

remains as well an eloquent indictment of America's inability to recognize and support a major literary talent who now seems to us what he wished to be: his nation's candidate for rivalry with Shakespeare or Milton.

#### •IV•

In 1849 Melville wrote to Evert Duyckinck, editor of the New York *Literary World* and his mentor and friend, describing his attitude toward Emerson, "this Plato who talks through his nose":

Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man's swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a humbug—then he is no common humbug. . . . Now, there is something about every man elevated above mediocrity, which is, for the most part, instinctively perceptible. This I see in Mr. Emerson. And, frankly, for the sake of the argument, let us call him a fool;—then had I rather be a fool than a wise man.

There is much in the biblical figure of the wise fool that characterizes the works of the American Renaissance and the sources of its strength. Its authors belonged to Melville's "corps of thought-divers" who consequently attempted and achieved more than any of their nation's writers had yet done. As he went on to tell Duyckinck, Melville loved

all men who *dive*. Any fish can swim near the surface, but it takes a great whale to go down stairs five miles or more; & if he don't attain the bottom, why, all the lead in Galena can't fashion the plummet that will. I'm not talking of Mr. Emerson now—but of the whole corps of thought-divers, that have been diving & coming up again with blood-shot eyes since the world began.

Melville was nonetheless prepared to make his distance from Emerson plain: where Emerson assumed a beneficent energy in the world, Mel-

ville felt uncertainty and frustration. "This 'all' feeling," he wrote to Hawthorne in 1851,

there is some truth in. You must often have felt it, lying on the grass on a warm summer's day. Your legs seem to send out shoots into the earth. Your hair feels like leaves upon your head. This is the *all* feeling. But what plays the mischief with the truth is that men will insist upon the universal application of a temporary feeling or opinion.

The "all" feeling was familiar in America, and it was soon to find its poet. Four years after this letter, Walt Whitman published the first version of his *Leaves of Grass* (1855), that work of cosmic inclusion which accepts the unity and beneficence of the All with an affirmation far more akin to Emerson's "Brahma" than to the skepticism of a Poe, Hawthorne or Melville.

The "all" feeling, the ideal of large embrace, is the guiding principle of *Leaves of Grass*. Its first preface expressly asserts it. Anonymous save for its daguerreotype of a bohemianized Whitman—named only once in the poems as "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos"—it offers to respond to the democratic American present in the spirit of the "equable man" who encompasses everything and sees eternity in each man and woman. Whitman casts himself as the poet into whom everything poured—the massive and varied continent, the democratic spirit, "the general ardor and friendliness and enterprise—the perfect equality of the female with the male," "the large amativeness—the fluid movement of the population—the factories and mercantile life and laborsaving machinery." America was itself the greatest poem: "Of all the nations the United States with veins full of poetical stuff most need poets and will doubtless have the greatest and use them the greatest." Over Whitman's lifetime, the dream, like the poems in the successive versions of the book, grew ever more complex, but even when he found that he was not "used the greatest," it was never entirely lost. The 1855 edition of *Leaves* was a slim volume, twelve untitled poems in ninety-five pages, some set in type by the author himself. Among them were the first versions of his finest, later called "Song of Myself," "The Sleepers," "I Sing



the Body Electric" and "There Was a Child Went Forth." For the next three decades, Whitman worked this same book like a landscape garden, shifting and changing, revising and deleting, developing mass and detail, dramatizing his own complex self, but above all incorporating—with that famous all-accepting, physical embrace.

Gradually, as edition followed edition, the original poems grew and major new poems began to emerge. The 1856 edition boldly added to its spine Emerson's warm salute celebrating the beginning of a great career, one of the most notable of all acts of literary acknowledgment: "I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed." It also added "Song of the Broad Axe," "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "The Song of the Open Road." The 1860 edition introduced "Starting from Paumanok" and "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," as well as the sexually explicit Calamus and Children of Adam poems that mark a change of direction from mysticism to personalism, from democracy to physical "adhesiveness." Whitman's ideal of democratic universalism was deeply strained by the Civil War of 1861–65, which challenged and in many ways broke the optimistic transcendentalist spirit. But the war ultimately intensified Whitman's identification with the nation and its people. In Washington he entered into the horror of the wartime bloodshed by visiting and working in hospitals, calling himself a "wound-dresser" and sharing the lives of the young men forced to enact their country's quarrel. He wrote his later prose account *Specimen Days* (1882) and the cycle of war poems *Drum-Taps* (1865) in the light of this experience, identifying with the historical momentum of the times and the deaths of "beautiful young men"—"everything sometimes as if blood color, & dripping blood." Above all, his identification with Lincoln was total. The President's death and state funeral drew the poet into a process of complex incorporation: of death with life's flow, of a hero with his nation and people, of Whitman himself with Lincoln, the people and the nation. Whitman's lament for the dead leader, "When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloom'd," is one of the finest elegies in the language. With *Drum-Taps*, it, too, merged with the ever-growing *Leaves* in the edition of 1867.

