

# INTERPRETATION OF THE POETRY OF WALT WHITMAN

Cesare Pavese

Honors Thesis, University of Turin, 1930

Translated and with an Introduction by Lawrence G. Smith

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

On the afternoon of Friday, June 20, 1930, the twenty-one-year-old Cesare Pavese walked under the arcades of the Via Po and entered the 18<sup>th</sup>-century palazzo that houses the historic core of the University of Turin. Inside, he continued into one of its large lecture rooms, probably, given the formality of the occasion, the university's great hall or *aula magna*. He found in the room, as he expected, ten members of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy before whom he would defend his degree thesis (*tesi di laurea*). This encounter marked his last examination before receiving his university degree (*laurea*). At the end of the discussion, he stepped out of the room and waited until called back in, at which time the committee chairman told him they had found his performance satisfactory and informed him of the final, summary grade for his entire university career.<sup>2</sup>

We know nothing of the actual back and forth in the examining room other than that, as Pavese wrote in English to an American friend the next day, one or more of the examiners "lectured [me] about the fondness of slang I showed in my degree...."<sup>3</sup> We also know that after the discussion and a review of the thesis and Pavese's entire university record, the committee awarded him a graduating grade of 108 out of a maximum 110. If one were to use categories like "Average-Good-Very Good-Excellent" as reference guides, Pavese's 108, in the context of the Italian university grading system, would translate as "Very Good." He needed a minimum 66 to get his degree and a true "Excellent" grade would not have been just 110 but "110 *con laude*" or the most desired but rarely awarded "110 *con laude e dignità di pubblicazione*," which would have meant the faculty found the thesis worthy of publication. Whatever he thought of his final grade,

Pavese felt happy enough about getting his degree that, like legions of students before and after, he came home that Friday, in his own words in English, “late in the night...a little tight.”<sup>4</sup>

The thesis Pavese defended, *Interpretation of the Poetry of Walt Whitman*, written in an informal, almost colloquial Italian—the committee was not wrong about the slang—comprises, including notes and bibliography, about 51,000 words on 305 double-spaced typewritten pages. The original typescript still rests in the University archives located in the same building on the Via Po where Pavese defended it. The three hundred-some pages contain hundreds of overstrikes (by the typist) and manual corrections (by Pavese); whoever typed it, certainly not Pavese—he never learned to type--knew English only imperfectly, if at all, and the document appears sloppy, particularly for a formal academic presentation. The title page gives two dates, as was required then, “1930---VIII,” the second of which, though unnecessary for the examiners, reminds us that Pavese finished his thesis in the eighth year of Mussolini’s Fascist regime.

By 1930, the year after he concluded the Lateran Pacts with Pope Pius XI, Mussolini had consolidated his position and attained a level of prestige and power that would not significantly diminish until the second year of World War II. His Fascist party and the Italian government had become virtually indistinguishable. The government had established formal censorship offices and permitted no overt political criticism of the regime. The effects of fascism’s inflated rhetoric and pressured conformism were felt everywhere. The reality of the political and intellectual environment of the time meant perforce that a thesis on the most democratic of a foreign democracy’s great poets, submitted for a degree at an Italian state university, funded entirely by the Fascist

Ministry of Education, had political overtones. As H. Stuart, Hughes, making a broader point, put it, “In the 1930s an interest in the United States was itself an act of political protest, a token of admiration for a free and dynamic society.”<sup>5</sup>

Pavese’s choice to write in 1930 a thesis on Whitman did in fact constitute an act of calculated critical subversion, and its political sub-text represented an oblique rebuke to Italy’s sanctioned culture. In praising Whitman’s genius and America’s vitality, Pavese was intentionally making an unspoken comparison with what he saw as Italy’s lack of creative vitality under a repressive political system. With censorship a reality and imprisonment or internal exile (*confino*) always possible—as Pavese would personally learn five years later—only a free society could produce, or even permit, a poet to utter a “barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.”

Because of the reality of fascism, the thesis contains nothing explicitly hostile to the regime; Pavese knew that his adviser and the examining panel could not accept a work with any openly political criticism. Thus, Pavese, like all like-minded writers of the period, had to make literary criticism sometimes do double duty as political commentary. For example, in his analysis of “Song of the Broad-Axe” he says, “The poem’s great defect is already expressed in its title. I refer to the axe, the symbol of conquest, methodical labor, destruction, and various other things.”<sup>6</sup> For any Italian in 1930, among the “various other things” the axe would have symbolized was the Fascist regime, whose emblem, harking back to ancient Rome, was the fasces: a bundle of rods surrounding an axe with blade protruding.

Pavese’s principal passion, however, unlike that of some of his close friends, Norberto Bobbio and Leone Ginzburg for example, was for literature, not politics and his

thesis is primarily a work of literary criticism and a document of cultural history.

Pavese's long essay presents not only an uncommon approach to Whitman, but also a view into the intellectual mindset of one of Italy's important twentieth-century writers at the beginning of his literary career. Pavese's thesis on Whitman represents the first fruit of his passionate embrace of American literature, an encounter that was as important for Pavese as it was for modern Italian culture. To understand its literary and personal significance one must understand what Whitman and America meant to Pavese in 1930.

Pavese's feelings for American culture when he was drafting his thesis are best summed up in the often-quoted passage of an April 1930 letter he wrote, in English, to Antonio Chiuminatto, an American student whom he had met in Turin but who had returned home:

You are the peach of the world! Not only in wealth and material life but really in liveliness and strength of art which means thought and politics and religion and everything. You've got to predominate in this century all over the civilized world as before did Greece and Italy and France....Each of your worthy writers finds out a new field of existence, a new world, and writes about it with such downrightness and immediateness of spirit it's useless for us to match.<sup>7</sup>

And chief among the American artists who wrote with immediateness of spirit was Walt Whitman. Pavese saw Walt Whitman's life and poetry as embodying poetic genius, expansiveness, virility, and freedom, all things that the ardent and talented young man wished for himself—and his country. In his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass* Whitman had said, "Of all the nations the United States...most needs poets," and Pavese thought that of all the other nations, Italy most needed Whitman and to explain why, Cesare Pavese.

Before he graduated from the *liceo* in 1926 at age seventeen Pavese preferred Walt Whitman above all other English-language writers. This simple fact of preference, Pavese's point of departure in his relationship with America, will always remain mysterious. No Italian secondary school in the 1920s "taught" Whitman in translation (nor for that matter did they teach English as a foreign language; Pavese learned to read English on his own) nor did the American poet then enjoy any popular success in Italy as did, for example, Poe and as would later Edgar Lee Masters. While Pavese left no evidence of how he first discovered Whitman, He did leave written traces of his developing attachment to the "Bard of Democracy."

During their last year in the *liceo* (1925-26) Pavese passed a note in class to his friend Tullio Pinelli, that read:

A moment does not negate the past. He [Whitman] says that the past has already happened, it has already had its moment and now the present must have its. "What is the present if not the son of the past?" he says. He says that the entire past is reassumed in the present and that the living must work on life and give it the imprint of the present. It is not a philosophy that negates everything, but one that places itself above all life; it does not love this or that action, but action for action. And it exalts above everything the great forces of the modern world, *love of liberty, human love, justice, energy, enthusiasm*.

He does not have a systematic philosophy, a moral line. He has overcome the line of moral conduct with modern thought. He exalts the forces which I mentioned because *he likes them*. For no other reason (Viva Walt Whitman) He rejects grace, weakness, sentimentality---why? Because "I prefer force." And with these forces he contributes to "his union."

And anyhow, he is a thinker who bounces back and forth; he exalts democracy, the Union of the States, and he exalts the individual which is the opposite.

He is a poet in whom all modern life resounds, who has put religions in a museum. He has no moral line, he only has *preferences*.<sup>8</sup>

While this interpretation of Whitman may seem overly filtered through the lens of early twentieth-century Italian Futurism in its exaltation of irrationality, modernity, and force, its late adolescent enthusiasm is undeniable.

The following August, in the summer between *liceo* and university, Pavese wrote Augusto Monti, his literature Professor and the most important teacher Pavese ever had, a long letter about his summer activities. The letter shows that before starting the university a well-read Pavese had maintained his especially high estimation of Whitman. In one paragraph he gave Monti, somewhat boastfully, a summary of what he called “my work”:

I study Greek so as one day to understand Homeric civilization, Pericles’s century, and the Hellenic world. I read alternately Horace and Ovid and thereby discover all imperial Rome. I study German via *Faust*, the first modern poem. I devour Shakespeare, I read, alternately, Boiardo and Boccaccio, all the Italian Renaissance, and finally the *Légende des Siècles* [Victor Hugo] and the *Leaves of Grass* of Walt Whitman—this is the greatest.<sup>9</sup>

That same August he wrote to Pinelli, “In these woods I exult in Walt Whitman.”<sup>10</sup> In September, before the new school year began, he wrote again to Pinelli, “I don’t know if it is the influence of Walt Whitman but I would give 27 countrysides for one city like Turin...life, the real modern life that I dream of and am afraid of, is a great city, full of noise, of factories, of enormous buildings, of crowds and beautiful women.”<sup>11</sup>

A month after this letter, and just before matriculating at the university he wrote Pinelli again:

I fumble about, caught between darkness and light. I don’t know what I want. Or better, I do know but do not know how to reach it.

I need character, a strong soul that would impose itself on my internal anarchy....I fear I am good for nothing, that

I'm just pretending to have the qualities of a precocious and powerful adult with heroic poses à la Byron, à la Leopardi, à la De Musset, à la Ibsen (am I or am I not literary?). And the truly funny thing is that I model myself on Walt Whitman who does nothing but thunder against these weaknesses.<sup>12</sup>

In the summer after his first university year, Pavese, vacationing in the country, wrote, again to Pinelli, "I feel nature with my brain like Darwin and with my heart, the heart of poets like Walt Whitman."<sup>13</sup>

During his second year at the university, Pavese had a character in one of his posthumously published short stories, a discontented junior-high school teacher who feels himself overly influenced by his reading, wish that "he had sufficient internal spiritual strength not to be influenced by any mound of journals, as, for example, was the case for the great American, Whitman, a ferocious cultural iconoclast, and yet suffused with culture, and a genius of almost incommensurable originality."<sup>14</sup>

By the third of his four years at the university, Pavese had already chosen Whitman as the subject of his obligatory degree thesis. During the summer before his fourth year, he began in earnest gathering what Whitman materials he could find, a difficult problem in the Italy of 1929.<sup>15</sup> He conducted his research during the academic year 1929-1930 and wrote the thesis that winter, finishing it in the late spring of 1930.

The thesis excited Pavese. He prepared himself by reading every poem in *Leaves of Grass* and making notes on each.<sup>16</sup> He loved Whitman's poetry and felt he was exploring new ground, especially in the context of Italian scholarship. In November 1929, even before he started drafting, Pavese wrote Chiuminatto, in English, "I succeeded barely in finding something I wanted for my degree's thesis about Walt Whitman. (You don't know, I'll be the first Italian to speak at some extent and critically of him. Look me



over, I'll almost reveal him to Italy.)”<sup>17</sup> In February 1930 he wrote one of his Italian friends that “the thesis keeps progressing and is continually more impressive.”<sup>18</sup>

This sense of exploration, of revelation, together with his affection for Whitman and his admiration for American culture, formed the background of Pavese's thesis. He was not writing about a standard English-language author but about one he loved, though he was a poet barely read in Pavese's country. Pavese saw himself not just as a student writing a mandatory piece of criticism with the hope of obtaining professorial approval but also as a teacher himself, pointing out to the rest of the Italian intellectual community the real worth of a truly great but not sufficiently appreciated poet. Pavese worked from the conviction that others had not grasped the essence of Whitman but that he had and that he had to share this understanding. As he said in the thesis, “I am trying to separate as much as possible the true nature of Whitman's poetic creation from its own inherent dross and to make it visible despite the fog created by others.”<sup>19</sup> And to emphasize his opinion of most of the earlier criticism he had read, he wrote in Chapter 4 that he could “comfort myself with the knowledge that no matter how badly my study of Whitman turns out, others have said something more ridiculous about him.”<sup>20</sup>

Before considering Pavese's overall achievement let us clarify what the thesis is not. It is not a first-rate piece of scholarship. Despite his frequent condemnations of previous critics, Pavese had not read a major part of the corpus of English-language Whitman criticism published before he began drafting. He defended the choices he cited by writing in the bibliographic essay at the end of the thesis, that it was “virtually impossible to generate a satisfactory bibliography of Whitman in Italy because the materials for American studies are so scarce. Added to this general situation is the

particular difficulty that my author presents because of his having been, as I have noted, the subject of too few truly critical monographs and of too many articles and essays dispersed among the newspapers and journals of the world.”<sup>21</sup> Yet that difficulty does not excuse his overlooking *all* of the following works: Paul More’s 1906 essay on Whitman; Stuart Sherman’s 1922 piece in *Americans*; D. H. Lawrence’s important essay in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923); T. S. Eliot’s 1926 and 1928 remarks on Whitman; the earlier comments of Ezra Pound (1909), William James (1902), Barrett Wendell (1900), John Jay Chapman (1898), Henry James (1865) or William Dean Howells (1865 and 1889).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Pavese stood on weak ground when he so roundly dismissed earlier Whitman criticism as mostly useless. He had in fact not read much of the best English-language criticism and let himself be convinced that what he had read represented fairly all Whitman criticism.

Furthermore, Pavese’s felt need to be the first person to truly “reveal” Whitman to Italy led him unjustifiably to downplay the works of Italians before him. As early as 1879 Enrico Nencioni had written his first article on Whitman, which brought immediate and enthusiastic responses from artists of the level of Giosuè Carducci and Gabriele D’Annunzio.<sup>23</sup> In 1887 Luigi Gamberale translated selections from Whitman’s poetry<sup>24</sup> and in 1898 Pasquale Jannaccone published a book-length study of Whitman.<sup>25</sup> In 1907 Gamberale completed a full translation of *Leaves of Grass*<sup>26</sup> and critical pieces on Whitman appeared in Italian periodicals throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century. All in all, one can fairly say that Italy had produced a respectable though not abundant body of Whitman criticism before Pavese began his research.<sup>27</sup>

But even if the prior criticism of Whitman in Italy had been more copious, Pavese's stance would have remained the same. He did not want to make just more critical observations, but rather to drive home what he considered the only correct way to approach Whitman. Pavese did not mean that Italy needed *a* revelation, he meant *his* revelation. Any maturing young critic likes to think he has seen more deeply into a particular topic, work, or artist than have previous critics and Pavese was no exception. It is not for its scholarship that we should value the thesis but for Pavese's personal insights into Whitman and the energy with which he expounded them.

Pavese organized his long essay as a running commentary on *Leaves of Grass*, prefacing the thesis with an introduction and adding to it comments on Whitman's prose. Pavese literally turned his work into an extended thesis: that is, a proposition advanced and defended. Early in the work he stated his position and then pointed out how each important poem supported his proposition or constituted a logical extension of it.

The core proposition Pavese advanced is what he called Whitman's "Myth of Discovery," or the "poetry of making poetry," by which he meant that Whitman did not so much create poetry about a newly discovered world as create poetry out of the act of discovery itself. Whitman, in Pavese's view, did not discover a new kind of poetry, but wrote wonderful poetry about his effort to create a new poetry. In countless ways, Pavese always came back to this interpretation as the key to Whitman: not the poetry of an act but the poetry of writing about the act.

Pavese's first statement of his contention appears in Chapter I on page 19:

Walt Whitman did not achieve the absurd goal of creating a poetry adapted to the democratic world and newly discovered land because poetry is always only poetry. But by devoting his life to the repetition of this

design in various ways, he made poetry of the design, the poetry of discovering a new world and singing it. Did it not seem a mere pun I would say that Walt Whitman made poetry of making poetry. It is this, in another form, that I call the myth of discovery.

I want to make myself clearly understood about this point: It is the essence, originality, and fundamnetal justification of my study.

This “myth of discovery,” this “poetry of making poetry” had as it corollary the figure of the pioneer, the one who discovered and who, more importantly, sang the act of discovery. Pavese entitled the thesis’s second chapter, “The Pioneer,” and on page 37 described Whitman’s pioneer for the first time:

Walt Whitman's pioneer is not the rough and elemental man one would expect....Walt Whitman's pioneer knows he is a pioneer and this makes an enormous difference. It means that instead of the conventional figure of a pioneer, we have here the poetry of being a pioneer....

That is, in this specific case he failed to create poetry adapted to a hypothetically stronger and more primitive human race but instead created for us the poetry of this aspiration.

Pavese’s Whitmanian pioneer was more than just a discoverer singing of discovery. For Pavese he was also “the man who lives life Whitman's way, who is a good comrade, strong, calm, ‘receptive,’ and in his time a stalwart male. No more nor less, as I have said, than the pioneer of ‘Song of Myself.’”<sup>28</sup>

This figure of the pioneer/good comrade, Pavese contended, was the *only* inspirational persona in *Leaves of Grass* and when Whitman ignored it, he put a poem in danger. At one point Pavese wrote, “even in the songs of war the pioneer/comrade is the sole inspiring figure of W. W.”<sup>29</sup> and when discussing “Dirge for Two Veterans” says the whole poem fails because Whitman’s failed when describing the two dead soldiers “to give them any characteristics of the pioneer or comrade.”<sup>30</sup>

Pavese was aware of his insistence on the importance of the poetry of discovery and the figure of the pioneer/comrade. So much so that he wrote at the beginning of the thesis's last chapter:

I believe I have already put forward my thoughts about the persona of W. W. as pioneer, a persona that possesses those characteristics analyzed throughout my study. I see no need, therefore, to rearrange material that I have presented at length elsewhere. To conclude and present the last proofs of the absolute preponderance of this persona in *L. of G.*, I propose now to demonstrate that death, the passage to the beyond, and what lies beyond the self, all, in sum, which in a hasty phrase is called the mysticism of W. W., is for him yet one more myth of discovery, a pioneer's conquest.<sup>31</sup>

Pavese repeated his two contentions—the importance of the myth of discovery and of the figure of the pioneer/comrade—in every chapter of the thesis and the critical vocabulary he used did not come from America or from his own university but from Naples in the ideas and works of Benedetto Croce.

Croce was a figure, as Hughes put it, “whose influence in his own country, over which for a half-century he exercised a kind of literary and philosophical dictatorship, was without parallel in our time.... Not since Goethe had any single individual dominated so completely the culture of a major European country.”<sup>32</sup>

Croce, born in 1866, began publishing his historical, literary, philosophical, and political works before 1900. By 1910 his reputation had grown so solid that he was appointed “Senator for Life” by the Italian government. He served as Minister of Education in 1920-21 but resigned from the cabinet when Mussolini came to power, and never served under fascism. A firm anti-fascist, though less and less outspoken as fascism consolidated its power, Croce's extraordinary prestige within and outside Italy prevented

Mussolini from taking any but verbal action against him. By the mid-1920s he had become the living symbol of intellectual resistance to the regime.

Croce, as a philosopher usually classified as “neo-idealist,”<sup>33</sup> developed what he called the “philosophy of the spirit.” Croce saw all of history as a playing out of the human spirit into a multitude of individual acts. Croce believed this human spirit, universal yet individual, spilled over into art in specific ways, ways that he dealt with equally specifically in his philosophy of aesthetics and in his countless articles of literary criticism.

For Croce, all art, literature included, was:

neither feeling nor image, nor yet the sum of the two, but ‘contemplation of feeling’ or ‘lyrical intuition’ or (which is the same thing) ‘pure intuition’—pure, that is, of all historical and critical reference to the reality or unreality of the images of which it is woven and apprehending the pure throb of life in its ideality.<sup>34</sup>

Croce believed that each successful work of art was its own individually happy fusion of image and feeling into “lyrical intuition.” He rejected any concept of a work of art as a social or historical document; a work of art might *also* illuminate some characteristics of the time in which it was created, but that was not what made it art. For example, as Croce put it, “Dante is not simply a document of the Middle Ages, nor Shakespeare of the English Renaissance; as such they have many equals or superiors among bad poets and non-poets.”

Since for him all art—poetry, fiction, music, architecture, painting, sculpture, etc.—came into being only when successfully infused by the artist with “contemplation of feeling” or “lyrical intuition” and because art resists categorization, Croce believed

that at the moment of creation all art is one. He put this unitary idea simply: “art is one and cannot be divided into arts.”

Croce’s assertion of the unity of art, despite the individuality of different works of art, meant that all criticism of art could and indeed *should* proceed along similar lines. The reader/viewer/listener needed to use his trained discernment to determine if the personality of the artist infused the individual work with “lyrical intuition.” If it did, the critic should proclaim the work “successful,” that is, as art; if it did not, the work, whatever its other merits, must be declared a failure, that is, not art.

Art as one, art as “lyrical intuition,” the importance of individual personality, judgment of each work of art on its own, criticism as the discernment of what succeeds and what fails: all these aspects of Croce’s aesthetics had evident impact on Pavese when he was writing his thesis on Whitman.

For example, Pavese used such words as “lyric” and “poetry,” as in, “the lyric of the world seen through this dream,” “because poetry is always only poetry” and, “Walt Whitman made poetry of making poetry,” as interchangeable words in a precise Crocean sense. In short, “poetry” equals “lyric” equals “the contemplation of feeling” equals “lyric intuition” equals “art.” As such, the last quote could read, “Walt Whitman made art of making poetry.” It is this Crocean use of the word “poetry” and “lyric” as shorthand for “art” that allows Pavese elsewhere in the thesis to say that Whitman’s prose pieces “occasionally rise to the level of poetry” or to describe a certain strain of Whitman criticism as an “a-aesthetic approach that does not deal with the poetry as poetry.”<sup>35</sup>

Also, the seemingly tautological statement that “poetry is always only poetry” is not a casual comment, but a Crocean credo. It restates in Pavese’s words Croce’s dictum

that “art is one and cannot be divided into arts.” Pavese made that statement on page 19 of the thesis and on page 192 restated it in even more obvious Crocean terms, “for us the issue is clear: Art is one unity and there are no higher levels of subject matter nor a dramatic mode that is better than a lyric mode.”

One other conspicuous feature of Pavese’s approach to Whitman derives directly from Crocean dicta: Pavese’s persistent summary judgments of Whitman’s poems as falling into one of two categories: success or failure. This binary system of classification is in fact a Crocean imperative and the criteria Pavese used derived almost entirely from Croce’s aesthetics for Croce, as mentioned above, insisted that the critic’s first obligation was to judge a work and explicitly declare if it is or is not art. Croce’s conception of “criticism as judgment,” as one of his translators called it,<sup>36</sup> did not, of course, limit itself to making *only* the binary distinction between the work in question as art or not art, but for Croce, criticism started with this sorting process. As he said as early as 1910:

Criticism gives only the knowledge that what stands before us is, or is not, a product of art. Its problem is formulated in these terms: ‘*A* is art; or *A* is not art’; or ‘*A* is art in parts *a*, *b*, *c*; it is not art in parts *d*, *e*, *f*.’ In other words, criticism enunciates: ‘There is a fact, *A*, which is a work of art’; or ‘it is mistakenly believed that there is a fact *A*, which is a work of art.’<sup>37</sup>

The critic fulfills this first obligation, which is establishing whether the work is or is not art, by determining the presence or absence of lyric intuition. Pavese accepted this obligation. He said, for example, of only the second poem he dealt with at length, “A moment’s reflection is enough to make one realize that even *Song of Myself*, the “tremendous ‘*Song of Myself*,’ cannot be anything except lyricism, a poem. (Whether it succeeds or fails is our job to investigate.)”<sup>38</sup> He declared that this poem did “succeed”



as did, among many others: “By Blue Ontario’s Shore;” “Myself and Mine;” “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry;” “Passage to India;” “L. of G’s Purport;” “Sail Out for Good, Eidólon Yacht;” and “Good-Bye My Fancy.” These poems therefore were “lyrics” or “art.” Many of Whitman’s poems failed the test, however, and Pavese judged them harshly, that is, as “failures.” A sampling of those that did not pass Pavese’s test are: “Scented Herbage of My Breast;” “Fast Anchor’d Eternal O Love!;” “Song of the Broad-Axe;” “Song of the Exposition;” “Song of the Answerer;” “Faces,” and “Chanting the Square Deific.”

While unnecessary for appreciating Pavese’s interpretation of Whitman and his analyses of individual poems, a knowledge of Croce’s now rarely invoked aesthetic theory does help explain the way Pavese approached Whitman and at times the very vocabulary Pavese used. Whitman and America account for the subject and the passion of the thesis, but Croce provided its aesthetic underpinning. Croce in a sense made the task simpler for Pavese by stating so clearly what a critic should do first with a poem—determine if it is art, and if it is art describe the realized image that makes it so. Pavese did just that with many of Whitman’s poems, but it is what Pavese saw in the poems, not the Crocean vocabulary he used, that gives the thesis its enduring value.

That value becomes easier to grasp if we change the title Pavese gave it from “Interpretation . . .” to “An Appreciation of the Poetry of Walt Whitman, Poet of America.” For when all is analyzed, it is Pavese’s love of Whitman and enthusiasm for American culture that give the thesis its momentum. Anyone reading the thesis senses immediately that its young author had mastered Whitman’s original English, cared about Whitman as poet and person, and even more deeply about Whitman’s poetry. The thesis shows how a gifted embryonic writer/critic like Pavese can use and at the same time go

beyond established critical theory, in his case, Croce's. Several extended and rewarding close readings of selected Whitman poems provide pleasure in themselves, especially that of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom" that goes from page 223 through 227. The work also witnesses the now perhaps bygone ability of America to provide imaginative alternatives to those abroad feeling constrained by government-imposed limits on their own cultures.

If Pavese had not become the famous writer he did, his thesis would have less importance in the history of Whitman criticism or for twentieth-century Italian literature. Absent his later accomplishments, no one would probably have published or translated this obligatory undergraduate Italian academic production.<sup>39</sup> That would have been a loss to us all. The *Interpretation of the Poetry of Walt Whitman* stands as a valuable literary and cultural document that not only enriches our understanding of Whitman but reveals the passion for poetic and political freedom repressed during Mussolini's Fascist regime. It becomes doubly important because it does so through the voice of a student who turned into one of Italy's most important twentieth century writers.

We will never know how much weight his examining committee gave to its enthusiasm but no one reading the thesis can ignore its fervor and drive, nor its frequent insights and sense of purpose. When you finish reading the thesis, what stays with you, in addition to the two central themes Pavese continually reprised—the poetry of making poetry and the centrality of the pioneer/comrade—is its energy and bravado. It is an insistent, a loud work, like a long piece of music played continuously *con brio*. Reading it, you realize, has made you consider Whitman as Pavese interpreted him, and has,

moreover, made you admire Pavese. Once you've read this thesis, you cannot be surprised to learn what, in his maturity, its author became.

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this introduction appeared in Chapter Six of my *Cesare Pavese and America: Life, Love, and Literature* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 2008), 135-169.

<sup>2</sup> The members of Pavese's committee included six tenured Professors including the then well-known Ferdinando Neri (Pavese's thesis adviser though the head of the French Literature department) as Chair plus Vittorio Cian (Italian Literature), one untenured assistant professor (*incaricato*) and three untenured instructors (*liberi docenti*). Since Pavese was the only one of the University's twenty-six 1930 *laurea* candidates in Letters and Philosophy who concentrated in English literature it has always seemed odd that the professor most likely to sit on, if not chair, Pavese's committee, the *incaricato* for English Literature, Federico Olivero, did not take part in the process. His absence has been more commented on than explained and the reason, whatever it was, remains uncertain. The reasons generally proposed are either that Olivero, a conservative, though not extreme, Fascist disliked the political implications of Pavese's thesis topic, or since Olivero specialized in English Romantic writers he felt he had nothing to say about a long essay on Walt Whitman. See: Lionello Sozzi, "Le letterature straniere," in *Storia della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Torino*, ed. Italo Lana (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2000), 441; Angelo D'Orsi, *Allievi e maestri: L'Università di Torino nell'Otto-Novecento* (Turin: Celid, 2002), 52; Norberto Bobbio, *Trenti anni di storia della cultura a Torino, 1920-1950* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 2002), 74. One knowledgeable scholar of the era even believes it possible that Olivero refused Pavese as an advisee because of Pavese's too enthusiastic acceptance of Crocean aesthetic theory; see Angelo d'Orsi, *La cultura a Torino tra le due guerre* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 2000), 20. Yet the cause could have been as simple as illness or a pressing appointment that came up late. The faculty's administrative committee scheduled three other *laurea* exams for the same afternoon as that of Pavese's and placed Olivero on all four committees. He attended none of the four exams; see Minute book of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, University of Turin, 1930, Turin: University Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Pavese to Antonio Chiuminatto, Turin, in *Cesare Pavese: Lettere, 1924-1944* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1966), 205. This volume forms the first of two of Pavese's collected letters; henceforth referred to as *Letters Vol. 1*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *The United States and Italy*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 242.

<sup>6</sup> Cesare Pavese, *Interpretazione della poesia di Walt Whitman* (Degree thesis, University of Turin, Italy, 1930), 130. Henceforth referred to as Thesis.

<sup>7</sup> Pavese to Chiuminatto, Turin, April 5, 1930, *Chiuminatto Correspondence*, 61-62.

<sup>8</sup> Pavese to Tullio Pinelli, Turin, in class at liceo, winter 1925-26, *Letters Vol. 1*, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>10</sup> Pavese to Pinelli, Turin, August 1, 1926, *Letters Vol. 1*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Pavese to Pinelli, Reaglie, September 1926, *Letters Vol. 1*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Pavese to Pinelli, Reaglie, October 12, 1926, *Letters Vol. 1*, 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> Pavese to Pinelli, Reaglie, August 18, 1927. *Letters Vol. 1*, 74.

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- <sup>14</sup> Pavese, *Lotte di giovani e altri racconti, 1925-1930* (Turin: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1993), 71.
- <sup>15</sup> Pavese's attempts to gather materials for his thesis are documented in various preserved letters. See, for example, all in *Letters Vol. 1*: to Massimo Mila, Bibiana, September 4, 1929, 143; to "a professor," Turin, October 1929, 148; to Chiuminatto, Turin, November 29, 1929, 156; to "a librarian," Turin, November 29, 1929, 161.
- <sup>16</sup> Centro Gozzano-Pavese, AP.X. 25; AP.X. 26; AP.X. 27.
- <sup>17</sup> Pavese to Chiuminatto, Turin, November 29, 1929, *Letters Vol. 1*, 156.
- <sup>18</sup> Pavese to Enzo Monferini, Turin, February 20, 1930, *Letters Vol. 1*, 177.
- <sup>19</sup> Thesis, 97.
- <sup>20</sup> Thesis, 133.
- <sup>21</sup> Thesis, 296.
- <sup>22</sup> T. S. Eliot, Introduction to *Selected Poems*, by Ezra Pound (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1928); Eliot, review of Emory Holloway's *Whitman; an interpretation in narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1926), *The Nation & The Athenaeum* 40, December 18, 1926; D. H. Lawrence, "Whitman," in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: T. Seltzer, 1923); Stuart P. Sherman, "Walt Whitman," in *Americans* (New York: Scribner, 1922); Paul E. More, "Walt Whitman," in *Shelbourne Essays*, Fourth Series (New York: Putnam, 1906); William James, "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness," Lecture 4 in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York, London: Longman Greens, 1902); James, *Le varie forme della coscienza religiosa: Studio sulla natura umana*, trans. G. C. Ferrari and M. Calderoni (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1904); Barrett Wendell, "Walt Whitman," in *A Literary History of America* (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1900).
- <sup>23</sup> Mariolina Meliàdò, "La fortuna di Walt Whitman in Italia," *Studi americani*, 7 (1961), 43-76.
- <sup>24</sup> Walt Whitman, *Canti scelti*, trans. Luigi Gamberale (Milan: Edoardo Sonzogno, 1887).
- <sup>25</sup> Pasquale Jannaccone, *La poesia di Walt Whitman e l'evoluzione delle forme ritmiche* (Turin: Roux-Frassati, 1898).
- <sup>26</sup> Gamberale's translation was published as *Walt Whitman, Foglie di erba: Con le due aggiunte e gli echi della vecchiaia, dell'edizione del 1900* (Palermo: Sandron, 1907).
- <sup>27</sup> Meliàdò (see note above) reports some twenty-six individual pieces of Whitman criticism prior to Pavese's thesis. Pavese cited ten articles in Italian plus Jannaccone's book.
- <sup>28</sup> Thesis, 88.
- <sup>29</sup> Thesis, 205.
- <sup>30</sup> Thesis, 217.
- <sup>31</sup> Thesis, 265.
- <sup>32</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958; New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 19 and 201. Citations are to the Transaction edition.
- <sup>33</sup> See, for example, Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, 200-229; Cecil Sprigge, *Benedetto Croce: Man and Thinker* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952) 38; Ernesto G. Caserta, "Croce, Benedetto," in *Dictionary of Italian Literature*, Revised, Expanded Edition, eds. Peter Bondanella and Julia Conaway Bondanella (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996) 143; Antonio Gramsci, *Letters from Prison*, trans. Lynne Lawner (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), 243.
- <sup>34</sup> All citations of Croce are to the *Britannica* entry unless otherwise indicated.
- <sup>35</sup> Thesis, 236.
- <sup>36</sup> M. E. Moss, Introduction to *Benedetto Croce: Essays on Literature and Literary Criticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 21.
- <sup>37</sup> Benedetto Croce, "Critica e storia letteraria," in *Problemi d'estetica* as quoted by Giovanni Gullace in "Translator's Introduction" to Croce's *Poetry and Literature: An Introduction to Its Criticism and History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), xli.
- <sup>38</sup> Thesis, 48.
- <sup>39</sup> For seventy-six years, the thesis remained available only at the Turin University Archives. For Christmas 2006, Giulio Einaudi editore "published" the thesis as a special gift edition of one thousand copies, edited and introduced by Valerio Magrelli. That edition, called in Italian a *plaque*, carried no ISBN number and never entered commercial channels. In 2020, when Pavese's works entered the public domain, the thesis, with Magrelli's same introduction, was published as *Cesare Pavese: Interpretazione della poesia di Walt Whitman: Tesi di laurea 1930* by Mimesis Edizione, Milan-Udine in their series, "Punti di vista."

## Translator's Foreword

Because Pavese's original Italian readers, and indeed Italians even now, would have a richer context within which to place Pavese commentary, I have occasionally added some notes of my own. My observations appear as footnotes. Thus, with rare and obvious exceptions, all footnotes in this translation are mine and all endnotes are Pavese's.

Pavese's typist clearly did not know English well, if at all. The typescript contains dozens of overstrikes by the typist and even more manual corrections by Pavese himself. Sometimes, however, incorrect spellings of English words remain, as, for example, "standars" for standards. Virtually all these uncorrected errors arise in the context of quotes or citations from Whitman. When the errors are small and obvious, I have silently corrected them. The unattractive alternative was to [SIC] the translation to death. When, however, the possibility exists that Pavese may have deliberately misquoted Whitman to support a point in the thesis, I have left Pavese's spelling intact and added a translator's footnote.

Walt Whitman appears in the thesis by his full name, also as W. Whitman, most frequently as W.W., and occasionally as Walt, never as just Whitman, though Pavese does use the adjective, "*Whitmaniana*," as in "*la*

*poesia whitmaniana*.” The translation reflects each of Pavese’s choices in referring to Whitman and uses either Whitmanian or Whitmanesque for *whitmaniana*.

His use of non-Italian words and phrases, especially his many quotes in English from Whitman and Whitman scholars and his citations of so many of Whitman’s poems and prose pieces, require the adoption of consistent conventions for the English language reader, especially since Pavese sometimes put the quotes from English into Italian, rather than using the original English. I think it useful for the reader to know what was Italian in the original and what was English (or occasionally French, German, classical Greek, or Latin).

The conventions I have used in this translation are:

- Pavese put almost all English and other non-Italian words or phrases and citations within quotation marks using roman script. In the translation I use quotation marks but *italic* script. For example, Original, “in the common people, south, north, east, west.” Translation, “*in the common people south....*”
- Italian words or phrases that Pavese put within quotation marks, remain within quotation marks in the translation but in roman, not *italic*, script. For example: Original, “*materia poetica*,” Translation, “poetic material.”
- I have not offered translations of the French or Latin Pavese included but have added notes for his one use of German and two uses of classical Greek.

In his first two endnotes Pavese listed the three-volume edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the one-volume *Prose Works* from which he cited. In his thesis text he generally cited the volume and page number for a poem or a prose piece the first time he used it by putting the reference in a parenthesis immediately after the citation, for example, “‘Myself and Mine’ (Vol. I pag. 289).” I keep that convention even though the editions of Whitman Pavese worked with are out of print. Except for a few prose works, all the Whitman pieces Pavese cited can be found under the same titles in current editions of Whitman, as, for example, The Library of America edition, *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1982).

Pavese often referred to poems after the first citation in an abbreviated way: *Starting from Paumanok* often became *Starting...* or *Starting from*. A major exception was *Song of Myself*, which he never shortened. Despite the occasional ambiguity this practice can cause, I have left the cites the way they are in the original. Thus, the English-language reader will see exactly what his examining committee saw.

