The Correspondence of John Addington Symonds and Havelock Ellis on the Project of *Sexual Inversion*

Editor's note

Ellis’ letters to Symonds, held at the University of Bristol special collections, have never previously been published. Letters from Symonds to Ellis, held in the Ellis collection at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, are also published here for the first time. This fills significant gaps in the published correspondence between Symonds and Ellis in Herbert Schueller and Robert Peters’ 1969 edition of *The Letters of John Addington Symonds, Volume III, 1885–1893*.

MS 1791 (Schueller & Peters, Vol III, 1969)

560 Zattere Venice May 6 1890

Dear Mr Ellis,

I want to thank you for your book [The New Spirit\(^1\)], which you so kindly sent me—and to congratulate you on it.

I thoroughly sympathise with the point of view from which it is written, and admire its criticism.

How far we agree, and why I welcome “The New Spirit”, will appear to you if you look over my forthcoming “Essays Speculative and Suggestive”, of which I have ordered a copy to be sent to you to the care of Messrs Bell.

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S. Brady, *John Addington Symonds (1840–1893) and Homosexuality*  
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I must say that I did not expect another man to group so frankly Whitman,² Millet ³ and Tolstoi⁴ together! You will see in my essay on “Democratic Art”⁵ that I have done so implicitly—not with the same directness perhaps as yourself. But the mere fact is enough to indicate a deep critical sympathy between us.

You seem to me to have succeeded as well as it is possible to succeed in the hopeless task of setting forth Whitman. I have tried over and over again (at any time during the last quarter of a century) to say what I think and feel about him, to express what I owe to him. It has never come to anything with me. I wish you had said more about “Calamus”: or, if you have formed an opinion, that you would tell me what you think. In many ways Whitman clearly regards his doctrine of Comradeship as what he might call “spinal”. Yet he nowhere makes it clear whether he means to advocate anything approaching its Greek form,* or whether he regards that as simply monstrous. I have tried but have not succeeded in drawing an explicit utterance upon the subject from him. But I felt that until my mind is made up on this important aspect of his prophecy, I am unable to judge him in relation to the gravest ethical and social problems.

I have ventured to touch on this point to you because I see, from the note to p. 108, that you have already considered it—and, as it seems to me, have both arrived at the conclusion that Whitman is hinting at Greek feeling, and also that his encouragement of “manly love” would necessarily and scientifically imply a corresponding degradation of women.

I am inclined to think that Whitman in comradeship includes any passionate form of emotion, leaving its mode of expression to the persons concerned. It is also obvious that he does not anticipate a consequent loss of respect for women. And are we justified in taking for granted that if modern society could elevate manly love into a new chivalry, this would prejudice what the world has gained by the chivalrous ideal of woman?

His own deepest utterances on the subject are, I think, in “Primeval my love for the woman I love” and “O earth my likeness.”

I should much like to hear your views upon the matter; because, as I said before, I cannot estimate Whitman in his most important

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² Walt Whitman (1819–92), American poet and essayist.
³ Jean François Millet (1814–75), French Realist painter.
⁴ Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), Russian novelist, dramatist and philosopher.