

of “performative” language seen in vows and oaths. The poems “do things with words” and render a world in action rather than making definitive statements about a static world. Whitman’s language and world view are thus relational, dynamic, and dramatic rather than doctrinal and propositional. By focusing on certain movements within each poem, the readings offered here are intended to be open-ended and incomplete. They open the way to other readings and hint at further poetic accomplishments.

1855: “Song of Myself”

The poem ultimately known as “Song of Myself” appears only under the repeated title of “Leaves of Grass” in 1855. It dominates the first edition and is considered by many critics to be Whitman’s masterpiece. It is the certainly the longest poem he ever wrote and remains in all editions the most comprehensive. In style and subject matter, it anticipates almost every turn in Whitman’s mature poetic development but also exhibits a number of features that make it unique in the Whitman corpus. Its centrality to *Leaves of Grass* involves, among other accomplishments, its experimentation in form and style, its development of a fluid persona embodying Whitman’s theories of the self within a democratic union, its celebration of a mystical experience that merges spirituality with the experience of sexuality and the body, its use of catalogues of images and expanded vignettes to explore the range of experience within modern life, and its exploration of the limits of human knowledge and language. The reading that follows considers each of these movements and the thematic and formal connections among them.

The poem conducts a radical experiment in poetic form

In “Song of Myself,” Whitman experiments with his mode of expression at all levels – word, phrase (or line), section (or stanza), and whole text. What would later become relatively fixed genres, poetic modes, or rhetorical strategies for him – the cosmic/prophetic mode of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” the elegiac/introspective mode of “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” and “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” and the imagistic mode of “Cavalry Crossing a Ford” and “The Dalliance of the Eagles” – appear to vie for dominance within the poetic laboratory of “Song of Myself.” The reader seems to catch the various modes of expression in the act of formation, highly dynamic and volatile.

At the level of the word and phrase, Whitman foregoes the standard language of elevated poetic diction (the “thees” and “thous” and other archaisms still

used in British Victorian poetry, for example) and favors instead the ordinary language of American conversation with a strong mix of foreign terms, colloquialisms, place names, technical terms, slang, and new words he creates himself with innovative uses of prefixes and endings. A sample of the oddities would include *loafe*, *kelson*, *savans*, *embrouchures*, *vivas*, *veneralee*, *foofos*, *kosmos*, *duds*, and *accoucheur*.² He often mingles formal and informal diction, as in Section 6 of “Song of Myself” when he calls the grass “a uniform hieroglyphic” that grows the same “among black folks as among white, / Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff,” using colloquial expressions for people from different regions and ethnic types (193). His figurative language stretches the bounds of common sense and poetic practice – confusing anatomical references to the heart and genitals, for example, and muddying distinctions between body and soul, male and female, animal and mineral.

At the level of the phrase, line, and stanza, Whitman’s experiment goes yet further. Rather than the arbitrary limits that traditional versification places upon syllable number, stress pattern, or number of lines, the phrase itself seems to determine the length of lines in Whitman’s verse while shifts in topic, perspective, or voice drive the stanza breaks, as in prose paragraphs. The lines tend to be long, and line and stanza length are highly irregular and variable. The clearest model for this experiment is the King James Bible, but Whitman’s free verse also mimics the cadences and rhythms of oratorical prose. Indeed one of the boundaries Whitman challenges in *Leaves of Grass* is that between prose and poetry. The prose of the 1855 Preface was sufficiently poetic to be, in the 1856 edition, incorporated into the poem later titled “By Blue Ontario’s Shore.” The highly varied lines and phrases in “Song of Myself” are held together by repetitive devices such as assonance and alliteration, syntactic parallelism, and repetition of key words and phrases, especially at the beginning of lines (using the rhetorical device of anaphora).