Pavese refers in his thesis both to Whitman’s prose works generically, and to Whitman’s *Prose Works* as a title. I capitalize and italicize the latter.

Pavese used the Italian sentence-style convention of capitalizing only the first word of the titles. For example, “When lilacs last in the door-yard bloom’d.” The translation uses the American style of capitalizing the first plus all important words, for example, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.”

Because Whitman used cardinal numbers in their numeric form (i.e., 1,2,3,4 etc.) in the writing of his poems and Pavese cited the sections in the same way, I have left Pavese’s citations in numeric form rather than spelling them out as more current conventions might require. The only exception is the infrequent occurrence of a number as the first word of a sentence, in which case I have spelled it out.

Pavese used endnotes rather than footnotes in his thesis, though several times he footnoted an endnote. He placed the notes for each chapter at the end of that chapter. I have done the same. I have left the endnotes in the same format Pavese wrote them.

Pavese included a three-page bibliographic essay at the end of his thesis followed by 35 entries divided into three sections, with the works listed chronologically within each. I have retained the chronological arrangement but put the entries into a U.S. Chicago style bibliographic format.



Interpretation  
of the  
Poetry of Walt Whitman

Honors Thesis

Cesare Pavese

1930 -- VIII

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## Chapter I

### The Myth of Discovery

*Leaves of Grass*<sup>1</sup> and its various revisions and additions occupied Walt Whitman from his coming of age to his old age, forty years of his life. He frequently stated and often explained his aims in writing the book. Indeed, almost all his prose<sup>2</sup> seeks directly or indirectly to clarify and justify the means and the ends of this book. He made such a case for the book, this Walt Whitman, that in the thick of these explanations, the patient reader finds himself remembering with regret the wonderful but unfulfilled possibilities of certain *Specimen Days* (*Prose Works*, pp.1-193) dealing with the Civil War or life at Timber Creek.

Thus, the author's thoughts—or at least his intentions—about *Leaves of Grass* are quite clear. For he said essentially the same thing the three times he returned to this theme in his literary life. These were in 1855 with the publication of the first edition of his work; in 1871 with a meditation on

the renewed American Union of the post-Civil War era; and in 1888 when he published a small volume of poetry and prose that, however, contained no essential revisions of *Leaves of Grass*, having brought that to definite closure with the edition of '81. These three points, the Preface of '55, *Democratic Vistas*, and *Backward Glances o'er Traveled Roads* represent the beginning, peak, and termination of his work.

In "Preface, 1855, to first issue of 'L. of G.,' Brooklyn, (*P.W.*, pp. 256-268) Walt Whitman described the new American poet, naturally meaning himself, in that rhapsodic, oracular, and Emersonian way that de Sélincourt, almost in passing, characterized as obvious and inclusive,<sup>3</sup> and let us know that this poet must interpret the new American reality not only in its external appearances but "*in the common people, south, north, east, west,*" (p. 257) because "*not swarming states, nor streets and steam-ships, nor prosperous business, nor farms, nor*

*capital, nor learning, may suffice for the ideal of man—nor suffice the poet* (p. 257) and “*the soul....in the sum of the profitable uses of individuals or states, and of present action and grandeur and of the subjects of poets*” (p. 257). He continued with this mission of making the poet symbol and transfiguration of the new America’s “*Fullsized man,*” stressing his simple spontaneity and intuitive virtue. Naturally, the poet had to oppose reversion to the cultures of the past: “*as if it were necessary to trot back generation after generation to the eastern records!*” (p. 258) He spoke also of the beauty of nature and the ways it reveals itself, and the necessity for the poet to pay attention to its work, this poet who will live like a natural being and thus enjoy perfect “*self-poisedness,*” like nature itself.

But all this is not what is most relevant for us now. Now, it is enough to grasp that already by ’55 Walt Whitman wanted to write the poem of America understood as a new creation, distinct from Mother Europe, and this America seen naturally in its spiritual significance drawn from its indigenous and spontaneous forms of life.

Walt Whitman wrote *Democratic Vistas* between '67 and '71 and first published it separately in 1871 at Washington and then had it reprinted in his *Prose Works* (pp.197-250). He wrote these reflections with the War of Secession ended and its linked anxieties laid to rest and did so as a way of resolving the problems and doubts that the events of the drama had raised for him. I will discuss this work—in his prose second in importance only to *Specimen Days*—at the proper time. Here I want only to highlight that in this work philosophical and political questions turned into literary issues, especially the eternal Whitmanesque literary issue of the need—the necessity—for the States to shape a literature that expresses the country and gives it significance. His main theme, though touching on all that was “rotten” and “canker’d” in America, was a declaration of faith in the mass of the people, full of greatness and the capacity for sacrifice but with whom poetry had never dealt in a worthy fashion, and alongside the mass, an examination of the democratic Individual. For above all, the new literature needed to exalt this model of the Personality—the cellular building block of all past poetry.

He also stated that these older literatures shaped the people of whom they were the expression and he proclaimed that America must create her own literature, or risk extinction. *“Our fundamental want today in the United States, with closest, amplest reference to present conditions, and to the future, is of a class, and a clear idea of a class, of native authors, literatures, far different, far higher in grade than any yet known, sacerdotal, modern, fit to cope with our occasions, lands, permeating the whole mass of American mentality, taste, belief, breathing into it a new breath of life, giving it decisions, affecting politics far more than the popular superficial suffrage, with results inside and underneath the elections of Presidents or Congresses—radiating, begetting appropriate teachers, schools, manners, and, as its grandest results, accomplishing...a religious and moral character beneath the political and productive and intellectual basis of the States. (pp. 199-200)*

Walt Whitman’s almost fixed idea courses through passages like these, which we find every step along the path of *Democratic Vistas* and they all express the insufficiency of the past and the need for a new literature.

I skip over for now the many minor essays, which, in various guises, presented the same arguments and affirmed the same ideas and come now to the third work in question, *A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads*. As its title indicates, this work brought consciously to closure a finished opus. It was written around '88, was first published in the mixed volume of prose and poetry, *November Boughs*, and with the author's permission was reprinted separately as an appendix to the 1891 McKay edition of *Leaves of Grass*. (*Leaves of Grass*, ed. cit., Vol. III, pp. 41-66) Here he no longer put forward indirect descriptions of an abstract human type (Preface of '55) or analyses of the political needs of a nation (*Dem. Vistas*) but rather affirmed directly that "this, I wanted to do myself." That is, Walt Whitman here defined the reasons for his work: "...a feeling or ambition to articulate and faithfully express in literary or poetic form, and uncompromisingly,



*my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America—and to exploit that Personality, identified with place and date, in a far more candid and comprehensive sense than any hitherto poem or book.”* (p. 44) And all this because, “*...no land or people or circumstances ever existed so needing a race of singers and poems differing from all others, and rigidly their own, as the land and people and circumstances of our United States...*” (pp. 65-66).

Walt Whitman declared this at the end of his work, almost as summary and reaffirmation.

During his whole life, then, from the first sure affirmation of *Leaves of Grass* to the calm meditation on completed work in his twilight years, Walt Whitman never tired of repeating his intention to create poetry out of the America of his time. A poetry counterposed to the feudal concept of life

and literature, a poetry that would arrange and organize its new material around an arch-typical Personality, which itself would be an expression of life's new circumstances.

At his point, however, the “mode” of his intent interests us more than the nature of his intended new poetic world. I have already noted that his intent bordered on the obsessive, and he repeatedly and almost stubbornly injected it everywhere in his prose. So much so that Walt Whitman, the declared enemy of any literary contrivance that robs nature of its spontaneity, encountered and experienced the eternal—let us not say literary, that would be too ironic—spiritual and cultural issue of a future indigenous poetry even in his descriptions of nature, even in the simple contemplation of a moment, or of a season in the open air. One citation can serve to make this point; it comes from “Gathering the Corn,” first published 1891 in *Good-bye My Fancy* and reprinted in *Prose Works*. (ed. cit., pp. 495-96) These brisk, georgic notes about an “*average West Jersey farm*” (p. 495) read as follows:

*“How the half-mad vision of William Blake—how the far freer, far firmer fantasy that wrote ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’—would have revell’d night or day, and beyond stint, in one of our American corn fields! Truly, in color, outline, material and spiritual suggestiveness, where any more inclosing theme for idealist, poet, literary artist?”* (p. 496) Whitman could not always escape this unfortunate tendency to think within a literary context even when he would rather have reacted spontaneously, humanly, or be, as he says, *“average.”*

And finally, Walt Whitman’s desire to reform literature arose from his particular cultural education, from his way of reading and understanding books. As he himself declared, *“I went regularly every week in the mild seasons to Coney Island, at that time a long, bare, unfrequented shore, which I had all to myself, and where I loved, after bathing, to race up and down the hard sand, and declaim Homer or Shakespeare to the surf and sea-gulls by the hour.”* (P. W., p. 9) And later: *“How many hours, forenoon and afternoons...I have had...riding the whole length of*

*Broadway...or perhaps I declaiming some stormy passage from Julius Caesar or Richard.” (P. W., p. 13) And also this frequently cited passage: “I used to go off...down in the country or to Long Island’s sea-shores—there in the presence of outdoor influences, I went over thoroughly the Old and New Testaments, and absorb’d (probably to better advantage for me than in any library or indoor room—it makes such difference where you read,) Shakespeare, Ossian, the best translated versions I could get of Homer, Eschylus, Sophocles, the old German ‘Nibelungen,’ the ancient Hindoo poems, and one or two other masterpieces, Dante’s among them, etc.” (L. of G., Vol III, p.55). What did the books he read this way mean for Walt Whitman? It seems to me no one has ever noticed: “—a few immortal compositions, small in size, yet compassing what measureless values of reminiscence, contemporary portraitures, manners, idioms and beliefs, with deepest inference, hint and thought, to tie and touch forever the old, new body, and the old, new soul! ....All the best experience of humanity, folded, saved, freighted to us here. Some of these tiny ships we call Old and*

*New Testament, Homer, Eschylus, Plato, Juvenal, etc.” These are “national, original archetypes in literature. They only put the nation in form, finally tell anything—prove, complete anything—perpetuate anything (P. W., p. 232). Why tower in reminiscence, above all the nations of the earth, two special lands, petty in themselves, yet inexpressibly gigantic, beautiful, columnar? Immortal Judah lives, and Greece immortal lives in a couple of poem.” ( P. W., p. 200).*

I repeat, no one has ever noticed that Walt Whitman saw these European and Eastern poems as works that accomplished for the past what he meant to accomplish for the America of his time. Indeed, his choosing in every literature only the great national poems, representatives of their eras, only confirms that his idea of a new literature and mentality was not some isolated occurrence, but the enduring central reality of his intellectual life.

Within this idea, Whitman leaned to writers who showed a preference for the apparently primitive. (In one wonderful instance—for us, an insight—he was taken in by Walter Scott whom he considered a poet equal

to Homer or Dante simply because Scott depicted a primitive world. [*L. of G.*, Vol, III, p. 55 and passim *Dem. Vistas.*])

This idea of a new literature and mentality also included the reading of books in the open air, and he would later read his own poetry by the sea and in the woods or declaim them to illiterate “*stage-coach*” drivers. And because this idea remained his core intellectual reality, it lead to eccentricities, such as the declaiming just mentioned, and to critical heresies such as his belief in a primitive literature that knows it is primitive: that is, a literature outside literature.

I want to emphasize this last point because it is the basis of my whole interpretation.

Leave aside Walt Whitman for the moment. But let us stay with American literature, which is rich in these ambiguities, and ask how many people reading, say, Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* realize that they are dealing with a complex, highly literary work of art? A book that is the product of a culture anything but primitive, a highly discerning and self-involved culture that at the same time desires, searches for, and takes pleasure in the primitive. To be specific:

both the dog-wolf Buck of this work and the protagonist of another London novel, *Martin Eden*, are anything but the primitive beings their creator wanted them to be. Rather, they are individuals, who like Eden, are tired of a complicated, civilized life, or, like Buck, are faced with new conditions and choose and polemically exalt an existence that in reality would be lived without any awareness of its characteristic qualities and would signify nothing without the contrast to the former state.

This is more generally true of all those writings in English I call “the literature of the South Seas.” From Stevenson, a sick man who escaped to a native island in search of innocence and primitive health,<sup>4</sup> to a certain recent film that wonderfully documents the Arcadian paradise of a similar life, and which happens to be based on a novel,<sup>5</sup> we always find a sense of liberation from the civilized and sophisticated at the root of all this modern delight in the primitive. And this, among other reasons, is why we value these works: We civilized and sophisticated people take pleasure in this search because it is the product of our super-refined spiritual needs.

I have spoken of Arcadia and I know some avid connoisseurs of the primitive will scornfully smile at what I am about to say. Nonetheless, I think we should ask if the differences between *White Shadows in the South Seas* and, say, *Aminta*,<sup>A</sup> or between the three-century old “Hyrcanian tiger”<sup>B</sup> of three centuries of our literature and *The Terrible Solomons* of Jack London’s *South Sea Tales* do not lie more in conditions external to the works than at first appear. I speak, of course, of an historical correspondence and a spiritual attitude and, besides, if Jack London is now a great success while the Italian poems go unread, something must have changed. I find this change in the use London has made of virgin material—names, places, adventure voyages—as opposed to our authors’ handling of material polished by more than a millennium of literary tradition. And, of course, I find it in the particular poetic world of each individual writer. For while this world always includes a general delight in the primitive caused by a cultivated distaste for the overly civilized, it will otherwise be different for each author.

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<sup>A</sup> *Aminta*: a lyric, pastoral play first performed in 1573; considered Torquato Tasso’s most important and influential work.

<sup>B</sup> *Tigre ircana*: A traditional symbolic figure in Italian literature. Signifies a ferocious, wild beast from a strange and foreign land. Hyrcania was located in present-day Iran and Turkmenistan.



In *Aminta*, for example, it will be the slightly sensual and aristocratic fascination with delicate limbs barely covered by primitive garb. Or the fascination with an amorous interlude that plays out rather preciously within its own simple limits. In Jack London it will be the taste for adventure lived and fought with only the fundamental weapons of a healthy body and lucid mind and that ends with a final sadness: the realization that the drama has no purpose. In others, something else.

John Burroughs in the last century and more recently Leon Bazalgette<sup>6</sup> can stand for the many who have understood Walt Whitman as the primitive poet who, in the renewed youth of the world, far from all the complications of European civilization, created a poetic work to serve the new Adam.

I will try to show instead that he was, if anything, rather the poet of this feeling oneself as primitive and that he created from this feeling a most modern myth. But meanwhile, Walt Whitman an Arcadian! The thought is enough to horrify the ghosts of many of his apostles. Yet, after all the Whitmans that criticism has given us, this one is perhaps not the most paradoxical.

All the same, to end this long digression: I believe I have adequately explained my thoughts on Whitman's poetic aims. And I repeat, what matters here is that Walt Whitman had these aims be they good or bad, and that he meant to do what he did. Criticism or no criticism, the method is what matters here, not the object. The method was to think and live his resolution so intensely that it completely dominated reality for him. As we shall see, this resolution was for him reality itself.

All commentators have noted that the above-mentioned Preface to the '55 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was recast in the second edition, '56, into poetry. Recast especially into the two poems then entitled "Poem of Many in the One" and "Poem of the Last Explanation of Prudence", which became, respectively, "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (*L. of G.*, Vol. II, pp. 107-126) and "The Song of Prudence" (*L. of G.* Vol II, 146-149). This is not just some elegant conceit of mine. One finds it with successive variations of the adapted text in Oscar L. Triggs's "Variorum Readings of Leaves of Grass" attached as an appendix to *Leaves of Grass* (Vol. III, pp. 83-255).

Bailey's idea is even more elegant. In his recent study of the poet, he compared<sup>7</sup> a passage in this Preface with the corresponding passage in "By Blue Ontario's Shore" and observed that the variations amount to almost nothing; that if anything is changed it is an "*a capo*" every now and then. Bailey's opinion is that it is not uncommon for Whitman's verse line to be mere external show, prose and nothing more.

Bailey concerned himself a great deal in his work with "*W. W's language and meter*" and he arrived at subtle conclusions even if he often found a particular poem beautiful only because Whitman constructed it according to a plan that Bailey liked. For Bailey that meant a poem that was neither too free nor too rigid and demonstrated a certain strophic measure. But more of that later. At present, I want to concentrate on the ideas Bailey compared.

I, too, have made these comparisons but with entirely different results. I refer to the sections Triggs labeled 6 through 10 plus 13 and 14. I find that these sections recast from prose do not feel like an interpolation in a full reading of "By Blue Ontario's Shore."

I admit that this conclusion in itself proves nothing. It is perfectly possible that, as an exception, an entire poem in the work could harmonize with the tone of the *Preface*. What matters more is that “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” does not clash with the entirety of *Leaves of Grass*. A general atmosphere pervades the whole book, one that repeats the atmosphere of the “Preface of ’55” and that of *Democratic Vistas*, *Backward Glance*, etc., repeats, in sum, the atmosphere of all the Whitmanian prose that dealt with and affirmed the necessity of a new literature.

I have revisited this issue of the tone of certain individual pieces even though I could simply have noted that many of the poems are a catalog of the new arguments and an invocation to deal with them because I believe that not only did Walt Whitman sometimes proclaim in *Leaves of Grass* that which he also proclaimed in his prose, but that the overall atmosphere of the book, the true spirit of the *Leaves of Grass*, is directly discovered in the different areas of experience that successively enriched and transformed his

poetic world, this sense of discovering a new world, of the joy of contemplating it and giving it expression.

What I mean is that Walt Whitman so intensely lived the continuous and almost preclusive thought of a new literature to be given to a new people, that while he could not escape the inevitable failure of such a plan, he in fact saved himself by not realizing his failure. He did not write the primitive poem he dreamt of, but rather the poem of this dream. He did not in fact create a book qualitatively different from “European” books. He did not create a book that was not a book, but like every “European” poet worthy of the name he created his own book in which his dream resolved itself in the poetry of the dreaming, the lyric of the world seen through this dream.

Walt Whitman did not achieve the absurd goal of creating a poetry adapted to the democratic world and newly discovered land because poetry is always only poetry. But by devoting his life to the repetition of this design in various ways, he made poetry of the design, the poetry of discovering a new world and singing it. Did it not seem a mere pun I would say that Walt

Whitman made poetry of making poetry. It is this, in another form, that I call the myth of discovery.

I want to make myself clearly understood about this point: It is the essence, originality, and essential justification of my study. Without it, I would be producing just another critical compilation and given all that has been printed about Whitman, such an effort would be at the very least useless. I also want to emphasize this point because the body of Whitman criticism, despite its extensive and imposing mass, has not shed any light on it. The only exception in this regard is Basil de Sélincourt. Despite a certain amount of obscurantism and disarray, he remains Whitman's most profound critic, the only possibly true genius among all the petty biographers, journalistic reviewers and abstract philosophers who have written about Walt Whitman. The barely grudging acknowledgments his colleagues have so far accorded him<sup>8</sup> demonstrate his achievement. His *Walt Whitman* is not a systematic study that clearly constructs a human or poetic figure, but rather a collection of scattered essays that seem to have been written at various

times on this or that, now biographical, now artistic, aspect of the poet, and it is not harmonious; it does not make into a whole its different parts. He jumbled together rhetorical discussions of style with political or philosophical interpretations throughout the work, all without any noticeable order.

But within all this thicket of ambiguities, parentheses, and twisted turns we find at every step unexpected definitions of problems, original approaches and solutions, extraordinarily sharp observations, many of which we shall have occasion to remember later in connection with specific issues. And above all, there is the chapter that concerns us at this juncture, his conclusion about Walt Whitman and America<sup>9</sup>; the relationship he established between the America striving to create itself in the future and Walt Whitman, the poet of this historical moment, the poet of this search and desire.

Before that, in a diffuse chapter on Whitman's style that also contains an intelligent defense of the "catalogs" as the most unadorned mode of Whitman's poetic imagination, he upheld the discredited theory that the dead art in these catalogs (mere names) flow together with the live verses in a lyric of universality. It was in this chapter that

de Sélincourt stated, “*His poetry is his desire for poetry.*” This lacks only some further developments and a few examples to emerge from the murk and become the principle I believe the most appropriate, and which I am defending in this, my study.

But de Sélincourt dealt only with style, metrics, and historical context, never with aesthetic realization, the search for which could have formed the systematic principle lacking in his disordered work. For example, in the chapter on W. W. and America, de Sélincourt, trying to resolve the contrast between an absurd Walt Whitman, national poet, and the low esteem in which his countrymen held him, discovered how Whitman could draw poetry unerringly from America’s lack of national characteristics, could make poetry of the aspirations of the country for a great future and an indigenous literary form.

But I go too far. Nothing in the chapter stated this conclusion and I would be hard put to quote one sentence from his text that



exemplified it. The idea is rather this reader's own unconscious anticipation. Having found there all the disorganized premises for such a conclusion I end by believing that this indeed was what the author meant to conclude. Some of these under-developed premises are that Walt Whitman, despite all his claims, turned out to be a most aristocratic writer (p. 31); that he failed to present America with a literary model worthy of Walt Whitman but made this failure his strength (p. 248); that he sensed America's tendency to reassert a certain faith in the primitive and expressed this faith as his aspiration (p. 250), etc.

But when he finally offered a precise definition of Whitman's poetry, he fell back on the usual affirmations that Walt Whitman was the "*poet of the principle of life, of the pilgrimage and progress of the soul, of perpetual effort and amelioration, of the joy of spiritual growth* (p. 242)...." or "*the poet of the ever beckoning future, the ever expanding, ever insatiable spirit of man.* (p. 151)"

As I hope I have made clear, Walt Whitman was also and above all else the poet of the desire to be such a poet. That which I have just highlighted in de Sélincourt constitutes the high point that criticism has so far reached in trying to delineate an aesthetic figure for Whitman. Indeed, all the other scholars, including those who wrote after de Sélincourt, not only came to no conclusions in this regard but did not even try.

All of them, including the best of this century such as Perry, Noyes, Bailey and Michaud,<sup>10</sup> have operated for the last twenty years within the same framework. Each presents a summary and even criticism, often excellent criticism, of Walt Whitman as a man and thinker. They generally also include rhetorical or abstract resolutions of various technical issues in his work. But not a word as to how Walt Whitman expressed—that is, created—the poetic world for which it seems he has become so famous. The comments in this regard that one does find tend always to draw conclusions

one could reduce to de Sélincourt's already-mentioned formula: "*Walt Whitman is the poet of the principle of life, etc.*" They lack any singularity and all merge into the same foggy generality. Even Bailey, who in 1926 advanced so far as to say that Whitman's merit was to have created a new, human figure out of his own experience,<sup>11</sup> then goes astray and describes a biographical rather than poetic figure.

But I do not want to review all Whitman's critics here. I do not want to write, as one might say, criticism of criticism. That is not my goal; nor is it my goal to deal with, for example, the historical issues of Whitman's, sources and influences. It would be too easy to attack these critics in the name of a principle they did not consider and that I did not personally discover. It is only natural that if one looks at W. Whitman from a point of view no one else has used, one will have something to say no one else has said.

And that no one has ever deliberately searched in W. Whitman for his creation of a poetic world that goes beyond and includes all his ideology

and intentions is an absolute fact. Any examination of the voluminous body of work Sélincourt and these commentators have produced verifies it. The only exception is de Sélincourt and he with all the limitations I have noted.

I have emphasized de Sélincourt simply to render him justice. I have mentioned the conclusions of the other Whitman scholars, not to catalog them for historical or polemical reason, but only as an aid in clarifying my own thoughts. For in reading them I noted the same gap in all despite their otherwise frequently limpid and astute critical examinations. One last reference will end this discussion.

In his *History of American Literature*, William P. Trent condemned the entire ideological content and all the theoretical assumptions of W. Whitman's poetry. With some overstatement<sup>12</sup> he declared that "*the cant of originality, the cant of equality, the cant of the natural, these and many other forms of the universal human malady seem continually present in his work* (p.493)." This severity can be explained as a justifiable reaction to all the journalistic,

glorifying and Dionysian commentary on Whitman that began with J. Burrough's essay in *Galaxy*<sup>13</sup> and continued right down to the European studies at the end of the last century. These generally only repeated and exalted W. Whitman with his own words.<sup>14</sup> Trent continued, "*He has glimpses, but only glimpses, of the facts and principles connected with the transmission of culture, and hence like many of his contemporaries and successors, was forever harping upon the inadaptability of old world art to new world uses. In other words, much of his life was spent in trying to expel human nature with a pitchfork.*" And he concluded, "*But he displayed an immense amount of interesting human nature in the attempt* (p. 493)."

This leads to the real issue: to explain how this "*amount of interesting human nature*" became poetry. It would be too easy and expeditious to do so without considering his so frequently mentioned personal magnetism, that mysterious irradiation of attractiveness and health that healed the wounded, fascinated visitors, and created devoted friends. If anything, the question

should be: did W. Whitman create poetry from this magnetism to which so many witnesses testify, and if so, how?

I believe I have stated the issue in clear terms. W. Whitman's poetry is a world in which he exalts in his discovery of a new land; exalts in giving it spiritual laws and in living the continual discovery of these laws. These are, of course, generalizations that deaden, drying out with definitions the stunning variety and richness of imagery in Whitman's poetry. As I analyze his work in detail in the following chapters I will try to capture as best I can the nuances and differences of his various creations. They are all expressions of the fundamental spiritual posture described above, but all are distinct and unmistakable because prompted by different experiences.

And because so many of Whitman's poems are successful works of art, one finds in him, as in any other poet, various stages and a certain organic development. These give rise to general groupings of the poems and these

groups arrange themselves in a certain sequence, more or less chronological, in line with the biographical events that determined the experiences behind them. But just as W. Whitman himself transposed and rearranged his individual pieces while preserving a biographical alignment in the sweep of his work, so, too, in my analysis I will cite and discuss poems out of chronological or positional sequence while following an overall biographical thread.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In my citations from *L. of G.* I refer always to the three-volume edition of D. Appelton, New York that repeats the 1897 edition of Small Maynard, Boston, which was authorized by Whitman's literary executors. (Cf. Frank Shay, *The Bibliography of Walt Whitman*: New York, Friedmans, 1920).

<sup>2</sup> For the *Prose Works* I use the one-volume edition of Mitchell Kennerly: New York, 1914 that repeats the first edition of Small Maynard: Boston, 1898, which was authorized by Whitman's literary executors (Cf. Previous note).

<sup>3</sup> Basil de Sélincourt, *W. Whitman: A Critical Study* (London: Martin & Secker, 1914), 38.

<sup>4</sup> [This endnote is blank in the original. *Trans.*]

<sup>5</sup> *White Shadows in the South Seas* (Metro Goldwyn Mayer, 1928), W. S. Van Dyke, Director; from the novel of the same title by Frederick O'Brien.

<sup>6</sup> John Burroughs, *Whitman: A Study* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1896). ...*his work ranks with the great primitive books* (16); Léon Bazalgette, *Le "poème-evangile" de W. Whitman* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1921), 301-10 and passim.

<sup>7</sup> John Bailey, *W. W.* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 100-01.

<sup>8</sup> Walter de la Mare, "Current Literature," *The Edinburgh Review* (April 1914), 419-22; William S. Kennedy, *The Fight of a Book for the World* (West Yarmouth, Ma.: The Stonecroft Press, 1926), 122-23.



<sup>9</sup> B. De Sélincourt, op. cit., 194.

<sup>10</sup> (+) Henry B. Binns, *W. Whitman and His Poetry* (London: Harrap, 1915); Bliss Perry, *W. Whitman: His Life and Works* (London, Riverside Press, 1906); Carleton Noyes, *An Approach to W. Whitman* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1910); Bailey, op.cit.; Régis Michaud, “W. Whitman, poète cosmique” in *Mystiques et réalistes anglo-saxons* (Paris: Colin, 1918) and “L’expansion poétique” in *Littérature américaine* (Paris: Kra, 1928).

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(+) Without much effort, one could exclude Michaud from the others cited. At a certain point in *Mystiques* (103) he said, “*On n’avait jamais composé ainsi tant de poèmes pour nous dire uniquement son ambition d’être poète.*” But it is just one sentence and nothing more.

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<sup>11</sup> Bailey, op.cit., 198.

<sup>12</sup> William P. Trent, *A History of American Literature* (London: Heineman, 1903).

<sup>13</sup> John Burroughs, "W. W." in *Galaxy* (December 1866).

<sup>14</sup> One exception to this kind of nineteenth century commentary is Edmund G. Stedman. In his *Poets of America* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1889), he wrote, thirty years before de Sélincourt, of the aristocracy of W. Whitman's art and its total failure as popular poetry. It is a pity that even Stedman went no further than that and in his aesthetic analysis considered landscape, pathos, truth, etc. Also, he is overly fond of *O Captain! My Captain!*

## Chapter II

## The Pioneer

Walt Whitman's work is almost perfectly bracketed between two trips he made through the American continent.<sup>1</sup> The first, 1848-49: To Louisiana, the "*great river*," New Orleans and the "*magnet south*" and on the way back, Memphis, Illinois, Chicago, Milwaukee, the Great Lakes, the charm of Wisconsin—"the proper place to come to" the most beautiful of the States."

After thirty years of work and battles, with *Leaves of Grass* fixed in the "*Centenary Edition*" of '76—praised, debated, and contested even in Europe—Walt Whitman, still recovering from his first stroke, restored by life at Timber Creek, and more than ever pugnacious and "bard" of his land, set out on the second long trip of his life, this time to discover the West.

1879: Illinois, Missouri—"the placid pastoral region"—Kansas, Topeka, the prairies, Denver, the Rocky Mountains—"America's backbone"—and on the return, Arkansas, Pueblo, "*The Spanish Peaks*," then Niagara, Canada.

In '81: The Osgood edition of *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>2</sup>

In '82: *Specimen Days*, the best of his prose, written during the War and at Timber Creek. By now he had finished his work. What followed would be only annexes, minimally important fragments.

And for that matter, it was in '80 that Richard M. Bucke circulated to friends a request for documents relevant to his biographical study of the poet. He published his *Walt Whitman* in '83, thereby embalming Whitman for posterity.<sup>3</sup> And so nine years before his real death, Walt Whitman was already dead to the world. He had become a subject for biography, a research topic, a myth.

Thus, 1848 and 1881: the journey to the South and the journey to the West; the discovery of his poetry and its confirmation. In between, *Leaves of Grass*.

By this juxtapositioning I do not mean to infer that W. Whitman incorporated into his poetry the experiences of the journey not yet made, though just such a link exists between the body of *L. of G* and "A jaunt to Denver." I mean rather to posit an ideal correspondence, half-symbolic, half-explicit, between certain episodes in the life of the

“*magnificent idler*”<sup>4</sup>—as Rogers called Whitman in his lively but overly romantic biography—and the general attitude of his poetry. I also want to point out how these journeys and their curious positions in the poet’s life help us understand certain characteristics of the human figure he created in *L. of G.*

To say that W. Whitman sang the pioneer is of course not to say much. Many have said it<sup>5</sup>, thereby supporting Whitman himself. Anyone spending even a little time reading the poems or just scanning their titles could say the same. We need, therefore, to examine the different attributes of this pioneer in different poems, to describe this myth of the pioneer and thereby, at a minimum, distinguish it, for example, from that postcard figure of a pioneer, the young hero of Longfellow’s *Excelsior*. We must, in sum, define the formative characteristics of Whitman’s pioneer. This figure is, in fact, a creation of his poetry and separates itself from conventional models and substitutes for them a humanity and experience all its own.

Now, he who contemplates Walt Whitman the traveler finds in him something quite different from the usual type of pioneer. He and his brother traveled comfortably to the South, their expenses paid by the *Crescent*. They went down the Mississippi, stopping in picturesque places and Creole cities, enjoying, at least on W. Whitman's part, a kind of soldier's break before the battle. The trip to the West, Walt's infirmities aside, was even more comfortable: "*Central Pacific*," Pullman sleepers, warm receptions, requests for interviews, pleasing landscapes and "*cow-boys*" seen from the train window. And yet:

*We, primeval forests felling....*

*O to die advancing on !...*

*Pioneers! O pioneers! (L. of G., Vol. I, pp. 280-81)*

What's happening here?

Perhaps those who take W. Whitman to task for describing in *L. of G.* landscapes and events as already experienced when, in fact he never saw them are not so wrong after all. Granted, a poet does not require a

material experience and even when one occurs it must become for him an ideal experience, shedding every characteristic of materiality; but even granting this, certain contrasts between life and art are nonetheless always revealing.

In fact, we are here able to apply the definition of Whitman's poetry I proposed in the previous chapter. Walt Whitman's pioneer is not the rough and elemental man one would expect. Nor is he someone who just gets on with the realities of his life and who, because of the way he proceeds, cannot bother with reflection. Walt Whitman's pioneer knows he is a pioneer, and this makes an enormous difference. It means that instead of the conventional figure of a pioneer, we have here the poetry of being a pioneer.

The reproach often leveled at W. Whitman that, in fact, the rough man, the "*average*" man, does not consider his condition an advantage and wants instead to enter the more refined world denied him is resolved here.<sup>6</sup> W. Whitman failed in his intention but at the same time he created the poetry of the intention.

That is, in this specific case he failed to create poetry adapted to a hypothetically stronger and more primitive human race but instead created for us the poetry of this aspiration. For him, the raw facts of territorial conquest transformed themselves into immediate spiritual values. The pioneer, while retaining his traditional appearance (pistol, axe, leather pants, etc.) became the "*minstrel latent in the prairies*," the poet of the States, he who proclaims a new life.

W. Whitman's journeys were in fact living confirmations of his attitude. He never climbed onto one of the legendary covered wagons, nor used an axe on road blocks or a rifle against ambushes, but W. Whitman did recross America and rediscovered it in its ideal meanings just as the pioneers had materially discovered and conquered it. As we will see, when we go through his book, the first image of the poet we come across is that of a man who enjoys scanning and contemplating the States. And he does so with the same inclusiveness he demonstrated in his synthesizing trip through those same States: he does not present the



minor landscapes of a curious traveler, but a continental sweep. His mind transcends and fuses all the different visions into one immense vision of the entire continent, the theater of a new individual who, through his new qualities, assumes a greater grandeur.

The entire construction of *Leaves of Grass*, when not biographical, is contrived. That is, it was composed after the fact with the deliberate purpose of defining this figure. We, therefore, need not stop now to consider all the short pieces that make up the first Section of the book, “Inscriptions.” In stating this, I go beyond de Sélincourt who accepted the book's construction, except for “Autumn Rivulets”.<sup>7</sup> But even he invoked a fundamentally biographical principle, accepting this Section because it generally followed that principle and discarding the rest as a chaotic mix from different periods.

The “Inscriptions” do not introduce anything. They are short poems like many others in the volume. Those that do have the aspect of prelude or dedication suffer because by trying to be such they become concept,

abstraction, effort but no longer poetry. I will deal with the few commendable pages of these “Inscriptions” later.

The true introduction to *L. of G.* is the short poem, “Starting from Paumanok” (*L. of G.*, Vol. I, pp.16-32). It was placed at the start of the edition of 60<sup>8</sup> with the title of “Proto-leaf”<sup>9</sup> and from then on always just before “Song of Myself,” which is also a mine of almost every Whitmanian theme.

What makes “Starting...” the prelude for the whole work is not its abundant catalog of themes—in fact, it lacks many motifs that will dominate in the later poems—rather it is its making poetry of the idea of a prelude, its touching on all these various themes, not sequentially for the love of each, but for their total significance as the poetic material of a future work. Let me clarify this point by referring to Michaud's scolding of W. Whitman for being chaotic, for often creating a list of themes for poetry rather than poetry itself.<sup>10</sup>

I would resolve this argument by saying that Walt Whitman made poetry of the idea that exhilarated him: the idea that with one theme or another he, or some future national bard, would create poetry worthy of America. We have here once again an application of the principle I have already stated. And using it, one understands how the catalogs of W. W. were born and how they justify themselves, these famous catalogs that have given so much work to those who study him.

De Sélincourt also arrived at this solution in his chapter on style already cited. He affirmed that with the catalogs, despite their polemical origins, Whitman reached a new "*perception*," "*new themes and meanings*." (p. 142) But then, as usual, the critic lost himself in absurdities. He linked this catalog style, often made up of mere lists of words, to a hypothetical artistic system of Walt Whitman that he called "*reciprocation*." In this system the dry leaves serve to balance the luxuriant petals found elsewhere and the whole forms an expression of the internal universe of his contradictions.

No one seems to want to admit the obvious: To admit, that even with justifications such as mine, the catalogs, as a common expression of Whitman's poetic imagination, sometimes fail and turn into dead pages, sometimes because too schematic, other times because too confused and in all cases because of too little interior clarity. The critics either see nothing but catalogs and therefore, like de Sélincourt, devise strange theories, or else repudiate the catalogs on principle and for this reason condemn poems like "Our Old Feuillage," (Vol. I, pp. 206-212) which are among the poet's best.<sup>11</sup>

In returning now to "Starting..." one should note that we find here already realized the continental view of America and the outsized figure of the "*lounger*" adequate to the landscape, who I consider the foundation of Whitman's poetry.