The war changed things, and so did the Gilded Age. Whitman was no longer the mystical bohemian radical, but the "good gray poet."

His early hopes changed to the serious doubts that afflicted most intelligent Americans in the period of careless industrial growth that followed the Civil War. Whitman made his opinions plain in the prose of *Democratic Vistas* (1871), lamenting a spectacle of depraved greed and base acquisitiveness. A logic of despair was perhaps appropriate, but others, like Henry Adams, expressed it, not Whitman. Though everything seemed less simple than before, the westward flow toward human happiness less inevitable and democratic spiritualization less certain, Whitman's fundamental transcendent assertion remains: life is good, with America the vessel appointed to carry it forward into the future. Thus to the edition of *Leaves* in 1871, the year of *Democratic Vistas*, he added his poem of westerling transcontinentalism and democratic world unity, "Passage to India." There were to be three more editions, in the centennial year of 1876, in 1881 and, in 1892, the "Deathbed Edition." They incorporated change and recorded an altered national destiny, the bloodiness of war, the shifting motion of history. Yet the essential structure remained the same. The open-ended and never-punctuated leaves remained persistently affirmative—man is divine, the self true, the world good. The continent America was filling would eventually manifest its destiny in a perfect commonwealth that would reshape the world. And the *Leaves* would live as he had meant them to, as procreative leaves of the life force itself.

*Leaves of Grass* could thus be the massive open poem that nonetheless always retained its essential principles and its essential structure. Edmund Gosse, one of Whitman's many British admirers, once described the *Leaves* as "literature in a condition of protoplasm. . . . He felt acutely and accurately, his imagination was purged of external impurities, he lay spread abroad in a condition of literary solution." That was the aim and the novelty. At the heart of its subsequent widespread influence on the twentieth century was its capacity to incorporate all, and although its essential task was mystical, it was also realistic, that of amassing and cataloging. A subjective poem of self, it is also confidently epical in its absorption of the past and celebration of the future of a people. Whitman's aim was preemptive. He offered himself—and has ultimately been accepted—as the nation's Homer, Vergil and Milton, singing the song of the nation as a song of a particular self. This was a new song, both a way of seeing and being,



a unifying song compounded of ego and society, people and landscape, male and female, death and life, personal sensation and historical destiny.

In both his radical poetic theory and his politics, Whitman sought to merge his opened-out self with his country and her place in the march of history by a transcendent and transcendentalist act of the ego—and thereby become an Emersonian representative man, prophet and seer. The "Walt Whitman" who stands bearded in his broad-brimmed hat and stares confidently out from the frontispiece of the first edition is a seer whose visionary words are intended to be large and long-lived. Similarly the poetry is a shocking break with the private intonation of traditional lyric poetry. "I CELEBRATE myself," begins the lengthy "Song of Myself":

Shall I pray? Shall I venerate and be ceremonious?  
I have pried through the strata and analyzed to a hair,  
And counselled with doctors and calculated close and found no  
sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones. . . .

Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I  
touch or am touched from;  
The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer,  
This head is more than churches and bibles or creeds. . . .  
I dote on myself . . . there is that lot of me, and all so  
luscious. . . .

By 1867 he could add to the poem:

One's-self I sing, a simple, separate person;  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word *En-Masse*.

The operative public recitative of the frank, tasteless ego, what he himself called the "barbaric yawp" he sounded across the rooftops, becomes universal; it can embrace society itself.

The space between that representative ego and the private man can still baffle Whitman's biographers. Born of a modest, barely literate Long Island family, Whitman had eight brothers and sisters, two of

them imbeciles. With only five or six years' formal schooling, he took to the trade of Franklin, Twain and many other American writers: setting type for a printing house. After some schoolteaching, he turned to journalism—reporting, reviewing, editing—eventually becoming an editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in 1846, to resign in 1847 because the paper was too conservative on the slavery issue. There was a period of "loafing," out of which the first *Leaves* came, but he was never to support himself with his verse. He held a government post for a time but lost it when a superior discovered the sexual explicitness of his poetry. During the Civil War, he spent long hours nursing and comforting the wounded of both sides; and he eventually—after a paralytic stroke in 1873—retired in a wheelchair to Camden, New Jersey, where for twenty years he continued his revisions of *Leaves* and reminisced for the adoring disciples who now clustered about him. His book claims that "who touches this touches a man," yet neither the book nor the facts really clarify the actual Walter Whitman. Specificity was one of his standards; his poems seem acts of frank description derived from the hard details of his actual life. But as often as not he was distorting, inventing, coloring the facts to flesh out the changing fictive character of the all-embracing "I," the persona he invented for *Leaves*: "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos,/Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . eating, drinking and breeding,/No sentimentalist . . . , no stander above men and women or apart from them . . . no more modest than immodest."

