

WHEN WALT WHITMAN WAS A PARISIAN

"I am a real Parisian," Whitman wrote in "Salut au Monde," "I see where the Seine flows." Actually, of course, he never set foot in France or anywhere else in Europe and never left North America, but, while performing his spiritual exercises ("Realize where you are at present located . . . think of space . . . which way stretches the north and what countries, seas, etc. which way the west . . . England, the Mediterranean Sea . . . and such like distinct places . . .") he sometimes no doubt imagined himself in Paris with the help of what he had read about it. He carefully kept among his papers a newspaper clipping dated December 24, 1853, entitled "An American Woman in Paris," and he had read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Eugène Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*. He knew Paris from A to Z and had visited in imagination even its sewers and its underworld. To him, however, Paris was above all the capital of democracy in the Old World, the place where Thomas Paine had taken refuge, the place where revolutions had flared up in 1789 and again in 1848. He celebrated both events in *Leaves of Grass*. In "France, the 18th Year of These States" (ie. 1794), he retroactively sent his "salute over the sea" to the French revolutionists:

And I send these words to Paris with my love,
And I guess some chansonniers there will understand them.

To conclude, he addressed Democracy in French:

I will yet sing a song for you ma femme.

In 1848, when King Louis-Philippe was dethroned and the Second Republic set up, he exulted, but he grieved when the revolutionary movement petered out or failed in other European countries. He did not lose hope, though, as his poem "Resurgemus" ("We shall rise again"), later retitled "Europe, the 72nd and 73rd Years of These States," shows.

In 1871, when Paris was besieged by the Prussian army and later became torn by a civil war, he once more sent a message to "crucified"

France, that "strange, passionate, mocking, frivolous land" which "amidst [her] many faults [. . .] ever aimed highly" ("O Star of France"). Once more he expressed the hope that she would be "reborn" and her star would shine again and "beam immortal."

He deeply sympathized with the Parisians for political reasons and did not even condemn them on moral grounds for their well-known frivolity. He told Horace Traubel, "I never took any stock in the ordinary disposition to cry down French life."¹ On another occasion he added: "I am aware of what our puritans think of the French; it counts for little with me . . . the main difference between us and the French in sex directions is their frankness as opposed to our hypocrisy."²

In his eyes, their frivolity was amply redeemed by their sense of solidarity. If we are to believe Traubel, he waxed eloquent when "Solidarity" was mentioned: "It is peculiarly a French word: comes naturally from the French. That is a fact I always remember in connection with Victor Hugo — with Tolstoy too, who is not French, yet human with Hugo: their great purpose is human: their purpose is communication, understanding . . . Solidarity is the future."³

He loved French writers for the boldness of their thought, especially eighteenth century "philosophs," as he called them in his approximate French. "Out of the times of Buffon, . . . Fontenelle, Diderot . . . rose the Encyclopoedia Francais [sic]. Long live free literature! Long live science! The French Encyclopoedia tuned the instruments of the French Revolution and the American Revolution," he wrote in *Life Illustrated*.⁴ He even owned a copy of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, and he read and re-read Volney's *Ruins* and Rousseau's *Social Contract*; he even read Rousseau's *Confessions*, though he found some parts "disgusting" (but wasn't it in a way Rousseau's "Song of Myself"?). He also loved Michelet and George Sand, whom he called "the brightest woman ever born."⁵ Sand's *Journeyman Joiner* was to some extent a prefiguration of himself, since he worked as a carpenter for a time.

When he lived in Washington, a French friend of his named Obin⁶ translated for him, orally, Victor Hugo's *Légende des Siècles*. "He

would sit at the other side of the table," he told Traubel, "and talk across — was very lively, very animated — almost danced some of his verses out."⁷ Whitman knew no French (except for a few words like "allons," "en-masse," "trottoirs," etc.), so he depended wholly on translations. He had read Hugo in the *Canterbury Poets* series, but it was a dull and mediocre translation by a clergyman called Carrington, "mere skim milk."⁸ Obin, on the contrary, knew how to make Hugo's poetry come alive. Mrs. Gilchrist, too: "She put the *Legend des Siecles* into English: copied it for me — showed it to me — while she was here. It was nobly done."⁹ He deeply admired Hugo's poetry in spite of its "flatulent literary blotches and excesses." He would probably have concluded like André Gide that Hugo was the greatest French poet — alas! — without realizing that the same thing could have been said about his own place in American poetry.