In the larger scheme of the whole poem, Whitman blends the genres of epic and lyric poetry. Echoing the opening of Virgil’s *Aeneid* – “Of arms and the man I sing” – Whitman’s famous first line, “I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself” (188), transforms the epic genre as surely as it alludes to it, fusing the functions of hero and bardic poet in the self-reflexive “I,” and introducing the element of personal involvement usually associated with lyric poetry. The lyric side of the poem is further manifested in the variable moods of the poem’s persona or speaker. He performs a shamanic or prophetic role in such lines as “I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own” (192) and “I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash’d babe, and am not contain’d between my hat and boots” (194). He bears witness as a casual bystander, “amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary . . . curious what will come next . . . Both in and out of the game” (191), and makes reports as the

journalist or public servant might: "The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom, / I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen" (195). He takes the part of the hero, boasting like Beowulf, but winking at his own hyperbole in such lines as "Whimpering and truckling fold with powders for invalids, conformity goes to the fourth-remov'd, / I wear my hat as I please indoors or out" (206) and "Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touch'd from, / The scent of these arm-pits aroma finer than prayer" (211). He superimposes himself onto the characters of American history, past and present: "Alone far in the wilds and mountains I hunt" (196); "I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs" (225). At various points, the bardic voice returns to narrate the history of the nation, as in the vignettes of the Goliad Massacre in the war for Texas's independence from Mexico (226-7) and the "old-time sea-fight" of John Paul Jones in the War of 1812 (227-8).

The poem embodies the ideals of personality within the context of political democracy

Thus expanding the role of the bard as the bearer of culture, Whitman represents the people of America in at least three senses. As a writer represents a topic, he reproduces the nation in art. As an elected official represents a constituency in a republic, he speaks for the nation in the voice of an individual citizen. And as a hero represents the aspirations of the populace as a whole, he models the fullest experience of selfhood. This diverse development of the poem's main voice, "Myself," is as significant to the poem's psychology and politics as it is to Whitman's experiment in poetic form. It radically extends the sympathetic imagination associated with eighteenth-century poetics and the English Romantic poets, the tendency of which is to identify with others to the point of empathetic self-transformation. This fluidity of personality is dramatized, for example, in the interplay of "I" and "you" throughout the poem. The poet seems to overwhelm the reader in the second line – "And what I assume you shall assume" – but immediately qualifies the assertion by allowing that "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (188). In this way, the poet–reader interchange becomes the first instance of a key theme in the poem – what Whitman calls the "knit of identity" (190) or "the merge." "Who need be afraid of the merge?" he asks in an 1855 line later removed from the text (33).

Throughout the poem, boundaries between self and others – boundaries of time, place, language, identity, and social distinction – dissolve as the poet unfolds visions of personal, political, and metaphysical union. The merge is of course figurative but also surprisingly literal. Just as "every atom of my blood"

is "form'd from this soil," so is "your" blood formed; and just as the speaker was "born here of parents born here from parents the same," so has the reader been born of a particular lineage in some native place (188). The shared grounding of birth in the homeland, and more generally in the earth, is extended to include the sharing of atoms in the air in Section 2, which begins with the poet growing intoxicated on the "distillation" of rooms "full of perfumes" and ends with the poet's injunction that the reader should "filter" all things from the self, to distill it down to its basic substance (188–90). This odd interchange between the literal and the figurative is most perfectly realized in Section 6 in which the grass is said to "transpire" (literally breathe forth) from the buried bodies of dead men and women: "the beautiful uncut hair of graves" (193). The corpses literally feed into the grass and are transformed not only metaphorically but biologically, leading the poet to conclude, "The smallest sprout shows there is really no death" (194). The human self and nonhuman nature ultimately converge as one being.

The theme of the merge evolves as a wavelike, cyclical movement of blending and separation, identification and distinction. The movement is dramatized in the image from Section 3 of the "hugging and loving bed-fellow" who "sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with stealthy tread" (191). The departing lover leaves "baskets cover'd with white towels swelling the house with their plenty" (191). This characteristic image suggests not only a gift of rising bread dough left for the lover now sleeping alone, but also the "swelling" of a figurative pregnancy, recalling the lines from Section 2: "Urge and urge and urge / Always the procreant urge of the world" (190). "Procreation" is practically a synonym for all sexual activity, whether reproductive or not, in the nineteenth century, an age in which birth control was virtually unknown and certainly ineffective. The sexual impulse is the force that drives the merge, which depends upon an acceptance of the body's goodness and health: "Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean, / Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest" (190–1).

The political uses of the sympathetic merge become clear by Section 19, in which the democratic spirit is represented in "the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is . . . the common air that bathes the globe" (204). Section 20 states explicitly the theme implicit in the poem's opening lines: "In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less" (206). In Section 21, the poet's inclusiveness extends to gender ("I am the poet of the woman the same as the man") and to metaphysics as well as material life ("I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul, / The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me"), and to the whole of the earth,

personified as the poet's welcome lover: "Far-swooping elbow'd earth – rich apple-blossom'd earth! / Smile, for your lover comes" (207–8).

