Elizabeth Cady Stanton: Existentialist Among the Reformers

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Elizabeth Stanton once wrote of Susan B. Anthony, —In ancient Greece she would have been a Stoic; in the era of the Reformation, a Calvinist; in King Charles' time, a Puritan; but in this nineteenth century, by the very laws of her being, she is a Reformer.

—And you? I remember thinking when I read these words. —What about you? Is that how you are to be summed up? As an essence of an Age of Reform? Just to ask the question was to hear it answered. No, the description was insufficient. If anything, it made her reader (this reader, at least) more aware than ever of the difference between Stanton and her great comrade in arms; between Stanton and the mass of vibrant, eloquent women who stood shoulder to shoulder with her, if it came to that.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton is the American visionary thinker equal in intellectual stature to Mary Wollstonecraft and Simone deBeauvoir. She, like they, had the philosophic cast of mind large enough to grasp with radical speed the immensity that women's rights addressed. Each of these women–Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir, Stanton–had been an ardent partisan of a powerful social movement connected with a great war–the Enlightenment, the anti-slavery movement, Existentialism–and the contribution that each made to feminist understanding turned, appropriately enough, on an application of the central insight of the movement to which she had been devoted. Wollstonecraft urged passionately that women become rational beings; Stanton that every woman exercise governance over her own inviolable self; Beauvoir that women cease to be —other.

Stanton differed from the other two in that each of them wrote a single famous-making book at white heat in a comparatively short time--*Vindication of the Rights of Women* over a period of a few weeks, *The Second Sex* over a few years--while she, Stanton, lived within the embrace of feminist thought for half a century, thinking the matter out decade by decade, provocation by provocation, through a series of speeches, letters, and essays that demonstrate an ever-deepening, ever more encompassing world view. Had she written —the book, we would be reading her today instead of John Stuart Mill on the subjection of women. As it is, in the end she left political life with a final public address--—The Solitude of Self-–written by a woman possessed of a vital piece of understanding tempered by fifty years of political struggle that had made what she knew cast long shadows back to Plato, forward to the Existentialists. Hers was the American contribution, and it makes clear why feminism as a liberation movement has flourished here as nowhere else in the Western world.

She was born in 1815, in upstate New York, into a rich, conservative, socially connected family, and she grew up to become the brilliant relative of brilliant people–-daughter to distinguished jurist, cousin and wife to abolitionist of

reputation. As a girl she had read law in her father's office and had as many thoughts as his students on the nature of political liberty. As a young woman she was a constant visitor to her cousin Gerrit Smith's home–-a stop on the Underground Railway-–and took part in the impassioned conversations going on there. It was at Gerrit Smith's home that she met Henry Stanton, already a well-known abolitionist speaker. When she decide to marry him, it was as though the daughter of a respectable Belfast lawyer had brought home a speechwriter for the IRA.

Then she and her husband went to the 1840 Anti-Slavery meeting in England, and the Conference refused to seat her; a meeting called in the name of equality for all would not seat women. Her husband was disturbed, but not that disturbed: he took his place in the hall although William Lloyd Garrison would not. Elizabeth was twenty-five, not long married. Lucretia Mott-–patient, intelligent, twenty years older, also not seated at the Conference-–walked her around London, and explained her to herself. With all the thinking Elizabeth had done about slavery, liberty, and the American ideal, it had never dawned on her until this moment: —When the democracy was conceived, *you* are not what they had in mind.

She never got over that flash of plain sight. It was a stunning moment of conversion–-the moment when she realized that in the eyes of the world she was not as she was in her own eyes-–she was —only a woman. In her writing, the memory of it returns repeatedly to galvanize mind and spirit. One can almost see her picking up the pen to make the moment live again.