I also state at the outset that one part of this *poem* is a failure, but one could pluck it out entirely, like a single clump impeding a stream, and the current of poetry would run clear and whole.

I refer to sections 6 through 13. In proclaiming new poetic materials, with an introductory sketch on an immense scale, we see men throughout the ages descend on the continent and all this—a miracle—without rhetoric, through the simple virtue of a clear vision, W. Whitman passes on to the proclamation of America's ideal values—the Soul, Religion, Democracy—and everything turns confused, chaotic, shapeless. He argues, defines, polemicizes, and proclaims. But he does not create an image; his passion remains vague and oratorical.

But as soon as he returns to the scenes of the continent (section 14), to his large and passionate embrace of the States, and to the vision of the hardworking American "*steaming through his poems*," he finds the image again and his formerly vague ecstasy at the thought of becoming the prophet and poet of the land becomes concrete when he brings back in these scenes the figure that he had sketched out tentatively in section 1 as the "*wanderer*" who had roamed all the States and worked at all its occupations, and who in sections 2-4, became the one who proclaimed America's marvelous historic genesis, and from section 14 forward

is the outsized citizen who, everywhere in the States, unites them in a single embrace with a single viewpoint. It is hard to define exactly how W. W.'s continual returning to the scene of an entire America leads, without parody, to the creation of this human figure, equal in stature to the land—but certainly, the miracle of this, his first lyric, lies precisely in that achievement.

As we shall see, this lyric of the discovery of a world and the elation of singing it is constantly at work in W. Whitman, linking, for example, *Starting...* to several short "*poems*" in "Inscriptions" that could almost be considered fragments of another "Starting...." They are the poems entitled "On Journeys through the States," "Me Imperturbe," and "I hear America Singing" (Vol. I. pp. 11-12-13).

In the first two we have again, more or less, the atmosphere of section 1 of "Starting...." the man who absorbs and dissolves himself in America's life and forms. Here, however, there is a further step and here poetry is attempted, poetry not so much of America, but of the perfect "*self-poisedness*" of the natural life "*as the trees and animals do.*"

Despite this attempt, we realized here only the figure of the "*lounger*" who lives for the entire continent and the exhortations, especially in the first "*poem*" are merely words.

"I hear America Singing" is more interesting. We have here a remarkable catalog of the different occupations of an "*average life*" bound together by the thread of "*singing*" and concluded with the lovely scene in which the verse itself gives way to song:

*...at night the party of  
young fellows, robust, friendly  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.*

This poem contains the word "*hatter*," which Robert Louis Stevenson found unpalatable and, apropos of "*such comicalities*" in W. Whitman declared that he preferred John Milton, thank you very much.<sup>12</sup> This issue in the field of Whitman studies is already resolved mainly because of Bailey's work and I therefore defer to his book, particularly the first pages of his fourth chapter ("W. W.'s Language and Meter") in the cited work.

“I hear Am. Singing” is a familiar quick look at an entire America that gives us rather than a series of regional landscapes a human atmosphere of simple life expressing itself in songs. One can link these verses to those sections of “Starting...” that invoke, with a little thickening of the voice, an “*utterance*” of poetry for America. In section 3, for example, “Chants of the Prairies,” etc. and in 16, he expresses the lyric of “*language-shaping*,” and the desire to create poetry. He does this by using a catalog of Indian names that are like natural sounds and which became American place names:

*The red aborigines*

*...natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds, calls as*

*of birds and animals...*

*Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monogahela...Chattahoochee...*

*Oronoco...Miami...Chippewa....*

In general, little has been written about “Starting....” Most critics who have dealt with it have emphasized its function as an introduction to a symphony. Who can miss that? What matters, however, is



to determine if and why it is poetry and not just an index to the other, and no one has done that. This observation, however, has, as I have said before, an attenuating factor: no one has done so for the other *Leaves* either. But an endless amount has been written about the other poems in the work and before setting out on a new examination, it is useful to recall certain judgments regarding, for example, "Song of Myself."

This enormous poem, whose 52 sections I would swear not all the critics have read, is truly its own touchstone. Bailey said "*The 'Song of Myself' is perhaps not a poem at all. But it is one of the most astonishing expressions of vital energy ever got into a book.*" <sup>13</sup> And Will Hayes considered it a kind of Sermon on the Mount when he stated, "*Such is the Song sung by the Prophet of the New Era on the mount of vision.*" <sup>14</sup> Between these two, the latter is perhaps not the most fantastic.

Certainly, "Song of Myself" contains in its mass and methods the quintessential entirety of Whitman's virtues and vices. At first glance it

also seems qualitatively different from any work composed before it, the only one that truly realizes the cited "*ambition to articulate and faithfully express...and uncompromisingly, my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual and aesthetic Personality (L. of G., Vol. III, p. 449).*" So bizarre is the method of the poem that one is almost tempted to believe W.

Whitman, and even worse, Bailey, and believe that we have here poetry of a new genre, "*not a poem*" but an "*expression of vital energy.*"

That would be a mistake. A moment's reflection is enough to make us realize that even "Song of Myself." the "*tremendous 'Song of Myself,'*"<sup>15</sup> despite any eccentricities, can be nothing except lyricism, a poem. (Whether it succeeds or fails is our job to investigate.) It is an expression of spirit, a poem neither more nor less than those of, for example, Keats whom Whitman's critics like so much to counterpose to W. Whitman.<sup>16</sup> It is the old story of Ariosto and Alighieri: one is a poet and the other an artist.

Let us examine, then, what this “Song of Myself” creates (Vol. I., pp. 33-109). First, we must isolate its design, its development, in sum its action, because it is difficult to discuss or listen to discussions about these things without having clearly in mind the essential framework of the poem's construction. I will cut to the chase.

Two nodes anchor the first part of the poem, two catalog views of different areas of experience; these are sections 8-19 and 33-37. Each of these is preceded by a prelude that consciously expresses the joy of these experiences. These are sections 1- 8 and 25-32. Sections 20-24 constitute the core of the poem: the direct expression of the persona who lives the above-mentioned experiences.

Section 38 initiates a second part. It continues the description of the central persona as having a mission to accomplish based on the life given him. But here the description is rhetorical and polemical (sections 38-43). Finally, sections 44-52 reprise the descriptions of the central persona, enriched now with the traits that give him his sense of mission: the contemplation of supreme things and the attitude of the good companion.

From just this sketch, one can immediately identify two inherent defects in the design of the work: The first, the duplication of catalogs of experiences (8-19 and 33-37); the second, the polemical tone of sections 38-43.

In fact, the first part of the poem is a case of double refraction. The prelude expresses the joy of absorbing all the facets of the world while remaining serene; it does this through the figure of the "*lounger*" who counters problems and questions with calmness and "*self-poisedness*" (sections 3 and 4). He stretches out in a meadow (section 5) and vegetates among the leaves of grass (section 6).

Then a first catalog depicting this "*lounger*" through all the experiences and scenes of the continent and the sea (sections 8-19), culminates, as already said, in the direct description of his "*gross*" and "*mystical*" figure, which is compared in its bulk, joy of living, and robust sureness to nature itself (sections 20-24). After all this comes a new prelude that presents the healthy joy of a strong personality existing and absorbing everything necessary (sections 25-32).

This leads to a return of the endless scenes and situations that experience offers to this life. While these new catalogs (sections 33-37) are a lively part of the familiar myth of a serene curiosity experimenting and absorbing the world, they also impede the reading of the poem. They arrive as repetitions; they confuse and wear down the thread of comprehension.

We see in the polemical tone of the first sections of the second part of *Song* one of Walt Whitman's common failings. His aim, to create for America, etc., sufficiently described in my first chapter, is such that the almost always oratorical arrangement of his longest poems often results in proclamations, perorations, prophetic preaching or, as here, polemics—everything except poetry. Whitman creates poetry in these "*songs*" when, in one way or another, the message takes objective shape for him. Then, as I have already written ten times, he creates the poetry of this proclaiming a message.

Thus, sections 6-13 of "Starting....," where he preaches

and argues, fail while others of the poem succeed because in them, without even meaning to, he describes himself, the prophet, through actions.

Sections 38-43 fail because in them the affirmation of his own acceptance of life is chaotic. He dogmatically affirms the acceptance of everything and pits his own figure and ideas against those of people who do not accept everything, who make choices in life, such as priests or the rich. These pages are often pure argument. Nonetheless, some of their passages rank among his successes, for example, when describing the "*friendly savage* (section 39)" he adds a few brush strokes to the figure of the "*lounger*" and (section 40) where he extends his virile help to the weak, the fallen and the dying.

The concluding sections of the poem (sections 44-52) are its best. There, the persona who lost time quarreling and logically explaining himself in the polemical sections, now lives fully and justifies his position without any further need of argument. He assumes a pose; he appears enormous against the backdrop of the earth and heavens; he looks at God and death with the calm sureness and serenity that befit him. The synthetic and errant

existence, only sketched in the first part, is now absorbed in the ideal of singing, and of teaching a comrade this perfect life.

The tension between the mystery of happiness thus achieved and the intruding exigency of logic is nicely resolved in the last section. The accusing hawk that swoops by makes him aware of the untranslatable nature of all lived experiences. And another touch, a synthesis of the entire poem, brings it to conclusion: the affectionate presence of the poet everywhere, in every form of life.

To summarize again: the creation of “Song of Myself” consists of the figure I define as the Whitmanesque pioneer. This is the myth of the man who takes joy in experiencing everything about the world, absorbing all as revelations of a serene calm, as revelations of an active acceptance satisfied with the proclamation of itself. It is the same myth as that of “Paumanok” but with a different tone. In that poem Whitman gave more thought to the structure of the proclamations to America than to the quality of the joy lived. Were it not so obvious, one could say that the atmosphere of “Starting...” is

more national while that of “Song of Myself” more universal. But the methods of realization are the same. In both we find the grand “*lounger*” who travels the continent and beyond. And we also find the familiar poetry of the discovery and the usual image of absorbing the new life, singing it, and communicating it to men.

So far I have spoken in generalities. To examine the poem closely is dangerous in the space available but relatively easy, though the task does require jumping about in the poem. In sharpening our focus on this “*song*” we find, even in the sections I have justified, obscurity, repetition, undeveloped material, connections to nothing—deficiencies without end. An example is the long scene in section 11 that interrupts and disrupts the perfect flow of scenes that began in section 9, with the farm, and continued in 10 with the mountains, the marriage of the “*trapper*,” and the flight of the slave. Whitman picks up the thread again in the city scenes of section 12, but only with effort. Given the aesthetic figure



of the poem, however, such negative observations are obvious; anyone who reads the poem can make them.

I would like to speak, instead, of the curious use of parables in some of these pages. To my knowledge, only Will Hayes has touched on this subject in his *W. W.: The Prophet of the New Era*. Each chapter of this book has an epigraph taken from the Gospels and throughout it Hayes creates absurd parallels between Jesus Christ and our poet. He entitles one chapter, "Many Things in Parables" (pp. 67-78). There, Hayes highlights the double meaning of *Leaves* and interprets many of the poems as allegorical truths. He tells us, for example, that the "*poem*," "There was a Child Went Forth" (Vol. II, pp. 135-38) is nothing but a parable "*of the Power of Environment*," and that the "Song of the Open Road" (Vol. I. pp. 177-90) is the parable of the "*Eternal Journey*," and so on. He then adds that the reader must always keep in mind this double sense or else miss much of the beauty of *Leaves*, just as, without allegory, the Gospel parable of the sower of seeds might pass for a tract on "*farming practice*."

Clearly, if in the parable of the sower the allegory was a simple

second meaning represented materially by the symbols of the parable, this parable would indeed be a pure tract on "*farming practice*." It is, however, a parable, or better yet poetry, in the good sense that it expresses the utility of the objects of the earth and world when sought with good will and discernment. It does so by integrating the description of the choice of different seeds and their planting with the sense of ideal practice. All this is obvious.

Nonetheless, Hayes was on to something when he spoke of parables in relation to W. Whitman. The way in the middle of a proclamation, or indeed right at a beginning, he stops to mention something specific, to describe a scene or type, is truly the Vedic or Biblical method of illustrating imaginatively an abstract truth. It does not matter if W. Whitman derived this method from classic religious literature or from his Quaker, Protestant nature, or even from his own, let us call it, prophetic preaching. What matters is how, for example, in this "Song of Myself," in the second catalog of experiences (sections 33-37) he uses these long and

elaborate scenes to arrive at the last two: the "*murder of the four hundred and twelve young men*" and the "*old time sea-fight*" (sections 34-36) that are more than memories from experience; they have the intentional characteristic of parables. They are imaginative illustrations of the abstract reality of the virile, imperturbable, heroic man. Also, this theory of Whitman's parables resolves the thorny question of the so-called "Dutch verses."<sup>17</sup>

Let us now explore what place certain short poems—pure descriptions of a landscape or person—have in a work like *Leaves*, made up almost entirely of sermon-poems or quasi-orations. What place can pure description have among poems that always have a didactic or ethical purpose even with they grant something to imagination?

For us it is easy, too easy, to say that this is an issue of poetry versus non-poetry, but how would W. Whitman explain this literary taste for description for the sake of description? Some say that we must remember that as a descendant of the Van Velsors, Dutch blood coursed in his veins and accounts for the origin of the little poems. But that explains nothing,

especially not how W. Whitman would justify to himself this liberty. Nor does the proposition that old age had made him garrulous, more disposed to write as a man of letters for the pure pleasure of exercising his imagination. There are many of these "little poems" in the Third Edition of '60, published in his full manhood.

I believe that W. Whitman, in an unconscious expression of his poetic imagination, meant to compose with these short, let us grant, descriptive, poems a series of allegories, of relief-incised illustrations of truths affirmed in other places. Let us not forget his original intention, which was that *Leaves of Grass* would form an organic whole, like the body of a tree or person. Only later, with acquired habits, did W. Whitman perhaps begin considering the idea of a little description as simply the pleasure of "making poetry."

We have, thus, a certain number of poems that are true and fitting parables of Whitmanian ideas. These escape from didacticism when they depart from the ambiguity of allegory and create a picture of the felt life

with a tone, to think on it, of hypothetical teaching delivered as a revitalization of the faith W. Whitman had in himself.

They are almost always lyrics of a serene life, balanced and healthy—the attributes of the pioneer already described. The group, “By the Roadside” (Vol. II., pp. 25-30) is full of them. Poems there included like “The Dalliance of the Eagles” (p. 35), “A Farm Picture,” “The Runner,” and “Mother and Babe” (p. 36) fall into this category. In other groups, poems with these characteristics are “The Ship Starting” (Vol. I., p. 13), “To the Man-of-War-Bird” (Vol. II., p. 18), “Sparkles from the Wheat” (Vol. I., 164), “The Torch” (Vol. II., p.170), “A Paumanok Picture” (Vol. I., p. 242) and “To a Locomotive in Winter” (Vol. II., p. 253).

I skip for now similar poems from his old age because I deal with them later. Furthermore, I have selected these poems somewhat randomly, choosing from here and there throughout the book, just to give some examples. I do not want to attach too much importance to an essentially empirical distinction such as this of parables. Rather, I want to demonstrate that the aesthetic figure of each of these poems is a means to an end, that they are fragments of the larger construction of *Song of Myself*.

But they are more than just fragments. No matter what scene they describe, they generally recreate the poetry of that almost practical experience, of that calm and satisfied contemplation that, as we have seen, forms the poetic flesh of the "*idler*" of "Song of Myself."

Take, for example, "The Dalliance of the Eagles." This simple narration seems isolated from everything else, but in the end this coupling of the eagles forms one of the many paragraphs of "Song of Myself" that amass experiences for the reader just as, for example, the first part of section 14 does. Without question, the poem expresses the same lyric atmosphere despite some hidden terms of comparison, of a "moral." W. Whitman did not mean this atmosphere to be made up of definite thoughts, but rather of vague references to health and strength that enrich the deliberate preaching in other places. It is a stroke of good luck that W. Whitman in these, let us call them, his parables, did not have in mind rigid allegories but indeterminate lessons, a figure, a sign, and, more than anything else, a state of mind through which he almost always created poetry.

When a thought presented itself to his mind in a clear if abstract way, he preferred to make of it a simple enunciation, dry and quick, that is worth what it is worth. In these instances, he did not aim for aesthetic value, nor provide that ambiguous quasi-lyrical atmosphere that enriches many collections of his thoughts and makes us consider them poetry. These are the innumerable fragments with the title "Thoughts" that one encounters everywhere in the last Sections of the volume, the heteroclit elements of those less defined Sections.

I want to examine one of the parables I cited, "The Ship Starting" from the "Inscriptions" Section, because it provides an entrance to one curious province of the Whitmanian world. It is a simple look, a snapshot of a ship getting under way. But who cares about that? It is understood that we have here an allegory of the book departing for the world. What generates the spark of life, of "poetry," is the idea of a book's weighing anchor. The breath of hope, the cloudless faith in the completed work expresses itself, without any reference to the book, in the sure and bold image of the ship that breaks the waves and joyfully spreads its sails above the foam.

The same scene reappears in more detail and leads to the same figure in “After the Sea-Ship” in the “Sea-Drift” Section (Vol. II, p. 24), but I want to point out something else. In this, as in many other poems with a nautical theme, W. Whitman, no matter how far from land, mountains, and prairies, or from any the other usual environments of pioneers, is always the ideal pioneer of “Song of Myself.” He goes forth, discovers things in life, and proclaims the joy of these discoveries. The preliminary definition of his world that I have put forth, when tested by the text, seems to me ever more that which most comprehensibly and broadly interprets his poetry.

For W. Whitman the myth of the sea is also the myth of the pioneer. This is a significant point. Even though there are only a few poems with this subject matter—a small number in the second volume encompasses almost all of them (pp. 6-24)—the sea, as Whitman himself confessed, was his faithful friend, ideal paragon, and obsession his entire life.<sup>18</sup> A wonderful taste of Whitman's lyrical transfiguration of the sea



occurs in the poem “In Cabin'd Ships at Sea” from “Inscriptions” (pp. 2-3). Always the same mission—the revelation of the divinity of life, of a free, natural, life full of suggestions, serene, and above all the joy of this mission, and the joy of the ideal embrace of comrades.

The sea here suggests a perfect form to him. Serenity and the infinite become revelations expressed in the radiant calm of spacious solitude. They do so with no allusions, with no secondary expressions of any parallel that might abruptly affect the miracle of the scene, which itself is the stage and revelation of this life. The poem continues and then concludes with a rush of love for all seamen, "his" readers, and expresses the joy of the revelation with the fullness of his gift, "*my love*," with his communal fervor and universal embrace "*o'er the boundless blue*" to all the "*mariners and their ships*."

Putting aside the constructive image that makes this poem (as any poem) unique, and considering only its attitude, it becomes clear that we are here once again in the world of “Song of Myself,” a world of the discovery of the mysterious influences of ordinary things—even in the

daily monotony of sailors' lives at sea—and the consequent serenity and joy of life and song.

I want to speak now of two other poems from the “Sea-Drift” Section and in doing so I will close out my explanations of those references to “Starting from Paumanok” and “Song of Myself” that are scattered throughout the book. I refer to the famous “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life” (Vol. II, pp. 6-17).

Bailey says something worth noting about the latter: *"the sea lifted him (W.W.) above the world of assertions and opinions into that of imagination and vision."*<sup>19</sup> That W. Whitman's sea-related poems are particularly successful in interesting ways is a fact. But it also a fact that Bailey got it wrong-wise, so to speak, when he posits a W. W. ruined by the influences of his long newspaper career. Bailey attributes a certain prophesying rhetoric of the streets to the poet's background in journalism and certainly, as Perry says,<sup>20</sup> there is in Whitman some of that *"sans-culotism of the forties."* In this, Perry might be right, but he is wrong when he goes on to say that the amassing of tangible facts, essentially the making of catalogs, grows directly

out of his newspaper practice.<sup>21</sup> Everything we have of Walt's journalism—not just the strictly literary but also the political—demonstrates his taste for the refined style of the time, something between the decorative, aristocratic rhetoric of Poe and the rhapsodic sermonizing of Emerson.<sup>22</sup> Having attributed to the catalogs a low origin as the newspaper practice of matter-of-factly combining random events, Bailey continues logically to his obvious conclusion that the catalogs are the ballast of *Leaves of Grass*.

I believe I have already demonstrated that while certain passages and poems in *L. of G.* are undeniably terrible, neither W. Whitman's catalogs nor his "*world of assertions and opinions*"—even read as street rhetoric or gross sansculottism—is the cause. We have seen in "Starting from..." the creation of poetry precisely through and not in spite of "*assertions*," and in "Song of Myself" we saw the catalogs directly express the marvel of a particular aspect of his state of mind. The truth is that when the poet fails, he fails because of a congenital defect in his vision, because of

imaginative incoherence, and not because he inserted at that moment "*assertions* " or "*opinions*" or made catalogs, even if by chance these defects and the catalogs coincide.

And so, in the famous poem "Out of the Cradle..." we have no unusual world of "*imagination*" and "*vision*" but the familiar world of Whitman's successful poems. These, even if they seem a series of "*assertions*" and "*opinions*" always contain an image, a realized "*vision*." What then is the image of this poem and why do I speak of it here?

Everyone's mind will turn to the already cited "There was a Child Went Forth." This, already in its almost definitive version, formed part of "Song of Myself" right from the first *Leaves of Grass* edition of '55<sup>23</sup> and is among the most thoroughly representative of Whitman's world. Its design is simple. It starts with "There was a child went forth every day" and continues with a catalog of things, of phenomena, which the child sees and absorbs: "*they became part of him.*"

Now if this catalog were merely a list of items in a chronicle, the mere words they say Whitman's catalogs are reduced to, then the didactic repetition of "*they became part of him*" would not suffice to make poetry of them. What really gives life to these pages is the tone of marveled simplicity with which the objects, the forms of the world, are noted and made to follow endlessly one after the other. That in this case the particulars are chosen to describe in their totality the sights and intimacy of a "*Long Island*" village is irrelevant because the premise, the situation, the entire sense of the writer aim at something else. And this "something else," this lyric rationale of the "*poem*" is the sense of the discovery of the realities of life in their essence, physical and detailed yet full of endless "*suggestions*." It is yet again the dreamy but material gaze of the pioneer of "Song of Myself," the man who caresses and absorbs things and, in this way, forms an existential ideal.

"Out of the Cradle..." recreates this situation of the child but raises it to a different level. First, the myth of the primitive, virgin panorama composed of common things; then the pain of these things

felt as revelations of beauty and music, replete with longing; and then the ecstatic trembling at the thought of the future mission—the proclamation of poetry.

Though it shares the same lyric material as that of, for example, “Starting...,” the situation here is different. In the former, the mission was seen as progress and with a more practical tone; the elation was not sung. Here the mission is rather hoped for, invoked after an almost idyllic scene representing the ecstasy. But we can see that it is still the myth of the revelation of the “*suggestions*” of life. With this established, it is easy to analyze the image of the poem.

It has been said that the song of the “*mocking bird*” that here corresponds to the turmoil of the “*child's*” soul is a song of lament, of loss, of “*bereavement*,” as is that of the “*hermit-thrush*” in the similar poem “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd,” which I will discuss later.<sup>24</sup> Michaud, in the chapter cited from his *Littérature Américaine* affirmed this

characterization for the second poem when he stated that "*le chant funèbre du président martyr est l'hymne de l'immortalité sereine.*"

But we can easily show the characterization does not hold for the first poem. There, the "*mocking-bird*" does more than just try to bring back his vanished mate with song; he recreates the ecstatic, almost orgiastic fullness of the passion and melody revealed in the surrounding elements of the wind, moon, and sea. And above all, the "*mocking-bird*" invokes the sounds of the night, the songs, the fury of the seas, the murmuring of his own throat. And when the bird stops singing, the poet's descriptive phrases that continue the commentary are just as eloquent:

*"The aria sinking,*

*All else continuing, the stars shining,*

*The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing, etc...."*

There is no pause, only the continuation around and in the heart of the same themes, of the same lyric ecstasy. And so it is with the entire poem:

Passionate invocations of lyric elation, of revelation, of communion with the endless "*suggestions*" of nature, life and joy, the delirium of this state, "*the messenger...the fire, the sweet hell...the unknown want, the destiny of me.*"

All the rest, the disappearance of the bird's mate and the sea's final answer, the word of death, are only pretexts, impassioned points of departure for the universally appealing melodic suggestions woven into the song. And in any case, death is the "*low and delicious word*," "*the sweetest song*," "*the strong and delicious...*" because it is revealed "*melodiously*," because, in the last analysis, it is poetry.

The other "*poem*" from "*Sea-Drift*," "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," forms part of this same world. And I have chosen it to end this chapter on the pioneer because the poem, though appearing at first glance to be a song of defeat and renunciation, is in fact yet again the praise of the revelation and passionate absorption of things. The song goes on too long, perhaps because of the imprecision of the parallels of the ocean with life, and the ocean's flotsam with the poet. This image is perhaps more stated than realized. In particular, the last section with its confused evocation of flotsams linked to a not very precise second sense of humanity, or whatever, is certainly muddled and fails to achieve its synthesizing and conclusive function.



But an integrated figure, a created myth, which, upon reflection resembles that of “Song of Myself,” truly animates the earlier parts of the poem. We see it in the image of the pensive walk by the ocean's edge (section 1), in the implacable mystery of things that escape every effort of song (section 2), and in the impetus of a desperate love that wants to fasten to and merge with the shore and ocean, “*those little shreds...you and me and all*” (section 3). And, to think about it, do we not have in this figure the same poetry of the man who walks though the world (here he walks along the seashore, but this means the same as the world), who caresses things, who touches all experience? He caresses and touches and then declares that nothing is yet reached or obtained, that in his “*arrogant poems the real me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreveal'd.*” He goes on to abandon himself to the same fervor of communion, of absorption which, under different forms—a bodily embrace, identification with sea—pursue and will pursue him all his life.

Either I am deluded, or it is here, right here, that W. Whitman expresses fully his ideal of a poet: the poetry of creating and living one's own poetry. Even the images of resignation and annihilation that one might expect from the comparison of the things of life with the detritus of the ocean—tufts of straw, sand, dead leaves—resolve themselves in this thoughtful sadness that is almost peace, almost serenity.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> These trips can be followed place by place in *Specimen Days* and other prose (*P. W.*, 1-193, etc.) from which I have taken all these quotes. For the first trip see especially in *November Boughs* the chapter “New Orleans in 1948” (*P. W.*, 439-43) and for the second the chapters “Begin a Long Jaunt West,” “In the Sleeper” and those from “Missouri State” through “Upon Our Own Land,” all in *Specimen Days* (*pp.*, 132-148).

<sup>2</sup> P. Shay, *op.cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Richard M. Bucke, *W. W.* (Philadelphia: McKay, 1883); also, cf., Shay, op.cit.

<sup>4</sup> Cameron Rogers, *The Magnificent Idler* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1926).

<sup>5</sup> James Thomson, *W. W.: The Man and the Poet*, introduced and published by G. Dobell (London: 1910), 32.

<sup>6</sup> B. De Sélincourt, op. cit., 31 and others.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., the entire chapter, “Plan.”

<sup>8</sup> Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1850. Also, cf. Shay, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Oscar L. Triggs, op. cit., under “*Starting from Paumanok.*”

<sup>10</sup> Michaud, *Mystiques et realists*, 104.

<sup>11</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 162.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, “W. W.,” in *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (London, Chatto and Windus: 1917), 85 and 63.

<sup>13</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 146.

<sup>14</sup> Will Hayes, *W. W.: The Prophet of the New Era* (London: C.W. Daniel, n.d.).

<sup>15</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 21.

<sup>16</sup> Perry, op.cit., last pages of Chapter VII. James Thomson, op.cit., first chapter (originally published 1874 in *The National Reformer*).

(The most relevant text to which Pavese here refers appears in Perry, p. 303, "The answer is...that Keats was the better artist; that in his hands truth and beauty were wrought together into forms instinctively precious to men. Whitman, greatly dowered as he was by nature, and far transcending Keats in range of imaginative vision, had but an imperfect control of the recognized instrument of poetry, and the new one that he strove to fashion has not yet been approved by time." Translator's addition.)

<sup>17</sup> Luigi Gamberale, Preface to *Foglie d'Erba* (Palermo: Sandron, 1907), XXXVI. (In the cited Preface, Gamberale makes one parenthetical reference to "Dutch verses": "Certainly here and there [in *Leaves of Grass*] one encounters graceful verses (they call them Dutch perhaps because of his maternal origin) but they are few or unpolished." From the preceding context in his Preface one understands that Gamberale considers "graceful" those poems or sections of poems that are less abstract and more detailed and that present, in his words, not just "human personality" but "human persons" Translator's addition.)

<sup>18</sup> See in this context the often-cited Chapter, "Sea-Shore Fancies" in *Specimen Days* (P. W., 88).

<sup>19</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 165.

<sup>20</sup> Perry, op.cit., the concluding pages of the Chapter, "The Caresser of Life."

<sup>21</sup> J. Bailey, op. cit., Chapter III, VI and passim.

<sup>22</sup> I am aware of the controversy over whether W. W. had or had not read Emerson before the summer of 1855. See in this connection W. S. Kennedy, *Reminiscences of W. W.* (London: Alexander Gardner, 1896), 78-83 that conclude for the negative. I, with Perry, op.cit., 84, and Bazalgette, *W. W.: l'homme et son oeuvre* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1908), 192-94, believe the contrary.

<sup>23</sup> Oscar L.Triggs, op.cit., under “*There Was a Child Went Forth.*”

<sup>24</sup> Henry B Binns., op.cit., 131.

## Chapter III

## Manly Love

In the preceding chapter I deliberately omitted any reference to the last section of “Starting from Paumanok” or to a certain tone in the last parts of “Song of Myself,” because through these we enter a most important region of Whitman's world. I refer to the refrain, “*O camerado close! ....o hand in hand!*” that closes “Starting from Paumanok”—that poem of prophetic proclamation—and alludes passionately and affectionately to the “*lovers*” and “*loving comrades*” who appear throughout “Song of Myself” and become more frequent and considered in its last pages. Mixed among other notes we will often find this one in various “*songs*,” almost always at the end of a poem as the conclusion, the peroration of the “*sermon*,” which in many respects the longer “*songs*” resemble.

Now, however, I want to dedicate a chapter to this theme of comrade and lover, which, though often confused with other themes in the *Leaves*, as I shall show, has given rise to an enormous amount of biographical and ethical commentary—What is its nature? What is its reasons?—and has

its own bibliography as extensive as that dealing with Whitman's innovations in form. W. Whitman himself placed the most characteristic poems on this theme in two linked Sections of the book.

We come to the thorniest part of the question in the second of the two Sections, "Calamus," and because of the reticence and clumsy assumptions of the pedantic critics of Puritan descent, it is tremendously difficult to understand and follow the argument. One wishes that more of them had expressed themselves with the scientific frankness of Johannes Schlaf who, clear as the sun, entitled his article, *Walt Whitman homosexuelle?* For an example of the opposite approach, read Perry's pages in the chapter, "The Caresser of Life."<sup>1</sup> There, in discussing J. A. Symonds's famous letter and Whitman's response (10 August 1890), Perry defends Whitman's morality with such transparent silence that legitimate impatience almost leads us to believe the contrary.

Some of the questions raised are fortunately not important for us because of the nature of my research. For example, was “Children of Adam” the result of a youth full of license and orgies as some have suspected? (What an exaggeration!) Or was “Calamus” the result of secret relations that Walt had with those young omnibus drivers he felt so comfortable with? I say these questions are “fortunately” not important, because to add my bit to these arguments would be to waste paper and conclude nothing. Further, other writers are more interested in Whitman's biography and better informed than my modest self. The most indispensable source for the issue in question is the Boston *Calamus* edition of the letters to Peter Doyle<sup>2</sup> and I believe not one copy exists in all of Italy and it is beyond my means to buy it on the private market.

For us, the biographical and moral questions of the legitimate or illegitimate loves of W. Whitman matter little. We have before us poems with erotic and other themes that speak of friends and comrades. How are love and friendship positioned in Whitman's poetry? How are these two



sentiments integrated into the complex figure of the poetic man that we have seen gradually forming in *Leaves of Grass*? In sum, what exactly are love and friendship in the poetry of W. Whitman? In analyzing them we will accept, for the sake of argument, that preliminary separation of the themes made by W. Whitman, but we will do so empirically because for us it is given, and even obvious, that neither love nor friendship can exist in the realized poetry of *Leaves of Grass*, but only their poetic figurations.

In accepting for the moment love and friendship as preexistent matters in poetry, which they are not, one must resolve a first question brought forward by two scholars who have, in fact, taken this distinction too literally and made it into an absurdly judgmental scheme. The two polemicists are the usual, de Sélincourt and Bailey, enemies to the end, never in agreement on even the most minute quibble concerning W. Whitman. One can rest assured that if de Sélincourt (1914) says one thing, Bailey (1926)

says the opposite, be it about catalogs, single components, poetry-prose, or anything. And so it is here as regards the contents of “Children of Adam” and “Calamus.” De Sélincourt, with paradoxical justice, argues so strongly that “Children of Adam” is the praise of sex without love and “Calamus” the praise of love without sex that he contends the lovers in “Calamus” are men and not women specifically as a stratagem for escaping the danger of animal desire.<sup>3</sup> Bailey responds to this with the irrefutable truth that *"the two sections are in fact much more allied than that sharp distinction suggests,"* that love for W. W. is *"a vital force to be used alike by body and spirit,"* and that in general the Sections taken together are *"Lucretian joy's modern version"* and *"the wonder more than the luxury of sex."*<sup>4</sup> From this exchange one can see that the ground the two have selected for their argument is not the best since it permits, without apparent error, such decisively contradictory affirmations.

The mistake, it seems to me, lies in the definition of the problem, in taking too literally the distinction between love and friendship. Instead, one should explore the images with which this world of love and friendship is expressed and do so through a detailed analysis and verification of the aesthetic figure of individual poems. How is this world created and which of its aspects come to take possession of the new myth?

Let us begin then with “Children of Adam” and try to define this figure.

This Section begins with “To the Garden, the World,” an introductory poem that, together with the last of the Section, “As Adam Early in the Morning,” constitute a frame for the Section. They form an ornamental initial letter, a miniature, in which indistinct and athletic nudes (“*Eve*,” “*Adam*,” the “*Children of Adam*”) appear barely visible against a background of nature (“*the garden*,” “*the bower in the morning*”). But we have here only sketches, stylized studies; we still need to sharpen the image I described and that requires not just an understanding of the text but imagination. For that purpose, these two poems are too much just “introduction” and “conclusion.”

We find the complete and definitive lyric of Whitmanesque love in the poem that follows “To the Garden...” that is, “From Pent-up Aching Rivers.” It was this poem, with a few others in the same Section, that in 1881 caused the “*Boston Society for the Suppression of Vice*” to ban the entire book as “*obscene literature*.” That had the usual result of giving the entrepreneurial publisher the opportunity to sell three thousand copies in a single day.<sup>5</sup>

Oh, the trees that have been felled to justify these few pages! And with no need. For example, Gamberale's justification is unnecessary. It is simply not true, as he says in the preface to his translation of the *Leaves* that if Whitman is not immoral in “Children of Adam” it is because he deals as a man of science with taboo topics and thus produces science not poetry.<sup>6</sup> It is not true because, as we shall soon see, if W. Whitman ever wrote something beautiful we will find it here in this proscribed “From Pent-up Aching Rivers.”

The poem has almost no design. It is a tabulation of catalog segments with no logical nexus. They gather like a symphonic mass and together shape an ambiance, a state of mind. It is the almost orgiastic description of the joy of a carnal embrace felt as fullness, as excess of life. This is projected against a background of "*gross nature*" which, however, turns out to be a delicate symphonic accompaniment of color and sounds. We have here neither lascivious nor meditative love—both, by the way, also capable of engendering poetry—but a sense of befitting healthiness, of elated communion with nature. So much so that it seems totally unforced when Walt Whitman compares the lovers to "two hawks in the air," to "two fishes swimming in the sea," "*lawless*" like these. A sense of freshness and natural well-being pervades not just these similes but also the framework, ambiance, and atmosphere of the entire song. The "*wet of the woods*," the "*mad pushes of the waves*" are all one with the "*long sustain'd kiss upon the mouth or bosom*."

The merit of the work lies in its technique of cataloging the successive discoveries of phenomena in such a way that the sense of unexpected vision,

the cry of surprise, this joyfulness, and this freshness, find a suitable expression that distances the poem from a possible tone—which some might call morbid but for me in this case would be simply off-key—of complacency or indulgence. And, to summarize the impression of rugged healthiness that this lyric creates we need only note last adjective of its last line is neither “*sweet*” nor “*alluring*” nor anything similar, but rather “*stalwart*.” Such is the whole poem, even when passing through a “delirium of the senses,” and unless I am mistaken, certain passages of the passionate absorption of things in *Song of Myself* (sections 21 and 22) echo this tone.