Picking up a theme from the 1855 Preface, the poet says in Section 21, "I chant the chant of dilation or pride" (207), a claim he balances in Section 22: "I am he attesting sympathy" (209). For Whitman and his contemporaries, "pride" would have meant, among other things, the tendency to impose the self onto the world (to "dilate" and "absorb") while "sympathy" would have suggested the contrary tendency to suppress the self and allow external forces (nature and ideas as well as other people) to shape one's identity. "I find one side a balance and the antipodal side a balance," says the poet, "Soft doctrine as steady help as stable doctrine" (209).

The expansive, alternately prideful and sympathetic movements of individualism and democracy are fully realized in the celebration that forms Section 24, the heart of the poem. The section begins with the poet's famous naming of himself, "Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son" (210). He is at once an outcropping of the universal world soul, a "kosmos", and a particular, local phenomenon, "of Manhattan the son" – a body no less than a soul, animal as much as human: "Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, and breeding" (210). Above all, he is democratic and egalitarian, "no stander above men and women or apart from them" (210). In the 1855 version of this line, he displays a special identity with the working class and the lower levels of society – "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (50). Although he abandons his explicit affiliation with "the roughs" by the final version of the poem, perhaps in the search for an ever wider application of democratic sympathy, he continues to pursue an unrelenting egalitarianism, rooting political identity in the "primeval" body and the theory of democracy: "I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy, / By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms" (211).

The poem spiritualizes the body and materializes the soul in an effort to reinvigorate the religious experience

Section 24 also enfoldes the shamanic role and enacts the upside-down mysticism that brings the poet closer to the earth rather than transporting him to some heaven. In his claim that "Whoever degrades another degrades me" (210), he echoes the attitudes of Jesus and Buddha – Jesus in his insistence that whatever is done to the least of his brothers is done also to him, and Buddha in his incarnation as the Bodhisattva who refuses to attain enlightenment until others can have the same. The poet channels the voices of others through his own voice, like a man possessed – the "many long dumb voices" of

"interminable generations of prisoners and slaves," of "thieves and dwarfs," and "of the rights of them the others are down upon". He includes "the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised," right down to the lowest, most accursed conditions of nature: "Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung" (211). These reflections bring him to the very root of human shame and separation from nature – the disgust for the body and the fear of death, which Whitman dispatches in a single line, using a term for sex normally reserved for animals: "Copulation is no more rank to me than death is" (211). Among the "forbidden voices" channeled through him are "voices of sexes and lusts," which if "indecent" are "by me clarified and transfigur'd" (211). For him, "Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle" (211). "Divine am I inside and out," he says, building steam toward a litany of admiration for the body's beauty: "If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it" (211). His egalitarianism extends to the despised or neglected parts of the human body as much to every constituent of the body politic. He portrays the body as both a metaphorical landscape ("shaded ledges") and the means for cultivating the land (the phallus appearing as a "masculine colter," that is, the blade of a plough) (211–12). The metaphors proliferate to the point where it becomes difficult to distinguish which part is figurative and which part literal, suggesting a mutuality of human and natural being. Is the "timorous pond-snipe" and "nest of guarded duplicate eggs" (212) a figure for the poet's own genitals or an actual observation of a swamp bird on its nest that arouses through its shape and movement the phallic impression? Substitutions and metonymies abound. Breezes that might ordinarily be described as tickling the nude body instead take on a body of their own: "Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me" (212). The litany reaches a climax (in every sense of the word) with a vision of a fully phallicized cosmos: "Something I cannot see puts upward libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven" (212).

While necessary, however, the body is not sufficient. The soul must also be "clear and sweet": "Lack one lacks both, and the unseen is proved by the seen" (190). In this light, the image of the swelling baskets in Section 3 hints at the Christian story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand from a few baskets of fish and bread. Everyday life, Whitman suggests, is not only good and pleasurable; it is full of miracles. As he proclaims in Section 31, with typical hyperbolic humor, "a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels" (217). As he says in the 1855 Preface, "folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects. . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls" (10; punctuation as in original).

