Walt Whitman Quarterly Review

http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr

Walt Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth": The Image of "Edges" in the Origins of Life

E. Lâle Demirtürk

Volume 2, *Number* 4 (Spring 1985) pps. 41-45

Stable URL: http://ir.uiowa.edu/wwqr/vol2/iss4/6
ISSN 0737-0679

Walt Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth": The Image of "Edges" in the Origins of Life

E. Lâle Demirtürk

Abstract

Offers a reading of "There Was a Child Went Forth" emphasizing how Whitman's poems reconcile images of edges into the "central edge" of the poem's "shore mud," a gesture that conveys edges as representative of "the origins of life."

11 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), p. 335.

12 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* pp. 260–261.

13 Whitman, *Leaves of Grass,* pp. 64–65.

14 Meyer Schapiro, *Vincent van Gogh* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 100.

WALT WHITMAN'S "THERE WAS A CHILD WENT FORTH": THE IMAGE OF 'EDGES' IN THE ORIGINS OF LIFE

Walt Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth" is a poem of edges that reveals a child's generative touch with the world. His encounter with different objects sharpens his perception, for he touches the world through contrasts and opposites. The first edge is the third-month, the month of March, half winter and half spring, an edge between death and renewal of life in nature. As he literally intersects the edge, he interacts with nature and is able to gain a holistic vision of the animals as the "brood of the barnyard"[1] rather than seeing them separately. He can now see the "relations in all objects"[2] after he perceives their idiosyncratic differences. Then he encounters, among other objects, the mire of the pond-side—another edge, a combination of water and soil. This edge enables him to perceive the fish against its background, "the curious liquid." Both of these edges suggest the fertile origin of life. The child's contact with the origin of life nourishes what Sherman Paul calls "the developing seed within the self."[3]

He encounters the opposing elements in nature, and they become the edging/sharpening of his perception. After connecting with the world through the edge of the "mire," he is now able to find some sort of unity in different objects:

> The field-sprouts of Fourth-month and Fifth-month
> became part of him,
> Winter-grain sprouts and those of the light-yellow
> corn, and the esculent roots of the garden,
> And the apple-trees cover'd with blossoms and the
> fruit afterward, and wood-berries, and the
> commonest weeds by the road. . . . (ll. 11–13)

The images of roots, sprouts, blossoms and fruits fascinate him, while his perception unfolds like a "bud."[4] The contrasts between the images reveal the diverse elements in nature. The winter-grain sprouts are contrasted with roots. The light-yellow corn signifying the fullness of growth stands in opposition to the sprouts and roots which demonstrate to the child the nature of growth as a process. The blossoms with their "fruit afterward" are opposed to the "commonest weeds" on the road. Through the process and the causality of growth, he senses unity in nature's diversity: roots nourish sprouts which eventually blossom and bear fruits.

This process of natural growth toward maturity corresponds to the development of the child's perception. He starts conceiving diversity in unity:

> And the old drunkard staggering home from the out-house of the tavern whence he had lately risen,
> And the schoolmistress that pass'd on her way to the school,
> And the friendly boys that pass'd, and the quarrelsome boys,
> And the tidy and fresh-cheek'd girls, and the barefoot negro boy and girl,
> And all the changes of city and country wherever he went. (ll. 14–18)

The images of human existence are opposed to the animal and plant life of the country. The old drunkard is contrasted to the school-mistress, the friendly boys to the quarrelsome boys, the fresh-cheeked girls to the negro boy and girl. All these images, following his insight into the unity of nature as the process of growth, connote his ability to see the diversity in social order.

He moves from nature out into the city where he turns to his own roots and origins:

> His own parents, he that had father'd him and she that had conceiv'd him in her womb and birth'd him,
> They gave this child more of themselves than that,
> They gave him afterward every day, they became part of him. (ll. 19–21)

He now assimilates his relationship with his parents, literally encountering his roots. They remind him of the original journey that he became the product of. His parents became part of him when his mother conceived him in her womb. The womb represents another edge where his father's contact and his mother's assimilation literally transformed their love into the origin of his life.