This present lyric is a serene expression of the healthy equilibrium of natural forces and yet W. Whitman rarely repeated its intentionally orgiastic tone.

In two or three other poems of this Section, he did try to recreate, if not the image, the tone, but when Walt, as in these cases, abandons precise descriptions in favor of vague exclamations and passionate but oratorical concepts, he almost always fails.

For example, “One Hour to Madness and Joy” (p. 129) and “O Hymen! O Hymene!” (p. 133) and “I Am He that Aches with Love” (p. 133) are pure lyric howls that create no image, but only, as in “One Hour to Madness and Joy,” merely fix on the presumed logic of the image and proclaim that the desire for love is one with a *"new unthought-of nonchalance with the best of Nature;"* one also with the desire for liberation, for further discovery *"to escape utterly from others' anchors and holds."* We have here his characteristic fusion of love with the universe of the pioneer, a fusion that already existed in potential in “Song of Myself.”

We find the most definite and developed image of Whitman's famous eroticism in the poem “I Sing the Body Electric” that follows “From Pent-up Aching Rivers.” It is the longest of this Section and certainly the most important.

The nine sections of the poem follow a definite, if barely perceptible, logical progression. The first section is purely an introductory epigraph; the poem really begins with the second section, whose first words,

"*The love of the body of a man or woman*" perfectly fix the situation of the poem and characterize the entire "Children of Adam" Section. It is not a love song about a long affair, nor a series of scenes from his "*love-life*," nor is it the lyric outpouring of any of his real or imagined passions. Walt Whitman is operating on an entirely different level. He aims to sing the beauty of the body, male or female. He wants to proclaim its vitality, the joy it finds in love and in all its other expressions, and he pays special attention to the promise of spiritual revelation incarnate in the body. This is Whitman's eroticism and one can easily see that it is but a short step from here to the life lived by the pioneer of "Song of Myself," that life of the discovery of "*suggestions*."

And this explains and justifies how section 2 of the poem, which begins with the "*love of the body*," develops and then concludes with a catalog of "*natural, perfect, varied attitudes*," the human body seen in motion, walking, at work, fighting and, only in the background, making love—why not?



Section 3 follows with a description of the "*common farmer*," vigorous father and perfect companion, the true and proper myth of balanced existence in accord with the truth earlier asserted. Here, we are clearly in the world of the pioneer I described earlier. Consider, for example, these aspects in the portrait of the farmer:

*“He was a frequent gunner and fisher, he sailed his boat  
himself...*

*When he went with his five sons and many grandsons to  
hunt or fish, you would pick him out as the most  
beautiful and vigorous of the gang,*

*You would wish long and long to be with him, you would  
wish to sit by him in the boat that you and he might  
touch each other.”*

Consider those characteristics and compare them with the deft description in “Song of Myself,” section 34, of the "*four hundred and twelve young men*" who are, if ever any were, examples of Whitman's ideal of simple and healthy men who live life the way it should be lived.

*“They were the glory of the race of rangers,  
 Matchless with horse, rifle, song, supper, courtship,  
 Large, turbulent, generous, handsome, proud, and  
 affectionate,  
 Bearded, sunburnt, drest in the free costume of hunters....”*

I find it remarkable that in the middle of “Children of Adam,” devoted, as some say, to the poetry of sex, or at least of procreation, we find a budding of lyric motifs so non-sensual and non-procreative as to be identical to themes found in other poems created with entirely different images. And, despite what people say to preserve Walt Whitman's morals, it is not the poetry of fathering children that is highlighted in the “Ch. of Adam.” Okay, we sometimes find references to future generations, to the “*offspring to come*,” but such references are few and oratorical. And in any case, they form part of the much broader picture of the man who lives life the Whitmanian way, who is a good comrade, strong, calm, “receptive,” and in his time a stalwart male. No more nor less, as I have said, than the pioneer of “Song of Myself.”

Another creation in the *Leaves*, also in a Section other than

“Ch. of Adam” should be added to the group of poems cited above in reference to the “*farmer*” because it clarifies even better the non-“erotic” nature of “Children....” I refer to “The Ox-Tamer” (Vol. II, p. 172), a poem that seems almost suspiciously miraculous because it has the enthusiastic endorsement of all the critics who have dealt with it. This “*poem*” is clearly another expression of the persona I have been describing. It sets forth his desire to abandon “*books, politics*” and “*poems*” to live a peaceful and illiterate life among georgic settings “*in a far-away northern country in the placid pastoral region.*” The overriding objective: to impose his own love on the divine animality that surrounds him. This illiterate life devoted to taming young oxen certainly ranks with that of the “*farmer*” in “Ch. of A”. as another experience that forms the poetic essence of the “*magnificent idler*” found in the “Song of Myself.”

I could continue with these kinds of parallels and define almost all the “Ch. of Adam” as reflections of the pioneer who knows also how to be a good “*lover.*” But I will mention only one more, that delicious little poem, *Native Moments* (p. 133), which so candidly expresses the desire,

as the gentle poet Tagore put it, to get drunk and go to the dogs.

*"Give me the drench of my passions, give me life coarse and  
rank."*

The wrath of God has been visited on this poem and others like it, and many scholars have struggled with it, arguing every which way to remove this stain on Whitman's honor. Some, like de Sélincourt, have concluded that W. Whitman never had the shameful experiences listed in *Native Moments* for the subtle reason that since these experiences are invoked as desired, the poet could not have lived them.<sup>7</sup> The sin, in sum, not being consummated, the desire is thus catharsis. De Sélincourt should give thanks that he has other strengths as a Whitman critic, otherwise this passage on *Native Moments* would suffice by itself to ruin his reputation.

So as not to stray too far, I leave aside other scholars who, like Burroughs,<sup>8</sup> reduce Whitman's not infrequent preference for a coarse and

open life to the noted theory of “I, vicarious.” In this schemata, Walt Wh. assumes the almost Christ-like role of speaking for all humanity. Maybe yes, maybe no; arguing, you can prove almost anything. The aesthetic fact remains that if W. Whitman expressed in a vital way the desire to be—let us speak frankly—a “rowdy,” he was just that in his soul at that moment and not some vicarious I. And that is what he was in these *Native Mom.*, where it is undeniable that he exalts a world in which he identifies with the “drinkers” and enjoys being “*lawless, rude, illiterate.*”

That this desire to be primitive is the most literary thing in the world is an entirely different matter, and it is precisely this difference in W. Whitman that I have spent pages to generally affirm. The beauty of this short poem, I believe, lies primarily in its expression of the ardent desire for a sincerely felt literary life, expressed, for example, as “*I will be your poet.*” We find the exact same situation in “Starting from Paumanok” where he says, “I will be the poet of this life.”

“Native Moments” is miraculously constructed out of almost nothing: “*coarse and rank*” moments and then the search for “*coarse and rank*” companions. A few lines describe them and as usual they are felt more as health and freedom (“*Outlawness*”) than as vice. And then comes the concluding invocation, “*O you shunn'd persons.*” This poem truly is something wonderful and it takes nerve to argue about its morality, just as it would to investigate the morality of the “*rangers*” in the Texas story.

I have digressed from “I Sing the Body Electric” because I wanted to demonstrate that the poetic image of “Ch. of Adam” is essentially the same as that found earlier in “Song of Myself.” I wanted to show that the myth there created was that of the pioneer who proclaims, and that this figure, enriched with more experience, continues throughout all the *Leaves of Grass*.

I return now to “I Sing the Body...” to interpret it more fully. We can see how the song continuously develops and then concludes what I have called its essential note—the male and female body viewed, not erotically, but in the glory of a normal and balanced life. This is invariably the same

world as that of "Song of Myself." The two sections I have already discussed introduced the figure of the working, loving body and culminated in the description of the protagonist of this world, the "*farmer*," the father of five and yet himself the handsomest and strongest of the family.

Walt Wh. then leaves the figure of the "*farmer*" but continues the sense of the ideal in two other sections (5 and 6) in which he praises female and male bodies living freely and fully, proud of their functions. Finally, in the last sections, jumping off from his exaltation of the slaves, he defends and praises the holiness and perfection of the body, pregnant with spiritual significance, and itself the expression of spiritual life, the sum and flower of creation.

The very last section somehow fails its purpose. It tries to express Whitman's worship of the body but instead only dryly lists all the body's parts. These passages truly turn into just a catalog. The fault lies not in the

catalog technique but simply in Walt Whitman's here expressing a mere idea and forgetting any emotion. He is still compiling a catalog in the last lines of the section, but then he infuses a rush of new blood and the parts of the body become for him such a realization of health that they intoxicate his spirit. He arrives at the conception of the soul as transparent in the body thereby finding its perfect and decisive expression.

This is "I Sing the Body Electric" as I see it. And by now I hope it would be superfluous to mention yet again that we have here neither the poetry of love as commonly understood—platonic or libidinous—nor, despite what others say to save one who needs no saving, the sanitized love that aims at procreation. Certainly, this latter idea is intentionally expressed in the poem, in section 5 for example, but the final poetic realization, the image evoked, is not this type. We have in this section the poetry of the



healthy body, the instrument and reason of life. It does know how to make love, but it is above all health, fullness, and the joy of spiritual certainty. The notorious "*jets of love hot and enormous*," the "*jelly of love*," the "*white-blow and delirious juice*" are more vigorous expressions of glorious vitality than voluptuous memories. Furthermore, that Whitman praises the male and female body equally and that both have for him the same significance is dispositive. It also leads to and explains what many have noted, that when speaking of women, W. Whitman generally describes them as mothers or future mothers, okay, but he also describes them essentially as equals, companions in life and work, and in all ways comrades who happen to be female. Look at, for example, "A Woman Waits for Me," which the "*Boston Society*..." equated to "From Pent-up Aching Rivers." Note there that despite the unequivocal description of

*"They are not one jot less than I am,  
They are tann'd in the face by shining suns and blowing  
winds,  
Their flesh has the old divine suppleness and strength,  
They know how to swim, row, ride, wrestle, shoot, run,  
strike, retreat, advance, resist, defend themselves,  
They are ultimate in their own right—they are calm, clear,  
well-possess'd of themselves."*

Obviously, the world of the "*rangers*" and that of these women is the same. Thus, this lyric, which, if any, ought to be erotic instead fashions Whitman's characteristic image, which I consider the base of everything, the vigorous pioneer and good companion.

In “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” a poem I have already discussed, there is a stanza that speaks to my present point. Whitman is describing the fervent march west and the panorama of the symbolic conquest of the new continent when suddenly he utters this invocation:

*"O you daughters of the West!*

*O you young and elder daughters! O you mothers and you  
wives!*

*Never must you be divided, in our ranks you move united,*

*Pioneers! O pioneers!"*

The resolute and combative nature of the "*young and elder daughters*" seems here unequivocal to me. His vision of the world as an arena in which life unfolds—healthy, conquering, and revealing—is so powerful and restrictive that Walt Whitman reduces even women, the "*mothers and wives*," to types within this rubric. I do not mean this as a reproach. All I am trying to do is to separate as much as possible the true nature of Whitman's poetic creation from its own inherent dross and to make it visible despite the fog created by others. To recapitulate: all of “Ch. of Adam” can be reduced to the themes and images I have here mentioned.

I have omitted references to some of the poems either because of their insignificance or because the reader can easily judge them. “We Two, How Long We Were Fool'd,” for example, is a poor and exaggerated copy of the lyric atmosphere of “From Pent-up....” A poor copy because though it returns to the parallel of lovers and nature, it does not live it, but only tells it; an exaggeration because it replaces the fresh symphonic variety of the earlier poem with an unrelenting, logical list of the similarities between the freedom passion brings, and the instinctive life of animals and things.

Nor have I analyzed “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd” that Bailey likes so much.<sup>9</sup> It is a confused and cerebral simile, almost an allegory, that seems to be trying to express the universal cohesion of man in equilibrium with everything. But it is in fact an absurd dialogue between the poet and an artistically invisible drop of water. And, finally, even though it begins with the muscular description of the pioneer-giant, I have not spoken of “Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals” with its deformed image of his songs bathed in “Sex.”

I want to touch on only one more poem from “Ch. of Adam” before going on to “Calamus.” I refer to “Spontaneous Me.” We happily and clearly find again in this poem the methods and tone of “From Pent-up...,” but—and this is why I have waited till now to deal with it—we also find something more, something we will come across again immediately in “Calamus.” In “Spontaneous Me” the characteristic symphony of love and nature is marvelously composed: The rhythmic breaking of waves corresponds to the trembling pulsing of blood; the smell of fruit and sage to the embrace of the two sleepers. In this masterful catalog, so accomplished we can call it “*careless*,” we see the first outline, the shadow-shape of another image that will be expanded in “Calamus.” I allude to the fusion of the descriptive passages into a fantastic natural landscape—forest, plants, sea—something more suggestive than anything bounded or defined by space. And the lovers do not appear as characters in a scene, rather they people this landscape as figures who draw all their intimacy, all the poetry of their spiritual relationship from what W. Whitman calls the “*suggestions*” incorporated in this environment.

Carnal love also makes an appearance in “Spontaneous Me,” but only the semblance because, as I have already said, in W. Whitman even the detailed description of the act of sex becomes a hymn to health, joy, and spiritual significance. Not to mention that any similarity between a southern breeze and one's "*love-odor*" is too much a simile and too little an "*interchange*" of "*spiritual meanings*."

What we have here is the poetry of the reflective man receiving intimations of human magnetism as he wanders in the midst of nature. We will soon see in the following “Calamus” Section how this theme is developed from the few measures scattered in this song. The figure who concludes *Spontaneous Me* is the poet who encounters animals and plants and discovers that their purity purifies him; the poet who reaffirms the rightness and glory of the contact and ends with the incomparable reference to the bunch plucked from himself in the open air and tossed "*carelessly to fall where it may*." This figure in “Spontaneous Me,”

who earlier was the magnificent "*lounger*" of "Song of Myself," becomes the "*loving comrade*" who opens the "Calamus" Section by announcing his desire to flee henceforth in "*paths untrodden, in the growth by margins of pond-waters,*" far from all the "*standards*" of life "*to tell the secret of my nights and days, to celebrate the need of comrades.*"

The poem containing these lines, "In Paths Untrodden," though only an introduction to the Section, does a good job of introducing the figure described above. But beyond that, it clearly affirms something I cannot repeat too often: Walt Whitman is not just, as he says, the poet of "*manly attachment*," but precisely because he says so, he is also the poet of the resolution to be the poet of "*manly attachment*." And, let us remember, he is above all and always, the poet of poetry.

The figure who in "Starting from Paumanok" declaimed the intoxication of building a nation with song, here more softly creates, and creates better for being softer, a different myth, that of the companion who finds in nature infinite vibrations corresponding to his "*love-secret*" and who promises to put those vibrations into words and make them a passionate poem for the companions, a gesture of love. One must always keep

in mind what W. Whitman said in “Native Moments,” his most anti-literary effusion of sympathy for the uneducated and marginal, “*I will be your poet.*” Here lies the deep heart of Walt Whitman and the failure to grasp this point leads to innumerable errors of judgment as the body of Whitman criticism shows and I have already sufficiently demonstrate

This “In Paths Untrodden” is a good poem. And note how its “*seclusion*” amidst nature, its search for the “*manly*,” the “*athletic*,” and the “*young*” transform this world of tender meditations on friendship into the healthy and vigorous world of vital triumphs and significant discoveries—that world, in sum, that I have defined, with the name W. W. himself offered us, as the world of the pioneer.

“These I Singing in Spring,” the fifth of the Section, reproduces the entire technique of “Spontaneous Me” but with, let us say, a “Calamus” touch.



We see here again the "*lounger*" who goes into the woods, our old acquaintance from "Song of Myself" and "Children...", but this time he does not just enter an imaginary landscape but really walks. He searches for solitude as a better way to find the spirits of "*dear friends dead or alive*" that gather "*a great crowd around.*" The walk is full of caring thoughts for the "*tokens*" he plucks for the "*lovers*" and "*comrades.*" These souvenirs are clumps of leaves, flowers, twigs, bunches of fruit, the landscape and people of the poem. The significance of all this lies in the gentle, slightly mysterious, almost symbolic richness of the plants, and especially in the true and fitting core symbol, the "*calamus-root*" that he will give only to those who love as he himself is capable of loving.

Later, in a poem toward the end of this Section, W. Whitman speaks again of the loving collection of "*living tokens*" and the spirit of friendship and manly attachment that he sees as part of nature. "I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing" clearly expresses this lyricism of manly friendship and also a little envy of the tree that without "*a friend or lover near*" still lives "*unbending, lusty....uttering joyous leaves.*"

Another poem, "Scented Herbage of My Breast," takes up the theme of leaves and vegetation as an expression of supreme spiritual moments and also as an expression of the joyful thought of death. But the poem is a failure. First, because of its overly logical scheme and mangled image. Second, because of the ambiguous nature of the image of the "*scented herbage*," the "*blossoms of his blood*." We never see these, and in any case, they seem absurd on the tomb of someone still alive who promises us more songs. The logical transformation of leaves into symbols of death's beauty does not suffice to create the image of this feeling and it distorts even more an already muddled, overly cerebral scene. It is not unusual for W. Whitman to toy with weird concepts and this idea of the leaves is just that. And here, as sometimes happens in other such cases, he creates a poetic monster.

The problem, I should point out, has nothing to do with catalogs. There is no attempt at one here. It continually amazes me that so many critics take umbrage at this stylistic innovation instead of paying attention to what really matters. The only explanation that seems to make sense is that they hate the mess Walt makes of syntax. That would simplify the matter because it would end forever the argument by making crystal-clear the different positions of the two parties. For myself I freely admit, for the last time (I hope), that when W. Whitman wrote ghastly poetry it was almost always in catalog form. But, with de Sélincourt I also affirm that catalogs usually serve Whitman well as the most efficacious expression of his lyrical world.<sup>10</sup>

Returning to “Calamus,” we find in another poem the familiar figure of the pioneer who searches for the “*comrade*” “*in some wood...in the open air,*” that is, “Whoever You Are, Holding Me Now in Hand” (p. 140). Here we

find the poetry of the proclamation of the self, the self created by poetic intimations lived out in a solitude *a deux*. We find the poetry of the definition of his own inherent, mysterious, exclusive, and passionately untamed richness opposed to the shabby, domestic, suffocating "*standard*" of normal culture and customs. We see here clearly that the man of "Calamus" and the pioneer of the two great "*songs*" are one and same person. In this poem, the definition of the self is created by the affectionately masculine discourse addressed to him who would become the poet's comrade. And so, against the background image of the two wandering in the woods, on a hill, arm in arm, and listening, the affirmation of his intrinsic force and elusiveness, phrased as warnings and incitements, acquires almost the tone of the animate suggestions of all nature. And nature herself, as the poet here portrays her, suggests the same words of dignity and freedom.

We thus see W. Whitman repeat himself with infinite variety and bring to life the same myth: the man who discovers and proclaims the meanings of life in a world seen with virgin eyes. He sings the enchantment of this discovery and proclamation even when, as here, the song of joy is not an explicit hymn but the pleased satisfaction of the man who describes it and prides himself on being new and different.

This same attitude of being dangerous to, or of hurting or deceiving the "*dreamer*" who seeks him, gives rise to another poem, "Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?" But this poem has neither image nor lyric. We see neither the "*lounger*" who speaks nor the "*dreamer*" who listens. There is no nature, no nothing; only blunt questions, clearly logical but lacking any poetry of proclamation or of secret suggestions.

At various times W. Whitman opposed the notion that "all is vanity" with the concept of friendship. He does so in "Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances" and succeeds in producing a satisfactory image. He declares in this poem that while everything may be pointless, friendship

is still enough to fill life, to give color to the world, to satisfy every doubt with "*untold and untellable wisdom*." The first part of the poem, that expressing the doubt, is watery and tepid. He creates true poetry only in the second part, where, in describing the peacefully ineffable satisfaction and the infinite suggestions generated by the presence of the friend, he invokes by implication all the meaninglessness, coldness, and uncertainty of a world deprived of this life-giving presence.

There are many poems in "Calamus" we could call theoretical poems on the theme of friendship. Almost all of them suffer from being too logically contrived and lack an effective figure such as that of the pioneer or comrade. They are basically just thoughts. One such is "Fast Anchor'd Eternal O love!" which is a totally unstructured cry that attempts to differentiate two loves, one for the woman of "*athletic reality*" and the other for the "*comrade*." This poem has thrilled many who search for the doctrinal distinction between "Children of Adam" and "Calamus" but for me, who searches for any vital image W. Whitman creates in either, it is useless.

“City of Orgies” also suffers from the ambiguous doctrinal nature of differentiating between one subject and another, in this case between life and poetry. Its method of doing so—a list of tableaux of the city that once pleased him followed by a quick synthesizing allusion to the “*lovers, continual lovers*” who now attract him—seems rather contrived.

The capstone of these logical nonentities is that trifle of a poem, “Trickle Drops.” The questionable idea here of his own blood's dripping from him and saturating all his songs is only slightly less deformed than that of his “*songs*” bathed in “*Sex...offspring of his loins* (p. 131)<sup>A</sup> that we saw in “Children of Adam.” It is curious that Whitman, who has been taken for the simplest and most immediate writer who ever saw light, every now and then plays these mind games. The explanation is obvious: W. Whitman was never simple and primitively immediate except to the extent those qualities are necessary for any poet. Rather, he tried to express many intellectually complex ideas, and sometimes because of his prodigious talent and richness of experience this effort produced poetry. But sometimes, without

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<sup>A</sup> “...Sex/Offspring of my loins” is the finishing phrase of the poem, *Ages and Ages Returning at Intervals* from the “Children of Adam” Section. Translator’s note

question, he failed miserably. These failures, however, are not such great disasters that we have to ignore them or, as some overly zealous apostles have done, invent esoteric aesthetic theories to justify them.<sup>11</sup> If poets are to be crowned by virtue of the number of their successful works—an admittedly crude way of judging—few others will have a more brilliant crown than Walt Whitman.

Let us now proceed to other poems that deal with the general theme of friendship, those that achieve a happier result through a realized image. “Not Heat Flames up and Consumes,” for example, despite the forced logic used in comparing nature's ways and his own “*love...wafted in all directions*,” does a decent job of presenting the two or three phenomena chosen as analogs. These, by themselves, suffice to fully express the intimacy of their correlation with friendship.



The last poem of this type, "Roots and Leaves Themselves Alone," fortunately omits any reference to the second term of the contrast mentioned earlier, friendship. Rather, it "*carelessly*" describes a cluster of natural "*tokens*," like those found in "These I Singing in Spring." The poem expresses its sense of friendship, of affectionate intimacy, though the types of appellations given to things: "*pinks of love*," "*breezes of land and love*," "*love -buds*," and to certain "*twigs offer'd...to young persons wandering out*." This poem brings us back to the old image of the lover or comrade who wanders in the woods, who listens, thereby living out alone his passion.

My goal in this chapter has been to isolate this figure and show how it expresses Walt Whitman's affective world. But I want to do even more: Because this figure is in fact just one aspect of the pioneer described in my preceding chapter, I also want to establish a poetic unity for *Leaves of Grass* which, resolving its contradictions, defines its significance.

“Recorders Ages Hence” and “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” are two other beautiful works, both of which conclude with this characteristic image. These two introduce us to the other class of poems in *Calamus*, which we will now examine.

An interesting side of the vision of friendship begins to show itself clearly in “Recorders of Ages Hence,” an aspect that Bazalgette described well.<sup>12</sup> It is the passionate type of friendship that leads Walt Whitman to jealousy and the *"sick, sick dread lest the one he lov'd might secretly be indifferent to him."* And still, this poem concludes with the characteristic praise of *"wandering hand in hand...through fields, in woods, on hills."*

This figuration of friendship gives rise in “Calamus” to a group of short poems, each of which expresses its own little drama, an affair of this strange passion. The comrade, the *"dear friend"* is a more individualized personality in “When I Heard at the Close of the Day” than in earlier poems. The poet waits for him in autumn, first at dawn and then at night and the surrounding nature becomes the old atmosphere of suggestions, faithfully reflecting every human movement that occurs. And here, finally, we

encounter the great, definite, and unequivocal confession: W. Whitman goes to bed with a man. We must decide, they say: was he or wasn't he? And in doing so they say we must also consider another poem, "Earth, My Likeness," in which the poet pulls back, terrified, from the final step.

I believe, as I have already said, that it is useless to try to answer this biographical question. There is no documentation.

I personally believe that W. Whitman did not have that vice, but my opinion means little because, for example, André Gide believes with equal justification that he did. I realize that Gide has reasons to be biased but because of that you cannot deny him the force of logic.<sup>13</sup> The issue will be resolved when definitive documentation comes to light that fully and clearly decides one way or the other. In the meantime, there is nothing to do. No, there is something to do, that which I am trying to do here. And that, put simply, is to try to see what aesthetic figure the offending poems succeed in creating. In doing so, we arrive at the same conclusion we did for the eroticism of "Children of Adam:" W. Whitman does not create here the

poetry of the pleasure of vice but creates again his typical poetry of a passionate attachment and, yes, carnal contact. To the impartial eye this contact appears healthy and vigorous like the natural phenomena that accompany it and are compared to it, as they always are, just as they were in “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer.”

In this sense, W. Whitman's ambiguous and fearful confession of his own sensual joy in holding the hand or arm of a friend, or of kissing his face, is no longer either ambiguous or fearful. It becomes rather the sincere expression of a whole range of feelings which are, in the end, a little ambiguous for all of us.

I hate to admit it because of certain of his general ideas about W. W., but Bazalgette is correct when he reminds us that we all take pleasure in bodily contact with a friend, in the grip of a hand, in a hug.<sup>14</sup> And because of his famous personal magnetism, Walt Whitman must have felt this need strongly. Indeed, it is his glory that he expressed this most human way of friendship and transformed it into art through the poetry I am speaking of.

From this passion came the poems of jealousy and desire. These, were they not also the expression of a calm and manly life, did they not portray the always calm and manly persona—the pioneer—these, let me state an only seemingly obvious truism, would not be in fact what they are. In truth, for W. Whitman all affection reduced itself to the kind of attachment I have described, something between passion and restraint. So much so that a poem in the “Ch. of Adam” Section,” *Once I Pass'd through a Populous City,*” written for a woman, a lover, has the identical tone for example, as “*What Think You I Take My Pen in Hand?*” which in “Calamus” describes two men parting on a pier.

And the author confesses in other poems such as “*To a Stranger or Among the Multitude*” that though the secret of happiness is the desire for the shared life in the presence of an other, the object can be indifferently a man or a woman: “*You were a boy with me or a girl with me,*” and “*acknowledging neither wife nor husband.*” This indifference also brings *Calamus* within the general law I have already posited for W. Whitman's poetry. The pioneers of W.W. are neither men nor women,

they do not have sex, or better yet, they consider sex a natural phenomenon and therefore something excellent and healthy. It follows logically that the resulting poetry creates images not of licentiousness or sin but of a serene "*self-poisedness*" in life.

And now, "Behold This Swarthy Face" brings us the nth reproduction of the figure which first appeared in section 1 of "Starting from Paumanok," here enriched with the attributes of the "*comrade*." All the ways he was described in "Song of Myself," "Nat. Moments," and "Ox-Tamer" are renewed here in "*the silent manner of me...the robust love...American comrades...two natural and nonchalant persons.*" And always, always, the same beloved and stalwart comrade, the "*ranger*" of the fall of the Alamo.

W. Whitman also expresses his aspiration through jealousy as in these poems: "When I Peruse the Conquer'd Flame," "A Glimpse," "Sometimes with One I Love," and "O You Whom I Often and Silently Come." In general

these are artificial scenes created around a thought, expressionless lyric utterances, and yet something passionate and suggestive courses through them. "A Glimpse," for example, is a well-realized scene of two lovers sitting silently amid the noises of a "*bar-room*" and it presents to our imagination a typical fragment of that larger world of suggestions the pioneer gathers in life.

Finally, we come to what I called the politically programmed poems of friendship. They are scattered throughout "Calamus" and while those who believe in the program may like them well enough, a close reading reveals that they are, to tell the truth, overly schematic and thin gruel. Either they try to intimate the total reality of friendship in one verse, or they rationalize, expound, and strive for solemn and polemical expressions. Among these are: "The Base of all Metaphysics," "To the East and to the West," "No Labor-Saving Machine," "I Hear It Was Charged against Me," and "I Dream'd in a Dream." Even if they do contain some nice intimate touches, they very much have the tone of patriotic epigraphs.

But one poem of this type redeems them all, the true poem of the proclamation of friendship in America: "For You O Democracy." Here W. W. rings as true as he ever did. Sentiments that in other poems seem sententious statuary inscriptions, for example "*the institution of the dear love of comrades*," here becomes the electrifying refrain of a hymn:

*"With the love of comrades,*

*With the life-long love of comrades....*

*By the love of comrades*

*By the manly love of comrades."*

The wonder of this poem lies in the grandeur of its view of all America and in its creative virtue of making the landscape of the continent itself an image of "*comradeship*." Here are no didactic instructions, no parallels, similes, or other over-exertions, only reality as seen by the poet and the myth of the passionate embrace of comrades. The lands themselves



are "*magnetic*," "the continent is "*indissoluble*," the cities are "*inseparable...with their arms about each other's neck*." With the same kind of grand gesture that gave us the giant of *Starting...*, W. W. here creates, without grotesquery, the image of these lands in love.

*"I will plant companionship thick as trees along all the rivers  
of America, and along the shores of the great lakes, and  
all over the prairies...."*

"*Companionship*" takes on the dimension of the entire continent and in truth becomes its vital juice (in Whitman's reality, of course), identified with its rivers, lakes, and prairies.

All this is hammered home by that stupendous refrain with its simple variation of one adjective. And at the end, the characteristic joy of having been the poet: "*...for you I am trilling these songs*."

The image of friendship compared to America returns in two other poems of this group, "The Prairie-Grass Dividing," and "A Promise to California." Unfortunately, things are now no longer so immediate. The former is only a parallel desire, a rationalization, the latter saves itself with

its sketch of the "*teacher*," the same man of "Starting..." who here returns to construct a nation. Both poems are notable for the lyric wave pushed forward by their decisive and primitive force. The "*rowdies*" return, "*coarse, sunlit, fresh, nutritious*" and made worthy, "*leading not following...a never-quell'd audacity...simple, never constrain'd, never obedient...those of inland America.*"

There is a myth, as I have noted, that flowers throughout the *Leaves*: that almost Dionysian ideal, though stripped of all associated morbidity, of the robust and roguish companion. I want to return to that myth and in doing so conclude this chapter especially devoted to him. I do so through "We Two Boys Together Clinging." The two robust comrades of this poem, fools in their labor of liberation, go forth resolute and joyful to "*foray*" across America, to eat, love, dance on the beach, and conquer cities. These laughing and thieving comrades are well and sincerely portrayed in the "leaf" dedicated to them.

That W. Whitman himself never did anything that they did is of no importance, nor do I understand why poetry should be valued less for this. The Futurists never dynamited Venice nor scaled the Himalayas, but certain works that propose these gestures are nonetheless valid. Something of the literally revolutionary spirit that enlivened certain 1910 manifestos truly breathes at times in W. Whitman.

In this short poem we see Whitman's concept of friendship carried, as they say, to its extreme conclusion. The result is a persona composed of all the experiences heretofore listed—the "*ranger*" and "*cow-boy*," who, through manly comradeship, merge into poet and prophet.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Perry, op.cit., 44-48.

<sup>2</sup> *Calamus—A Series of Letters Written During the Years 1868-1880 by W.W. to a Young Friend (Pete Doyle)*. Boston: 1897, introduced by Richard M. Bucke. Not to be confused with the *Calamus* Section of *Leaves of Grass*. From this point forward, all references to *Calamus* mean that of the *Leaves*.

<sup>3</sup> De Sélincourt, op. cit., 207-08.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bailey, op. cit., 150-51.

<sup>5</sup> George R. Carpenter, *W.W.* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 157.

<sup>6</sup> F. Gamberale, op.cit., XXXIX.

<sup>7</sup> De Sélincourt, op. cit., 26-28.

<sup>8</sup> J. Burroughs, *Whitman*, ed. cit., 191-194.

<sup>9</sup> J. Bailey, op. cit., 155.

<sup>10</sup> De Sélincourt, op. cit., the chapter on "Style"

<sup>11</sup> L. Bazalgette, op. cit., 85-102.

<sup>12</sup> L. Bazalgette, op. cit., 204-209.

<sup>13</sup> André Gide, *Corydon*, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1929), 17-19.

<sup>14</sup> L. Bazalgette, op. cit., 208.

## Chapter IV

The Great "*Songs*"

I call the works I deal with now the great *songs* despite the vast number of minor poems involved. I do so because the great family of "*songs*," including the monumental "Starting from Paumanok" and other giants of the type like "By Blue Ontario's Shore," "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood," "and Proud Music of the Storm," forms the core of the group, the center of gravity around which the other almost dependent minor poems cluster. The tone and themes of these poems differ from those of the groups dedicated to Love, the Epic, or the Soul. They contain broader, more extensive subject matter, less easily reduced to any biographical argument. They defy general classification. All one can say is that they are uniquely the poetry of Walt Whitman.

In what W. W. would call the first "*brood*" of these songs we encounter again the persona of the pioneer—the prophet we left in "Starting from Paumanok." We thus return to the man who proclaims his discovery of the new reality.

In doing so we find that he brings up here something only implied in section 2 of “Starting...:” the birth of America as the culmination and flowering of the world, and consequently America as the renewal of the inspired, primitive life. In doing so, he creates through a number of "*songs*" a true historical myth of America, a myth of its genesis and its significance in relation to the past. He develops a poetically perfect and living myth that is useless to disparage by alleging deficiencies in W. Whitman's historical knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps he knew only a little history, but W. W.'s political interest was such that he created from those scarce notions a synthesis that lacks nothing when viewed aesthetically. It may lack something when viewed logically, but I believe it is the aesthetic principle that should be first applied to a writer like W. W., who, in any case, has the same right to synthesize as does any conventionally approved author.

The well-known “Salut au Monde!” introduces in this group of great "*songs*" the lyric of America's historical significance. One critic, I no longer remember which, considered this poem a grotesquery, beginning

right with its title. (For those who enjoy these bibliographic rarities, the best, however, happened while W.W. was still alive and Gustavo Strafforello, in his little history of American Literature— Hoepli, 1884—classified him as one of America's great humorists, given that his poems, "...if not exactly humoristic were always odd and bohemian...and caused a great hullabaloo" (p. 144).

For those who hold to the parallel between W. W. and Keats that I mentioned earlier, "Salut au Monde!" is a perfervid Bacchanal or, at minimum, a cautionary example for the young about certain pretenses to originality that can trigger artistic aberrations. Noyes comes to mind. In the chapter, "W. W.'s Art" in his book, *An Approach to Walt Whitman*,<sup>2</sup> he approves the verses of *Salut...* that he considers enriched by the inclusion of a beautiful scene and deprecates those limited to a list of names. In fact, *Salut au...* is beautiful precisely because it is made up of a great list of names, an embrace of the entire world felt first as sounds and sights (sections 3-4-5), then solemnized by references to divine mythical



heroes (section 6) and finally reprised in a crescendo of passion as a declaration of the dignity of every human reject in the name of America.

We have here the familiar poetry of the cosmic vision, the usual passionate embrace of a continent, of the globe, so much so this time that he ends with a vindication of the savages and the uncouth. This global context allows us to understand that his crying "St. Petersburg" and then "Berlin" in one of the crescendos is his expression of the astonishment and joy of this discovery and not an arid assembly of catalogs. Some minor bits are also here, and they are welcome even if the longest of them are only interruptions and annoyances.

But in the end, the aesthetic figure we search for does not lie in the finished image of the various places and their inhabitants but rather in the image of the one who proclaims and embraces and loves these places and those who live there for their immensity and their promise of future life. It is this promise of future life that justifies the Intermezzo of section 6, which begins with vague references to religious prehistory and ends with a call

to the martyrs, the "*divine young man*," the "*deaths of the bodies of God*," "*the old signifiers*," Christ, Hercules, Kneph and Hermes, "*dying, well-belov'd*."

After this, the parade of countries and peoples turns more somber. Without losing any of the élan of the proclamations, W.W. becomes more conscious of the tragedy of history and searches out with his loving embrace the most downtrodden—the slave peoples, the savage peoples—and promises them justice, equality, and the "inevitability" that all will live on earth in accordance with nature (section 13) and America (section 13).

All this is the first draft of what I call W. Whitman's historical myth, America understood as the crown of the world. We will soon see clearly how, in this sense, the entire history of the world assumes the characteristics of exploration and conquest by pioneers. How it serves, too, as the backdrop and epic fable for the already-described figure of the pioneer. What is important in W. W. is that he has in fact created this fable, and all the rest---culture and objective history---has nothing to do with it.