The influence of Christian texts and concepts, such as the dualism of body and soul, immortality, and miracles, is clear in these lines. Equally clear, however, is that Whitman's treatment of body and soul differs strongly from mainstream Christianity. He rejects, for example, the notion of heaven and hell as states of future reward and punishment. There "will never be any more perfection than there is now," he says, "Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now" (190). Neither could he be satisfied with the linear and teleological assumptions of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as he indicates in his rejection of "the talk of the beginning and the end." In "Song of Myself," Whitman focuses on the present rather than the past or future, which he sees as contained in the mystical now: "There was never any more inception than there is now, / . . . And will never be any more perfection than there is now" (190).

The concept is powerfully dramatized in the famous Section 5, which appears to be an account of mystical illumination that adds elements of the dream vision to the expanding lyric-epic form. Beginning "I believe in you my soul," the passage appears to be a modern version of the medieval genre, the debate of body and soul (192). As the passage progresses, however, "I" and "you" accrue ambiguity, suggesting many possible pairs – the body and the soul, the poet and the reader, or the lyric poet and his real or imagined lover. Recalling the line from Section 1, "I loafe and invite my soul" (188), the speaker (body) invites the lover or fellow singer (soul) to "Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat," to join in a primal union that eludes language – "Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best, / Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice" (192). The repetition of the liquid l's and the humming m's suggests the ecstatic moaning of the lover as well as the voicing of the mystic "OM" chanted in yogic meditation. And instead of debate, we get seduction; the enlightenment merges into sexual experience, one experience informing and transforming the other. The mutual "loafing" and mingling of voices yield to the memory or fantasy of "how once we lay such a transparent summer morning": "How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me, / And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart" (192). These heated lines defy particularization. The position of the lovers' bodies suggests oral sex, particularly fellatio – "you . . . reach'd till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet" (192) – but the anatomy is anything but clear. The "plunging" of the tongue to the "bare-stript heart" mingles hints of kissing and cunnilingus with the mainstay of sentimental romance, the throbbing of the heart, the supposed center of emotional experience. Whitman figuratively strips the heart bare; that is, he associates it with the language of nearly pornographic

sensuality, transforming the dominant sentimentalism of his age with material intensity.

The wild figures of these lines make the familiar strange and create a kaleidoscopic shifting of perspectives. The aim appears to be the representation of alternate states of perception, as in the mystical experience, and alternative versions of sexual experience. They take the poet "out of himself" much in the manner that Emerson describes in the famous "transparent eyeball" passage from *Nature*. Walking across a bare common, he says, "in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration . . . I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; I am part or parcel of God." In the process of transformation, he says, "all mean egotism vanishes."³ Whitman's transformation – which differs from Emerson's by engaging the whole body rather than limiting the experience to the sense of sight – involves perceiving the unity of the self with God ("the spirit of God is the brother of my own"), with other human beings ("all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers"), and all creation. Indeed the elements of creation appear in images that mirror the elements of his own body – the pores of the skin reflected in "brown ants in the little wells beneath them," and the phallus mirrored in "the leaves stiff or drooping in the fields." Spreading out before him is "the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth," the knowledge that "a kelson of the creation is love" ("kelson" referring to a strengthening timber that runs along the keel of big ships) (192). The unity with God, all people, the body, and nature creates a metaphysical foundation for the democratic sentiments of the poem, thus launching the "myself" persona into the role of poet-prophet of democracy.

The calm that follows the intensity of the illumination – "the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth" – also suggests the restfulness, the "loafing" attitude of the body after sex. The mood extends into Section 6, in which the poet patiently reflects on the question of a child, "What is the grass?" (192). He runs through a number of possible answers, modeling an open-ended interpretive method that frees readers to "filter" each image for themselves and refusing to impose a definiteness of understanding. He allows the grass and other such things of nature to maintain something of their own integrity, the something that human consciousness can never fully "absorb" or master but can only "guess" at. His caution or tentativeness in this regard distinguishes him from Romantic predecessors like Emerson and Wordsworth, who more confidently read the book of Nature. For Whitman, the grass is alternately "the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven"; "the handkerchief of

the Lord, / A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt" (to catch the attention of human lovers, "that we may see and remark, and say *Whose?*"); a child itself, "the produced babe of the vegetation"; an emblem of democracy, "a uniform hieroglyphic . . . Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones, / Growing among black folks as among white"; and finally "the beautiful uncut hair of graves," the sign of immortality in the shared life of all natural beings (193). Section 7 reiterates the theme of immortality and its evidence in the beauty of all the things that life has to offer and of all people without exception, all "lips that have smiled, eyes that have shed tears" (194), all bodies – "Undrape! you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded, / I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no" (195).