Like Milton's blindness, Whitman's life, with its frustration and final physical incapacity, mocked the heroic mission he had undertaken as the nation's epic bard, its articulating public voice. But everyone must live with the gap between what he is and what he would like to be; part of Whitman's greatness—like Milton's—was his ability to project the larger-than-life self he could imagine into the voice of his poetry. Whitman's "I," which in the end *becomes* the poetry and the poet's supreme creation, is a recognizable product of American oratorical tradition, a *spoken* or chanted ego. As he tells us in "A Backward Glance . . . ," his 1888 meditation on his conception of the *Leaves* and its high national function, it had its literary sources. He was an early and avid reader of the Bible, Shakespeare, Ossian, Scott and Homer, knew Greek and Hindu poets, the *Nibelungenlied* and Dante



Goethe's autobiography showed him a man unafraid to portray the universe in terms of himself, and Carlyle and Hegel reinforced Emerson's stress on the representative man and his heroic role in cosmic consciousness. All this crossed with the apparently contradictory mission of finding an aesthetic formulation that would merge the poet with the ordinary life of the folk. The result was a democratic epic: "Endless unfolding of words of ages! / And mine a word of the modern, the word En-Masse." Moreover, this voice of the self, voice of the mass, voice of the destined future, voice of the all, must also be the voice of the All, the Over-Soul. "I speak the password primeval . . . I give the sign of democracy; / By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms." His aim was to solve the problem of writing an epic in democratic America: the fundamental desire behind the poem was, he tells us,

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.

For his contemporaries, this Adamic aim was particularly evident in one notable aspect of Whitman's "I": its unabashed physical corporeality. His is, he said, "avowedly the song of Sex and Amativeness, and even Animality." This was one thing that divided him decisively from the transcendentalists. Thoreau understood his transcendental aims, but not this: "it is as if the beasts spoke," he said. Emerson strolled with him one day on Boston Common trying to persuade him to soften his explicit sexuality; Whitman made it clear that he not only would not, but could not, compromise. "Nature was naked, and I was also," he wrote in *Specimen Days* (1882), the late book where he painfully sought to reconcile the divisive elements of commercial, Gilded Age America and to question the cultural Genteel Tradition that it nourished. The naked sexual self is central to his desire to include everything, from birth to death, dark city street to wide coun-

tryside, rich life and poor, men and women, in his work. Like the spear of grass itself, sex expresses the life force that drives the poetry onward:

Tenderly will I use you curling grass,  
It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,  
It may be if I had known them I would have loved them;  
It may be you are from old people and from women,  
and from offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps,  
And here you are the mothers' laps. . . .

O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues:  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths  
for nothing.

Like Emerson's ideal symbol, Whitman's grass-blades, the uttering tongues of the writing and the central figure in his title, resist narrow signification. But a crucial implication is the phallic one of irresistible creativity, Thomas's "force that through the green fuse drives the flower." Grass is life itself, speaking beyond and behind death, common everywhere and to all, endlessly vital, tirelessly procreative. So were his own leaves to be, as they continued in unending growth and inclusiveness from edition to edition. By modern standards, his sexual frankness and homoerotic implication is tame; it is nevertheless important to recognize that his embrace and ejaculations are meant to evoke the surge of nature's continuous renewal, while his indiscriminate mergings of men and women, self and nature, are his signs of divine love.

These stratagems bred hostility for Whitman by setting him firmly in opposition to the decorum of the Genteel Tradition. Whitman mourned this, but it was what he had calculated. "Establish'd poems, I know, have the very great advantage of chanting the already perform'd, so full of glories, reminiscences dear to the minds of men," he observed in "A Backward Glance O'er Travell'd Roads"; "But my volume is a candidate for the future." His aim was essentially avant-garde; he was a radical and a new kind of symbolist. Though he appeared to literalize the world about him by granting it linguistic



place in his poems, he insisted on his aesthetic novelty and above all, in symbolist fashion, on "the image-making faculty, coping with material creation, and rivaling, almost triumphing, over it." Proposing a new relation between observing poet and what he observes, his aim was experimental—as was America's. He always felt that his *carte de visite* was to the coming generations and not alone to his own:

One main contrast of the ideas behind every page of my verse, compared with establish'd poems, is their different relative attitude towards God, towards the objective universe, and still more (by reflection, confession, assumption, &c) the quite changed attitude toward the ego, the one chanting or talking, towards himself and towards his fellow-humanity. It is certainly time for America, above all, to begin the readjustment in the scope and basic point of view of verse; for everything else has changed.

This was the spirit of Ezra Pound's later determination to "Make It New." With it, Whitman made himself central to the legacy of nearly every later American poet of scale, for the multivalent imagery he cultivated posed long-term questions of the relation in America between symbol and reality, ego and epic. That fertile tradition of the expansive and incorporative American poem that haunted so many twentieth-century American poets—Pound with *The Cantos*, Hart Crane with *The Bridge*, Wallace Stevens with *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, William Carlos Williams with *Paterson*, Charles Olson with *The Maximus Poems*—took its rise and guarantee from Whitman's faith in the open assimilative poem, ever in process of creative renewal in its reach toward the future.