For example, there are two poems, both of which establish eminently logical schemes for this same concept of America's "accomplishing the rondure of the world"<sup>A</sup> and yet neither of them manages to create anything. They are "A Broadway Pageant" (Vol. II, pp. 1-5) and "With Antecedents" (Vol I, pp. 292-94). The first is a simple conceit: Japanese ambassadors arrive in New York City; the races are rejoined and will now advance in Liberty. Section 2 is effective as an evocation of the ancient Orientals seen as present-day pioneers, but as a whole, the poem has the tone of an occasional piece with the same almost journalistic tone he often used in those poems that were, either by happenstance or design, most specifically political, and which, as we shall see, occur frequently in the works of his old age.

The other, "With Antecedents," says much the same as the first but, of course, in a different setting. The Union is in danger, but all history teaches us that everything that happened had to happen; we are the sum of history

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<sup>A</sup> Pavese's paraphrase in Italian of the last line of section 4 of *Passage to India*, "Thou, rondure of the world at last accomplish'd."

and therefore things can only go well even though they are going badly. As one can see, these thoughts are mere propositions with no possible image.

In the “Song of the Broad-Axe” (Vol. I, p. 233) we have the first true great image of this history of pioneers who, from the beginning of time, worked to construct America. And yet the song as a whole is a failure, a chaotic chasm spanned at points by splendid words. The poem's great defect is already expressed in its title—the axe—symbol of conquest, methodical labor, destruction, and various other things. Too often in the course of the song we hear that the axe is meant to link all these things but the continual use of the concept to thread together the various themes comes across as artificial.

I grant that the poem has a development that is not solely exterior. The long description of pioneer life and commonplace occupations in section 3, both felt with the same spirit of health and vigor (with no mention of the axe) leads in Sections 4-6 to the praise of the power of personality that endures this existence (with no mention of the axe) (sections 4-5-6).

Then in section 7 a sketch of the prehistoric pioneers (the axe enters to wreak destruction) and finally, in sections 9-12, America created as a theater of work, joy, and human dignity (and the axe ruins everything).

Clearly, the appearance in the poem of the above-mentioned tool carries with it confusion, declamations, gushing prophecies and all the usual Whitmanesque deformities. Granted that it is the symbol of work and conquest, but being also that of tyranny and other scourges, the "*broad-axe*" in this "*song*" leads to a contrapuntal rhetoric of exclamatory praise and disparagement. It gives rise to a sensational apocalypse of red-draped executioners and enigmatic "*shapes*" rising in the air. The rhetoric is such that the much-acclaimed description of the new femininity in section 11<sup>3</sup> seems to me more a description of the Statue of Liberty than that of an admirable figure, such as the one found, for example, in "Children of Adam."

And one can go on in this vein. Section 8, dealing with the tyrannies that were but are no more, brings together all those poems that Michaud

aptly defined as belonging to Whitman's Victor Hugo-1848 phase. These begin with "France" (Vol I, p. 287) and continue with "Europe" (Vol II, p. 27), "To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire" (Vol II, p.142), and include, among others, many poems in "Drum Taps" They end with "O Star of France" (Vol II, p. 170), which is the triumph of these ghastly personifications and even worse political generalities that lack any creativity. Of these, only "France" is not so bad, mostly because of the poet who appears at the end hoping for the joy of songs from across the sea.

But with all this bad poetry noted, the sections without the "*broad-axe*" in the "Song of the Broad-Axe" remain and certain parts of the other sections that should not be taken lightly.

For Bailey, this "*song*" was "*perhaps chiefly remarkable*" because it begins with "*six rhymed lines*."<sup>4</sup> For all I know, the distinguished American scholar was here amusing himself with a bit of irony and if that is the case, I bow to him because in my opinion nothing is more agreeable than a critic who knows how to drop the rigid mask of his profession. Though I hope not,

it is possible that Bailey in here noting the anomaly of the six rhymes truly believes that they are the most interesting thing about the poem because of his principle that the more willingly W. W. accepts rhythmic schemes, the better he succeeds. If this is the case, then I will drop my mask, and remembering de Sélincourt's remarks already cited in relation to "Native Moments," comfort myself with the knowledge that no matter how badly my study of Whitman turns out, others have said something more ridiculous about him.

De Sélincourt, who favors complete metric freedom, cites at one point this "*eight-line stanza*" and maintains that it, in common with various other experiments in rhyme and measure, is a blotch, a fatuous trifle, "*a silly jingle of words*."<sup>5</sup> He at least speaks in broad terms and cites from all sections of the work without giving, or pretending to give, much attention to the body of individual poems. But my noting that Bailey, involved in a regular "*Walk through L. of G.*," can say when he reaches *Broad-Axe* that it is "*chiefly remarkable*" for its initial rhymes, is not, as one might think, just

a pretext for some petty Byzantine polemic of mine. Having brought up this case, I point it out as one indication among many of that lacuna in Whitman criticism to which I broadly referred in my first chapter. On the one hand we find endless, petty formalistic arguments: How he ought to have done something, how he could have done something, in what something consists, the personae, meter, style, etc. On the other hand, we find historical issues of ideas, reform, parallels: W. W. democrat, W. W. thinker, W. W. theosophist, W. W. man of the woods, nurse, friend, journalist, paralytic.....Poet? Yes, even poet every now and then. And ironically, the latest studies all still protest their faith in *Leaves of Grass*, a work that is above all, literary. Bailey is the classic here: on page 3 of his introduction, he declares war on the legend of "*W. W. poet in a new sense of the word*" and concludes this discourse by promising to remove all the obstacles created by W. W. himself to arrive thus at a "*clear view*" of what remains of the real "*poetic achievement*."



In fact, all these critics go on to discuss metrics and democracy and leave the reader to deal with the poetry. A solution, I might add, that would not be bad but then, of course, we would have to burn all the works I've referred to.

But I, too, have fallen into the war of words. Let me return to the positive and to my task; what does the poetry of the "Broad-Axe" consist of? I have already said that the first sections and some parts of the last are not to be taken lightly. Excluding the first page, made up of the central symbol and a succession of landscapes without atmosphere, the rest up to section 7 constitutes one of the most notable Whitman poems. I have already described section 3, the group 4-6, and section 7. After a first great and beautiful catalog of men at work in America's cities and countryside, he goes on to a perhaps overly oratorical description of the large personalities required for this new life. Then, taking up again what he earlier emphasized

at the end of the passage on pioneer America (section 3), he looks back to antiquity and sees operating the same formative work of conquest. What then follows, except for section 10's catalog of the calm "*self-poisedness*" of America's "*every-day life*" is, as I have already said, a chaotic and useless apocalypse, "*too like*," and here even I cite Bailey, "*the exuberant newspaper articles*." To sum up: the essential element of this "*song*" is the poetry of the construction of America compared to past constructions and understood as the coronation of all those past works.

Another "*song*," "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" (Vol II, p. 235)," mines this seam of the new nation, fruit of all history, and lays out the lines of the present and future, even calling attention to the "*livid cancer*" and "*moral consumption*" that menace the future. But things get even worse. The theme of political America was always risky for W. Whitman and even more so in a poem like this one, written for public recitation at a college commencement.

Nineteenth-century prophesying, and national (Puritan) sermonizing rewarded those who shouted loudest and thus we have here exclamations, definitions, hypotheses, personifications, grand words in all capitals—the only thing missing is *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The Dartmouth College students, who had not listened to a word of this "*commencement poem*," only realized Whitman had finished when their President shook his hand.<sup>6</sup> Frankly, they did not miss anything.

We could try subtlety and say that section 2 contains a decent description of "*Outdoor America*," but given how many fine pages W. W. wrote on that subject it would be shameful to try to promote this fragment, damaged as it is by its patriotic emphasis and polemical tone. Sections 3 and 4 interest us more: not as poetry—of which there is little—but as a reprise of the image of America as the justification and continuation of the world.

Here the image is that of a ship sailing forth and let us remember that the sea is also the theater of the pioneer. But it is a pitiful thing.

Also pitiful is the “Song of the Exposition,” which was also written for an official function, the opening of the 40<sup>th</sup> annual American Institute Exhibition in New York City, where the author recited it with I do not know what success. Binns is right when he says that these two poems lack “inevitability” because of their overuse of “*stock poetic touches*,” which at his best the poet hated.<sup>7</sup> Its defects are the same as those of *Thou Mother*.... The solemnity of the civic ode produces only grand personifications of Columbia, flat exclamations, and polemical contrasts of the New World with the Old. As often happens, some of Whitman's better phrasings are scattered in these pages: the old world disappearing, as though tired from too long a journey, the fight to form the present reality of work and nature. But solemnity, rhetoric and polemic rob these elements of the life-giving characteristic of being proclaimed instantaneously in the act of discovery. A surface coating of the conventional and ordinary suffocate them. One could say that W. W. fails here because he does not sing

a song of discovery, but rather enumerates phenomena discovered at other times. Here, truly, the catalog is a catalog, a mere listing of words and not the look of an eye astonished by the landscape that is the image of the marvel it suggests.

But having said all this, one must notice section 1, which, entirely separated from the rest, well and soberly expresses the cosmic fatalism implicit in the incessant force and continuity of history, and also section 3 despite its opening and conclusion. Its remainder expresses the parade of the past, vanished, destructive, yet always fraternal, ever marching toward one ideal. This represents a curious moment in the historical fable of the pioneer I have described, and W. W.'s usual optimism makes this sorrowful story doubly impressive.

We must remember that W. W., who knows how to cavort with shouts of joy—"*barbaric yawps over the roofs of the world*"—when facing the immense reality that promises him immense songs also knows how to face a different reality. When confronted with injustice, evil, or mystery he thoughtfully and straightforwardly faces their inevitability. Many

have tried to single out this second side of his world, not because of its poetry, but, as usual, to attribute ethical dignity to the man, to make sure we understand that he was aware of the tragedy of life. I believe there is no scholar of the *Leaves* who has not joined in this unsolicited effort to rehabilitate the poet.

As Papini says with his usual incisiveness<sup>8</sup>, while quietly stealing a line from Robert Louis Stevenson, "The optimism of W. W. is not exactly that of Dr. Pangloss."<sup>9</sup> In fact W. W.'s elegiac, or tragic, poems are assuredly great and beautiful, but not because of the gloomy reason that many of them touch "the depth of sadness that is the final revelation of every profound look at existence" as someone, I forget who, said. Rather, they are so because with them, the poet has manifestly escaped the plague of those affirming "*songs*" in which the smallest things were sufficient to engender beatific visions expressed in that didactic rapture and demagogic rhetoric we know so well.

When his ideas turn dark, W. W. usually describes things dryly. He may be as affected as a child, but he forces himself to look unemotionally, with teeth clenched behind his beard. And gradually, the stoic face gives way to passion and becomes loving, like a father's. In a sense, the beauty of the "elegies" within the *Leaves* lies in their contrast of his serene optimism with brutal reality and the consequent mute sadness of the insatiable impulse of love. It is the desperate search for a manly response and leads to the passionate embrace of the good companion on the hard journey—the comrades, the pioneers of “Calamus.”

W. Whitman meant to save optimism with this involuntary image of a Don Quixote-like struggle with impassivity giving way to love. But instead, he saved his poetry. We shall see in “Drum-Taps” the prophet's true agony evolving amid atrocities. He contemplates them in silence, even, one could say, in terror until, as the good companion, he finds release in the affectionate and fatherly care of comrades.

But I go on too long. I will take up this point again later. For now, I return to the historical fable that gives life to that "song" of the "exposition." The last sections, overflowing with the ongoing life of the entire Union and the ardent embrace of the flag, its symbol, are just enough to drown out the echo of the lament for all the history that has disappeared, destroyed by the past. If, despite its forced rhetoric, this "song" has any value it surely lies in this embryonic drama, which, though in a different form, resembles the development of the "Song of the Broad-Axe." The enthusiastic march of pioneers who here discover, poorly concealed, the inevitable sadness of the myth—the future paid for by the past, "all is dead, all is larva."

I leave for now the larger subject of poems in which the world's evil in all its aspects torments the good poet to cite here in this group of historically oriented poems two other works that touch on this drama of time: "Unnamed Lands" (Vol. II, p. 144) and "Yonnondio" (Vol. II, p. 310).

The first, with little in the way of scenographic effects, directly



evokes pre-historic epochs seen through the simple, universal characteristics of daily life. And in answer to the question, are they really gone? comes a firm affirmation of faith, "...*every one exists this hour here or elsewhere, invisible to us.*" The answer is no more than a thought; but the poem's peaceful image of vanished lands still alive is noteworthy, not for the spiritualistic solution of W. W., but rather for the amplitude and dignity of its configuration.

The subject of "Yonnondio," a poem of his old age (1888) is instead a lament for the fate of a noble people, "*Race of the woods, the landscapes free, and the falls!*" who have vanished, been swept away—"the storm and wintry night,"—without a trace, nothing, "*no picture, poem, statement passing them to the future.*" This is the brave lament of the figure who in *Starting from Paumanok* proclaimed the final glory of a people who knew how to remain alive by creating songs for themselves and the future. But here the desperation is total; not even the present time of the States, elsewhere all powerful, suffices to console the poet: "*To-day gives place, and fades—the cities, farms, factories fade.*" We search vainly here for the optimist who silently faced so many evils regardless of the cost. The poet's

old age and sickness are certainly responsible in part for this and in fact “Yonnondio” appears in the first appendix to the *Leaves* in which this despondent note is not rare. In fact.....but I will deal with that in the appropriate chapter.

In the meantime, this consummate demonstration of the optimism of understanding and certainty in the face of the iciest desperation lends credence to that which I have anticipated: when faced with pain, W. W., forces himself to believe and hope in an aesthetic result—the poetry of the conquest of optimism, the creation of a new figure, the pioneer-seer, the sturdy companion who "tries" to acquiesce and finds release in transports of love.

But I have broken this theme down into too many fragments. The poems in which W. W. expressed his concept of the pioneer shaped by history are up to this point, taken as a whole, failures. And one can understand why: the extraordinary opportunity they offered the poet to do himself in with rhetorical effects and empty pages.

There is one "*song*," however, that succeeds perfectly in creating this historical myth, but I must not analyze it here. By rights it belongs with my future chapter, "The Passage of the Soul." This poem, "Passage to India" (Vol. II, p. 186), gazes with a universal eye on the anguish and motive of historical pioneers but resolves itself in an ulterior march that goes beyond death, the soul, the eternal. We will see all this, and we will see how W. W., even in his most mystic hymns, ever remains the pioneer who advances, absorbs, and conquers.

As he does, for instance, in "Prayer of Columbus" (Vol. II., p. 198), where he enriches the historical myth of this specific pioneer with mystic themes and elevates the theme of discovery and conquest into the spiritual atmosphere of the beyond. So true is this, that the final vision of oceans and unexplored shapes is, granted, one of America but also something more, a paradise, an "*ethereal abode*." In fact, this uninterrupted passage from the

rude world of earth-bound pioneerism to the heavenly voyage will later serve to demonstrate that W.W. is always, always, even in his most opaque mysticism, always the pioneer of “Song of Myself” and “Starting from...,” the joyous discoverer who sings this joy.

Returning now to the point where we left the road, we find “Salut au Monde!” followed by poems we can call political, that celebrate America and in which we find the myth of its historical genesis. We find here the figure of America as human, political reality and we continue also to find here images of discovery and conquest, and always, in various forms, the myth of the pioneer who has followed us all along.

Among these political poems is the “Song of the Redwood-Tree” (Vol. I, p. 251), one of Whitman's grandest and most soaring creations. For Bailey, needless to say, it seems “*interesting on account of its lyric...the song of the California tree.*” And even more, Bailey is amazed that the modernist W. W. there speaks of dryads and hamadryads.<sup>10</sup> I will not pause this time to argue with him but pass directly to my comment.

Despite its magnificence, the song would be nothing without the mood and echo of its setting. True, the energy and inevitability of the conquest are expressed in the calm and massive dignity of the tree's agony, but more important is the atmosphere of suspension, almost of anticipation in the surrounding landscape. The "*new-race*" spreading through the new land is described mainly in terms of older races—vegetation, rocks—and both thereby are raised to the same level of dignity and force. "*You untold life of me....*," the life of the sequoia, evolves in the same realm as the life of the "*new culminating man: ...Here may he hardy...grow....*" And this new life is not, as it is sometimes with Walt, vain teaching, but rather a lived reality. More than in the announcements of the future, this reality lives in the identification with the race that falls as another conquers, in its descriptions from the former: "*pois'd, stalwart, great.*" etc.

But above all, as I have said, this song sustains its intensity—full of proclamations so taut that, when read aloud, they make us a little dizzy—

through the superb presentation of the landscape that shapes and justifies it.

It begins on a stage of giants with nature's voices as "*base and accompaniment*" and throughout the poem the setting intervenes, supports, and comments. At the closing of this first section, it echoes even more immensely, "*From the Cascade range to the Wahsatch,*" from "*Idaho far*" and from "*Utah.*"

In the section that follows, which, musically, is like a muted reprise of the "maestoso" finale of the theme, the stage becomes larger and more crowded: California, Australia, thousands of Pacific "*island paradises,*" cities, inventions, waterfalls, and mines.

The last section, with one grand look at the whole scene already described, returns to the comparison of man to Nature, the great tree drawing its sap from America. This seems to me the logic of the poem and anyone can see what dryads and hamadryads become in the face of the majesty of the new myth created by the idea of conquest.

Another small example of this grand motif is a short poem in the

“Autumn Rivulets” Section, “The Prairie States” (Vol. II, p. 107). There, the enthusiasm for civilization's "*new teeming paradise*," risen to replace wild nature and alive with nature's freshness, continues to express itself in effective imagery.

One great "*song*" remains to conclude this group of poems exalting the historic fact of America: “By Blue Ontario's Shore” (Vol. II, p. 107). For me, this poem, recast in part from sections of the Preface of '55, is crucial because through the most comprehensive of all examples it conclusively establishes the figure I have so often described—W.W. the poet of poetry.

I want to put to rest first of all the idea that this “*song*” was the final summary of Whitman’s hope for America after the trauma of the Civil War—as one critic, whose name I will save from further wear, says on page 176 of his work.<sup>B</sup> This is a simple chronological point and, as they say in his country, my anonymous critic “*should have known better.*” “By Blue Ontario’s Shore” first appeared in 1856 (“Poem of Many in One”<sup>11</sup>) when Lincoln was still debating Douglas and the last war fought by the Union was

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<sup>B</sup> John Bailey in his *Walt Whitman*.

the Mexican campaign of '47. Only a few passages in the "*Song*" deal with specifically warlike themes and these, inserted in 1867,<sup>11C</sup> do not transform the spirit of the rest, which remains that of the famous Preface. Indeed, section 7, written right after the Civil War, is an indelible stain on the poem. Using imagery more suited to the Europe of 1848 it expresses only commonplace patriotic fervor and is best considered a blank space separating two moments of the song.

Instead, as anyone can see, "Ontario..." is a great, well-ordered and eloquent sermon, preached to the chosen people, on the enormous reality of America, the terrible grandeur of the office of its poet and the great need he feels for this poetry. The heart of the oration lies in the relationship between a coarse and forceful America and a challenge as severe as the equally coarse and forceful challenge the poet lays out for himself in sections 8-13. The lyric image that

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<sup>C</sup> This second use of Endnote "11" appears in Pavese's original.



W. W. here creates, not despite, but through the sermon, is that of the oracle who abandons himself so convincingly to his work that from it springs forth the poetry of this work.

The three intervals of the “*song*” clearly demonstrate this result.

Sections 2-6: America seen in its reality, which spiritually or physically always contains its vital “*ruggedness*.” Section 8-13: The poet as a reflection of the nation and therefore required to possess all its characteristics, and those characteristics come to describe the necessary stature of the poet.

Sections 14-18: The synoptic figure of the author who proclaims his work, thereby raising himself to the level of example and myth as the necessary poet, concluding with a characteristic encounter with raw nature. He then returns in sections 19-20 to external scenes: The lake, America, the invocation of the poets who will arise.

Nothing could be better suited than the solemnly oratorical form of this “*song*.” Through it, Whitman indeed expresses the poetry of proclaiming to America. The movement of section 19 provides convincing

evidence, for there the figure of the orator and prophet becomes distinct and objectified in the reader's imagination, to the point of a definite physical image. And since for W. W. proclamation is poetry, I find here described the figure of the poet and therefore the lyric of creating poetry. This figure of the poet splendidly reprises, I repeat, in contrast, to sections 19-20, the exposition of the preceding choral song

The "Song of the Answerer" (Vol. II, p. 200), on the other hand, fails in its attempt to repeat this myth of the poet. Though made from the same stuff as that of "By Blue..." it finds no environment, no shaping atmosphere and proceeds with admonishments and definitions in its ineffective effort to create some trace of feeling. This ghost of a poem lacks an America useful for location and comparison, lacks that world of absorbed and enjoyed nature that gave a foundation, and therefore a consistency, to the "*idler*" of "Song of Myself."

This figure of the “*answerer*” and prophet, that is, the figure of the poet married to that of the “*lounging*” pioneer does, however, give shape elsewhere in the work to a notable poem, “Myself and Mine” (Vol. I, p. 289). The way the atmosphere the poet describes enlivens the poem’s lessons gives these two pages their fascination. In fact, the description is not put forward directly but rather through the form of proclamation: “*To stand the cold or heat, to take good aim with a gun, to sail a boat, to manage horses, to beget superb children....I henceforth tread the world chaste, temperate, an early riser, a steady grower....these continual lessons of air, water, earth....*” And above all, the phrase, “*I will make no account of the laws.*” This is indeed the world of “Song of Myself” and of the “*farmer*” of “I Sing the Body...” and we can only marvel at the way our famous poet here rises above teaching to create poetry. I am ever more convinced that this is the true world of W.W., the critical formula that best explains him.

And so, we have found the figure of the pioneer—the basic premise of my analysis—also in the historic fable of America. I have already twice dealt with the marching song dedicated specifically to the pioneers, “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” (Vol. I, p. 279) and I have nothing to add except to note how, as usual, it is the landscape that in great part creates the figures and gives them that largeness of gesture and resonance which allows them to transcend such simple didactic rhetoric as “*we take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson.*” I would also like to say once and for all to the many critics of “*Walt Whitman’s language and meter*” that the strophic scheme of “Pioneers” is far from irrelevant to the poem. I say that because the poem’s cadenced rhythm expresses well the sense of the enthusiastic march that is in great part the figure of the song. We have here a true and fitting *ἐμβατήριον*<sup>D</sup> and I make bold to say that this is the only time that a metric scheme actually served a purpose for W. W.

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<sup>D</sup> Greek for marching tune, i.e. military marching melody.

Even though it lies outside the limits of the specific historical myth of America, there is among these great “*songs*” one definite statement of this going forth to conquer and proclaiming to the world discoveries and their resolution: It is that “*alter ego*” of “Song of Myself,” the “Song of the Open Road” (Vol. I, p. 177). In essence, all the *Leaves of Grass* is a continuous “Myself” but this “Open Road” more so because of the parallel situation of the poet who goes forth into nature, confronts it, and extracts life-giving influences from it.

“Song of Myself,” because of its already-noted defects and, in truth, partly because of its length—here I agree with Edgar Poe<sup>12</sup>—and despite all the defensive tactics of favorable critics, deconstructs itself into somewhat disparate episodes that can be interchanged without apparent damage. It does not, I repeat, achieve the solid construction and perfect fusion of continual didactic phrasing that, with its image-constructed atmosphere, “Song of the Open Road does.” This latter song, in fact, together with “By Blue Ontario’s Shore, “which I have already dealt with, demonstrates

better than anything else in *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman's prophetic fixation and the consequent rigmarole of thoughts or "proclamations" are not necessarily enemies of his poetry.

We have seen, for example in "Myself and Mine," how lessons can be the direct expression of the environment and of the figure of the poem. In that specific case the "*outlawness*" of the air, water, and earth became the proclamation of freedom and pride. In its turn, "Song of the Open Road" expresses the human lesson of the "*outdoors*" through its various scenes and the projecting figure of the man who goes forth to live on the road and finds feeling, struggle, joy, and serenity. The poem delivers this lesson with continuous pronouncements, all constructed—and this is my point—with a resolute and frank tone, appropriate for such a protagonist. A protagonist, needless to say, who again has all the characteristics of the familiar pioneer and this time, as was true in "Pioneers! O Pioneers!," also those of the affectionate comrade. Truly this "Song of the Open Road" is one of Whitman's great poems.

Its construction is simple. Leaving aside the first and last sections, the usual prelude and postlude here signifying the call of the open contrasted with “*indoor*” comfort and spoiled ease, the entire great chorus of the song seems to me divisible in two parts, two different progressive movements. Sections 2 to 8 contain the revelations that arise from everything surrounding the road: sections 2-3, the virgin and pregnant aspect of all things; sections 4-5, the praise of the strength and composure these inspire; Section 6, the wisdom and cosmic harmony taught by the road and, sections 7-8, the currents of magnetism and the affection that brings the open world of things close to those who know how to absorb them.

At this point, he suddenly truncates the praise of embraces and the “fresh and sweet” contact amidst nature and with section 9 raises a shout, a call, an incitement to action aimed, in accordance with the manly rapture of the “*idler*,” at the pioneer who acts: “*Allons! whoever you are....*” This entire

second movement is densely spangled with these inciting “*Allons!*” and I regret that they raise another instance in which Bailey must be challenged. On page 92 of his cited work, he states that the use W. W. made from time to time of foreign words (*Libertad, Omnes, Accouchez*, etc.) is a grave defect and an indication of an even more serious general decay in his poetry. Whether W. W. uses these foreign phrases to show off or for some other reason is not terribly important. What is essential is that they help in better expressing an idea. And, allowing for my modest knowledge of English, I believe that in this case nothing could better serve to distinguish the particular fervor of the incitement from all the rest than this almost international “*Allons!*,” uncompromising and impressive in its positioning and repetition. What would Bailey prefer? A feeble “*come on!*” or a prattling “*get up!*” or a “*forward*” or “*let’s go!*”? Or maybe a picturesque and “*slangy*” “*shake a leg!*”? But then again, Bailey is not entirely wrong when, in the same section of his book, he says that in W. W. certain phrases sound off-key not because they are common or plebeian but because



they ruin the pitch of a harmonious word or phrase or are otherwise unsuited to render the desired image. But for now, “*let’s on*” ourselves.

This second movement of the “*song*” then plays out from section 9 to the end with the more rapid rhythm of a sermon, with frequent repetitions of prophetic phrasings. But sections 9-10, the call to health and new conquests, express themselves though the boldness and fullness inspired by the proclamations, a dramatic situation, in which the persona of the prophet takes an almost objective pleasure in the discourse. Thus, we have here, to repeat yet again, the poetry of this prophesying and hymning. It is not, in sum, an expression of the primitive joy of the outdoors, something that in any case never existed, but a polemical joy (note the dig at the bat-eyed priests) of living this primitive life free from the encumbrances of the

more civilized. Naturally these two sections contain more than just sermons and themes. A modest hint of atmosphere, of the scene is enough to raise the entire discourse to the level of an expression of the recurring myth of the free road: “*where the wind blows,*” “*the Yankee clipper,*” etc.

Section 11 begins the ascetic lesson. The exertions and sacrifices of the road increase the importance of the journey, increase the fervor of those undertaking it and little by little raise the significance of the material search for freedom and joy to that spiritual sphere of mission and conquest that always underlies Whitman’s every word.

In section 12 we have sketched out for us the true and proper parade of pioneers, the “*great Companions*” who, through nature and freedom work Whitmanesquely to construct a totally new race that will live its life as one great march on the “*open road*” and will continue in the “*freedom*” of death.

Then in section 13 the ranks of comrades appear. They are perfect for

the spiritual enterprise, which is described entirely through scenes of normal life: arrivals, good-byes, rejections, and emotions—the history of the eternal wanderers.

Toward the end of the poem, in section 14, he returns to reemphasize the law of the road, its lesson of strength and sacrifice—the necessary struggle and rebellion. But in section 15, disavowing again peace, quietude, and respectable trades with a last “*allons!*” W. W. concludes by promising to embrace the comrade. And this is the ultimate lesson: Prophet, poet, pioneer, but above all, comrade—the resolution of every secret of life combined with the myth of Manly Love.

And we will see later how the experience of war and death also provided W. W. with ideal figures for a spiritual march alongside comrades.

This spiritual march is such a powerful reality in the soul of W.W. that in another poem, “A Song of the Rolling Earth” (Vol. I, p. 268) he deals with the abstract idea of the earth in the universe by treating the earth as though it were an American man or woman. Here, despite some rhapsodic

and sibylline philosophical declarations at the beginning of the poem, he creates a serene and “*self-poised*” image like that of a “*ranger*,” “*farmer*,” or a Christopher Columbus, an image of the eternal and sure journey of the pioneer and good companion we have already met: “*Amelioration is one of the earth’s words....*”

Indeed, one passage in this “*song*” could pass for the frequently quoted description of the “*farmer*” from “Children of Adam” or one of the Texas “*rangers*:”

*The earth does not argue,  
Is not pathetic, has no arrangements,  
Does not scream.....etc.*

Truly, the figures of the pioneer man and the pioneer earth merge into each other. I will not take my analysis of this poem beyond the first section because the rest of the “*song*” (sections 2-3-4) lacks any substance. It proclaims myriad ideals—the equality of men, the reality of the soul, the certainty of future architects—but produces no image to structure them. All these ideals are fine things and elsewhere they have found worthy expression, but here they form only an undeveloped sermon without even a

sermon's reflective joy.

At this point, in these last songs, the figure of the historical pioneer and that of the pioneer are resolved in an echo of the more wayward and Dionysian figure of "Song of Myself." The correlation of the description of the earth, muscularly "*self-conscious*" and divine, with the many pictures of the world of my second chapter is obvious. Political declarations have entirely disappeared, leaving less dangerous, simple human and cosmic proclamations.

And now, even though it means dealing again with the ideas and forms of America, I want to demonstrate how W. W., by simply returning to the old attitude of one who goes wandering among landscapes and objects, enjoying revelation and evocative richness, succeeded in writing two works which, if they are not considered among his best the fault lies solely with the critics: "Our Old Feuillage" (Vol I., p. 206) and "O Magnet-South" (Vol II., p. 254).

I believe I have said elsewhere of the former that in the heat of the anti-catalog campaign it has been defined as “*little more than a catalogue, which contains, however [Thank God] items that only the most curious [!]) eye would have noticed.*”<sup>13</sup> What do I have to do? Explain all over again my entire theory of style? I have already done that too often. I can, however, state that if someone were to complain that we have here a list of vignettes inserted carelessly and without order among casual protestations of love for and faith in America, concluded with a gesture that is not a conclusion, that would be sufficient evidence to doubt that the malcontent ever understood anything about W. W.

Let us leave aside the idea of the “altogether,” the idea of different scenes justified by the overall landscape they create because of the danger of giving credence to that tricky idea of de Sélincourt that I dealt with on page 41. Even disregarding this argument, it does not seem difficult to understand that the value, the fascination of “Our Old Feuillage” lies precisely in its careless and disordered development and upsetting conclusion. Expressed here is the sense of the continuous and varied discovery

of an entire continent, the joy of the carefree passing from one setting to another, and the nonchalance, the indolence of a contemplator for whom all existence is captured in the spectacle of this world. Moreover, the scenes describe the open and free life: The frankness and force of this embrace of a nation created from nature is so strong that even the rare urban scenes feel its boldness and freshness. What seems to me perfect in this “*song*” is its descriptive reach, at times great sweeps through regions, at others, calm looks at forests and rivers, at scenes swarming with work and life. And each time, a more distinct figure: an animal, a planter, a miner. And every now and then when the impulse strikes, improvised refrains of love, of passionate attachment to the lands (“*O lands! All so dear to me...*”), to the great promise of America. And the conclusion: It is the “*magnificent idler*” who speaks and what else could he do but invite us to collect bouquets of America’s incomparable flowerings?

“O Magnet-South” is much the same but accentuates the great languor of the South: a sultry and rich life in a tropical atmosphere; slow, placid, all given over to whatever may happen; to the “*sluggish*” flow of a river, the strange scents of a forest, the fascination of sounds and colors. This could well be a page from “Song of Myself:” life as a narrative, full of “*suggestions*.” And the almost idyllic, pantheistic elements mix with the rest to form the figure of the prophet-pioneer who, beyond his mission, beyond the problem of evil, raises high his hymn to joy, the supreme expression of life.

These pages also clearly bring us back to what I said in the beginning about W. W. as Whitmanesque idyll—his absurd positioning as a man of letters who does not want to be such, a position resolved with the above formula and now sharply mirrored in a true Arcadia. The supposed Whitmanesque meteor in the sky of culture and history here reveals itself as the ordinary fruit of its time. Granted, it is the work of a great poet but otherwise it is not something uncommon, it was rather a normal expression of contemporary



conditions. In this creation of an idyllic, earthly paradise outside the constraints of culture and daily life W. W. unconsciously anticipates another poet of his time and the present-day thirst that American culture feels for an Arcadian escape to a more primitive, pure, and sensual life.

W. W., as we have seen, discovered the South: Tennessee, Virginia, Alabama, etc.—the Negro states. Herman Melville, on the other hand, discovered the South Seas fifteen years earlier (1846), not just in *Typee* but perhaps more effectively in *Moby-Dick* (1851). (It seems to me that people do not consider how much of *Typee* is carried forward in *Moby -Dick*. The “Whale” passes for a harsh sea story and nothing more.<sup>14</sup> I believe, however, that you must look beyond the sustained atmosphere of the Puritan awe of the sea to find its best pages in Ishmael’s dreamy navigation of the Pacific and its episodic allusions to the coral islands such as those

found in the invocation of the Tahitian sailor in Chapter XXXIX [1920 edition] and in other scattered descriptive passages.)<sup>E</sup>

And contemporary American literature continues in part as a derivation from these two. Leaving aside the frequently cited Jack London and Frederick O'Brien one can think about the recent success of Joan Lowell's *The Cradle of the Deep*.<sup>F</sup> She wanted to substitute, literally I maintain, a good, realistic description of life aboard ship for the literary "glamour" of the Pacific islands but instead ended up by indulging in a fable of the "Pitcairn" Islands with all that entails. And we do not even need to consider the cinema, that sure index of the "drift" of mass culture, which is full of tender love between whites dressed in white and olive-skinned girls with beautiful white teeth and flowers in their hair.

Thirty years ago, the American "*dime-novel*" generally represented Arcadia as being California and the "*cattle countries*," that is, the *West* introduced by Bret Harte. Now, America's Valley of the Temples is

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<sup>E</sup> Pavese later translated *Moby-Dick* into Italian. His version, first published in 1932, remains one of the standard Italian translations.

undoubtedly Typee—I mean the endless reproductions of the valley of Typee that we see in movies set on the shores of the South Seas.

But in fact, the “*dime-novel*” and the movies have democratized this oceanic ideal a little too much. America’s more serious writers are slightly offended by it all. But what is one to do? Everyone needs an idyllic escape, especially the average American with spiritual problems that are becoming more common over there under the weight and artificiality of the mechanized life of the big cities.

Here W. Whitman comes to the rescue. He does not invoke the evangelical Negroes of Harriet Beecher Stowe, or their derivatives who, as Poe says, would resonate in the “*repetends*” of Virginia “*minstrelsy*.” All that is nothing. Without any doubt it is W. W. who in these few cited pages discovered the southern states and without defining them through the Negro people did something more important: he expressed the Negroes’ atmosphere of lazy dreaminess and child-like delight in color and sound.

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<sup>F</sup> Simon Schuster, New York, 1929; the third best-selling non-fiction book in the U.S. that year.

And I'm not even going to point out how America is now "*swept*" by the whirlwind of the "*nigger revival*." That is common knowledge. What is important is to point out through examples the way this Negro world presents themes and a background for white liberation. One work can stand for all, Sherwood Anderson's 1925 *Dark Laughter*. Without too much forcing, this book, especially its Book IV, could be the novel of W. W.'s famous stay in New Orleans. Certainly, the intensity of the joy and restlessness of the "*idler*" are the same in the twentieth-century novel as in Whitman's song.

Of course, many now try to deny that Whitman had any influence on modern writers. But this effort does not modify what I have said about the normative quality of his position in literary history. Even if Sherwood Anderson or Vachel Lindsay had never read a word of Whitman—something that at least Anderson denies in his memoirs<sup>15</sup>—the fact would remain, indeed with increased importance, that W. W. introduced their themes a half-century earlier. And if this does not put one in the

sequence of a national literary tradition, then such a tradition does not exist.

And now, we return to the *Leaves*.

We could retrace our entire journey and repeat everything I have said by traveling this road of the free expression of the inherent will to joy. The pioneer I have described, with all his defined characteristics, is above all someone who enjoys: a poet who exalts in the idea of joy and makes it the measure of his vision. It is important to note that W. W. loves the idea of joy as an end in itself; he loves it almost in the abstract even when he adorns it with images. For him, to say joy is to enjoy it.