The poem uses catalogues of images and vignettes to suggest the open-ended and endlessly varied range of experience within modern life

The seeing poet unfolds a series of images in Sections 8–10, a celebration of sights and sounds of the teeming city, the baby sleeping in the cradle, the suicide victim sprawling dead on the floor, the blushing boy and girl in the meadow, the "blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders" – "I mind them," he says, "or the show or resonance of them – I come and I depart" (195). This is the first of the famous "catalogues" in "Song of Myself," instances of the "enumerative style" that list impressions and images with and without commentary, often at great length. The catalogues have variously entranced, amused, irritated, bored, and puzzled readers since their first publication, inspiring admiration, condemnation, some imitation, and a great deal of parody. Whatever the response of readers, the technique is central to *Leaves of Grass* in every edition but is most prominent in the poems of the fifties.

Whitman follows Homer in using catalogues to lend an epic breadth and sweep to his vision. But his lists also have newer and deeper political and poetic implications. For the democratic poet, the attempt to all but exhaust a field of vision suggests that all people deserve attention and recognition. For the urban poet – the *flâneur* or aimless Rambler absorbing the sights and energies of the city – cataloguing captures the experience of walking through the streets, taking account of faces old and new, getting the news, and relating oneself to the ever-changing display of people and scenes. For the transcendental poet of nature in the age of science, the earth deserves no less attention. Everything is potentially meaningful and connected at the deepest levels. The lists take the speaker out of himself and bring the richness of varied impressions into

the self. He touches upon the items in each list lightly, the catalogue moving over the immediate impressions as a hand might caress the body of a loved one or a set of cherished objects. He is, as he says in Section 13, "the caresser of life . . . not a person or object missing, / Absorbing all to myself and for this song" (199). The flowing images likewise present to the mutually creative reader a world of material ready-made for poetic participation – and in this way, each compressed image within the catalogues anticipates the imagistic and impressionistic direction of his later poems.

As the poem cycles through the images, they undergo contraction and expansion as the poet seems to pass quickly or linger. An uneven but definite rhythm develops. In Section 10, for example, the movement slows and the images expand into five brief narratives. Short scenes of hunting, sailing, and digging clams are followed by slightly longer vignettes of the marriage of a trapper "in the open air in the far west" to a "red girl" and the hiding of a runaway slave by the speaker of the poem who takes the part of an engineer on the underground railroad (the network that supported the passage of escaped slaves moving from the south to the north) (196–7). The two scenes are related in involving contact between different races. Both involve a degree of tension. The differences in the dress and demeanor of the trapper and his Indian hosts and his grip upon the hand of his bride – as well as the power relations implicit in the conqueror taking a bride among the conquered – hint at some uneasiness in what might otherwise seem an idyllic portrait of democratic union on the frontier. The willingness of the northern householder to entertain the fugitive slave is likewise accompanied by the "revolving eyes" and "awkwardness" of the slave, not to mention the "fire-lock" leaning in the corner (197). Whether the speaker means to emphasize the threat of the gun in the eyes of the guest, or the possibility that violence might be needed to defend against the slave's pursuers, or merely the disuse of the gun as the black man sits next to the host at the dinner table remains ambiguous.

Expanding into an even fuller vignette, indeed becoming what amounts to a stand-alone poem, Section 11 picks up the theme of the contact narratives in musing on the most common social distinction of all – the difference between the genders. The vignette is narrated in the third person but from the perspective of a woman who "owns the fine house by the rise of the bank" and "hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window," watching as "Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore," the number matching her "Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome" (197). In taking the perspective of the woman, Whitman offers either a subversion or an outright transgression of the gender norms of his day. Subversively, he suggests that regardless of restrictions on "womanly life," fantasy runs rampant beneath the surface:

"Where are you off to, lady? for I see you, / You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room" (197). And the fantasy is no mere sentimental idyll, but a full-blown and sexually charged vision, virtually masturbatory in its intensity: "They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch, / They do not think whom they souse with spray" (198). A yet more transgressive reading would see the male poet's performing the woman's fantasy as an act of imaginative cross-dressing – the "womanly life" of the big house's owner meaning that "she" is kept from participation in the group swim by the requirements of class and a self-protective masculinity. A submerged homosexual desire is released by the fantasy of becoming the "twenty-ninth bather" who can move unrecognized among the carefree swimmers. "They do not ask . . . They do not know . . . They do not think." Perhaps better than any other, the episode embodies the sexual ambiguity and rebellious energy of the 1855 edition.

