knew how much comfort it has been to me to get them, she would not only pardon you for transmitting them but approve that action. I realize indeed of this smiling and emphatic well done from the heart and conscience of a true wife and mother, and one, too, whose sense of the poetic, as I glean from your letter, after flowing through the heart and conscience, must also move through and satisfy science as much as the esthetic, that I had hitherto received no eulogium so magnificent." Concerning this experience Whitman said to Horace Traubel, at a much later period: "You can imagine what such a thing as her 'Estimate' meant to me at that time. Almost everybody was against me--the papers, the preachers, the literary gentlemen--nearly everybody with only here and there a dissenting voice--when it looked on the surface as if my enterprise was bound to fail ... then this wonderful woman. Such things stagger a man ... I had got so used to being ignored or denounced that the appearance of a friend was always accompanied with a sort of shock.... There are shocks that knock you up, shocks that knock you down. Mrs.

Gilchrist never wavered from her first decision. I have that sort of feeling about her which cannot easily be spoken of--...: love (strong personal love, too), reverence, respect--you see, it won't go into words: all the words are weak and formal." Speaking again of her first criticism of his work, he said: "I remember well how one of my noblest, best friends--one of my wisest, cutest, profoundest, most candid critics--how Mrs. Gilchrist, even to the last, insisted that "Leaves of Grass" was not the mouthpiece of parlours, refinements--no--but the language of strength, power, passion, intensity, absorption, sincerity...." He claimed a closer relationship to her than he allowed to Rossetti: "Rossetti mentions Mrs. Gilchrist. Well, he had a right to--almost as much right as I had: a sort of brother's right: she was his friend, she was more than my friend. I feel like Hamlet when he said forty thousand brothers could not feel what he felt for Ophelia. After all ... we were a family--a happy family: the few of us who got together, going with love the same way--we were a happy family. The crowd was on the other side but we were on our side--we: a few of us, just a few: and despite our paucity of numbers we made ourselves tell for the good cause."

From these expressions it is quite clear that Whitman's attitude toward Mrs. Gilchrist was at first that of the unpopular prophet who finds a worthy and welcome disciple in an unexpected place. And that he should have so felt was but natural, for she had been drawn to him, as she confided to him in one of her letters, by what he had written rather than and not by her knowledge of the man. There can be no doubt, however, that on Mrs. Gilchrist's part something more than the friendship of her new-found liberator was desired. When she read the "Leaves of Grass" she

was forty-one years of age, in the full vigour of womanhood. To her the reading meant a new birth, causing her to pour out her soul to the prophet and poet across the seas with a freedom and abandon that were phenomenal. This was in the first letter printed in this volume, under date of September 3, 1871, and about the time that Whitman had sent to his new supporter a copy of his poems. Perhaps the strongest reason why Whitman did not reply to passion with passion lies in the fact that his heart was, so far as attachments of that sort were concerned, already bestowed elsewhere. I am indebted to Professor Holloway for the information that Whitman was, in 1864, the unfortunate lover of a certain lady whose previous marriage to another, while it did not dim their mutual devotion, did serve to keep them apart. To her Whitman wrote that heart-wrung lyric of separation, "Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd." This suggests that there was probably a double tragedy, so ironical is the fate of the affections, Anne Gilchrist and Walt Whitman both passionately yearning for personal love yet unable to quench the one desire in the other.

But if there could not be between them the love which leads to marriage, there could be a noble and tender and life-long friendship. Over this Whitman's loss of his magnificent health, to be followed by an invalidism of twenty years, had no power. In 1873 Whitman was stricken with paralysis, which rendered him so helpless that he had to give up his work and finally his position, and to go to live for the rest of his life in Camden, New Jersey. Mrs. Gilchrist's affection for him did not waver when this trial was made of it. Indeed, his illness had the effect, as these letters show, of quickening the desire which she had had for several years (since 1869) of coming to live in America, that she might be near him to

lighten his burdens, and, if she could not hope to cherish him as a wife, that she might at least care for him as a mother. Whitman, it will be noted, strongly advised against this plan. Just why he wished to keep her away from America is unclear, possibly because he dared not put so idealistic a friendship and discipleship to the test of personal acquaintance with a prematurely broken old man. Nevertheless, on August 30, 1876, Mrs. Gilchrist set sail, with three of her children, for Philadelphia. They arrived in September. From that date until the spring of 1878 the Gilchrists kept house at 1929 North Twenty-second street, Philadelphia, where Whitman was a frequent and regular visitor.

It is interesting to note that Mrs. Gilchrist's appreciation of Whitman did not lessen after she had met and known him in the intimacy of that tea-table circle which at her house discussed the same great variety of topics--literature, religion, science, politics--that had enlivened the O'Connor breakfast table in Washington. She shall describe it and him herself. In a letter to Rossetti, under date of December 22, 1876, she writes: "But I need not tell you that our greatest pleasure is the society of Mr. Whitman, who fully realizes the ideal I had formed from his poems, and brings such an atmosphere of cordiality and geniality with him as is indescribable. He is really making slow but, I trust, steady progress toward recovery, having been much cheered (and no doubt that acted favourably upon his health) by the sympathy manifested toward him in England and the pleasure of finding so many buyers of his poems there. It must be a deep satisfaction to you to have been the channel through which this help and comfort flowed...." And a year later she writes to the same correspondent: "We are having delightful evenings this winter; how often

do I wish you could make one in the circle around our tea table where sits on my right hand every evening but Sunday Walt Whitman. He has made great progress in health and recovered powers of getting about during the year we have been here: nevertheless the lameness--the dragging instead of lifting the left leg continues; and this together with his white hair and beard give him a look of age curiously contradicted by his face, which has not only the ruddy freshness but the full, rounded contours of youth, nowhere drawn or wrinkled or sunk; it is a face as indicative of serenity and goodness and of mental and bodily health as the brow is of intellectual power. But I notice he occasionally speaks of himself as having a 'wounded brain,' and of being still quite altered from his former self."

