When I heard the learn’d astronomer Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1865)

When I heard the learn’d astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander’d off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look’d up in perfect silence at the stars.

"When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" originally appeared in *Drum-Taps* (1865). This brief eight-line poem entered*Leaves of Grass* in 1867 when *Drum-Taps* was appended to the main body of *Leaves*; in 1871, Whitman moved the poem to his "Songs of Parting" cluster, where it remained until the 1881 edition, when he moved it finally to the "By the Roadside" cluster. While the poem's subject is obviously not the Civil War, the tenor of the war times is nonetheless reflected in the speaker's desire to escape a place of fragmentation (where the unified cosmos is broken down and divided into "columns") and to regain a sense of wholeness. Union and oneness, pulling together that which has been separated—these are the subjects of many of Whitman's Civil War poems, and they are also the focus of this poem.

The first half of "Astronomer" consists of four anaphoric lines of steadily increasing length; the insistent repetition of the opening "When" joins with the accumulating verbiage to build to a peak point of exacerbation, after which the speaker expresses in a final group of four brief lines his relief at getting out of the "lecture-room" and into "the mystical moist night-air." The two halves of the poem, then, imitate the contrasting sounds of the scene: the first four lines (evoking the astronomer's lecture) contain sixty-four noisy syllables, while the last four (moving toward the speaker's "perfect silence") contain only fifty syllables and diminish into the relative quiet of the final ten-syllable line with its hushed concluding fourfold assonance ("silence at the stars").

As the speaker moves from the lecture-room—with its demonstration of book learning—out into the night, he repeats a familiar pattern in Whitman's poetry, as when the speaker of "Song of Myself" puts "Creeds and schools in abeyance" (section 1) and leaves the "Houses and rooms" to "go to the bank by the wood" (section 2). The erudite astronomer presents the cosmos as an intellectual abstraction—a series of proofs and figures and diagrams—and receives applause for, in effect, having broken the cosmos down into charts and moved it into a lecture room, where the only brilliance the audience can see belongs to the astronomer, not to the stars. One has to go outside to see the actual stars, which speak their proofs in "perfect silence." The speaker of the poem becomes "unaccountable . . . tired and sick" of the lecture, and the term "unaccountable" resonates with the speaker's desire to experience the cosmos again as "uncountable," as beyond the clever adding, dividing, and theorizing of the scientist.

And yet, as the speaker looks up at the sky, he does not forget the lessons he learned in the lecture room. He describes how he looked "from time to time" into the heavens, and the phrase signals one of the newly formulated concepts that the astronomer would have explained in his lecture: that when we look at the stars, we are not only looking across vast distances of space, but vast distances of time as well. When we look at the night sky, we are looking from our time to the light from distant pasts, "from time to time." As so often happens in Whitman, the scientist's lessons are not rejected but are absorbed by the poet, who employs them in surprising ways to create poetic truth. "Hurrah for positive science!," Whitman writes in "Song of Myself"; "Your facts are useful, and yet they are not my dwelling, / I but enter by them to an area of my dwelling" (section 23).

Author:

Folsom, Ed

Print source:

J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., **Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia** ***(New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), reproduced by permission.***

I Hear America Singing Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1860)

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deck-hand singing on the steamboat deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,
The woodcutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

"I Hear America Singing" appeared first in the 1860 (third) edition of *Leaves of Grass* as number 20 in "Chants Democratic" with the first line "American mouth-songs!" and an awkward final stanza, both of which Whitman wisely deleted for the next version of the poem in "The Answerer" cluster of 1871. His revision of the first line to "I Hear America singing, the varied carols I hear" (1871) provided what would become its title in his final placement of the poem in "Inscriptions" (1881).[…]

The idea of "America" in "I Hear" is that of the poem "America" (1888), conceived of as the Mother, source of the themes of freedom, law, and love expressed by her children.

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