Sections 12–16 go back to the cataloguing of compressed images – the butcher-boy, the blacksmith, the negro driver, the wood-duck, the "sharp-hooved moose." The rambling speaker flows from human to animal, from city to countryside, and then out to the whole nation, extending his territory. Images expand slightly, then contract again to lists with each impression confined to a single long line. Occasionally, the speaker pauses to reflect. The "Ya-honk" of the wild goose, for example, sounds to him like an invitation: "The pert [or impertinent] may suppose it meaningless, but I listening close, / Find its purpose and place up there toward the wintry sky" (199). The lines that separate human from animal dissolve in the poet's sympathetic imagination.

The poem pushes the limits of human knowledge and language

Section 25 sounds the theme of vocal, creative power yearning to articulate and elaborate the "something" just beyond the limits of human knowledge, stretching the bounds of consciousness and perception: "My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach, / With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds" (213). The great age of oratory and visionary prophecy finds expression in Whitman's notion that "Speech is the twin of my vision" (213). But finally, words are insufficient – "Writing and talk do not prove me" – and the experience of the mystical self remains ineffable though nonetheless real: "With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic" (214). In silence, he opts to "do nothing but listen" in Section 26 and is rewarded with a wealth of rich sounds, ranging from the sounds of the street to the singing of the grand opera, catalogued lovingly for the reader (214).

In Section 27, he shifts his focus to the sense of touch, which he finds particularly intense: "To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I can stand" (215). The reflection leads in Section 28 to the vignette beginning "Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity" (215). The scene can be read either as a masturbatory fantasy – "I went myself first to the headland, my own hands carried me there" (216) – or an orgy of sexual initiation. The "prurient provokers" that appear "on all sides" could be a metaphor for the many sources of stimulation in modern life (particularly urban life, though the scene takes place in the countryside) or actual sexual partners "straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip" (the heart again substituting for the genitals, as in Section 5). The setting in the outdoors on a headland (a meadow above a sea cliff) suggests the childhood home of the poet on the Long Island shore and may represent elements of his own adolescence, his entrance into sexual awareness. His defenses fall – "The sentries desert every other part of me" – and "given up by traitors," he submits to either his own fantasies of gang rape or the act itself (216). He is at once betrayed by his own sensitive touch and responsive body – "Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them" (215) – and beset by others, "the herd" that is "all uniting to stand on a headland and worry me" (216).

As in Section 5 and 24, the narrative climax of the episode – "You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat, / Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me" (216) – is the climax of the sexual act. Section 29 returns to the calm of relieved sexual tension and the poet's impression of an eroticized nature to match his own experience – "Landscapes projected masculine, full-sized and golden" (216). "A minute and a drop of me settle my brain," he explains provocatively in Section 30, connecting the mystical and the masturbatory, and then returns in Section 31 to the kind of transcendent vision already seen in Section 5 (217). Now a leaf of grass appears as "the journey-work of the stars" and the "running blackberry" vine beautiful enough to "adorn the parlors of heaven" (217). In what is usually read as an early reference to the theory of evolution, the poet claims that time and nature (mineral, vegetable, and animal) are perfected and embodied in his own being, reaching to attain its fullest realization: "I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots, / And am stucco'd with quadrapeds and birds all over" (217). Section 32 extends the vision with a celebration of the animals: "They do not sweat and whine about their condition, / They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins" (218). In his transcendent calm, the poet sees that the animals "bring me tokens of myself" – "tokens" meaning mementos or rough representations, signs "of myself" (218). The "gigantic beauty of a stallion" whom he catches and rides brings back the images of sexual ecstasy and

satisfaction in a brief vignette, with the clear suggestion this time of same-sex love, the stallion and his male rider the poet: "His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him, / His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and return." With the end of the ride comes release, suggesting a free and even promiscuous exchange: "I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion" (219).