Her own character was extreme. She took Flaubert – who said dress like a bourgeois, think like a revolutionary-–for her mentor. She always observed the social amenities-–good manners and proper dress-–but nothing could make her temper her thought. While her personality was vivid, fun-loving, and cheerful, it was also willful, stubborn, and autocratic. She hardly ever spoke before she thought, but she *always* spoke without consultation or strategic consideration. Her intellectual independence was seen by many as high-handedness; it broke party ranks, alienated radicals and reformers alike, and drove Lucy Stone wild, as well as William Garrison and countless others whose good will she could have used. But what she needed was to speak truth, as she saw it, at any given moment. This is what she *needed*. She needed it more than she needed the approval of family or steady companionship or even political success. The need often made her reckless, hot-tempered, and insensitive.

In her memoir she tells of how after she'd written her obituary of Lucretia Mott, she received a letter from a man who accused her of using an anecdote of his without attribution. —I laughed him to scorn, she writes, —that he should have thought it was my duty to have done so. I told him plainly that he belonged to a class of citizens who had robbed me of all civil and political rights…and now it ill became him to call me to account for using one of his little anecdotes that, ten to one, he had cribbed from some woman. I told him that I considered his whole

class as fair game for literary pilfering. That women had been taxed to build colleges to educate men, and if we could pick up a literary crumb that had fallen from their feasts, we surely had a right to…Moreover, I told him that…he should feel highly complimented, instead of complaining, that he had written something I thought worth using….

In Nebraska in 1875, out on the circuit, she is baited by a man in the audience. —My wife has presented me with eight beautiful children, he announces. —Is not this a better life work than that of exercising the right of suffrage? Stanton looks him up and down and says, —I have met few men worth repeating eight times.

On a Sunday afternoon--also in the 1870's--sitting in a railroad hotel, she writes to her daughter Margaret--who has written to ask if it's not lonely traveling as she does-- —It is indeed, and I should have enjoyed above all things having Hattie with me. Sensitive mother! Hattie is Margaret's sister, Harriot, Stanton's favorite child.

But suffrage was on her mind morning, noon, and night. It galled her--as it has many others after her--that the majority of women in her country did not see clearly on the matter of their own rights. It was a grievance that held her attention year after year after year.

In 1848 at Seneca Falls, she wrote: —Resolved, that the women of this country ought to be enlightened in regard to the laws under which they live, that they may no longer publish their degradation, by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance, by asserting that they have all the rights they want.

In 1855 she wrote: —Go watch the daily life of fortune's most favored Woman.…Who that has mingled with this class, is ignorant of the senseless round, the utter vacuity of such an existence. The woman who has no fixed purpose in her life is like a traveler at the depot, waiting hour after hour for the cars to come in-listless, uneasy, expectant--with this difference, the traveler has a definite object to look for, wheras the woman is simply waiting for something to _turn up'.…She may write books, but…instead of dealing stout blows…[she is] trimming [her] sails to the popular breeze….Had our literary women _all the rights they want,' we should have better books from them on subjects which they understand and feel most deeply.

In 1867: —Sometimes when I sit alone, and all the bearings of this question [of suffrage] loom up before me, I am filled with wonder at the apathy and indifference of our women…When they come to see that ideas as well as babies need the mother soul for their growth and perfection, that there is sex in mind and spirit, as well as body, they will appreciate the necessity of a full recognition of womanhood in every department of life….

Much as the Europeans burned over their second class status, it was impossible for them--from Wollstonecraft to Beauvoir--to give up their longing for inclusion in the world as men had made it: too lonely a prospect. This longing--

erotic in its power to compel--bound them to a dividedness of will that was politically crippling. The Americans, on the other hand, staring into democratic inequality, hardened their hearts against the romantic pull of the world as it is, and eroticized feminism; they could do it, they had enough company. Women's rights--in the name of Republic with a capital R--became their single-minded passion. This made them undivided in their pursuit of equality, and incomparably more revolutionary.

Elizabeth Stanton's life encompasses all of these influences and equations. In her is gathered an essence of Americanism informing this particular liberation movement. She is fiercely concentrated on the denial of what is promised her by right of birth—not birth into the world, birth into the American democracy. That concentration is the poetry of her political existence; it multiplies her insight, deepens her thought, clarifies her spirit. It infuses everything she wrote and said for the fifty years between Seneca Falls and death.