He was very fond of Béranger, too, whose popularity in his lifetime equalled that of Hugo, though he was only a lowbrow poet. Whitman called him "the French poet of Freedom" and praised in particular his poem on "La Sainte Alliance des Peuples" ("The Holy Alliance of Peoples," as opposed to the Holy Alliance of tyrants). He preserved four newspaper clippings about Béranger, notably one about his burial in Paris, which was attended by huge crowds of admirers. He often identified himself with Béranger as the "chansonnier of a great future."¹⁰ In the middle 1850s a young Brooklyn sculptor named John Quincy Ward who had frequented Béranger in Paris often spoke of him to Whitman, and he and his friends nicknamed Whitman "Béranger," which flattered him enormously, since he wanted to become the poet of America as Béranger had been the poet of France.

Henri Murger, another minor but very popular author, was also one of Whitman's favorite poets. In the late 1870s, he loved to recite a poem called "The Midnight Visitor," which people often thought he had written himself, whereas it was merely a translation of Murger's "La Ballade du désespéré," which he had touched up and thus, to some extent, made his own. Here it is:

The Midnight Visitor

- Whose steps are those? Who comes so late?
- Let me come in — the door unlock.

- 'Tis midnight now — my lonely gate
I open to no stranger's knock.

Who art thou? Speak! — In me find *Fame*;
To immortality I lead.

- Pass, idle phantom of a name.
- Listen again, and now take heed.

'Twas false — my names are *Song, Love, Art*;
My poet, *now* unbar the door.

- Art's dead — Song cannot touch my heart,
My once Love's name I chant no more.

- Open then, now — for see, I stand,
Riches my name, with endless gold,
Gold, and your wish in either hand.
- Too late — my *youth* you still withhold.

- Then, if it must be, since the door
Stands shut, my last true name to know,
Men call me *Death*. Delay no more;
I bring the cure of every woe.

(The door flies wide.) — Ah, guest so wan,
Forgive the poor place where I dwell,
An ice-cold hearth, a heart-sick man
Stands here to welcome *thee* full well.

Thus, though Whitman never came to Paris, he often lived there in imagination and even identified himself with a number of Parisian writers. He felt so French in his old age that, though he had been a teetotaler nearly all his life, except for his beer-drinking period at Pfaff's in New York, he took to champagne and, at the time when he wrote "Bravo, Paris Exposition!" in 1889, he was writing a poem entitled "Champagne in Ice." This poem has survived. It was written in pencil on a small sheet, which Horace Traubel's widow found among his papers. He had lovingly tried to polish it, for it bears inked revisions which show that he attached value to it. Here it is:

Champagne in Ice.

No use to argue temperance, abstinence only,
I've had a bad spell 40 hours, continuous
Till now a heavy bottle of good champagne in my thirst,
Cold and tart-sweet, drink'd from a big white mug, half
fill'd with ice,
Has started me in stomach and in head,
As I slowly drink, thanking my friend,
Feeling the day, and in myself, freedom and joy.¹¹

The champagne Whitman referred to was offered to him by Thomas B. Harned, one of his rich Philadelphia friends. It was French champagne, for, in those days, no champagne existed yet outside France.

NOTES

¹ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (New York: Mitchell Kennedy, 1915-1986) Vol. V, 352.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 223.

³ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, 360.

⁴ Reprinted in *New York Dissected*, ed. Emory Holloway and Ralph Adimari (New York: Rufus Rockwell Wilson, 1936), 71-72.

⁵ Horace Traubel, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, 35.

⁶ This is the spelling used by Traubel, but the name must rather have been spelt Aubin. See Edward Grier, *Walt Whitman - Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1955), 827, 1856.

⁷ Traubel, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, 361.

⁸ *Ibid.*, II, 329.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 335.

¹⁰ "The Centenarian's Story," I, 96.

¹¹ *Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, New York: New York University Press, 1965, pp. 684-685. The fifth line has probably been misread by the editors. They print it as:

"It is started me in stomach and in head," which makes no sense.