To some extent, the structure of the entire poem follows the pattern of development surrounding the climactic Sections 5, 24, and 28. A period of rising tension leads to a "fit" of intense passion, then climax and calm, with the final stage producing a vision of cosmic unity and goodness. In other words, the cyclic structure of "Song of Myself" mimics the sexual experience of the human male, at least as Whitman conceived it. With each iteration of the pattern, the range of the vision increases. Following the ride on the stallion, the poet seems to float away from the earth in Section 33. He is "afoot with [his] vision." "My ties and ballasts leave me," he says, "my elbows rest in sea-gaps, / I skirt Sierras," and looking down, as if from a hot-air balloon, "my palm covers continents" (219). From this height, he offers a catalogue of images running from the farm to the frontier, occasionally dipping down and taking a role himself: "I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires, / I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself" (224). He becomes the "hounded slave," the "mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken," an "old artillerist" (225-6). He floats as readily through time as through space, reporting on the Goliad massacre in Section 34 and the "old-time sea-fight" of John Paul Jones in Sections 35-7.

Enacting another pattern of the poem's structure – the interchange of openness to influence ("sympathy") and self-sufficiency ("pride") – he returns by Section 39 to ask of his own central role, "The friendly and flowing savage, who is he?" (231). As he does with the child's question "What is the grass?" in Section 6 (192), he again offers a set of provisional answers from Section 39 to the end of the poem, which amounts to a theory of the human self as a process rather than a definite object or specifiable state of being. The poet gives voice to what is best read as the paradigm of selfhood, "myself" (which can only speak in the first person after all), or the human body fully charged with the experience of the soul. "Behavior lawless as snow-flakes" (231), the self nevertheless contains a healing force that says to those who have yet to realize its full power, those lacking the sap of soulful life, "You there, impotent, loose in the knees, / Open your scarf'd chops till I blow grit within you" and "I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up" (Section 40, 232-3). Following a short catalogue of deities in Section 41 (including Jehovah, Osiris, Zeus, Buddha, and Allah, among others), the fully realized "myself" asserts the godliness of human life: "Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better

in myself, bestowing them freely on each man and woman I see" (233). The ordinary becomes miraculous as common experience is deified – not only the human ("the mechanic's wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born") but the animal as well: "The bull and the bug never worshipp'd half enough" (234). All appear in fully realized glory to the enlightened self, resulting in a vision that is at once democratic and ecological, each being filling a niche and contributing its integral part to the whole: "I do not call one greater and one smaller, / That which fills its period and place is equal to any" (238).

In Sections 46 and 47, the speaker in the first person directly addresses the second-person "you," another way of expressing the "flowing" quality of selfhood: "Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you, / You must travel it for yourself" (241). In this exchange, Whitman's "language experiment" engages two of the most unspecific words in English, "I" and "you," words that linguists call "deictics" or "shifters," whose referents cannot be found in the preceding text but only in the context of the utterance. Whitman specifies the "I" as "Walt Whitman" in Section 24 but then immediately proceeds to undermine the definiteness of the name by saying that "many long dumb voices" speak through him. Likewise, as seen in the variability of "you" in Section 5, the second-person pronoun is a free signifier specified only by context.

For Whitman, the pronouns offer a way to open the poem outward, creating connections beyond the limits of the text, and to express the self's tendency to lack stability, which becomes both a liability and a source of freedom. At times the clarity of the self is frightfully overwhelmed and must be reclaimed and reasserted. Yet because of this danger, selfhood is all the more an adventure for "myself" and "you." It is, as Whitman will say in a poem dating from 1856, "an open road," a journey he anticipates in his exchange with the indefinite "you" in "Song of Myself": "Shoulder your duds dear son, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth, / Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go" (241). The poet offers a short catalogue at the end of Section 47 in celebration of the kinds of interlocutors ("you") that approach his ideal of selfhood ("closest to me") – the mechanic, the farm-boy, the soldier, the hunter, the "young mother and old mother" who "comprehend me" (243-4).

Sections 48-9 prepare for the hero's departure by showing the position of the self relative to the highest metaphysical states and conditions of being. Section 48 insists that "nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" and urges readers not to lose sight of the self in theological speculation. "Be not curious about God," he says, "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least, / Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself" (244). Why should he want to see God, he wonders, when God appears in "faces of men and women I see" (245)? Having dispatched theology, Section 49 anticipates the objection that, unlike God, the

self is limited by the boundaries of life and death. "And as to you Death, and you bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me" (245). Death becomes an "accoucheur," a midwife, whom Whitman addresses with the familiar "you." He likewise greets the vision of death embodied – "And as to you Corpse, / I think you are good manure" – and sees that the midwife death brings forth the living earth, which the poet gives a pleasing human form, suggesting the animated vitality and fertility of life that spreads identity in every direction: "I reach to the leafy lips, I reach to the polish'd breasts of melons." The stink of the corpse yields "the white roses sweet-scented and growing" (245).