And this is not a defect: In “A Song of Joys” (Vol. I, p. 213) this treatment of material from a distance, finding in it the different fragments of a universal symphony, renews the typical miracle of these great “*songs*”—the catalog that creates poetry, the various visions of joy strung out as though they were casual sketches that express and indeed create the sovereign figure who goes wandering among creation to enjoy it. There is,

a certain development in this “*song*:” The sober introductory notes on the joy of animals and natural objects become the joy of the pioneer (the locomotive engineer, the horseman, the boxer, etc., and the wonderful mid-poem pictures of the fisherman, the miner, the whaleman, and the farmer) and finally the spiritual joy of “identity,” of the mission and death. Then the joy of the hero and of the infinite journey (“*Oh...to sail and sail and sail!*”). Through the catalogs this construction perfects the figure for which we search: initially, the carefree world of wandering and then little by little the spiritual myth of this life emerges from the same scenes—the intoxication of joy created in serene sureness.

Another great hymn to joy must be “Song at Sunset” (Vol. II, p. 278), which Binns compares to Saint Francis’s “Canticle of the Sun.”<sup>16</sup>

The intention of this poem was excellent: to compose, based on the splendors of the setting sun, an entire hymn to the splendor and happiness

of life and the universe, in the settled tone of one who must depart. But if we take away the ten lines—eight at the beginning and two at the end—that sustain the sunset scene as an expression of joy and glory, what remains is a rosary of the universe’s attributes. These could be highly interesting for understanding that “cosmic conscience” of which Riley speaks<sup>17</sup> but have nothing to do with creating poetry. An informing image is missing, and the passion is only a shout.

“Miracles” (Vol. II, p. 163) is another example in the *Leaves* of this type of minor poem, one in which a series of phenomena celebrate the universe. It is not a great poem but at least it gives us something to look at with its scene of the everyday universe—the dining room and the stars and the sea, all observed with that simultaneously serene and surprised look of “There was a Child Went Forth.” Yet another example is “The World below the Brine” (Vol. II, p. 21), which, apart from its philosophic conclusion, is a notable return of that curious and pleased way of looking at the universe that in

part characterized the old pioneer—that tension when faced with the discovery and absorption of things.

In dealing with hymns addressed to the universe one cannot overlook the “Song of the Universal” (Vol. I, p. 276). We have here, as I said, a hymn to the abstract idea of joy. If the poem redeems itself, it is through its tone: at first anxious and then exultant, definitive, a true catharsis of religious faith. The evil in the universe is resolved in the hope, the certainty of the joyful light that shines from the beginning and (in section 4) triumphs in the prophetic idea of America. The effort to reach this light despite all obstacles, to create this cosmic exultation becomes one with the desire, the yearning, to sing the triumph and the idea. We thus return to that W. W. who makes his very mission as singer the subject of his song.

And here I want to emphasize something: few other poets, even the most literary, have dealt in their art with the forms and ideas of art itself as frequently as has this presumably primitive poet. In this, W. W. clearly



shows himself to be that poet of the creation of poetry that I described in my first chapter. Perhaps only Carducci wrote as much in verse about the realm of metrics, rhyme, or the sonnet as W.W. did about the joy of the spontaneity and freedom of poetry. We see everywhere references to his mission; they are scattered in different pieces with different themes, but all are real and true poems that deal with and even argue about nature and the excellence of this art. We can see this in an arc that runs from that delicious “As Consequent, Etc.” (Vol. II, p. 127), which presents Whitman’s songs as a subtle piping, as many rivulets and little shells scattered throughout America to echo faint voices, through “Wandering at Morn” (Vol. II, p. 174), “Others May Praise What They Like” (Vol. II, p. 168), “Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling” (Vol. II, p. 243), “Excelsior” (Vol. II, p. 260), “By Broad Potomac’s Shore” (Vol. II, p. 264) and “As I Walk these Broad Majestic Days” (Vol. II, p. 269). From these various comparisons of naturalistic aspects, invariably tending to demonstrate perfect naturalness, or the thirst for naturalness that informs the entire

work or, as with “Exclesior” and “As I Walk...,” to proclaim the supreme importance and happiness of poetry, we arrive at the too-often cited “Spirit that Form’d This Scene” (Vol. II, p. 268), which is the definitive expression of the ideals and premises of the art of W. W.

These premises are not important to us at this point. Let me just note that the theme is so vital for W. W. that it allows him to create a good poem even in the almost universally fatal circumstance of praising one’s own song. Elsewhere, when he seems to be innocently describing America, W. W., as I have shown many times, always introduces a man satisfied that he has discovered such a new and promising way, who, in sum, describes with pleasure his own mission. Here, the scenography of the “*cañon*” accentuates his habitual taste for primitive nature and recalls the old figure of the pioneer.

This poetry of poetry, of art and joy together, gave rise to one of the most stunningly great Whitman “*songs*,” something even more daring than

“Sault au Monde!” This is “Proud Music of the Storm” in which the geographic lists become lists of musical instruments and compositions. According to Bailey (p. 182), this poem “...*has only the biographical interest of illustrating his love of music.*” I disagree and I believe that if any work in the *Leaves* best demonstrates W.W.’s devilish virtue of creating poetry from a list of names, this is definitely it.

It has become commonplace in essays on W.W. to note the poet’s passion for music in general and opera in particular. Moreover, he speaks of it himself in *Specimen Days* and elsewhere (*Prose Works*, pp. 13-24 and 514-519). At times some observers even push themselves to see a relationship between music and his “*loose recitatives.*” His pronounced taste for bird song and other natural sounds gets less notice in this context. I bring this up to demonstrate that for W. W. the art of sounds, music, and song, is the pinnacle of art. And to point out that in praising the “voices of the universe” he sings nothing other than a hymn to his own creative joy.

Just as the songs for America express the joy of discovering America, “Proud Music of the Storm,” this great homage to sound, expresses the joy of discovering sounds in life and for W. W. that means creating them in art.

We have in this poem his usual construction—the passage from natural, sometimes ugly things to, little by little, scenes of the highest spirituality—here followed by an important conclusion that interprets the meaning of the preceding journey in terms of Whitman’s life and art. Section 1 is a kind of symphonic prelude that, in one tone, fuses all the music to the “rhythm of nature,” a living and moving representation of the tumult of sounds that seize the poet’s imagination. Section 2 clarifies everything in a variegated passage of love, war, and ecstasy that leads to the first proclamation of meaning: discovery, the end of the journey (the pioneer), the perfection of the achieved world. Beginning with section 3 the poem is fundamentally a reprise of the different scenes and modes in

history and life. Section 3: the world of art that expresses passion. Section 4: a vast contemplation in time and space. And finally, section 5: religious ecstasy, grand church music that fuses in his soul the ultimate significance of every voice of the universe with the hope of his songs. Section 6 concludes by defining this ecstasy as the “*celestial dream*” that from now on will nourish him in life, promising him a hymn composed in sunlight (“*in the bold day*”).

This certainly is the “*song*” in which W. W. expresses most fully his ever-present joy as the poet of his own poetry.

W. W. produces good results at other times when comparing music to nature and arrives at the praise of abstract joy in art through music. He also frequently compares the origin of human works to the savage and

primitive: just think about “Prairie States.” In the specific case of art, we have also seen how he loves to compare his songs to a plant, a river, a landscape. “Italian Music in Dakota” (Vol II., p. 175) tries to create effects from this kind of comparison: the “*dulcet streams*” of notes that yet have power in “*barbaric grim recesses*.” While this poem has no great value it is still notable, if for nothing else, for this point of departure.

And finally comes “The Mystic Trumpeter” (Vol. II, p. 249), the second and last of these long “*songs*” about the power of art, with which I want to conclude this chapter. We no longer have here the obstacle of names of specific pieces of music or operas, which in the first were thrown in without comment to express the ecstasy of the song. And one can understand why. In “Proud Music...” we were basically listening to a sermon on the supreme excellence of art while here, in the “Trumpeter,” we observe the increasing joy of evoking states of mind of

increasing resonance: the joy of passing from intoxication to intoxication occurs in such a peculiar and rapid way that one can barely discern a programmatic aim until the last section in which he extracts from all the previous evocations the most ethereal essence, almost the most abstract—joy—and to it he intones the hymn. I would argue that the poetry of this “*song*” does not lie in the different states of mind—innocence, the Middle Ages, love, war, rebellion, glory—understood as a didactic or theoretical progression, but rather lies in what all these states of mind have in common: the orgiastic exaltation, the reverberation of the note immediately lost in the distance only to be replaced by another and so on to infinity. In sum, the poetry of inspiration.

All of this, which recalls what I said in Chapter II about “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” naturally leads to and joins with the defining figure of the pioneer.

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<sup>1</sup> W. P. Trent, op.cit., 493: “...*the bad effects resulting from W’s superficial knowledge of history.*”

<sup>2</sup> Carleton Noyes, *An Approach to W. W.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1910).

<sup>3</sup> H. B. Binns, op.cit., 79.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 163.

<sup>5</sup> B. De Sélincourt, op.cit., 70-71.

<sup>6</sup> B. Perry, op.cit., 203-10.

<sup>7</sup> H. B. Binns, op.cit., 152.

<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Papini, “W. W.,” in *Nuova Antologia*, June 16, 1908; reprinted in *Ventiquattro cervelli* (Milan: St. Editoriale Lombardo, 1912).

<sup>9</sup> R.L. Stevenson, op.cit., 79.

<sup>10</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 163.

<sup>11</sup> Oscar L. Triggs, op.cit.; *Leaves of Grass*, vol. 3: 206.

<sup>12</sup> Edgar A. Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” in *Poems and Essays*, (Leipzig: B. Tauchnitz), 273.



<sup>13</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 162.

<sup>14</sup> R. Michaud, *Littérature Américanerie*, ed.cit., 41-2.

<sup>15</sup> Sherwood Anderson, *A Storyteller's Story* (Garden City, NY: B. W. Huebsch, 1924), 155.

<sup>16</sup> H. B. Binns, op.cit., 80.

<sup>17</sup> W. Riley, "W. W.," trans. Renoir," in *Le génie américain*, (Paris, 1921).

## Chapter V

## The National Epic

For many Italians, even those “au courant,” the United States is a country with, well yes, a great future....however...the Latin genius...but...and in any case absolutely without a past. Millionaires as happy to marry a dancer as a duchess. Unimpressive nouveau riche on the make, disguised provincials. Occasionally, almost miraculously, a writer distinguishes himself over there but in the end, he is not as good as people say. In sum, an obscene democracy.<sup>A</sup>

These ideas, and others like them, have become so tritely common that it is hard to quote anyone specific. They are embedded in the assumptions and emerge in the tone of all our writing and discourse and thus no one is responsible. This total disregard of the historic, national, and indeed aristocratic elements of American literature leads those of us who are currently striving to keep abreast of its progress with translations and articles, be that progress promising or not, to make strange affirmations.

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<sup>A</sup> “Obscene democracy:” a standard Fascist rhetorical trope.

G. G. Napolitano, for example (a man who knows his authors well, who laments that America arrives in Italy “via Paris,” and who even writes about the cinema), finds space in his short article, “American Novelists”<sup>1</sup> to state that the War (1917-1918) “terrorized” the Americans, “who thought they were going to encounter a new kind of sport or perhaps discover some new physical delights” and strengthened the “ancient races like the Italian...sacrifice....spiritual discoveries, etc.” And he supports this with representative names like Dos Passos and Cummings.

In fact, the war did not “terrorize” just the Americans, but all who fought in it. If there are no Italian books that “denounce its horror,” the desire to do so is there as Remarque’s<sup>B</sup> success amply shows, not to mention the surrounding publicity that led to so many newspaper columns against the German author’s “immoral rhetoric.” It is also “full of meaning” that during this polemic many of the no-nonsense books about the Italian war, which few remembered, began appearing again in bookstore windows.

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<sup>B</sup> Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen Nichts Neues* (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) was published in 1929. The film version produced by Universal Pictures and starring Lew Ayers was released in 1930 and won the Academy Award for best picture of that year. Because of its pacifist theme, Mussolini forbade the showing of the film in Italy, but Mondadori did publish an Italian translation of the book in 1931.

This line of thought does not even grant the United States enough history, or consciousness of history, to understand the destruction a victorious war can cause. But it admits that even in America there are works that “encounter the tragedy with optimism” and these, by chance, are those made into movies by “*Metro Goldwyn*,” *The Big Parade*, John Gilbert and Renée Adorée, “*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*,” the comrade who dies for others and the love that rises from the fields made fertile with blood.<sup>c</sup> Now I do not want to offend Napolitano and the Italian war writers when I contend that this is their Latin ideal. They have a tradition to uphold, and so be it. But it seems to me that for too long the War has escaped criticism and gone without discussion in Italy.

It is in America that the gifted and talented strive mightily against the patriotic and democratic rhetoric personified, as Napolitano well says and as, via Paris, Michaud says even better<sup>2</sup>, by Willa Cather’s enthusiasm. It is in America that they fight like devils for and against this cause, which is so deeply

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<sup>c</sup> *The Big Parade*: a two-hour and twenty-minute silent war epic released by MGM in 1925. Directed by King Vidor and starring John Gilbert as a rich, aimless young American who matures emotionally through selfless heroism and compassion at the battle of Belleau Woods. Renée Adorée was cast as his love interest, playing the part of a strong, centered Frenchwoman.

rooted in their souls that it produces a fully engaged approach in art, culture and life, conservative for some, iconoclastic for others. It is in America that they do all this, and it is there, yes, there in America, that they live out an historical tradition. The seriousness of the dissent makes clear the gravity of the assumptions and issues that will certainly resolve themselves, as they are already doing, in new nationalisms and historical myths. As, to give one example among many, in Glenway Wescott's *The Grandmothers*<sup>3</sup> in which the Puritan pioneers' desperate conquest evokes an almost biblical solemnity and simultaneously the sadness of the mean uselessness of every-day life.

This creation of the historical fable, of the democratic myth, which is precisely the subject of current debate in America, goes back, as far as art is concerned, to Walt Whitman. Present-day writers and their predecessors have prepared the ideological and political material and have furnished

the incidents and human types. Some, like Whittier and Lowell, sang various aspects of it, but W. W. composed the epic, the *Chanson de geste* with the figure of the bard who above all sings the mission of the singer and sees in soldiers, including those of the enemy, their new significance as comrades in the march of life, pioneer colleagues who in a spirit of simplicity conquer the “prizes of the universe.” W. W. identified his myth of war with the image created in the rest of his poetry, explaining, and individualizing even “Drum-Taps” in literary history, and achieved the same result as that of the ancient epic singers—the creation of a national Olympus where the fathers of the country, etc. But he did so in a different way than those singers who in their narrative and dramatic epics put heroes on stage as humans and then had them perform feats that only later became national symbols. W. W. generated for us the epic fable of America’s new historical position, a constructive and conquering

labor of truly primitive people, illuminated by experience and civilization, in sum by thousands of years of history. That is, while he composed the national epic in which the figures and forces creating the nation play out, W. W., steeped in culture, knew all along that he was working on something like an *Iliad* or a *Chanson de Roland* and expressed this intention in his songs and, to return to my thesis, he made poetry of making poetry.

As a result, we do not have in “Drum-Taps” the usual warriors and  $\chi\theta\omicron\mu\sigma\epsilon$ <sup>D</sup> found in every authentic epic but rather the continual reproduction of the figure of the pioneer-comrade who for W. W. is that of the poet. Lincoln and Washington and equally the lowliest Southern soldier are all like those Texas “*rangers*,” pioneers in their actions, “*loving comrades*” in their feelings. This war is a march toward the ideal, no more nor less than that of the already-cited passage of the ship. Thus, as we will see, W. W. effortlessly presents in the guise of national heroes and fighters his usual pioneers and comrades.

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<sup>D</sup>  $\chi\theta\omicron\mu\sigma\epsilon$ : can be translated variously as, “old men,” “councilors,” “elders,” “chiefs.”

De Sélincourt has asserted that W. W.'s war experience was not in fact a revelation for him in any literary sense, but rather the proof of a reality determined by his pre-existing world.<sup>4</sup> This observation supports what I have said and demonstrates again the shrewdness of certain of this critic's insights. Right from the first conception of the *Leaves* W. W. had envisioned war as the sad but confirming necessity of the pioneer. War, a march, a bold resolution, the pistols and the axes, the nights in tents: All this is already poetry in the hymns of conquest in the great "*songs*." And when the war exploded in 1861, W. W. saw in it only a march of pioneers.

It is a pity that de Sélincourt, as usual, does not develop his thought by linking it to the reality of the poetry. It would have been easy, given his premise, to define the true nature of Whitman's war. It is de Sélincourt's habitual failing: he speaks too abstractly and does not deal with specifics, which explains why reading him is so often like driving in a fog. Nonetheless, no one else has yet written anything better about this topic.



Charles Cestre is another scholar who almost arrives at the formula of the soldier-pioneer. He, however, ruins his argument by exaggerating the comparisons of his persona with the “pioneeristic” elements of nature: mountains, waterfalls, storms, etc. He does this in commenting on America’s intervention in the Great War: “*c’est la même passion d’aventures—la flame qui brulait l’âme des pionniers—c’est la même , etc., etc. qui mets au cœur des Américains d’aujourd’hui leur noble idealism.*”<sup>5</sup> For him, it was the same with the War of Secession.

Some difficulties arise here because in my definitions above I was always speaking of Whitman’s subjective reality, never of the war taken objectively. But this said, the parallel is interesting. Naturally, Cestre puts forward no aesthetic interpretations, which is logical: he was writing political commentary and would have been foolish to attempt more.

Meanwhile, all those scholars who have written long chapters on the “*grey poet*” would have done much better to cut short their marveling about this miracle of human compassion since they can say nothing that W. W. did not say better in his own recollections. But let’s move on.

Coming now directly to the work after so much introduction, it is first necessary to undo the myth that Whitman’s war poems, as a group, belong to a “*world of higher values*”—life, love, and death—and are therefore preferable to the rest of his poetry.<sup>6</sup> This same kind of argument is put forward for “Sea-Drift,” the sea that gives greater spiritual value to the song, etc. That W. W. himself said (in a January 1865 letter to O’Connor<sup>7</sup>) that he preferred “Drum-Taps” to all else he had written till then because its poems were simpler, more captivating, more “American” is quite interesting and can aid those who care to study his aesthetic thought. But for us the issue is clear: Art is one unity and there are no higher levels of subject matter nor a dramatic mode that is better than a lyric mode. By stating this I mean to

respond to those, Gamberale for example,<sup>8</sup> who complains that W. W. is a collector of poetic themes, a poet of the universal who fails to objectify his sentiments in real individuals. It seems banal to have to say in response that the lyric-universal song, as he calls it, is neither more nor less than a dramatic objectification in characters, a way of expressing one's own world, a way of creating in the end the unique persona who is the result of every poem. To give one example: the "Song of the Redwood Tree," as we shall see, creates poetry just as much, and perhaps more so than the dramatic scene of Pete's return (*L. of G.*, Vol. II, pp. 65-67).

What then are these works that appear to be so miraculous? Nothing new, as I have said. We shall find here marvelous poems that have the same virtues of those mentioned in my earlier chapters mixed with others flawed with the same weaknesses I have already pointed out.

Keeping in mind that group of poems already discussed, which, with their historical origins, ought naturally to play a major role in the national epic, let us recall that group and remember their defects of taste, their

concessions to oratory, to the desire for resounding material or to the occasion and it will not surprise us to find their emphases, dissonances and sometimes their virtues in a good half of the poems in “Drum-Taps.” I mean all the war poetry that does not deal directly with the battlefield or the hospital, where W. W. is at his best, but that dwell on the war abstractly and therefore, often in personifications and allegories. It is as though he were writing in verse what otherwise would be newspaper columns to declaim, to proclaim once again his mission. And, as elsewhere, W. W. succeeds or fails depending on whether he does or does not fashion the material according to a unifying image, usually the vision of America or the figure of the pioneer and give the material a dynamic form. All the introductory and concluding poems of “Drum-Taps” are of this nature and all of them were, or could have been, composed before the poet even smelled a distant war zone.

Four songs serve as a worthy prelude to the future music of the battlefield and hospital. They are songs of an enthusiastic prophet who finally discovers the release and liberation of the whirlwind of his soul in the declaration of war—the resolute pioneer unchained and off to the conquest of his ideals. They are: “First O Songs for a Prelude” (Vol. II, p. 40), “Eighteen Sixty-One” (Vol. II, p. 43), “From Paumanok Starting I Fly like a Bird” (Vol. II, p. 45), and “Rise O Days from Your Fathomless Deeps” (Vol. II, p. 54).

The boldness and thrust of the figure of the pioneer generate everything alive in these works. Both the vision in the first poem, an entire city leaping to war, “*an arm’d race is advancing!*” and in the second, the distinct figure of the pioneer, the “*robust year*” crisscrossing America sure and resolute, are surely, though in different form, that march of an entire people that we saw in “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” The continental embrace of America returns in the third, and conquest compared to titanic nature reechoes in the fourth, “Rise O Days....”

Defects—the usual: For example, the hypothesis of Manhattan in the first song is as clumsy and inflated as that of the Muse in *Song of the Exposition* and in the second poem the personification of the first war year as a soldier. Comparable totally toneless poems are “A Boston Ballad” (Vol. II, p. 25), “Beat! Beat! Drums!” (Vol. II, p. 24), “Virginia—The West” (Vol. II, p. 56), and “Ethiopia Saluting the Colors” (Vol. II, p. 84).

In the first, while aiming for grotesque effects he merely creates a dismal invention that resolves itself in an empty allegory. The next two resolve themselves with an appeal to drums and a rebuke to the southerners. These three and the last, the half-allegory of the slave woman, fail because they abandon the forceful enthusiasm of the pioneer and lose themselves in concepts.

A good image of this full load of electricity ready to discharge itself appears in “City of Ships” (Vol. II, p. 57), a clear vision of New York without rhetorical personifications, like that in one of the better verses of “Rise O Days....”

*“Manhattan rising, advancing with menacing front—  
Cincinnati, Chicago, unchain’d;”*

Are not these Union cities perhaps just different versions of “*comrades*” engaged in manly undertakings? So, too, is everything alive in these songs.

Three conclusive poems have the same tone. “Over the Carnage Rose Prophetic a Voice” (Vol. II, p. 81): the loving embrace that unites America, the tender, strong note of the comrades of “Calamus.” “To a Certain Civilian” (Vol. II, p. 89): the polemical search for a virile energy similar, for example, to that which concluded “Song of the Open Road.” “Long, Too Long America” (Vol. II, p. 77): only a thought but dense with intimations of the awesomeness of the resolute march of the new pioneers.

Some songs written specifically to conclude the epic arise from the solemn almost paternal knowledge of the atrocity of war. “Spirit Whose Work is Done” (Vol. II, p. 90): the necessary and bravely endured sadness of

the test, and “Adieu to a Soldier” (Vol. II, p. 91). “Pensive on Her Dead Gazing” (Vol. II, p. 282) is a sad yet passionate reflection on the dead who return to memory merged in the essences of nature. And then, the serene resumption of the mission and joy in “Turn O Libertad” (Vol. II, p. 92) and “To the Leven’d Soil They Trod” (Vol. II, p. 92): the future that beckons from afar and the stupendous reality of America, ever the fresh land of morning and the “*open road*,” the impalpable presence of a fraternal spirit, the poet who finds himself in his world of wandering and revelations.

We can see that I could easily have included all these songs in my earlier chapters on the “Pioneer” or the “Great Songs,” since they deal with the same themes, have the same defects, use the same iconography and, in sum, all result in the same persona. Indeed, certain songs of “Drum-Taps” could be classified with the category in my last chapter of the free and miraculous continent—the historical treatment of the landscape of “Our Old Feuillage” and I don’t know how many other songs—and they would take on a different significance.



These are “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” (Vol. II, p. 46), “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun” (Vol. II, p. 77), “Delicate Cluster” (Vol. II, p. 88), and “The Return of the Heroes” (Vol. II, p., 128), which, even though part of the “Autumn Rivulets” Section is yet a war poem.

The first of this group, “Song of the Banner...,” a patriotic poem written as war broke out, seems entirely mechanical not least because of its irritating dialogue form. It has a totally logical scheme and purpose that are laboriously expressed through sequential and artificial scenes that are to the poem like framing to a house. Its scheme is easily described: there is a father who, beneath a flag, argues with his child. The flag and a poet call the child to war, to the ideal, while the father would, let us say, ambush him. It is one thing to state this contrast but something different to create it in poetry. For example, the visions of America’s prosperity, which the father places in front of the son to keep him home are resolved by the poet in the

poem through a hymn to the glory of those riches. Thus, the riches and material joy, which should serve as counterpoints to war and sacrifice, are instead experienced with equal satisfaction. Because of this, the poem has no dramatic contrast and is an artificial repetition of a few predictable lyric themes. But despite this basic fault an image does come through, a new expression of that old spirit of inebriation amidst nature's freedom. It is a serene joy in the nation's destiny and equally a rigorous, steadfast preparation for future undertakings. I refer to the figure of the pennant flapping in the wind, the poem's persistent, expressing freedom, joy, and other world-exalting thoughts.

We find a reflection of emblem in the short post-war poem cited above, "Delicate Cluster." Here, too, a flag expresses joy—the horrors and the dead

are kept within parentheses. After the War, W. W. is more “prophet” and optimist than before.

It is curious that when considering his thoughts about America or, in general, his past, quasi-pagan life, he fails to counterpose them to his present enthusiasm for sacrifice and struggle, but rather ends up commingling the two and praising them together as one: not pain or desperation but a single fullness of life, activity and hope. This conjoining happens in “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun,” in which W. W. means to position the new, febrile restlessness of the city-dweller and the war as contrasts to the beatific existence of the “*idler*” so often described. But it doesn’t work. As in “The Song of the Banner” he ends up singing the same song of praise to both worlds and the scheme leads nowhere.

I call this curious but whoever thinks back to the contrasts in “Song of Myself” will also find here that old likeable figure who cried “*Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.*”) (“Song of Myself,” section 51), the figure who created his poetry from the joy of feeling large and universal.

It happens again in “The Return of the Heroes.” In this case, wishing to counterpose the war and its disasters to the intoxicating prosperity of his usual America he squanders three sections (4-5-6) and makes five others (1-2-3-7-8) a cheery—there is no other word for it—hymn to the peace and fabulous fertility of the promised land. The three wasted sections are gray and sterile except when they recall the blessed peace of nature and work: “*Ah the dead to me mar not, they fit well in Nature,*” (section 5) and

*“Exult O lands! victorious lands!  
Not there your victory on those red shuddering fields,  
But here and hence your victory.”*

and

*“...saner wars, sweet wars, life-giving wars.”*

This whole poem, from the first synthesizing gaze on “*God’s calm annual drama,*” a serene vision of benign nature (section 2) to the first appearance of America as a ship freighted with riches almost to the point of sinking, and right on to the final animated panorama of work and harvests throughout the land, is truly a reechoing of the themes which, in other forms, created the atmosphere of, for example, “The Ox-Tamer.” They give

substance in the “*songs*” to the historical image of America as the crown of the world.

We see, therefore, that the hymns to war in the abstract—the declaration, the enthusiasm, and the effects—are those that give us Whitman’s political judgment on the matter; they also subsume the movement in his historical vision. They are the logical consequence of his poetic conception, illustrated in my Chapter IV, of history as progression, an incessant exertion toward the better, the ideal, and expressed in the sovereign and virile figure of the pioneers. Consequently, we see that even these odes to war, like those to history, flow into the creation of the myth of America. They give us a poetry of pain and reality that seamlessly become almost Dionysian hymns to a pregnant peace and joy.

It seems to me now that a justification is required for the admittedly empirical distinction I have made between abstract and realistic poetry. The poems I placed in the first category truly are aesthetically different from those of the second even if I have so categorized them mostly for the sake of brevity.

I have already half-described the differences that interest us by defining the content of the first category and comparing it to that of other chapters. In so doing, I want to demonstrate that war in the *Leaves* is only an episode in the life of the pioneer and therefore revives his two already distinct faces: the first, oratorical, political, proclamatory, and the second, calm, resolute, affectionate. Making distinctions only to explain them away may be the secret bad joke of criticism but it remains true that all the many aspects of the human figure in the *Leaves* are only particulars of that expansive figure I call the pioneer, a figure whose reconstruction is my goal.

But I do not want it thought that my categorization of “Drum-Taps” implies acceptance of the absurd idea, which I have already condemned, that W. W. becomes a more human and immediate poet when his “poetic material” becomes more heart-rending. Rather, I want to demonstrate that even the remaining poems of “Drum-Taps,” while they include many successful works of art, represent nothing new and that we have already encountered their themes many times in other works.

One can in fact introduce these poems of the battlefield with two of them that could be passages from “Song of Myself”—sections 10 or 14—or stanzas, only a little less extreme, of “Pioneers! O Pioneers!” The two are the short poems “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” (Vol. II, p. 63) and “Bivouac on a Mountain Side” (Vol. II, p. 64). The marching columns of soldiers, the curious and peaceful scene at the ford, the stopover among the rocks, the campfires and horses, and the simple solemnity of the moment—all this is decidedly the world of the pioneer. It reminds us of the “Ox-Tamer,” it reminds us of the “Open Road,” it reminds us of “young fellows who return in the evening and who

*“robust friendly  
singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs. (Vol. I, p. 14)”*<sup>E</sup>

Someone might say, “But there is no war here.” Exactly! War understood as a battle-filled epic is not war as portrayed by W. W. He describes a march of pioneers and when we find him facing

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<sup>E</sup> From “I Hear America Singing” in the “Inscriptions” Section.

carnage we find the comrade who bends down to comfort a fallen companion, who sustains and envelops him with infinite and silent love.

Sometimes a scene is set to the loud music of bombs, but the poetry is always the same, comrades on the march: “An Army Corps on the March” (Vol. II, p. 64). Or if, as occasionally happens, we are presented with close-order combat, as for instance in “The Artilleryman’s Vision” (Vol. II, p. 82), the scene is a curious picture, which for Walt has the same interest as that of the cavalry crossing the ford—colors, small groups of men, attitudes. The true sadness caused by atrocities, blood and death is either resolved, as I said above, in the figure of the “*wound-dresser*” or, and these are almost always poems in other sections, with the general images of evil in the world. In these latter cases it gives us the figure, whom I will deal with better elsewhere, of the emotionless prophet who unyieldingly accepts affliction because there is nothing else to do. Examples are the Texas massacres in section 34 of “Song of Myself” (“*I tell not the fall of Alamo/ Not one escaped to tell the fall of Alamo....*”), and the sea-fight in sections 35 and 36 (“*List to the yarn....*”), which, despite often betraying themselves



with invective or half-sarcasms (“...*it was beautiful early summer,*” “*assassin,*” “*These so, these irretrievable*”) reecho the austere tenderness of the “*strong educated person*” whose soul is filled with the “*floods of passion.*”

Returning to “Drum-Taps,” we see that the poetry of the march of comrades continues and gives us another evening bivouac, this time in the woods. The landscape is the habitual kind W. W. creates, simple and strong and full of vague suggestions.

I must say here once and for all that, just as “I don’t know which” Whitman scholar differentiates between the tender and morbid sentimentality of, say, Tasso, or in general of the Romantics, with whom I could nonetheless still confound him, we have here no abandonment to sweet and tender daydreams but rather the intimate and only way of reaching a higher world full of revelations, a world which an unemotional “*matter-of-factness*” is condemned to disregard. This is the kind of world we find in

“By the Bivouac’s Fitful Flame” (Vol. II, p. 65), as we did in many of the *Calamus* poems discussed, a world in which the shadows of the campfire give rise to ineffable thoughts of life and death, of lost friends and far-off figures—a “slow and solemn” procession. They are the “tender and wondrous” suggestions of “These, I, Singing in Spring” or “In Paths Untrodden,” the deepest secret of the poetry of friendship, which returns when faced with war. And, we will see that “Drum-Taps” is full of such thoughts.

The figure of the strong and taciturn comrade is presented in the appropriately named “O Tan-Faced Prairie-Boy” (Vol. II, p. 86). He symbolizes in the *Leaves* that myth of the “*West*” made more specific in the prose: the “*rangers*,” the “*squatters*,” “*those of inland America*.” This figure fills the ranks of three formations, soldiers, comrades, and pioneers, as, for example, in, respectively, “Race of Veterans” (Vol. II, p. 85), “I Saw Old General at Bay” (Vol. II, p. 88), and “As I Lay with My Head in Your Lap Camerado” (Vol. II, p. 83). We see in this last poem the decisive beginning of that tone of affectionate compassion and despairing comfort

sought in the infinitely pity-filled embrace of suffering companions that, more than all his theories and proclamations, has made W. W. the almost divine figure we know.<sup>9</sup>

“*Dear Camerado!*” We will see that many of Whitman’s poems, even outside “Drum-Taps,” resolve the problem with this cry.

There comes now the first great poem of this stop along the unknown road, “A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest, and the Road Unknown” (Vol. II, p. 69). Artistically speaking, the hospital scene is well introduced by the sadness of defeat and weariness that becomes embodied in the background atmosphere of deep shadows and dark-red flames. In this appalling scene, described with that slightly forced coolness, which is half the sincere stoicism of the pioneer and half the chosen emotionless demeanor of the new human type, the episode of the dying soldier, particularly because it is treated as any other description of the place, increases, more than I can say, the horror of it all. Clearly, W. W. knows his craft.

Naturally, the ambiguity that I have noted in the deliberately restrained tone in the face of pain is, in my opinion, anything but a defect. I see in it, as I anticipated in the preceding chapter, a particularly humanistic aspect of the figure I am describing. I see the drama of W. W., torn from his position of serenely and bravely accepting pain when every pain of the world penetrates him and makes him suffer. Though on a much higher artistic plane, the Whitmanian pioneer has something in common with that beloved character of adventure novels, usually a sailor, always rough and ready, who “furtively wipes away a tear with the back of his hand.” The “furtiveness” of W. W. lies, in this case, in the total absence in the song of judgmental words or phrases, or any concession to sentimentality. The entire scene, from the moment the poet stanches the soldier’s blood to the lad’s “smiling” death, is one seamless, extraordinarily tender taking-in of everything that betrays its turmoil in the force of its tension. And then the sad, sad phrases,

*“...the youngster’s face is white as a lilly....The crowd, O the crowd of bloody forms....”*

This, however, is rare in “Drum-Taps.” We will see it more often in my next chapter. In this Section W. W. is usually content with describing himself as a pioneer, then unleashing his love, as in “Calamus” where the justification was the manly ideal of a new Utopia.

This happens, for example, in “As Toilsome I Wander’d Virginia’s Woods” (Vol. II, p. 72), in which the scene is a forest and the poet is almost a “*ranger*,” and here it is not a sign of weakness or futility, but of good comradeship, to bow at a grave of one killed in battle and remember him as “*Bold, cautious, true, and my loving comrade*.” Note the adjectives.

Another example is “Vigil Strange I Kept on the Field One Night” (Vol. II, p. 67), in which the fallen comrade induces no tears, nothing, “*not even a long-drawn sigh*,” but only mystic hours of rapture on the bare earth under the stars: “*Vigil of silence, love and death*.” Walt’s last gesture here is truly one that his ideal pioneer would have made: the burial of the comrade in the “*rude-dug-grave*” in the “*blanket...where he fell*.”

*“I faithfully loved you ....dearest comrade....my soldier....boy of responding kisses.”* The poet’s tenderness is infinite, even the wind blows softly. But an inflection of simplicity and *“self-poisedness”* always flows beneath the delicacy and the pity; it is the atmosphere, the tranquilly of the primitive, the sense of detailed reality, which is the essential but never noted characteristic of these songs. And among them is also the little poem, “Ashes of Soldiers “(Vol. II, p.273).

“A March...” and “Vigil Strange...” constitute the first two parts of a trilogy of nocturnal poems of death and comfort and “A Sight in Camp in the Daybreak Grey and Dim” is the last. The tone of this last poem reaches an eloquence which, if comparisons are legitimate, transcends that of the other two. The construction of this poem is also notable: the strange light of dawn, the three corpses and the uncovering of their faces one by one in silent curiosity.

All this suspense leads to the affectionate question, “who are you” “*sweet boy*” you “*dear comrade?*” And then, the most affecting revelation at the end, “this face is the face of Christ.” The intensity of suggestions that W. W. can evoke from such a situation is indescribable. Simply by using the name of Christ he brings the scene wholly into the true world of these suggestions. It is even more poignant than the manly embrace of “Calamus.” But stop and think for a moment: now Christ himself has become a comrade—“*Young man I think I know you*”—just as happens in that other poem, “To Him That Was Crucified” (Vol. II, p. 159), where the two walk side by side, pioneers, to heal the world. Such is the creative force of myth.

“How Solemn as One by One” (Vol. II, p. 87) echoes weakly the mystic sphere of the trilogy mentioned above. It is more a touching thought than anything else—immortal souls behind the masks of tired faces.

This lyricism of comfort sought in the ineffable intimations of nature and the beyond—separate from “The Wound-Dresser,” which brings back active, manly love—finds its sovereign expression in the four lines of

“Look Down Fair Moon” (Vol. II, p. 80), which even brought forth a cry of admiration from Bailey though they also led him to posit an inexplicable parallel with Simonides.<sup>10</sup> No longer thoughts of attachments and of the beyond but a simple scene with infinite resonance, the ghastly dead under the pitying moon. Comparing this short poem to another like it makes clear the unique miracle it is. “Old War Dreams” (Vol. II, p. 266) uses almost the same language and yet achieves nothing. Its over-complexity, its refrain, or its insistence, I don’t know which, destroys any effect.

