

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Prayer of Columbus

WALT WHITMAN

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In this 1874 poem, American poet Walt Whitman (1819–92) imagines Columbus ashore in the New World (perhaps after his fourth voyage). He is sick, miserable, and close to death, hence eager for communion with God. How does Whitman’s Columbus, in his final prayer to God, allot responsibility for his own deeds and accomplishments? For what, if anything, does Columbus claim credit for himself? If he rightly sees himself as a vessel for God’s providence, would we have to reject Herbert Adams’ view (above) that Columbus’ voyage to America was the greatest event in secular history? What are Columbus’ hopes—and fears—for the New World he discovered? How would you answer Columbus’s question, “Is it the prophet’s thought I speak, or am I raving?” What is the vision that, thanks to Whitman, Columbus receives in the final stanza? Might it be an answer to his prayer? Can you square Columbus’ last words “And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me” with his prior claim that all that he did was really God’s doing? Has Whitman’s America—and ours—forgotten the possibility of miracles and the role of Providence?

A batter’d, wreck’d old man,
Thrown on this savage shore, far, far from home,
Pent by the sea and dark rebellious brows, twelve dreary months,
Sore, stiff with many toils, sicken’d, and nigh to death,
I take my way along the island’s edge,
Venting a heavy heart.

I am too full of woe!
Haply, I may not live another day;
I cannot rest, O God—I cannot eat or drink or sleep,
Till I put forth myself, my prayer, once more to Thee,
Breathe, bathe myself once more in Thee—commune with Thee,
Report myself once more to Thee.

Thou knowest my years entire, my life,
(My long and crowded life of active work—not adoration merely;)
Thou knowest the prayers and vigils of my youth;
Thou knowest my manhood’s solemn and visionary meditations;

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Thou knowest how, before I commenced, I devoted all to come to Thee;
Thou knowest I have in age ratified all those vows, and strictly kept them;
Thou knowest I have not once lost nor faith nor ecstasy in Thee;
(In shackles, prison'd, in disgrace, repining not,
Accepting all from Thee—as duly come from Thee.)

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All my emprises have been fill'd with Thee,
My speculations, plans, begun and carried on in thoughts of Thee,
Sailing the deep or journeying the land for Thee;
Intentions, purports, aspirations mine—leaving results to Thee.
O I am sure they really came from Thee!
The urge, the ardor, the unconquerable will,
The potent, felt, interior command, stronger than words,
A message from the Heavens whispering to me even in sleep,
These sped me on.

By me, and these, the work so far accomplish'd, (for what has been, has been;)
By me Earth's elder, cloy'd and stifled lands, uncloy'd, unloos'd;
By me the hemispheres rounded and tied—the unknown to the known.

The end I know not—it is all in Thee;
Or small, or great, I know not—haply, what broad fields, what lands;
Haply, the brutish, measureless human undergrowth I know,
Transplanted there, may rise to stature, knowledge worthy Thee;
Haply the swords I know may there indeed be turn'd to reaping-tools;
Haply the lifeless cross I know—Europe's dead cross—may bud and blossom there.

One effort more—my altar this bleak sand:
That Thou, O God, my life hast lighted,
With ray of light, steady, ineffable, vouchsafed of Thee,
(Light rare, untellable—lighting the very light!
Beyond all signs, descriptions, languages!)

For that, O God—be it my latest word—here on my knees,
Old, poor, and paralyzed—I thank Thee.

My terminus near,
The clouds already closing in upon me,

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The voyage balk'd—the course disputed, lost,
I yield my ships to Thee.

Steersman unseen! henceforth the helms are Thine;
Take Thou command—(what to my petty skill Thy navigation?)
My hands, my limbs grow nerveless;
My brain feels rack'd, bewilder'd; Let the old timbers part—I will not part!
I will cling fast to Thee, O God, though the waves buffet me,
Thee, Thee, at least, I know.

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Is it the prophet's thought I speak, or am I raving?
What do I know of life? what of myself?
I know not even my own work, past or present;
Dim, ever-shifting guesses of it spread before me,
Of newer, better worlds, their mighty parturition,
Mocking, perplexing me.

And these things I see suddenly—what mean they?
As if some miracle, some hand divine unseal'd my eyes,
Shadowy, vast shapes, smile through the air and sky,
And on the distant waves sail countless ships,
And anthems in new tongues I hear saluting me.