

WALT WHITMAN AND ANNE GILCHRIST

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INCREDIBLE as it may seem, one of the most passionate loves that ever held in bondage a human heart was given by a woman to a man she had never seen. In 1869 this woman read a book called *Leaves of Grass*, and straightway fell beneath the thrall of a personality that she felt informed every page of the volume. So overwhelming was her emotion that she was impelled to write to the poet, and thus began a correspondence that was to last, with a brief intermission, for sixteen years.

Who was this woman? She was a certain Anne Gilchrist, a cultivated Englishwoman, whose circle of acquaintances included many eminent men and women,—artists, such as Madox Brown, and literary lights of the order of Herbert Spencer, John Ruskin, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot and the Rossettis. She was born in London in 1828, and came of a very good family. Her education was along liberal lines, and she early displayed a literary and scientific bent. When she was twenty-three she married a young literary man, Alexander Gilchrist, who was preparing for the bar. For years the Gilchrists lived next to the Carlyles in Cheyne Row, and enjoyed the friendship of the Sage of Chelsea and his wife. Four children came to bless a union that was, without doubt, a very happy one. Upon the untimely death of her husband in 1861, Mrs. Gilchrist bent her literary gifts to the task of completing his *Life of William Blake*,—an occupation that put her into the frame of mind to appreciate the personality and work of one who was strangely akin, spiritually, to the great mystic.

When Whitman first felt the impact of the strong personality of Anne Gilchrist, through her letters, he was about fifty years old, nine years her senior. Born at West Hill, Long Island, New York, in 1819, the son of a carpenter, he had had a varied career as a teacher, a journalist, an editor, and a government clerk. The building trade he had abandoned to write poetry, and his first volume, *Leaves of Grass*, was published in 1855. It excited more condemnation and ridicule than praise; and when the Civil War broke out in 1861, it passed for a time into apparent oblivion. In the war, Whitman took upon himself the task of acting as a

nurse, a comrade, and a friend-in-need to the wounded soldiers in Washington, which soon became "one huge hospital." Many an hour he spent by the bedside of some poor fellow, keeping a vigil of comradeship and cheer, receiving his last messages, writing his letters for him, or binding his wounds. To each individual soldier with whom he came into contact he gave a part of himself in loving words, looks and caresses. The strain imposed upon even his superabundant vitality was immense. He had gone into the war "the caresser of life," who "loafed and invited his soul." He emerged from it with health that was permanently impaired, and with a "wounded brain," upon which was written the indelible record of all that he had witnessed of the suffering and anguish of the young soldiers whose pains he had sought to assuage.

To his poems he now added the fine war poetry, *Drum Taps*, and once more *Leaves of Grass* began to be discussed. In England, as in America, its worth was recognized by a few discerning minds—by John Addington Symonds, Edward Dowden and William Michael Rossetti. Rossetti, indeed, had published the "Selections" from Whitman's poems that had fallen into the hands of Anne Gilchrist. She was not satisfied to bestow upon them merely personal praise, but she sprang eagerly into the lists as his defender in the attacks that were made upon him for pruriency. An eloquent article by her, entitled "A Woman's Estimate of Walt Whitman," was published in *The Boston Radical*, in May, 1870.

In referring to this article in a letter to Walt Whitman, she said: "I had a strong conviction that it was necessary for a woman to speak—that finally and decisively only a woman can judge a man, only a man a woman, on the subject of their relations. What is blameless, what is good in its effect on her, is good—however it may have seemed to men. She is the test."

Of the tremendous impact which the personality of Whitman, as incarnated in his poems, made upon her, Anne Gilchrist has given testimony in letter after letter of the published correspondence between her and Whitman,—a correspondence in which her letters play decidedly the predominant part.

"If it seems to you there must needs be something unreal, illusive, in a love that has grown up entirely without the basis of personal intercourse, dear friend," she wrote, in 1872, "then you do not yourself realize your own power, nor understand the full meaning of your own words, 'whoso touches this, touches a man,'—'I have put my soul and body into these poems.' Real effects imply real causes. Do you suppose that an ideal figure conjured up by her own fancy could, in a perfectly sound, healthy woman of my age, so happy in her children, so busy and

content, practical, earnest, produce such real and tremendous effect—saturating her whole life, colouring every waking moment—filling her with such joys, such pains that the strain of them has been well nigh too much, even for a strong frame, coming as it does, after twenty years of hard work?”

It is in this tenor that Anne Gilchrist writes in nearly all her letters to Whitman. Calm, sequestered and happy as her married life had been, she felt that she had not known the meaning of love until she came within the magic circle of Whitman's influence. “I never before dreamed what love meant, nor what life meant,” she wrote to him. “Never was alive before—no words but those of ‘new birth’ can hint the meaning of what then happened to me.” In a still more passionate strain she writes:

I that never set eyes upon thee, all the Atlantic flowing between us, yet cleave closer than those that stand nearest and dearest around thee—love thee day and night—last thoughts, first thoughts, my soul's passionate yearning toward thy divine soul every hour, every deed and thought—my love for my children, my hopes, aspirations for them, all taking new shape, new height, through this great love. My soul has staked all upon it. In dull, dark moods, when I cannot, as it were, see thee, still, still always a dumb, blind yearning towards thee—still it comforts me to touch, to press to me the beloved books.

There is no doubt that Anne Gilchrist cherished the hope that one day Walt Whitman would recognize in her his mate, and ask her to become his “chosen companion.”