The war, then, is such a mystical passage in the spirit of “Calamus” that it serves almost as the imagined departure point for the march of the dead to the beyond, as for example in “Camps of Green” (Vol. II, p. 283).

I now turn to “The Wound-Dresser” (Vol. II, p. 73), which brings us back to what was almost the only theater of Whitman’s war, the hospital. The poem says as much: “I do not remember the battles or the trenches but follow me where the wounded lie on the ground and in their tents and on cots.”



An overly drawn-out introduction and too much time spent setting the scene spoil this poem; it is not a masterpiece. But certain improvised, almost instinctive outbursts succeed in creating the figure of the “good gray poet” who passes calmly and attentively among the wounded, “inevitable” but quivering with pain and “*a burning flame*” within his breast.

Certain touches are among the most human expressions that the spectacle of slaughter tore from W. W., the prophet of hope and good companion in pain: “*I never knew you, yet I think...to die for you....poor crazed hand, tear not the bandage away....Come sweet death!...in mercy come quickly....he dares not look on the bloody stump....Many a soldier’s loving arms about this neck....*” Such works as “Not Youth Pertains to Me” (Vol. II, p. 85), “Reconciliation” (Vol. II, p. 87), and “Lo, Victress on the Peaks” (Vol. II, p. 89) are scattered echoes of this tenderness. In all of these he clearly expressed the awareness of his national and human mission: “*at intervals composed these songs* (p. 85),”

*“no poem proud...psalms of the dead* (p. 90), etc. That awareness courses through all the poems of “Drum-Taps” and continues as what I defined in principle as the poetry of inspiration, or the poetry of making poetry.

The proof of my point—that even in the songs of war the pioneer/comrade is the sole inspiring figure of W. W.—can be found in two or three poems that abandon this specific world and lose themselves in empty phrases and rhetorical scenes. The first, “The Artilleryman’s Vision,” already cited, would seem, if one did not know W. W., a bravura piece of description. But when we analyze it, we find that the soldiers no longer being comrades are no longer anything. War for war’s sake means nothing to W. W.

And while Bailey, always eager to point out how good metrics rarely lead to poor outcomes, considers the “Dirge for Two Veterans” (Vol. II, p. 79) *“one of the very finest of all,”*<sup>11</sup> I view it as something quite different. I see the stripped and disassembled props for what will be the

great *mise-en-scène* of “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” The “Dirge...” does contain some fine examples of Whitman’s lyricism—the procession of the drums, the “immense” moon, the just-filled grave—but they amount to only empty “*décor*,” right to the conclusion, which is itself a forced conceit. The fault lies with the two dead soldiers, father and son. By that I mean the cause is the failure to give them any characteristics of the pioneer or comrade.

And finally, we come to the third, “Come up from the Fields Father” (Vol. II, p. 65), which has been overly praised or at least not appreciated for what it really is. The scene is quite moving, but moving in the way news stories are, the news of an earthquake, for example. This is a judgment, by the way, that applies to a great many of the war pieces in *Specimen Days*. For example, one might read that prisoners in the South died of hunger and be moved by the news. But you do not need a poet for that. Something like this happens in “Come up from the Fields, Father,”

which certainly does not lack drama (“*he is dead...the only son is dead*”). But the hidden part of the poem, it is important to note, lies outside the drama, in the prosperous landscape of “*teeming Ohio*.” W. W. wanted to give us the contrast but as usually happens with him, only one of the opposed terms comes alive. Think back to “The Return of the Heroes.”<sup>F</sup>

I have cited these three poems for another reason. One can see in them a first, perhaps unconscious attempt to create truly objective war scenes rather than lyrics formed around his own figure, an effort to create a more expansive dramatic world, to fashion, in sum, what is called the national epic. Naturally the songs turned out as they did because of this forced effort toward the objective, and whatever saving graces they have arise in proportion to the concessions to the old W. W.

Other poems he wrote, however, really do create that national Olympus of which I spoke, and these give us heroes garbed as pioneers. Naturally, for us the distinction between epic and lyric means nothing aesthetically and we find in fact that when W. W. created something, his

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<sup>F</sup> Cf. page 202

usual persona deserves the credit. And to return to the interesting historical question that opened this chapter, he was also without doubt the first and greatest singer of the national enterprise. It was he who gave the first artistic existence not only to the two sovereign names of Washington and Lincoln—the former already established by mid-century through much rhetoric and a few worthwhile studies—but to the face of the fighting and working masses, creating from them a type that now may seem banal because of overuse, but that is not the fault of W. W. And in any case, it is not that the heroes of W.W. have become banal but that their counterfeits in other times and places try the patience of their contemporaries. That is what happened with the Arcadian Pacific and will happen soon with the Negro.

There exists in America an infallible indicator for all changes in the taste for myths. When a literary theme arrives in “*film*” you

know it will be dead in a few years. I do not mean this as some special criticism of the cinema, I mean simply that when this art, which more than any other, must serve the great public, treats "material" of extreme maturity, it is an indication that the theme is indeed nearing exhaustion. Save, that is, for a creator who can make a great work from even the most tired themes.

I need not point out that the American cinema is now full of stories of conquest and war. The identification of the soldier with the pioneer made by W. W. has not gone unnoticed. The War of Secession and the conquest of the West have the same scenarios and Adolph Zukor and Jesse Lasky, "*managers*" of the "*Paramount Association*," who know their business, have made dozens of "*films*" that endlessly mix Indians, buffalos, blue-clad soldiers and "*cow-boys*."

But let us leave this interesting digression to see how W. W. treated the two fathers of his country.

In “The Centenarian’s Story” (Vol. II, p. 58) a veteran of the War of Independence describes one of Washington’s defeats and W. W., prophet, pays reverence to the dead of the battle. The poetry lies in the proud and sad memory of the slaughter that a helpless Washington had to watch (“*It was the brigade of the youngest men....Rais’d in Virginia and Maryland*”). Then, the defeat, the retreat under cover of darkness, the insults of the English—but the anguished Washington ever steadfast and decisive. The narrator’s tone is tremulous and restrained, as in many other poems in “Drum-Taps.” The figure of Washington, however, is that of the old W.W., saddened to death by the slaughter but still firm and resolute, wordless, a man of action, a pioneer. And the “*Terminus*” that concludes the poem brings back to mind W.W.’s mission; it is the figure of the prophet who rises in America to sing again his mission in history.

W. W. made this Washington in his own image just as he did every other hero. John Brown, for example, in the few lines describing him in “Year of the Meteors” (Vol. II, p. 291), where the poet “*silent with teeth shut close*” stood contemplating him, and Lincoln in the poems of

“Memories of President Lincoln” (Vol. II, pp. 94-106).

W. W. devoted an entire section of the book to this president and then dealt with him again in the *Prose Works*. And Certainly “*Old Abe*” repaid him handsomely with his “*Well he looks like a man*” of which Whitman biographers are unbearably “*fond*.” But let’s leave that alone.

Of the three minor songs devoted to Lincoln, the most famous is certainly the least valuable. ‘Twas ever thus. “O Captain! My Captain!” (Vol. II, p. 105) is even rhymed but for all that even Bailey finds it slightly artificial.<sup>12</sup> I don’t know who created the legend that it is an extraordinary poem because the other two put it to shame. They are “Hush’d be the Camps To-day” (Vol. II, p.106), with its affectionate and virile salute from the heavy-hearted soldiers and “This Dust Was Once the Man” (Vol. II, p. 106), with its restrained tombstone-like description, “Gentle, plain, just and resolute.”



Yes, “O Captain! My Captain!” does have some elements of a good Whitman poem—the journey ended, the captain adored and fallen, etc., but its setting with that crowd exulting and the wreathes and the excessively banal contrast with the dead man is something truly worthy of mass approval. The refrain, with those drops of blood and that loving arm beneath the dead man’s head, almost saves the poem but it is not enough to justify its fame.

We now arrive finally at one of W.W.’s masterpieces, the great elegy “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” (Vol. II, p. 94). While many have dealt with this work only one scholar so far has written something truly worthwhile. That would be Michaud in the passage already cited, “*le chant funèbre du président martyre est l’hymne de l’immortalité serene.*” I believe there is a great deal more to this song but nonetheless in view of Michaud’s rapid examination of *Leaves of Grass*, his observation is anything but inept.

I want to demonstrate that this elegy is not only a hymn to immortality, a rather vague word, but also a distinct reprise of the themes of

the comrade and of America's prosperity, developed even in the song of the thrush, which forms a synthesis of serene and passionate joy. The poem is constructed almost thematically and were it not for the extraordinary fullness of each theme one might consider their interweaving artificial. But this would be "*hair-splitting*" and besides, the themes have a definite common source that, just beneath the lines, develops into a harmonious crescendo.

There are four themes: nature, the star, the thrush, and the funeral. The backdrop of greenery that opens the song (sections 1-3) is the same as that of the journey in "Calamus:" lilac, perfume, flowers, "*heart-shaped*" leaves, the shady nook surrounded by green, the ineffable intimations of friendship in solitude.

This merges into the western star (section 2), which, in that first unexpected sunset, is less a symbol than a dear departed person, a comrade (he will say of the star in section 8, "*as we wander'd together*" and in 9, "*The star my departing comrade...*").

Then, in section 4, the first chord of the “*hermit’s*” song comes to life like an outpouring of surrounding nature, “*Death’s outlet song of life.*”

This is the type of musical “*utterance*” that, as I have said before, seems to W. W. to echo the fullness of nature.

And finally, the two sections (5-6) of the funeral procession end the first ideal movement of the symphony, reprising the tender infinity of nature, creating an intimation of the figure of Lincoln in the panoramic view of an entire America in mourning, a diffuse presence of pensive sadness and love. Lincoln the man is never clearly delineated, not here nor later in the poem; Whitman will refer only to the “*grave of him I love,*” but all the portrayals of the countryside, of America, and of the “*thrush’s*” hideaway will be such as to give continuity to the presence I have described, the ideal figure, the “*dear comrade.*”

The themes already identified return in the refrain of the second movement: nature (section 7), the star (section 8), and the singer (section 9). That which what was first an identification with all of nature becomes specific:

“*Now I know what you must have meant....O singer bashful and tender, now I understand you.*” What is meant is the knowledge of death and the tone now becomes almost exultant, an affection and passion that find an outlet in the last gesture of love: “*Blossoms and branches green....fresh as the morning....bouquets of roses...O death...early roses and lilies....*” And the funeral (sections 10-11-12) is a fullness of love; the sea-winds, the perfumes make it seem almost a celebration: all America “*from east and west*” is invited. The most “*delicious*” scenes of nature (section 11), the most exhilarating aspects of America (section 12) come to the poet’s mind, transforming the sadness and pain, enveloping everything in the hymn to this affection and joy.

At this point, in a passage of great effect (section 13), he cuts from the public scene and returns to the theme of the “*thrush*” who, singly, singing from the “*recesses*” renews the fullness and the “*Calamus*” nature of the joy. This solo suspends our attention for a moment in such a way that the great section 14 gushes forth truly as the “*climax*” of the ode, its

summation and entire significance. Its three pages, in fact, restate all the themes of visible America—her seas, fields, labors and richness—and of the “*secluded recess*,” meditative and solitary, and culminates finally in the concluding hymn to death. Having commented on “The Mystic Trumpeter” I have nothing to add here. The great value of this hymn, greater even than that of W. W.’s other ecstatic works, lies perhaps in his creation of the figure of death as a universal presence, a feminine essence, a wife, a veiled mother with passionately enwinding arms.

What follows then in the poem are only the necessary closing measures, the assuaging of the ecstasy and lyrical tempest that culminated in this hymn; the vision of death and the war that brings peace and nirvana (section 15), the pensive return to the “Calamus”-like recesses (section 16), and finally the intimate allusions and the farewell to the “*sweetest wisest soul of all my days and lands*.”

Such is the hymn to Lincoln’s death. In it the “martyr” disappears into the background of the larger hymn to the universe. And yet, this figure

of Lincoln, because it could transform itself through death into a hymn of love, remains truly the “*dear comrade*,” indeed the dearest comrade of America’s prophet.

The figure of Lincoln returns frequently in the prose works. In these he is rendered more historically, with longer theoretical discussions, but he is still the soul brother of W. W., the simple and resolute figure who came out of the West and saved the Union. This was more than enough to make him a pioneer. Many chapters of the war sections in *Specimen Days* deal with Lincoln but I will not analyze them one by one. They are “Abraham Lincoln” (*P. W.*, p. 37), “The Inauguration” (p. 57), “Death of President Lincoln” (p. 61), and “No Good Portrait of Lincoln” (p. 63). They all present the figure we already know. And the other pages dispersed throughout the *Prose* add only some particulars to the myth.

And speaking of his prose, I want to say something in general about those works and how they relate to my study of Whitman’s poetry.

Except for a few prophetic discourses, they are all diary-like jottings, which, as we will see, especially in my next chapter, occasionally rise to the level of poetry, but mostly share the common characteristic of not aiming at the construction of a world, of not trying to be, that is, the holy book of the new state, the literary model for the future. And just as I anticipated for the *Leaves* the results of its purpose—that is, the poetry of the mission of creating poetry, the figure of the pioneer/proclaimer, etc.—I note here that with all this missing, without the main driving force of Whitman’s lyricism, his prose becomes a huge, interesting, but cold collection of pieces rarely rising to the level of absorbing creativity. Still, his lively hand is visible at least once, in the notes at “Timber Creek,” where the detailed descriptions of emotions in the open air unconsciously recreate the landscape poetry of the *Leaves of Grass*: suggestions, the ways of life of the loafing pioneer of “Song of Myself.”

And as regards the war diary, I have already said something apropos

while discussing “Come up from the Fields...:” Not that all these recollections are merely journalistic narratives, but they certainly share a great deal of that nature. Now, an “authentic” critic can explain a joke and still miss its point. In fact, he usually ruins it. And when something beyond simple human pity comes alive in these pages, we almost inevitably find a friend, a comrade, or we see W. W., with that impassive look, contemplating some affliction or disaster. And other passages that strike our imagination could be, when we think about them, scenes out of “Drum-Taps.” For example, the group “A Night Battle, Over a Week Since” (p. 28) and “Unnamed Remains the Bravest Soldier” (p. 30) or the impressions of “A Cavalry Camp” (p. 35), the latter of which recalls the “bivouacs” of the *Leaves*.

One can say the same of the frequent references to “*Western youth*,” the best soldiers, who reappear from time to time in these notes in, for example, “Spiritual Characters among the Soldiers” (p. 42), “Sherman’s Army Jubilation--Its Sudden Stoppage” (p. 62), “The Armies Returning “(p. 66), and “Western Soldiers” (p. 67).



Interestingly, we can see in these prose pieces true, epic myths in formation, which, though a little too intentional, are nonetheless still part of that world begun with the veteran's story. We see this, for example, in the figure of General Sherman, with the victory shouts of his "*rangers*" (who resemble the 412 of Texas) and the peculiar atmosphere of the legend created around his only appearance in Washington after the war.

The march to the sea...the Ohio and Iowa veterans...the barbarous use of war cries...the mixture of father and condottiere, "*Old Bill*"—all contribute to the new myth.

And this myth of the "*western*" conquest, of the heroism of the Union's pioneers, culminates in the poem "From Far Dakota's Cañons" (Vol. II., p. 265): The Indian ambush of Custer's men, the slaughter, the familiar and glorious figure of the hero, "*sweet to soldiers*" who becomes the symbol of hope for the future.

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<sup>1</sup> G. G. Napolitano, "Romanzieri Americani," *Gazzetta del Popolo* (January 23, 1930).

<sup>2</sup> R. Michaud, *Littérature Américaine*, ed. cit., 247. Let me strike here while the iron is hot by saying that the most recent interpreters of the American spirit would do well to stop accusing their predecessors of slavish acceptance of French interpretations since all of them are simply rummaging in the works published by Kra and in the *Nouvelle Revue Française* and summarizing badly what they find there. It is instructive in this context to compare the second column of the newspaper article here cited from the *Gazzeta del Popolo* with pages 244-249 in Michaud (op.cit.).

<sup>3</sup> Glenway Wescott, *The Grandmothers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927), chapter II, "Alwyn's Knowledge of America and His Family;" Chapter XI, "...The Religious Faith of the Family;" chapter XV, "Conclusion."

<sup>4</sup> B. de Sélincourt, op.cit., 42.

<sup>5</sup> C. Cestre “W. W., poète de l’Amérique en guerre,” *Rivista delle Nazioni latine*, (Florence: October 16, 1918).

<sup>6</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 167.

<sup>7</sup> B. Perry, op.cit., 149-152.

<sup>8</sup> L. Gamberale, Preface cited, XXIV-XXXVI.

<sup>9</sup> W. Hayes, op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> J. Bailey, op. cit., 37.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., page 114.

## Chapter VI

## The Meditations

In my last chapter I spoke of the prose works. I suspect the reader was surprised that I ignored any “formal” distinctions between Whitman’s prose and the *Leaves of Grass*.

And he might even feel indignant when he realizes how far he has come in this study and how many ineffectual pages he has had to read without once coming across a reference to Whitman’s metrics. To this reader I say without hesitation that I have on purpose not spoken of these metrics, or rhythms if that is what they are. This issue ranks with that other cursed topic, his morals, in the consumption of paper and time, with, I have to say, enormously erratic results. Even de Sélincourt wasted two chapters on metrics. I therefore decided to leave metric considerations aside because I wanted to approach W. W. in a way I hope is not entirely absurd. I wanted to see if perhaps the substance of his poetry, like that of any other poetry, is accessible on a level beyond that of rhetorical

formality. I wanted to see, in sum, if it is possible to understand the creations of a poet without considering the musicality of his verses.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing against the science of metrics which, even though it has always struck me as slightly hermetic, I sincerely admire and respect as I do other historical disciplines. I wish, however, that it were truly considered only an historical discipline, that it would not get in the way of dealing with a writer's aesthetic qualities. And these intrusions in the case of W. W. are common; it is rare to read a book about him without encountering precious statements like, "*there is music in his best verses*,"<sup>1</sup> or that as a poet he has such and such virtue while as a prose-writer he has such and such other virtue,<sup>2</sup> or that because he writes in free verse he sometimes suffers from a certain "*formlessness*" and "*dilation*."<sup>3</sup> This last remark is not only tendentious but also immoral because it urges young writers who have nothing to say, to say it metrically so people will not notice the lack of meaning.

When critics deal with the metrics of W. W. as an historical issue, or as a matter of taste, I take my hat off to them. We have in Italy an entire treatise on Whitman's metrics,<sup>4</sup> one of whose merits is its decisively historical, aesthetically neutral approach that ignores the poetry as poetry. The cool and measured analysis of this little book should have taught aestheticizing critics like Bailey and de Sélincourt how to deal with issues of taste without arguing continually about the value the metric scheme confers on or takes away from this or that poem. Jannaccone does not convince me with his discovery of the famous psychic rhymes and such like, but I appreciate his method. His relatively modest conclusions may not justify the massive scholarly apparatus he constructed but they are nonetheless worthwhile little observations and, I repeat, they have the value, despite the title of the study, of not judging the poet.

The other two critics mentioned above certainly do judge the poet and, faithful to their habits, do not agree on even one stanza. One poem serves here for all: "Dirge for Two Veterans." Bailey in essence says, "This poem has a metric scheme and therefore it is beautiful," while de Sélincourt states,

“It could perhaps have been beautiful, but the metric scheme ruins it.”<sup>5</sup> The fault, and some of the merit, of the enjoyable and indecorous spectacle they offer is due completely to Bailey because he wrote ten years after de Sélincourt.

I do not know if the problem is just mine, but it seems that whenever these two posit a presumed Whitmanesque metric, conscious or unconscious, they fall into a pit of obscurity. We put up with reading these pages because of the importance of the issue of free verse, but what little of their argument one can understand and the great deal that is lost in the clouds seem not only foreign to everything W. W. did in the *Leaves* but also useless for any future applications. I can say of them, as Gamberale did of Jannaccone, that they are “too perceptive to be understood.” And

Gamberale,<sup>6</sup> despite everything negative Rabizziani and Jannaccone<sup>7</sup> say about him, will always have the merit of having increased the knowledge of W. W. in Italy by translating him while the others have only written words. And it is no great matter if Gamberale occasionally makes mistakes in his version: If, for example, in his haste he translates “*Dutch*” as “Danish” or “*So long*” as “how late.”<sup>8</sup> The mass of the book is magnificently rendered, and certain passages are more effective than in the original.<sup>9</sup>

But I realize that I go too far. This detailed and entirely useless Whitmanian criticism—useless for better understanding W. W.—involves so many trifles and so much petty wrangling that in discussing it I have myself become mean and gossipy rather than straightforward. My purpose in this introduction was simply to justify the parity I attribute to *Leaves of Grass* and the prose works. I believe I have done this, and I can now proceed freely to consider other poems and *Specimen Days*.



I have stated before, indeed by now it must seem a cliché, that through his intention to proclaim a new gospel, W. W. above all created the poetry of this intention, the figure, that is, of the proclaimer who is also a poet and a good comrade on the road. This poetry does not arise from just two or three songs particularly dedicated to this aim, such as “Song of the Answerer,” or “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” etc. Rather, we hear the consciousness of the mission reecho and express itself in every page of the book: in the description of a march, in the joy of friendship, in the praise of a piece of music.

At this point, the figure I have followed is now enriched with a new attribute, a new characteristic. Meditation.

I mean new in the sequence of my analysis because in many of the songs already discussed, especially in “Song of Myself,” we already have harmonic fragments in the complex figure of the new Adam. To consider for a moment the “*lounger*” of “Song of Myself” and the way he drew out

thoughts from nature and surrounding humanity, or to think on certain walks taken by the lover in *Calamus*, walks filled with thoughts of sweet secrets, can certainly serve as a fair prelude to the group of poems that I now want to discuss.

These poems do not come from any specific period of Whitman's life; many were included in the first edition of the *Leaves*. But because of the dates of the prose works they reflect, and somewhat because of their recollected and calmer, truly autumnal tone, these "meditations," taken as a whole, can be considered the fruit of the post-war period, the expression of the prophet made more serious and thoughtful by infirmity, age, and, perhaps, experience. I do not want this point taken too literally lest I be asked to explain the contradiction between it and what I said on page 33 of this study, "W. W., after the life at Timber Creek, is more pugnacious than ever and the bard of his land." I am identifying and classifying tendencies that ran parallel in the life of W. W. It is natural that after the war he was taken up with the fixation of prophesying to a reconstituted America, just as it is natural that

during and after the hard test of its existence, he paused to contemplate and think. Let us agree that throughout all the *Leaves* W. W. paused continually to meditate but let me now gather in this group only those works that best fit and truly “describe” the figure of the old man who withdraws into himself to meditate—the W. W. we always imagine, with the great patriarchal beard. As was true of the pioneer, this figure reverberates in every *Leaf* but in certain songs becomes a distinct object before our eyes.

The new attribute is well exemplified by the poem “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer” (Vol. II, p. 32). The important thing in this worke is not what Walt thinks, and in any case that is not described, but rather the repose of a self-contained person who, laying aside the weight of convention and artifice, lets the universe speak to him with its own voices.

One of Whitman's habits has elicited comment from all his biographers and yet none of them has arrived at the obvious aesthetic conclusion. I refer to his great delight in walking and pausing in the streets of New York, mixing with and enjoying the crowds. And to his standing for hours at the rail of a "*ferry-boat*" or along the Hudson to contemplate the view of the city and absorb its majesty. A city, parenthetically, which seemed to him quite democratic but was not. And the aesthetic conclusion to which I refer is my customary point: Every time he describes these views W. W. creates the poetry of the contemplation of them and thus it is totally nonsensical to deplore, as almost everyone does, his frequent use of catalogs. We have seen this earlier in "Salut au Monde!" The catalog is his form. To make the point more subtly, he uses the device not to describe this or that part of a view but to describe the way he himself absorbs its entirety. But putting aside this hoary issue, we see that many of the works that describe the loving contemplator of New York

are biographically linked memories also sketched out in *Specimen Days* and let us therefore turn to his prose.

In my last chapter I spoke generally about W. W.'s" prose works. I pointed out that in my view the important difference between them and the *Leaves* does not lie in their exterior forms—a negligible difference in any case, a mere typographic accident—but in the deeper driving forces and purposes of their respective creations. I need not repeat that whole discussion. The poetry of the prophetic mission that so often generates the poetry of poetry, or proclamations and conquest, is missing in the *Prose Works* because, and this is the point, W. W. did not mean them to create another bible for America. Apart from the essays and a few varied passages that we will deal with, the *Prose Works* are a great diary, and they have, as they say, the pros and cons of a diary. Sometimes, as we saw with the war "jottings," their simple, elementary humanity touches us with their tenderness, and other times they lose themselves in mere narration.

For example, in the prose, even though the author wrote on the same themes in the *Leaves*, the yearnings of the prophet and bard do not come through in the description of the old pioneer who stops to contemplate and meditate. I speak in general terms, you understand, but still, these descriptions of nature and humanity, full of subtle, regenerative impulses, as are all the impressions of New York and Timber Creek, do not carry the earlier oratorical and pugnacious energy. They present only the poet's serene absorption of the things he sees and his identification with them. There are works that accomplish this communion with the external world and then incite us to attempt the same, and to enter "pioneeristically" in the march for the "solid prizes of the universe," but I have already dealt with those works in my chapters on the pioneer and the comrade. The important point is not that I have dealt with them, but that all those works appear in the *Leaves*. Why there only? Because in the prose he only records impressions, he does not embark on the mission of remaking Adam.

Unless my argument has been too convoluted, I hope at this point that the position of those parts of *Specimen Days* from Timber Creek up to, but not including the “Collect” Section in Whitman’s poetry, is clear.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, I will cite a few examples from the prose without going too deeply into it, which, after all, would be senseless given what I have said.

Let us look at “Human and Heroic New York” (p. 110), “Two City Areas,” “Certain Hours” (p. 126), “Central Park Walks and Talks” (p. 127), and “A Fine Afternoon, 4 to 6” (p. 128). Someone remembering “Mannahatta” from the *Leaves* and comparing these pieces to it will find the same calm and satisfied spirit in both the poetry and the prose, the interest in and indeed the love of the city full of so much force and beauty, the same ardent and passionate gaze described in the notes from the Western journey, only there with a more oratorical sense of mission and adventure. And it is worth noting that the figure of the old man, the satisfied thinker who wanders the streets and piers

is perhaps better realized in these New York prose pieces than in the exclamatory tone of the poems.

Even more notable, first for their poetry and then for their greater resonance with the *Leaves*, are those pieces dealing with the Hudson and the sea: “Manhattan from the Bay” (p. 109), “Delaware River—Days and Nights” (117), “Hudson River Sights,” “Departing of the Big Steamers” (p. 125), and “Only a New Ferry Boat” (p. 185). Whitman’s joy in the sea and wind and colors and freedom gives the vision of New York as a metropolis of power and democracy a larger and broader natural resonance. The last of these pieces, “Only a New Ferry Boat,” is so filled with the myth of the sea that it almost recreates the miracle of “In Cabin’d Ships at Sea”.

All these pieces can be correlated with a “*song*” about which much has been written but nothing said, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (Vol. I, p. 191). In fact, it is less than nothing to make clever observations about this poem such as that in it the author embraces time as elsewhere he embraces space, and other such ingenious observations.<sup>11</sup> And Kennedy, who inveighs against the “*usual blunder*



*of judging Walt Whitman as a mere artist,”*<sup>12</sup> would do better to argue first with the conception of art of those he accuses and then develop a more creditable idea of art himself. If he did, he would realize that in fact it is not so criminal to judge W. W. as a poet; indeed, W. W. generally has more to gain than lose with this approach. As, for example, with “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

While I do not understand the philosophical sublimity of the meditations on the future, I find stunning the lyricism of the ecstatic look from the ferry to the city bathed in sunset light, a lyric of entranced contemplation, and a serene overflowing of truth in the soul of the protagonist. The continual references to the future are, however, just annoying, except in sections 5 and 6 where they express the fullness of life and joy and the thought that even when the author is gone, his incomparable existence shall nonetheless have been. Sections

3, 8, and 9 are obviously the finest because they broadly express the lucid contemplation of the East River, the city, and the bay.

This world of thoughtful idleness that I am trying to reconstruct has its clearest expression, however, in another extremely famous group of prose pieces that I can call, without pretending to be the first to do so, the pearls of the prose: the notes on life at Timber Creek (1876-77).

These pages at first glance seem only a diary—sometimes we find noted even the hour the entry was made—but fortunately their substance is something quite different. They remain a mere diary, that is chronicle, “prose,” and gossip, when all W. W. does is tell about incidents of his life up to 1882, incidents that he finds interesting, and fails “*to bring out...the affinities...with the open air* (p. 76),” fails to express the impressions of the marvelous experiment of life amidst nature.

We no longer have here the national and human mission, no grand oratory. The poet finds himself alone in an Arcadian valley far from the “sounds of the world.” He has discovered that nothing in the world, “*business, politics, conviviality, love...finally satisfy.*” For W. W. this is a serious statement and if that is the case then, “*...what remains? Nature remains; to bring out, etc.*”<sup>A</sup>

These pages are an endless and constantly new expression of wonder and peaceful contemplation. He does not, as Longfellow might, extract moral lessons from the nature around him, but rather life-enhancing impulses from the mysterious stimuli of things. The substance of the new poetry of these pages is perhaps best expressed in that image he himself uses—the tugging on oak “*saplings*” that injected a younger strength into his muscles (“The Oaks And I,” p. 98). This is the poetry of the sweetness of an Indian summer full of simple happenings, and of the sounds of nature avidly absorbed by the old, now wiser and more contemplative satyr, the simple still exultation

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<sup>A</sup> The full quote would read: “Nature remains; to bring out from their torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the trees, fields, the changes of seasons—the sun by day and the stars of heaven by night.”

of one who no longer proclaims to a nation but calmly rejoices in himself. I have called this poetry new, but this sage for whom a thought or meditation fuses with the virgin earth, the air, the laws of the universe, this sage is still very much the old W. W. of “Song of Myself” or “O Magnet-South.” Both the richness and coherence of the figure I am describing is found in this continuity.

This said, there only remains to cite from the Prose. It is worth noting how W. W., after his long experiment of life amid things, achieves in certain of these *Specimen Days* a hyper-acute sensibility of participating in specific natural phenomena. For example, he listens to the infinite variations of chirps and buzzes with an almost morbid pleasure: “Bumble-Bees” (p. 78), “Locusts and Katydid” (p. 82), “Crows and Crows” (p. 87), “Distant Sounds” (p. 96), and “Bird-Whistling” (p. 105). He fixes with pleasure on certain colorations of insects and flowers,

on certain almost Shelley-like sparklings of light on water and plants: “Summer Sights and Indolencies” (p. 80), “Sundown Perfume—Quail Notes—The Hermit-Thrush” (p.81), “The Sky—Days and Nights—Happiness” (p.85),” Colors—A Contrast” (p. 87), “An Afternoon Scene—The Common Earth, the Soil” (pp. 92-93), “Sundown Lights” (p. 103), and “Straw-Color’d and Other Psyches” (p. 114). In these notes, sentences run swiftly and unconnected; syntax no longer connects anything, and he returns to the law of the symphonic formulation of his verse. The impressions follow each other disjointedly; they are fused only by the overall lyric significance of the scenes. Pieces like “A July Afternoon by the Pond” (p. 81),” Birds Migrating at Midnight, Spring Overtures—Recreations” (p. 91), “The Gates Opening” (p. 93), “February Days” (p. 102), and “Swallows on the River” (p. 132) could be transposed into verse and inserted in the *Leaves*. There is no difference between them and, say, “Warble for Lilac-Time” (Vol. II, p. 152) other than a greater realistic delineation of the scene in the former

versus the construction of a broader idealistic landscape of seasons and natural happenings in the latter. But considered as poetry they both express the same world of exultation in the life-giving freshness of nature.

“Warble...” can be viewed as representing in the *Leaves* all the cited prose.

One can make similar comparisons between the prose and the *Leaves* by looking at those paragraphs in which the simple noting of a feeling turns into the direct expression of the thoughts derived from the specific scene. They become descriptions of the very figure of the contemplator and sage who presents himself meditating. “The Lesson of a Tree” (p. 83), “One of the Human Kinks” (p. 92), “A Sun-Bath—Nakedness” (p.96), “Thoughts under an Oak—A Dream” (p. 104), “Hours for the Soul” (p. 111), “A Civility Too Long Neglected” (p.116), and “Final Confessions—Literary Tests” (p. 191) are all pieces that, yes, posit theoretical arguments but do so with a tone of such natural frankness and serenity that they place in full view the living figure of the protagonist.

“This Compost” (Vol. II, p. 270) renews in the *Leaves* the poetry of the peaceful meditation on the things of nature. The poem fails in its attempted contrast of the putrid with the healthy but does express well the satisfied state of the one who meditates on the final goodness of everything.

But this mode cannot endure in the *Leaves*. We will see that it is only in the annexes of his last old age that he returns to the poetry of “art for art’s sake,” and expresses premonitions of his end. I don’t know through what miracle but in fact W. W. succeeded in the prose pieces mentioned and in the occasional “*leaf*” to describe the joy of contemplation and here, at least, he adopts a sensible approach to it: meditation. But the idea of his work’s great mission will not die while strength remains in him. Indeed, we see that in the greater part of the group, this figure of the wise “*natur-forscher*”<sup>B</sup> returns and clearly describes his “*wanderings*” as escapes from conventionality and doubt, an approach that implies the familiar poetry of mission, something we recognize from all the way back to “Inscriptions.”

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<sup>B</sup> Natural scientist, student of nature, or natural philosopher.

In this manner, W. W. finishes by giving us again the figure of the “good gray poet”—now a little grayer and more solemn—who passes amidst afflictions and contradictions in the grip of the “*answerer’s*” fever. And feeling that if he cannot rectify things, he must at least justify them, he looks about, theorizes, despairs, tries to remain unmoved but always ends with his unrestrained “*all-dissolving*” rush of love. This was, as we saw, how he resolved the sadness of history and the atrocities of war. And in this sense the figure of the old “philosopher” unites with the tradition of the pioneer. Comforting the afflicted forms part of the prophetic mission in these thoughtful short poems and the protagonist becomes the affectionate comrade of the fallen.

Because a human purpose always imposed itself on W. W., there are only a few poems in the *Leaves*, other than those already cited, that arise from situations like those treated in *Specimen Days*. Nevertheless,



beauty lies in the few lines that make up “Youth, Day, Old Age and Night” (Vol. II, p. 275) with their simple, cosmic amplitude, and the dizzying immensity with which he transforms the progress of existence youth, and old age through the image of day and night. In the same manner, the liberation of the soul beneath the stars is the poetic theme in “A Clear Midnight” (Vol. II, p. 270). And “On the Beach at Night Alone” (Vol. II, p. 21) clearly demonstrates that the thought itself means nothing in these songs, what instead matters is the meditation, the attitude of the poet who, confronted by nature, stops, thinks, and makes poetry of this attitude.

The almost homonymous “On the Beach at Night” (Vol. II, p. 19), however, introduces us to a new world. The scene seems the same: night, a beach, and meditations on the universe, but the spirit is entirely different. The drama occurring in the sky expresses, as an uncomplicated, non-allegorical “image,”

the eclipse of eternal things that happen in life. The poet's response, arbitrary even if true, is a grand piece of poetry: certainty in the future derived from the sublimity of the scene and the vastness and immortality of the stars. There is also something subtly suggestive in the relationship of the optimistic father and the crying daughter compared to Jupiter "*large and calm*" and the Pleiades, the "*delicate sisters*."

Not because of any truth or soothing conclusion, but because of the perfect figure of the sage who comforts the terrified child, this scene is one of the most notable in the book. Without question it introduces us, as I have said, to the new world of the philosopher, the divine "*healer*" who has the onerous responsibility of making things whole again.

Two other poems in the "Sea-Drift" Section continue the almost apocalyptic visions of the sea: *Tears* (Vol. II, p. 17) and "Patrolling Barnegat" (Vol. II, p. 23). The first, through the mystery of that

*“shapeless lump...crouched on the sand”* and the second, through the mystery of the *“group of dim, weird forms”* express the atmosphere of terror and bewilderment in the face of an angry God who makes himself manifest, and not just physically, in a wild coastal storm. (Though, in the latter poem, the explanation that the forms “are the waves, air, midnight” almost destroys the effect.) “Thought” (Vol. II, p. 232) is another poem dealing with the sea and, like certain of the historical pieces cited before, it is full of unresolved anguish.<sup>c</sup> It echoes the naval battle in “Song of Myself,” though differs from it because there the sea, with its howling force, made the poet impassive and here, instead, he freely expresses doubt.