Whitman, on his part, thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon sunshine of such friendly hospitality, for he considered Mrs. Gilchrist even more gifted as a conversationalist than as a writer. For hints of the sort of talk that flowed with Mrs. Gilchrist's tea I must refer the reader to her son's realistic biography.

After two years of residence in Philadelphia, the Gilchrists went to dwell in Boston and later in New York City, and met the leaders in the two literary capitals. From these addresses the letters begin again, after the natural interruption of two years. It is at this time that the first letters from Herbert and Beatrice Gilchrist were written. These are given in this volume to complete the chain and to show how completely they were in sympathy with their mother in their love and appreciation of Whitman. From New York they all sailed for their old home in England on June 7,

1879. Whitman came the day before to wish them good voyage. The chief reason for the return to England seems to have been the desire to send Beatrice to Berne to complete her medical education. After the return to England, or rather while they are still en route at Glasgow, the letters begin again.

Several years of literary work yet remained to Mrs. Gilchrist. The chief writings of these years were a new edition of the Blake, a life of Mary Lamb for the Eminent Women Series, an article on Blake for the Dictionary of National Biography, several essays including "Three Glimpses of a New England Village," and the "Confession of Faith." She was beginning a careful study of the life and writings of Carlyle, with the intention of writing a life of her old friend to reply to the aspersions of Freude. This last work was, however, never completed, for early in 1882 some malady which rendered her breathing difficult had already begun to cast the shadow of death upon her. But her faith, long schooled in the optimism of "Leaves of Grass," looked upon the steadily approaching end with calmness. On November 29, 1885, she died.

When Whitman was informed of her death by Herbert Gilchrist, he could find words for only the following brief reply:

15th December 1885.

Camden, United States, America.

DEAR HERBERT:

I have received your letter. Nothing now remains but a sweet and rich memory--none more beautiful all time, all life all the earth--I cannot write anything of a letter to-day. I must sit alone and think.

WALT WHITMAN.

Later, in conversations with Horace Traubel which the latter has preserved in his minute biography of Whitman, he was able to express his regard for Mrs. Gilchrist more fully--"a supreme character of whom the world knows too little for its own good ... If her sayings had been recorded--I do not say she would pale, but I do say she would equal the best of the women of our century--add something as great as any to the testimony on the side of her sex." And at another time: "Oh! she was strangely different from the average; entirely herself; as simple as nature; true, honest; beautiful as a tree is tall, leafy, rich, full, free--is a tree. Yet, free as she was by nature, bound by no conventionalisms, she was the most courageous of women; more than queenly; of high aspect in the best sense. She was not cold; she had her passions; I have known her to warm up--to resent something that was said; some impeachment of good things--great things; of a person sometimes; she had the largest charity, the sweetest fondest optimism.... She was a radical of radicals; enjoyed all sorts of high enthusiasms: was exquisitely sensitized; belonged to the times yet to come; her vision went on and on."

This searching interpretation of her character wants only her artist son's description of her personal appearance to make the final picture complete: "A little above the average height, she walked with an even, light step.

Brown hair concealed a full and finely chiselled brow, and her hazel eyes bent upon you a bright and penetrating gaze. Whilst conversing her face became radiant as with an experience of golden years; humour was present in her conversation--flecks of sunshine, such as sometimes play about the minds of deeply religious natures. Her animated manner seldom flagged, and charmed the taciturn to talking in his or her best humour." Once, when speaking to Walt Whitman of the beauty of the human speaking voice, he replied: "The voice indicates the soul. Hers, with its varied modulations and blended tones, was the tenderest, most musical voice ever to bless our ears."

Her death was a long-lasting shock to Whitman. "She was a wonderful woman--a sort of human miracle to me.... Her taking off ... was a great shock to me: I have never quite got over it: she was near to me: she was subtle: her grasp on my work was tremendous--so sure, so all around, so adequate." If this sounds a trifle self-centred in its criticism, not so was the poem which, in memory of her, he wrote as a fitting epitaph from the poet she had loved.

"GOING SOMEWHERE"

My science-friend, my noblest woman-friend (Now buried in an English
grave--and this a memory-leaf for her dear sake),
Ended our talk--"The sum, concluding all we know of old or modern
learning, intuitions deep,
Of all Geologies--Histories--of all Astronomy--of Evolution, Metaphysics

all,

Is, that we all are onward, onward, speeding slowly, surely bettering,

Life, life an endless march, an endless army (no halt, but, it is duly

over),

The world, the race, the soul--in space and time the universes,

All bound as is befitting each--all surely going somewhere."