In May, 1869, came the voice over the Atlantic to me—O, the voice of my mate, it must be so. My love rises up out of the very depths of the grief and tramples upon despair. I can wait—any time, a lifetime, many lifetimes,—I can suffer, I can dare, I can learn, grow, toil, but nothing in life or death can tear out of my heart the passionate belief that one day I shall hear that voice say to me, “My Mate. The one I so much want. Bride, wife, indissoluble, eternal.”

And how were these letters received by the gray-haired man with the look of premature age upon him, threatened with paralysis, who, when Anne Gilchrist began to write to him, was serving in the humble capacity of a third-class clerk in the Government at Washington?

One cannot help feeling that, as far as Walt Whitman was concerned, Anne Gilchrist came into his life at least ten years too late. Walt Whitman, after the war, was not the same man who had written the earlier poems of *Leaves of Grass*. The nonchalant “caresser of life” had felt the impress of pain, mental and physical,

upon every fibre of his being. More than ever, his love was of the cosmic order, going out to all mankind, and quite incapable of being "cabined, cribbed and confined" by an exclusive passion—especially for a woman. For there is some truth in the assertion that has been made about him, that he was "not romantic" about women. Such passion as he had been capable of feeling for the other sex had been given long ago to the mysterious, unknown stranger, who, it is said, bore his children. It is to her, undoubtedly, that he refers in the pathetic lyrics, "Out of the rolling ocean the crowd," and "Once I passed through a populous city." Whitman had a genius for comradeship with those of his own sex. One who was his almost inseparable companion for many years—Peter Doyle, a street-car conductor—asserted that Whitman was, in fact, rather shy of women. "I never knew of a case of Walt's being bothered up by a woman," he declared in pithy language. "No trace of any kind of dissipation in him. I ought to know about him those years—we were awful close together."

To the love which Anne Gilchrist revealed to him in her letters, Whitman responded with a love that was on a different plane from hers—and it did not satisfy her. He wrote to her in 1871:

I, too, send you my love. And you feel no disappointment because I now write so briefly. My book is my best letter, my response, my truest explanation of all; in it I have put my body and spirit. You understand this better, and fuller, and clearer than anyone else, and I, too, fully and clearly understand the loving letter it has evoked. Enough that there surely exists so beautiful and delicate a relation, accepted by both of us with joy.

That such a "delicate relation" was not sufficient for Anne Gilchrist is shown in the reply that she made to this letter:

Ah, that word "enough" was like a blow on the breast to me, breast that often and often is so full of yearning tenderness I know not how to draw my breath.

It is impossible to evade the impression from the short and rather constrained replies—interspersed with long silences—that Whitman made to Anne Gilchrist's effusions, that he was somewhat embarrassed by her advances! He appreciated prodigiously her sympathy with and insight into the meaning of his work, but he tried to elude the personal issue. Eventually, however, the relationship between these two souls did blossom into a great friendship. Whitman's feeling for Anne Gilchrist became stronger, and her passionate regard for him was transmuted into a deep, tranquil affection.

In 1876 Mrs. Gilchrist carried out the plan she had cherished since her first reading of Whitman's poems: she visited America, and with her three children settled in Philadelphia. Walt Whitman at the time was living in Camden, N. J., just across the river from Philadelphia, where he had made his home after the death of his mother, and he became a frequent visitor in Anne Gilchrist's house. In this atmosphere of almost daily contact with her, he grew to appreciate her real worth. He confessed that he found her conversation even more interesting than her letters, and he responded inevitably to a charm of manner that was one of her endowments.

Mrs. Gilchrist, at the time of visiting America, must have been about forty-eight years of age. There is a pen portrait of her by her artist son that will give the reader a vivid idea of her personal appearance: "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.'"

Mrs. Gilchrist, on her side, stated in a letter to Rossetti that Whitman "fully realizes the ideal I had formed from his poems,"—and to say that was to say all. Long before her actual meeting with him, however, she had begun to realize that she could not expect from him the exclusive affection that she had once craved, and slowly she adjusted herself to the new conception of her relationship with him.

When Mrs. Gilchrist and her family returned to England, she renewed her correspondence with Whitman, addressing him always as "My dearest friend". It was in 1882 that she first began to feel the shadow of death cast upon her by her difficulty in breathing, and three years later, in 1885, this devoted and loyal woman died. Just a year before her death she had written her splendid *Confession of Faith*, based on fifteen years of intimate knowledge of the life and work of Walt Whitman. A finer tribute from a woman to a man has not been written. Whitman had been the *motif* of her life for many years, and when she was approaching death

it was his philosophy that sustained her and gave her soul fortitude to meet the end with calm. In her *Confession of Faith* she quotes with assurance Whitman's own words on Death—

I know I am deathless;
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by the carpenter's
compass;
I know I shall not pass like a child's calacue cut with a burnt
stick at night.

The death of Mrs. Gilchrist was a great grief to Walt Whitman. "She was a wonderful woman—a sort of human miracle to me," he cried. "Her taking off . . . was a great shock to me. . . . She was near to me; she was subtle; her grasp on my work was tremendous—so sure, so all around, so adequate."

"Oh!" he exclaimed on another occasion, "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—as 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."

In these words, and in many others of a similar tenor, Whitman paid his tribute to the memory of a great woman. But perhaps the highest praise that he could bestow upon her was contained in the sonnet that, upon her death, he wrote as an epitaph—a sonnet in which he addressed her as his "noblest woman friend."