The impassive characteristic of “Song of Myself” takes its definite form in “I Sit and Look Out “(Vol. II, p. 34), a savage, almost sadistic tabulation of sorrows and horrors. Its conclusion, *“All these...I sitting look out upon/ See, hear, and am silent.”* resolves nothing either logically or humanly. Poetically, however, it is a stunning example of the tension of the old

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<sup>c</sup> Five poems in *Leaves of Grass* are entitled *Thought*. The one Pavese cites here is found in the *Whispers of Heavenly Death* Section.

pioneer trying not to despair, to find for himself an approach, an answer that will save both dignity and passion. The same severity of purpose is found in “A Hand-Mirror” (Vol. II, p. 30) where all the horror of the sick and decaying body is endured and contemplated. But how? “...*sternly....Hold it up sternly.*” The pioneer “must” be tough.

One finds the same apparently sure but anguished tone with which final corruption is faced in the long meditation entitled “To Think of Time” (Vol. II, p. 213). Here, after the first four outstanding sections of description, characteristically “impassive,” as for example in the recounting of a common workingman’s death and funeral, the justifications begin. He speaks his words of wisdom, however, without conviction or else shouts them to convince himself, but they change none of the sadness of the poem.

Whitman wrote other catalogs of this type, for example the slight poem “Faces” (Vol. II, p. 244). This poem fails in its construction because the

“*Lord*” of the poem is an absolute puppet who knows neither where he came from nor where he is going. And while there is a certain lyric effect in the satisfied tone with which loathsome things are so calmly and lucidly faced, the stratagem of linking everything to faces, as everything was linked to axes in the “Broad-Axe,” simply does not work.

That strange, too strange, poem “The Sleepers” (Vol. II, p. 201), though far from perfect, succeeds better in dealing with the contemplation of evil combined with an attempted justification. I confess that I do not see in it all the exoticism that some have<sup>13</sup> and even if there is something mysterious about the “*nimble ghosts*” who lead the dance, I do not understand why, aesthetically speaking, it is worth bothering about. The poetry of this song is something entirely different, much simpler, and more human. The unusual situation of the poet as one who, wandering at night, surveys those sleeping could logically explain sections 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 as dreams, but still, aesthetically, the vast difference of spirit between these and sections 1, 7, and 8 cleaves the poem into two discordant worlds and demonstrates

the fragility of its vaunted philosophic scheme. In the end all we can say is that sections 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 present to us a W. W. who, when faced with pain and evil, forces himself to put on the face of *I Sit and Look Out* and at most lets slip some sign of indignation or a quick despairing look. Sections 1, 7, and 8, however, give comfort to the “wretched,” linking them to the respectable and well-off, leveling all, caressing them in the tenderness of the night, which, a little like death in “When Lilacs Last...,” takes on the aspects of a lover or loving mother.

And once he starts down this road, W. W. does not stop. What the gray poet was for the soldiers, he is for all men. Humanity is, after all, to him, a pioneer, a single crowd of fellow travelers and comrades. “A Song for Occupations” (Vol. I, p. 257) again reechoes with the prophetic

proclamations among which it was born. Who looks for the figure of the “*average man*” in this poem, or for a variety of psychological types? They do not exist among the personae nor should they. The only figure created and inserted in this “*song*” is that of the loving poet who, in the passionate revelation of his truths, responds to evil, meanness, and shame with dignity offered with love to the meek and lost. The poem’s only flaw is that everything is already said by section 3 and from there to the end the lines are only words.

So similar as to seem almost a fragment of this poem is the shorter “To You” (Vol. I, p. 284). It is another that sings with fierce love the praise of all men regardless of their guilt or pain.

One finds this same acceptance of rather than explanation of evil in “You Felons on Trial in Courts” (Vol. II, p. 160) and “To a Common Prostitute” (Vol. II, p. 161) and in these it is expressed proudly and defiantly

but with little lyric effect. The poems are forced: Love, human pity, the strong arm ready to help are Whitman's only means of coping with the agony of evil in the world.

The ecstatic moment of the prisoners in "The Singer in the Prison" (Vol. II, p. 150) partakes of this same feeling. When they hear the hymn—a horrid hymn with its allegory of an imprisoned soul—they forget their guilt and punishment. The effect is achieved despite the somewhat oleographic figure of the singer who reminded me of the "*lady*" in "Old Ireland" (Vol. II, p. 138), and both are echoes of the personifications in "Song of the Exposition."

This sentiment is perfectly expressed in the much-praised "The City Dead-House" (Vol. II, p. 139), in which compassion for the vilified and destroyed body resolves poetically the problem of evil. Herein lies the greatness of W.W.: when faced with the world's pain and evil, this proud and gigantic figure of a pioneer is so human as to be moved and does



not know other than to be moved lest he be forced into indifference, which would be more tragic.

This compassion and unwavering will to hope reaches the sublime when, in “To One Shortly to Die” (Vol. II, p. 231) he speaks to the dying man who has no escape, whose body will decay in the earth. W. W. loves him and says, “...*let others tell you what they please...I am exact and merciless...I love you*” And with this love, with this embrace from a comrade, and with no other certainty, come the “*eternal*” words that comfort him at the end; “*I congratulate you.*”

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<sup>1</sup> William P. Trent, op.cit., 494.

<sup>2</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., chapter VI.

<sup>3</sup> B. de Sélincourt, op. cit., 83 ff.; Bailey, op.cit., 99.

<sup>4</sup> P. Jannaccone, *La poesia di W. W. e l'evoluzione delle forme ritmiche* (Turin: Roux-Frassati, 1898).

<sup>5</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 112; De Sélincourt, op.cit., 89-90.

<sup>6</sup> L. Gamberale, Preface cited, XLII.

<sup>7</sup> G. Rabizzani, "Il mondo poetico di Walt Whitman," *Nuova Rassegna di Letterature Moderne*, Anno VI (January 25, 1908); Jannaccone, op.cit., 30.

<sup>8</sup> L. Gamberale, op.cit., 492 and 513. (Pavese is right on both counts when he picks these nits. Gamberale himself realized the first error and corrected *Danese* (Danish) to *Olandese* (Dutch) in his revised 1926 edition of the translation. He did not change "Quanto tardi," though he should have. Enzo Giachino in his translation, commissioned significantly enough by Pavese as senior editor at Einaudi, and dedicated to Pavese's memory when published after Pavese's death, used the more appropriate, if slightly formal and religious, Italian word, "*Addio*" for "So long." [*Foglie d'erba*, Enzo Giachino, translator, Turin: Einaudi, 1993, 621]. Translator's addition to endnote).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 251: the segment beginning, "*E così il canto finiva....*"

<sup>10</sup> W. W., *Prose Works*, op.cit., 195-374.

<sup>11</sup> J. Bailey, op.cit., 160.

<sup>12</sup> W. S. Kennedy, op.cit., 94.

<sup>13</sup> L. Bazalgette, *Le poème-évangilé*, ed.cit., 50.

## Chapter VII

## The Passage of the Soul and Old Age

Since this chapter will be the last, I hope it will also be the most convincing. I will offer definitive proofs and clear demonstrations of everything I have so far affirmed.

I believe I have already presented my thoughts about the persona of W. W. as pioneer, a persona that possesses those characteristics analyzed throughout my study. I see no need, therefore, to repeat material that I have presented at length elsewhere. To conclude and submit the last proofs of the absolute preponderance of this persona in *L. of G.*, I propose now to demonstrate that death, the passage to the beyond, and what lies beyond the self, all, in sum, which in a hasty phrase is called the mysticism of W. W.,<sup>1</sup> is for him yet one more myth of discovery, a pioneer's conquest, the continuation of the earthly march expressed with the same figures—the road, the ship, the comrade, etc. And I propose further to demonstrate that this praise of the mission by way of the

mission itself is, beneath every theme, the true ultimate reality of W. W.

I spoke of two poems in my analysis of his historical vision: “Passage to India” and “Prayer of Columbus.” Their two mindsets, that of the earthly and the celestial pioneer, are so tightly linked in the unique personality described that it is hard to identify the precise moment of separation. Both poems start from true, apt images of historical distress and then, little by little and with no change of spirit, turn into investigations of the world beyond, of God, of a God, and this is essential, who is surely eternal and infinite but who is always the comrade, the “*loving comrade*” of the war and of *Calamus*.

The most interesting thing so far written about these poems is Michaud’s almost glancing historical comment: “*il y aura désormais dans ses odes une note nouvelle et sourdine. Il a vu souffrir et mourir...*”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, before the experience of the war and the ecstatic vigils with dead

comrades, W. W. did not know this world. He often spoke of the soul, but he dealt with it as he did with so many of his other ideas, with empty theorizing. Or he would use it as a suitable image for proclamations to the States, generating from the idea the poetic notes of the proclamation. Only after the war and its pain does he succeed in forging the idea of immortality into new images. “The Death of Thomas Carlyle” (pp. 160-63) and certain pages from the notes at *Timber Creek* show us that he arrived at this poetry through quiet meditation and contemplation born of aging and illness.

“Night on the Prairie” (Vol. II, p. 23) is from the “Whispers of Heavenly Death” Section, for all that it originates in an encampment of emigrants on the trek west, and from the desire for and joy in the discovery of ulterior values, it still resembles the stolen contemplative pauses of *Specimen Days*.

These “mystical” poems, in sum, reconnect in all senses to and blend with the spirit of all the various attitudes noted already in W. W.

But before going any further I want to return to one “*poem*” just mentioned because it is the most important of the group and summarizes all the others.

“Passage to India” is one more example of Whitman’s tendency to create poetry out of the landscape of the continent or, as here, truly out of that of the entire planet. Though he always goes right to the brink of rhetorical abstraction, W. W. manages every time to create an ideally true and poetically alive world when he draws on the life and character of his pioneer-prophet figure. While the “Song of the Redwood-Tree” used the calls and echoes of a continent for its background, “Passage to India” uses the entire earth for its setting. Its action consists of the conquest of the “rondure of the world” but draws its themes of discovery from a world beyond. In this way, the entire idea of the march of the pioneer returns and with it the myth that W. W. had imagined up to this point—America and history. He now adds the new myth of the passage to the beyond

as a synthesis and coronation of the earthly effort: all expressed in the fitting image of the rondure of the world “accomplish’d.”

In this sense the poem is one of the best constructed in the *Leaves*. The first sections, with their premise of continental vastness and two eras, past and present, resolve themselves naturally in the passage from the former to the latter seen as the agony of heroic enterprise that the figure of Columbus nicely summarizes at the end (section 6). Then comes the acknowledgment of the divine freshness of that ancient past (section 7), which leads to the spirituality of the secular search that, outside of time and space, becomes a mystical aspiration to reach supreme heights, the true mystical marriage (section 8) with the “*Comrade perfect*,” God. The

conquest, the ascent to these spheres, consists in the joy of the revelations that all nature offers and is also yet again the life of the discovery of the supreme meaning of things (section 9) that we have seen right from the beginning of “Song of Myself.”

I have written this interpretive summary of the poem as a justification of its logical construction. But what will never be forgotten about it is the entire marvelous correspondence of the successive terrestrial and cosmic passages with the successive levels of the protagonist’s search. For example, the image of the march of history is made into such poetry that it transforms every event into a bright image against the background of the whole world: The start of the search is a great emigration from the “gardens of Asia” and the transformation of the ideals of the fifteenth century into a sunset spreading over the whole world.

After this, the “Prayer of Columbus” adds nothing new. But, as I said in Chapter IV, it is a superb poem. The figure of the ill-treated explorer who arrives at the joy of his mission only through pain and death and for whom



the afterlife is an intense ecstasy of discovery “outside of time and space” is yet again what we expected.

The few other poems in the *Leaves* that try to describe this mystical world of the unknown either replicate, roughly, the sense of revelation in *Prayer*... or are unfeeling affirmations of faith and failed attempts to infuse life into logical abstractions.

One of these is “Whispers of Heavenly Death” (Vol. II, p. 221) and another “That Music Always Round Me” (Vol. II, p. 228). The first presents ethereal glimmers of a new trembling world of hope and discovery (“*Whispers...Footsteps gently...Ripples...tides...plashing...*”) in an equally ethereal and enigmatic landscape (“*cloud-masses...a...far-off star....*”). The second is an exultant revelation of the “*new meanings*” of joy.

While an almost theological tract such as “Chanting the Square Deific” (Vol. II, p. 222) appeals mightily to those interested in the esoteric opinions

of W. W.,<sup>3</sup> it is feeble poetry because, I believe, the beyond is presented as secure knowledge rather than as discovery, revelation, a voyage.

And all the other mystical poems in the *Leaves* re-echo the grand voyage.

The first two, “To Old Age” (Vol. I, p. 38) and “So Long” (Vol. II, p. 286) are curious because, while presenting old age and death as new beginnings, a new enterprise, they were written before the war. Lacking, therefore, that pain and meditative experience they do not have the true sense of liberation and joyful launching into the unknown that is the essence of the Whitmanesque “Passage of the soul.” Because of this deficiency, “To Old Age” is, in the end, just a thought and “So Long” more a goodbye to old themes than a presentment of the future, a tender indulgence in the sweetest of memories.

With these two exceptions and that of “A Noiseless Patient Spider” (Vol. II, p. 229), which elaborates too schematically the thought of future work to be done among the stars, all the rest of the group contain clear-cut descriptions of the passage to the beyond undertaken with

the true joy of one who finds himself in his own world again, the world of discovery, journeys, and comrades.

After the great construction of “Passage to India,” W. W. no longer concerns himself with creating proper poems from this poetry. A quick, flashing idea suffices; a thought, a moment’s delight is enough for him to fix a scene. In fact, “Portals and These Carols” (Vol. II, p. 286) are mere thoughts. Much of this poetry has the defect of being only a simple exclamation, a shout, an “Away” of departure: for example, “O Living Always, Always Dying” (Vol. II, p. 230) and “Joy, Shipmate, Joy!” (Vol. II, p. 285).

“But Gliding O’er All” (Vol. II, p. 37) and “Now Finalè to the Shore” (Vol. II, p. 286) offer something more: scenes from a lengthy voyage among the almost transparent appearance of things. These use again W. W.’s preferred trope for a passage, the sea voyage, with which, as we have already seen, he creates skilled images of the pioneers of this life.

We also see again in these songs the situation of the companion on the

earthly march who in “Out from Behind This Mask” (Vol. II, p. 156) succeeds in renewing the figure of two travelers linked together, facing the future and a new, unexplored world. I have to say, however, that the first section of this poem fails because he uses, as he often does, an overstrained image, in this case that of the mask. And the epigraph prefixed to the whole book, “Come, said my Soul,”<sup>A</sup> draws its life from the idea of comrades. In this case the passage to other spheres is entirely a case of this hope and joy of the eternal mission undertaken with “*a group of mates.*”

The “Whispers of Heavenly Death” Section is particularly dedicated to this type of poem. It contains the two masterpieces of the genre: “Darest Thou Now O Soul” (Vol. II, p. 221) and “The Last Invocation” (Vol. II, p. 233), poems that in their own smaller ways equal the superb last segments of “Passage to India.” The great beauty of these two poems lies in the muted tone of the invitation to parting in the first and the prayer for liberation in the second. Both the invitation and the prayer are murmured “*tenderly*” as intimate secrets of the soul, a tone that is the very atmosphere of the

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<sup>A</sup> A prefatory poem that first appeared in the 1876 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. In the 1881 edition Whitman placed it on the title page above his signature. Most later editions of *Leaves of Grass* continue to place the poem on the title page over a facsimile of Whitman’s signature. See, for instance, The Library of America edition (New York, 1982), page 147.

unexplored spheres of the new and eternal world, which is sensed only through far-off echoes (like those described in “Whispers of Heavenly Death”). “The Last Invocation” works better, perhaps because of the pointed contrast between the strong clasp of the world and the “*noiseless*” spirit.

Now, all this atmosphere of “Heavenly Death” could not go unpunished. I mean it would have been strange if scholars had not attempted to conclude their analyses and biographies of the author with the sentiments and passages of these last poems.

Let us make one thing clear: the last years of W. W., leave aside his death, were, from what we see in his writings, anything but an ecstatic anticipation of the afterlife. Rather, they consisted of an entirely human, painful, and often degrading daily effort to rise above the inevitable physical and intellectual decline of old age. So true is that, that the best scholars, Bailey for example, prefer to pass silently over everything W. W. wrote after “Song of Parting.”

This decline is nothing new: As early as 1906 Perry, a competent biographer no matter what Kennedy says,<sup>4</sup> had the legitimate courage to look with something less than enthusiasm at the facts of the “Sage of Camden.” The spectacle of the officious and oracular old man and his dear disciples grated on his nerves.<sup>5</sup> Perry took accurate measure of the prophetic value of the many “*sayings*” so religiously noted and expressed his doubts about the clarity and competence of W.W. on certain issues. I believe in fact that this is the secret motive for the mysterious notes that Kennedy produced to discredit Perry’s work.<sup>6</sup> You don’t mess with William Kennedy! He was the keeper of the flame from those special times in Camden when that heroic group, W. W. and his apostles, gathered together to launch their “little barque” on the world. But Kennedy’s judgment abandons him in this battle: He calls Henry James a “*second-rate writer*” for trashing *Drum-Taps*; he describes Swinburne as a “*wild, windy and occasionally sublime guitarist*” for his noted palinode and Vachel Lindsay as an “*envious poetling*” for I don’t know what similar error.<sup>7</sup> Then, best of all, he creates a most amusing list of those who

do and do not accept the *Leaves* and weighs the two groups!<sup>8</sup> We can almost hear W.W. himself when he divided the world into “*our crowd*” and “*not our crowd*.”<sup>9</sup>

I write now not so much to respond to the last apostles such as Kennedy and Bazalgette who, in any case, no longer influence anyone, but to clarify something simple, which, because of the heroic exaltations of the idol—not necessarily incorrect, just anachronistic—has been made complicated: the nature of the poetry of Whitman’s last years.

It seems to me only honest to speak of all that is possibly good or bad about this poetry and because I believe W. W. can only gain from a clear analysis of this part of his work, the part that has been least investigated, I suspect, because of the fear of finding rotting fruit.

W. W. himself, by the way, described the vice of his last

production in a wholesale way with one word: garrulousness. Empty repetition become habit. The little poem, “Queries to My Seventieth Year” (Vol. II, p. 296), in which W. W. describes himself as “*parrot-like*” should be viewed in this light as should *Good-Bye My Fancy*, the Preface to the “Second Annex” of *Leaves of Grass* (Vol. III, pp. 3 -5) in which he clearly asks himself if it is not time to wind up, “*to silently retire.*”

*Round Table with W.W.*,<sup>10</sup> the stenographic rendition of the conversations at the poet’s seventy-second birthday party, is a wonderful documentary of this vexatious state. The garrulous prophet who wants to get his own in at all costs, continually interrupts and embarrasses his friend Binton, who was charged with reading the messages of congratulations from the absent faithful. He distracts and interrupts everyone with the petulance of a baby who knows he is everybody’s darling. The only time he behaves properly is when listening to laudatory speeches addressed to him. Now, the W.W. captured in this stenographic record is the W. W. of the last Camden years and in general it is this Whitman the poetry of the “Annexes” reflects.



Little remains to be said about the prose that preceded and accompanied these annexes of the *Leaves. Collect*, published in 1882 with *Specimen Days*, contains pieces that appeared in 1871 and some written after then. None of them add anything new to the figure described in my earlier chapters. The best of the pieces are those in which W. W. returns to the role of prophet. In these, he uses his booming 1855 voice to proclaim the social and national truths we have come to know. It was not for nothing that I began my study with the observation that W. W. used both theoretical and polemic prose as well as prophetic verse to describe the same figure. Both the poetry and the prose are identical in spirit since they both arise from the desire to create a spiritual reality for the chosen people. In composing poetry, however, he naturally objectified the figure of the preacher through ambiance or images, while in the prose he rarely defined a personality. It seems logical that when fulminating in prose he was happy if he could just set his ideas down clearly.

Thus, the vaunted *Democratic Vistas* suffers in comparison with many great “songs.” In the prose, when he attempts the description of the continent

and its people spread out at the feet of the prophet/pioneer, what we get, admittedly with vivid rhetorical colors, is simply W.W. describing what he considers a proper social system. I state this as a generality for I realize that we are dealing here with difference of degree not of kind. Naturally, he sometimes gives a little touch in the prose that suffices to present this figure of the orator more vigorously, more definitely. When he does, W. W. thereby creates what seems to me the grand, and the only, poetry possible for him in such situations.

Burroughs's characterizations of the style of this prose—tempestuous, proud, etc.<sup>11</sup>—are simple rhetorical observations, descriptive images that lead nowhere and, if anything, are an attempt toward a new poetics as is Nencioni's famous phrase that "in the *L. of G.* one feels the movement of the wind that stirs the vines, the breeze from the great Ohio and Mississippi rivers."<sup>12</sup> It is an old complaint that criticism often misses the point and as regards W.W. one can never repeat it often enough because of the number of critics who have performed surgery on him with the wrong instruments.

The rest of the prose in *Collect* resembles that of *Democratic Vistas*: prefaces, discourses on poetry and then an assembly of political, critical, and moral essays—the *Notes Left-Over*. They are in the end all conventional discourses to the nation and to search for poetry in them is to waste time. They do have their biographical and historical value, but these are points I am not discussing.

I come now finally to the two groups of prose most pertinent to this chapter, *November Boughs* and *Good-Bye My Fancy*. He wrote and published both contemporaneously with the two groups of poems of his old age. With these we enter the true world of the last years of W. W. What then are these works?

For me, they are the output of a writer grown incurable, who, at all costs, wants to continue making books and has a great fear of seeing wasted even the most insignificant fragments of his work. These two groups,

especially the second, present an encyclopedic chaos of interesting comments on current events mixed with a gossip's scraps of memory. They would be excusable only if friends had published them posthumously.

Looking carefully, one can find some good things in *November Boughs*: An historical point or a well-expressed thought as in "The Bible as Poetry" (pp. 381-84), "The Spanish Element in Our Nationality" (pp. 388-89), or "Slang in America" (pp. 406-10). Some emotional returns to old themes as in "Father Taylor (and Oratory)" (pp. 385-87), "The Old Bowery" (pp. 426-31), "New Orleans in 1848" (pp. 439-49), and the descriptive and narrative passages of "Elias Hicks" (pp. 457-78). But all the rest, critical studies and preacherly tirades, as well as all of *Good-Bye My Fancy*, are just interminable "gossip" about the most disparate things. They are sad because they clearly demonstrate the low point of the old poet's spirit. This obstinate mania to pull together a book even if full of material already dealt with is exceeded

only by a state of mind indicated in certain biographies and studies that uselessly clutter the Whitmanian bibliography. It seems that the vice that afflicted W. W. spread to those who have studied him just as his prophetic pretensions did to his friends.

Now while all of this may be sad, it is also unfortunately the truth, and it is not indifference or critical ill-will to make it clear because by establishing W. W.'s normal decline into senility I arrive at a justification that explains an entire new vein of poetry running through the *Annexes*.

Let us consider: What does that diminished state of mind that we see in the prose, that tendency to look tiredly back to past themes produce in poetry?

First, they produced innumerable rehashes of past themes, fragments, dry thoughts, or figurations that fail to go beyond their intentions

and seem cuttings from the grand work that created the great “*songs*.” For example, the theme of America as the new historical reality resounds in many of these poems: “America” (Vol. II, p. 277), “To-day and Thee” (Vol. II, p. 297), “The United States to Old World Critics” (Vol. II, p. 312), and “On, On the Same, Ye Jocund Twain” (Vol. III, p. 8). He weaves into others the theme of the calm hope for new life: “Continuities” (Vol. II, p. 309), “The Voice of the Rain” (Vol. II, p. 314), “Orange Buds by Mail from Florida” (Vol. II, p. 318), “Bravo, Paris Exposition!” (Vol. III, p. 12) and “To Soar in Freedom and in Fullness of Power” (Vol. III, p. 31). Also, “A Thought of Columbus” (Vol. III, p. 37) in which every effect is attributed to a conceit, a curious thought.

In truth, these pages are more gnomic verse than poetry. Indeed, one can say in general that *Sands at Seventy*, *Good-Bye My Fancy*, and *Old Age Echoes*, were not generated by visions or feelings but simply by ideas that struck the poet.

Other old themes appear, such as the metropolis, the “*average life*,” and the legitimacy of evil: “Mannahatta” (Vol. II, p. 293), “Broadway” (Vol. II, p. 307), “The Commonplace” (Vol. III, p. 22), and “The Rounded Catalogue Divine Complete” (Vol. III, p. 23), etc.

I could go on for pages with this list but in the end they are just titles. A few poems in these Sections, however, convey the sense of the healthy and serene freedom of nature. This sense of nature, after all, as in *Timber Creek*, was the last Whitmanian theme that remained when all the historical motifs had gone silent. The poems are “Paumanok” (Vol. II, p. 293) and “From Montauk Point” (Vol. II, p. 293) as well as “With Husky-Haughty Lips, O Sea!” (Vol. II, p. 203). Except for these three, all the others I have listed are memories that W. W. “wants” to bring to life again. Even though they would appear to present him as the great anti-literary barbarian, they are in fact literature become a job, literary literature.

Certainly, in these last songs W. W. no longer has the earlier mission as his priority and therefore no longer creates the figure of the robust pioneer. He repeats rather the letter of that life and in general

does not even attempt the kind of poetry of which he would be capable as the oft-described contemplative sage.

One demonstration of how forced and unnatural are the themes that before were heroic can be seen in the conventional commemorative development of almost all his epic and national memories that earlier gave rise to the myth of the crucial role of the American pioneer in history. For example: “The Wallabout Martyrs” (Vol. II, p. 296), “Death of General Grant” (Vol. II, p. 304), “Red Jacket (from Aloft)” (Vol. II, p. 305), “Washington’s Monument February, 1855” (Vol. II, p. 305), “While Not the Past Forgetting” (Vol. II, p. 315), “The Dying Veteran” (Vol. II, p. 316), “The Dead Emperor” (Vol. II, p. 320), “As the Greek’s Signal Flame” (vol. II, p. 320), and “A Kiss to the Bride” (Vol. III, p. 32).

You could almost call him poet-journalist now if you wanted to be epigrammatic. But best go slowly. Because the secret of this new poetry lies precisely in this conscious giving of himself to what is no longer there, to that which can no longer be but a memory. We begin to find in the *Second Annex* genuine works of regret, which are no longer empty sentences but truly express something of the sadness of the end.



“A Twilight Song” (Vol. III, p. 17) and “The Pallid Wreath” (Vol. III, p. 10) are memories of the war, memories of “Calamus,” but out of focus like old pictures, and they have that bit of imprecision and trembling that old age brings. To these can be added the already-cited “Yonnonidio” and “To Those Who’ve Fail’d” (Vol. II, p. 294). These enlarge the sense of the end to include all who have disappeared or been defeated.

When W. W. stops trying to return to his youth in these poems, stops trying to redo the poetry of his young self, he immediately achieves some effects equal to those of the hymns of the pioneer. For example, the figure of the old man who has fought but now, exhausted, finishes sad and tired, without hope or mission. The situation and the figure’s desperation is well drawn in several poems such as “Twenty Years” (Vol. II, p. 317), “The Dismantled Ship” (Vol. II, p. 320), “After the Supper and Talk” (Vol. II, p. 322), and “Osceola” (Vol. III., p. 19)—all memorable for this painful sense of uselessness and ending.

The fine little piece “Old Salt Kossabone” (Vol. II, p. 308) is notable because it illustrates this theme and an interesting tendency as W.W. aged. The central character is still an old man nearing the end, like Osceola and the ruined ship, who spends his days, as did the old poet, restricted to an armchair and looking out to the open sea. Up to this point we have the typical last myth of the book. But the scene becomes more interesting if one notes that the old sailor is a Williams, a maternal forebear of W. W., and if one remembers the autobiographical chapters written in 1882 at the beginning of *Specimen Days* that dealt with his two family lines, the two family cemeteries, the “*maternal homestead*” and with all the Long Island life of his infancy and his visits there (*Prose Works*, pp. 3-10).

What is notable is that in his old age, with the storms of his prophetic manhood behind him, he returns to that which had perhaps been the only poetic theme of the meager stories published by the first W. W. “*in*

*the early forties,*” from ’41 to ’48. This was the description of the atmosphere of Paumanok (“Wild Frank’s Return” [*P. W.*, pp. 350-54]) and parallel with it, the memory of various other settings of his first youth, school, friends, the “*saloon*,” (“Death in the School-Room” [*P. W.*, pp. 336-40], “The Boy Lover” [pp. 354-59], “The Child and the Profligate” [pp. 359-65]). These demonstrate, as do the above-cited pieces from *Specimen Days*, that W. W.’s love of familiar things was tightly wound up with memories of early youth and the places where he grew up.

The slight pieces of *November Boughs* are also linked to this tendency of his old age: (“Father Taylor,” “The Old Bowery,” “New Orleans...”). As I have already pointed out, the emotion of memory creates the only poetry in these.

Returning now to my main point, I repeat that all the poems of the Sections I am now discussing have their origin in the figure of the old man who gives himself up to sadness and memories. That is, even if a piece expresses joy or acceptance, there always lies at its root pain or resignation,

an awareness of decay and death as for example in “Of that Blithe Throat of Thine” (Vol. II, p. 306). Here he desperately raises a song from the bleak landscape of ice and old age and deftly expresses the old man who looks for a last joy and thereby implies better than through any forced rephrasing of themes the virility and strength of the pioneer of long ago.

We must resign ourselves to accept that W. W. was in fact not a god and that suffering therefore overcame even him. With this admitted, we can easily approach his last great poetry for, while limited in quantity, W. W. nonetheless still created great poetry during this stage. The poetry lies in the figure of the old man who, inadequate to his past, oscillates between nothingness and a calm resignation to the last tepid events of life. Memories of happier times pass through this figure’s soul, a soul moved by the contrast and not expressed in terms of the rhetorical devices I have pointed out. For example, the thought of his finished work that will conquer death: “*L. of G.’s Purport*” (Vol. III, p. 24). Or some echoes of “heavenly murmurs:” “Sail Out for Good, Eidólon Yacht!” (Vol. III, p. 7) and “Good-Bye My Fancy” (Vol. III, p. 27). The image of the

voyage becomes a hope of life, of activity and immortality and, especially in the second, in which “Fancy’s” companionship makes the voyage one of friendship and love.

But most commonly, peace is found again in the “*annual drama*,” in nature, in serene landscapes full of color and music—a *Timber Creek* full of resignation and the consciousness of greater pain. Beneath every pleasure lies a comparison with that which came before and the liberating hope of a Nirvana, which, in Whitman’s way, is still mostly an intoxication with all things. These passages begin with winter’s dreams of spring and rebirth: “Soon Shall the Winter’s Foil Be Here” (Vol. II, p. 315) and “Not Meagre, Latent Boughs Alone” (Vol. II, p. 319). These are sharp, realistic scenes that go a little out of focus in *Halcyon Days* (Vol. II, p. 298), “To the Sun-set Breeze” (Vol. III, p. 14), and “Supplement Hours” (Vol. III, p. 34). And yet these works rise to invoke peace, health, and spiritual freedom—consoling and revivifying influences for the destroyed body and mind.

One can easily define these songs, but it is, I believe, impossible to render their tender and life-giving atmosphere, set among lovers and mothers, an atmosphere that like death in “When Lilacs Last...” surrounds nature. Death—now less sweet and more silent—is sharply described in these songs, for example, “Death’s Valley” (Vol. III, p.15) and it has so little of its earlier serenity that W. W. has to say parenthetically that he does not really fear it. Yet despite his giving death such appellations as “*holiest minister of heaven*,” etc., the deepest sense that remains with the reader is that of suffering and darkness.

Nature brings the sincerest and truly conclusive escape, that soft dreaming that loses every definition and becomes color, splendor, synthesis, pure flux: “A Prairie Sunset” (Vol. II, p. 317) and *Twilight* (Vol. II, p. 319), “...a haze—*nirwana*—*rest and night*—*oblivion*.”

And from this sentiment W. W. created, perhaps unconsciously, a true minor poem, and let me say it one last time, a myth: “Fancies at Navesink” (Vol. II, pp. 299-302).

The indeterminate atmosphere of the scene, in which the setting creates an image of the reverie itself, is on its own something special. Added to this is the sea's undulation that accompanies the ebb and flow of the solemn thoughts. The poem's true material begins with "*You Tides with Ceaseless Swell,*" and in that spectacle, something between abstract and immense, and in the thoughts and waves beneath the fog the metaphysical questions that he intones becomes themselves the poetry. The situation is one of desperation—suicide and oblivion but through the reverie and the scene he little by little adjusts himself, not happily—this is the new W. W.—but with resignation to the calm sadness of uselessness and the end: "...*my idle youth—old age at hand...the whole a nothing....*" To forget, to lose oneself in things, "*some wave...ye multitudinous ocean.*"

This is the end of the "great optimist." But, and here lies the unity of the *Leaves*, it is still the way of life of the wandering pioneer of "Song of Myself."

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<sup>1</sup> Carleton Noyes, *op.cit.*, chapter IV—which begins with a magnificent title, “The Soul’s Adventure,” could contain everything that I mean to say. But the soul’s adventure is not linked aesthetically to an earthly adventure. It is easy to say, “*the quest is truly the center urge of his whole being*” (page 137) but it would be more interesting to see described how the *L. of G.* creates poetry out of this quest and thus goes beyond the intention of the poet. Instead, Noyes goes no farther than simply describing the doctrinal world discovered by his author. This would be a noble effort by Noyes were it not that it still yields only the same result fifty years later.

<sup>2</sup> R. Michaud, *Littérature Américaine*, 66.

<sup>3</sup> J. A. Symonds, *W. W.* (London, 1893). I rely on Perry for this citation because Symonds’s work was unavailable to me.



<sup>4</sup> W.S. Kennedy, op.cit., 94-95.

<sup>5</sup> B. Perry, op.cit., chapter III, "The Camden Bard," 259, 263, 264.

<sup>6</sup> W. S. Kennedy, op.cit., 94.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16, 23, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Appendix II, 287-88.

<sup>9</sup> B. Perry, op.cit., chapter VI, 263.

<sup>10</sup> *In Re W. W.* ed by his literary executors: H. L. Traubel, R.M. Bucke, T. B. Harned (Philadelphia: McKay, 1893).

<sup>11</sup> J. Burroughs, "The Flight of the Eagle," in *Birds and Poets* (Boston: Houghton, 1895).

<sup>12</sup> E. Nencioni, *Saggi critici di letteratura inglese* (Florence: Le Mounier, 1898), 211.

## Bibliography

It is virtually impossible to generate a satisfactory bibliography of Whitman in Italy because the materials for American studies are so scarce. Added to this general situation is the particular difficulty that my author presents because of his having been, as I have noted, the subject of too few truly critical monographs and of too many articles and essays dispersed among the newspapers and journals of the world.

Certainly, it was easy for the scholars and friends who knew Whitman in person during the years of his literary battles to collect bibliographic material as it appeared and gave rise to various polemics. Among these the most gifted was William Sloane Kennedy who, luckier than Horace Traubel who died in 1919, lived to witness Whitman's fortunes in the first three decades of the twentieth century. He did his best to compile a list as perfect as possible of everything on Whitman published through 1926.

But perfection is impossible in this world. Even I, with my modest knowledge of the subject, am aware that things are missing in his list, for examples, Rabizzani's and Chimenti's articles and Michaud's book. But these are the kind of nits that give reviewers something to pick and they do not diminish the seriousness and importance of Kennedy's effort. Still, if one wanted to insist, one could take exception with the comments Kennedy makes after mentioning each work. But I have already had the opportunity in my study to note the curious disposition of this critic toward his colleagues and I will not repeat myself here.

That said, the bibliography of this book, *The Fight of a Book for the World* (ed.cit.) is excellent through 1925 and better than anything I could do in Italy, no matter what the effort. Thus, I recommend this book as a general bibliography for the period 1855-1925 and I limit myself here to listing only those books that I was able to consult personally. Even for those after 1925 I follow the same rule though I should mention that I used all my efforts to obtain everything that I know exists.

Anyone who observes that the great majority of articles that appeared in American and European journals in the second half of the nineteenth century are missing in “my” bibliography should remember that in general these articles do no more than trumpet the commonplace discovery of Whitman: “....A great poet arises in America.” These articles have some historical use in documenting the phases of Whitman’s reputation but no critical value. Furthermore, in addition to being cited and summarized infinite times in biographies and numerous later studies, many of these articles, or their extracts, are included in the miscellany I have cited, *In Re Walt Whitman*, published by the poet’s literary executors, Traubel, Bucke and Harned.

As regards the various Whitman editions, I have already said all that is necessary in the notes to my first chapter. For a work dealing explicitly with this subject one can refer to Shay’s work that I cited, *The Bibliography of Walt Whitman*.

Here now is everything on Walt Whitman that I could locate in Italy.

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<sup>+</sup> Thomson, James. *Walt Whitman, the Man and the Poet*. Edited and with an introduction by Betram Dobell. London: Betram Dobell, 1910.

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<sup>+</sup> Stevenson, Robert Louis. "Walt Whitman." In *Familiar Studies of Men and Books*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1927.

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<sup>+</sup> These articles appeared earlier in journals, but their publication details were impossible for me to determine.