As his parents are mentioned for the first time in the poem, Whitman grounds the child in the originating pulse of life by placing him at his roots. The germ of his perception grows into a deeper perspective on his parents and the people outside of his household. He depicts his parents realistically:

> The mother at home quietly placing the dishes on the supper-table,
> The mother with mild words, clean her cap and gown, a wholesome odor falling off her person and clothes as she walks by,
> The father, strong, self-sufficient, manly, mean, anger'd, unjust,
> The blow, the quick loud word, the tight bargain, the crafty lure,
> The family usages, the language, the company, the furniture, the yearning and swelling heart,
> Affection that will not be gainsay'd, the sense of what is real, the thought if after all it should prove unreal,

The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time, the
curious whether and how,
Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes
and specks?
Men and women crowding fast in the streets, if they are not
flashes and specks what are they? (ll. 22–30)

He perceives the contrasts between his parents, and those between their household and the people outside: the mother is a mild person with a vulnerable, giving nature, unlike his father who is mean and unjust, and the tidy home scenes are contrasted to men and women crowding fast in the streets.

The child's ability to come to terms with the origin of life as depicted through the edges, culminates here in his encounter with the edges of doubt/assurance. The "flashes and specks" are the expansions and contractions of his self-in-flux, which are in fact "the doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time, the curious whether and how," that make him question "whether that which appears so is so. . . ." He expresses his doubts, and he questions different edges like appearance/reality, men/women, shadow/light, waves/shore. Now he acts on the world through his doubts and questionings of possibilities and ways in which things happen. The catalogues vary, because his experience varies and therefore his perception broadens:

Vehicles, teams, the heavy-plank'd wharves, the
huge crossing at the ferries,
The village on the highland seen from afar at
sunset, the river between,
Shadows, aureola and mist, the light falling on
roofs and gables of white or brown two miles off,
. . .
The hurrying tumbling waves, quick-broken crests, slapping,
The strata of color'd clouds, the long bar of maroon-
tint away solitary by itself, the spread of purity
it lies motionless in,
The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance
of salt marsh and shore mud. . . . (ll. 32–34, 36–38)

A deepening perception develops as the contrasting images begin to settle on the land and the sea. The images of vehicles and teams, connected with the land, are opposed to the wharves, that connote the edges between the land and the sea, and the ferries of the sea which go through a continual shift and change. The sunset, shadow and the static horizon's edge are contrasted with the flying sea-crow. The child is able to achieve a deeper perception, as these stratified images become layers of perceptions in his mind. We see the development of what Joseph Doherty calls the "embryonic operations for organizing perception"[5] of the young mind. The child's attempt to locate things/objects in their backgrounds achieves its fullest statement here. The horizon becomes identical with his own horizon, because the depth of his vision implies the edging/sharpening of his perception. The broadening of his horizons gives the sense of a new perception which is, in Emerson's terms, "the perpetual romance of new life."[6] It enables us to see the child as Emerson's "new product of nature,"[7] and the process in which the impulse of life in him grows from

within, as it is fostered by nature. The endless search for new edges in the self of a man left, as Louis Sullivan once put it, "free to grow, to mature and to seek its own,"[8] regenerates the sense that "another new world [is] to arise above the limited horizon of his experience."[9]

As his horizons broaden, the child simultaneously sees the sea-crow in motion and the motionless horizon. This contrast between the kinetic and the static is also embedded in the images of salt marsh and shore mud, two images that blend the land with the sea. The land and the sea echo the soil and the water, the necessary elements for the growth of a flower, and reinforce the images of buds, sprouts, blossoms, fruits which constitute the flowering/fruition of his perception. All the edges dissolve in the image of the shore mud as the child assimilates the edges into his perception, perceiving them simultaneously:

> These became part of that child who went forth every
> day, and who now goes, and will always go forth every day. (l. 39)

The child's perceptual development gains another dimension if we view it in relation to Margaret Slattery's study of image-patterns in the poem.[10] The poet guides our eyes through the child's experiences. When the poem starts with "There was a child went forth," there is an outward movement. It then becomes inward, as "that object became part of him." Our vision is directed upward, as we move from the images of "lilacs," "grass," "morning-glories" and "clover" to "the phoebe-bird." "The phoebe-bird" is then followed by the images of "lambs," "litter," "foal," and "calf," and finally those of "the fish," which guide our attention back downward. Our eye moves upward from "the roots" and "the sprouts" to "apple-trees," but it moves downward again to the "weeds." "The old drunkard" moves inward, because he is going home, as opposed to "the school-mistress," who moves outward.

Our attention is literally lifted from the household of parents, Slattery says, "outward to the 'streets,' and from the land to the 'wharves' and 'ferries.'"[11] Our eye then moves upward from "the village" to the "mist," and downward from the "light" to "sea." The movement is now directed inward from the "waves" to the "shore," and then upward to the "clouds." Eventually, "the 'horizon's edge' directs the eye outward, and the 'flying sea-crow' soars upward."[12] In the image of the "shore mud" the outward movement of the "land" to the "sea," and the inward movement of the "sea" to the "land" "are reconciled."[13] This reconciliation joins the reconciliation of edges in the image of the "shore mud" which becomes an emblem of the two different layers of perceptual development, as the sense of wandering in the world and that of wondering about it are literally fused into the origin of life. In one respect, the fact that the edges literally flow into the "shore mud" makes it the central edge of the poem, for all the edges are one: they are the origins of life in this poem.

The University of Iowa E. LÂLE DEMIRTÜRK

NOTES

1 Walt Whitman, "There Was a Child Went Forth," in *Leaves of Grass,* Comprehensive Reader's Edition, ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (New York: W. W. Norton and

Company, 1973), p. 364. (All further references to the poem will be to this edition and line numbers will be given within the text.)

2 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature, Addresses and Lectures,* vol. 1 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1876), p. 27.

3 Sherman Paul, *Louis Sullivan: An Architect in American Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 44.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Natural History of Intellect," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* vol. 12 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1893), p. 24.

5 Joseph F. Doherty, "Whitman's 'Poem Of The Mind,'" *Semiotica,* 14 (1975), 351.

6 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Education," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Lectures and Biographical Sketches,* vol. 10 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), p. 144.

7 Emerson, "Education," p. 143.

8 Louis H. Sullivan, *Kindergarten Chats And Other Writings* (1918; rpt. New York: Dover, 1979), p. 190.

9 Louis H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography Of An Idea* (1924; rpt. New York: Dover, 1956), p. 46.

10 See Margaret Patrice Slattery, "Patterns of Imagery in Whitman's 'There Was a Child Went Forth,'" *Walt Whitman Review,* 15 (1969), 114.

11 Slattery, 114.

12 Slattery, 114.

13 Slattery, 114.

AN UNKNOWN WHITMAN PARODY

Under the heading "Rhymes of the Day," *Puck* published the following piece of atrocious verse in Vol. 8, No. 280, p. 434, 2 March 1881, signed *"Walt Whitman":*

LEFT.

Mrs. Garfield.
The wife of the President of the United States!
Think of that, you women!
I am going to celebrate her entrance into the
White House; over the sacred sill of the
nation's tenement.
I am going to tell you what she found there, in
the cellar, by a tallow candle illumin'd,
things left there by the Hayeses, departed,
retir'd, into oblivion fir'd out:
Two pickle-jars, empty, of one of them the
bottom crack'd.
Four clothes-pins.
One chest-protector, red flannel, R. B. H.
thereon embroider'd.
Of insect-powder one pound, the strength of it
evaporated.