In Sections 50 and 51, Whitman completes the transcendental sweep of the poem, dramatizing the poet at the edge of understanding, the limits of language. "There is that in me – I do not know what it is – but I know it is in me," he says of the force that he will at other moments call the soul (246). Now he is hesitant to name the "it," possibly for fear of contaminating it with theological and metaphysical prejudices of the reader. Having just claimed to "know what it is," he turns around and says, "I do not know it – it is without a name – it is a word unsaid, / It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol" (246). But he changes ground again and moves from negation to assertion of knowledge: "It is not chaos or death – it is form, union, plan – it is eternal life – it is Happiness" (246). Like Emerson, who says in "Self-Reliance" that "a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,"⁴ Whitman recognizes and here dramatizes the ultimate inadequacy of words and concepts to contain the fullness of being. "Do I contradict myself?" he famously asks in Section 51: "Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes)" (246).

Called from his reveries by the "spotted hawk" that "complains of my gab and my loitering" in the finale of Section 52, the poet departs with the "last scud of day," drifting away with the clouds: "I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags" (247). He performs the words of his own funeral – "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love" – the literal grass that contains the cells that were once his body and the figurative leaves of grass that are now his poetry and contain the written testament of his eternized being. "I stop somewhere," he promises, "waiting for you" (247), thus completing the poetic journey that begins with "I" and ends with "you."

Other poems dating from the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*

The other poems dating from 1855, all untitled in the first edition, include the two poems originally published in periodicals – the anti-slavery poem ultimately known as "A Boston Ballad" and the celebration of the revolutionary

spirit of 1848, "Europe, the 72d and 73d Years of These States" – which advance the poetic agenda mainly by revealing the poet's political roots somewhat more explicitly than "Song of Myself." The other poems seem in form and theme to be spin-offs from "Song of Myself." They make use of free verse, catalogues of images, narrative vignettes, prophetic visions, direct address of the reader as "you," and the first-person persona "I" in varying modes. They also celebrate democracy, diversity, sexuality and the beauty of the body, the fecundity and power of nature, and the depth and range of the human soul in space and time. "A Song of Occupations," the second untitled poem in the first *Leaves*, brings Whitman's identity with the working classes into the foreground and also, in lines removed after 1855, offers a brief excursus on his attempt to create intimacy with the reader and simulate oral performance in the printed "voice." "Push close my lovers and take the best I possess," he says, "I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us" (89). "I Sing the Body Electric" provides a focused treatment of sex and the body and sets in motion Whitman's meditations on gender difference that will by 1860 lead to his creation of separate groups of poems devoted to the love of man for woman ("Children of Adam") and the love of man for man ("Calamus"). "I Sing the Body Electric" clarifies the political dimensions of sexuality in the separate sections on "A man's body at auction" and "A woman's body at auction" (255–6), and thereby aligns Whitman with the dual causes of the social purity movement, the protests against slavery and prostitution (see Chapter 2). "There Was a Child Went Forth," in drawing upon childhood recollections, anticipates the way Whitman mythologizes the primal family and the process of growing up in the masterpiece of the 1860 edition, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking." "Faces" experiments with a thematically focused catalogue that suggests another step in the evolution toward his mature imagistic poetry of the postwar years.

One poem stands out as a particularly distinguished performance – "The Sleepers," the fourth untitled poem in the 1855 edition. "The Sleepers" shares much with "Song of Myself" – especially in style – but anticipates the poet's tendency in later editions to sharpen the thematic focus and stick to a single genre or mode of poetic expression within each poem. A more tightly unified example of the dream-vision genre, it stands as a night-time companion to the more day-lit "Song of Myself." Of all the 1855 poems, it most effectively reveals the anxiety that broods just below the surface of the "healthy-minded" optimism of the first edition of *Leaves*, exploring the dark side of human nature and the more psychologically threatening aspects of "the merge."

The first-person persona of "The Sleepers" is more consistently associated with the shamanic consciousness – the healer of the nation's nightmares – and