

WHITMAN IN ICELAND

Walt Whitman has been a hard nut to crack ever since I first came across him in 1953. First, he was often hard to comprehend for a relative new-comer to an English-speaking country owing to his linguistic quirks which were strange and uncomfortable for my standard School English. However, his frequently unorthodox way of handling his language held a strange and lasting fascination for me from the outset, and this fascination has grown with closer acquaintance. Second, my endeavors to translate his poems into the grammatically stricter and more orderly language of my native country have caused me endless headaches and many sleepless nights, but they have also provided me with many an exciting moment when a happy solution to a tricky problem was finally found and one hard nut cracked.

I never read *Leaves of Grass* through, despite Whitman's grave admonition, "Who takes me, must take me whole." I was not mentally or psychologically up to that formidable task at the time of our first encounter in 1953, when I was 25 and had recently arrived in America. I had spent the summer as an Intern at United Nations Headquarters in New York and in the autumn decided to stay on and study. So I went down to the New School for Social Research on West 12th Street and enrolled for a few courses in literature. On a friend's advice, I took "Modern English and American Poetry," conducted by William Troy, that extraordinary lecturer, of whom Stanley Edgar Hyman writes in his Introduction to Troy's *Selected Essays* (1967): "Although his articles are frequently still anthologized, his name is unknown to today's college students and to many of their instructors as well. Meanwhile, those who sat in his classes and attended his lectures unanimously describe William Troy as the greatest of lecturers on literature, and

Troy's peers--Kenneth Burke and Francis Fergusson, Allen Tate, and, in a later generation, R. W. B. Lewis and Joseph Frank--praise his published criticism comparatively."

It was my extraordinary luck to have that wise and gifted instructor open up the world of Walt Whitman to me. It was a brief encounter, but left a lasting impression and induced me to browse through *Leaves of Grass* time and again through the ensuing years, picking out passages that especially appealed to my sensibilities. "Song of Myself" was the main quarry, perhaps because it somehow reminded me of the longer works of Nietzsche and Blake and also some Greek poets, especially Anghelos Sikilianos and Odysseus Elytis, attempting to dramatize the national and philosophical extension of a highly personal sensibility, to present an image of a contemporary consciousness through the developing perspective of a first-person persona who is at once the poet himself and the voice of his country. I can still vividly recall reading and rereading Songs 21, 22, 23, 24, and 25, with their strange and intoxicating mixture of hymnal invocation of night, earth and sea, and the kind of pantheistic celebration of the body (Whitman's, of course) as the alpha and omega of everything. Like so many other Songs in *Leaves of Grass*, these touched on something remotely familiar, evoking the vivid picture in our Nordic mythology of the universe being created out of the body of the Giant Ymir: it was as though the whole world had been created out of the parts of Walt Whitman! This intensely physical, not to say carnal, aspect of *Leaves of Grass* was one of the most enthralling aspects of the book to a man in his early prime who sensed his environment with every fiber of his body.

Now, it is probably clear that when a poet comes into contact with a poet in another language, the possible effect or influence will be more or less

indirect in as much as the very tool of the trade, the means of expression, language itself, is outside the frame of reference. Even though Icelandic and English are grammatically, syntactically and structurally related, the differences between the two languages are such as to make any direct influence of one on the other out of the question. If there are influences, they will be in the areas of technique, ideas, attitudes, thought patterns.

What little I have to say about Walt Whitman and me as a poet will therefore only indirectly have to do with his mastery of the English language, his eloquence and rhetoric, his sometimes strange diction and other linguistic peculiarities, for they are all incidental to his impact in a foreign-language context.

Having been cursorily acquainted with the early poetry of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden, my first meeting with Whitman was something of a jolt--not so much because of his manner of writing as because of his "message," the very personal and open attitude revealed in *Leaves of Grass*. I had earlier studied theology and was thoroughly versed in the Old Testament, so that the loose metric forms employed by Whitman did not cause any surprise or unease--on the contrary. I also knew Heinrich Heine rather well. What was surprising and intoxicating (despite my relatively advanced age) was the tone and content of Whitman's apocalyptic writing: his all-inclusive sympathy, his cosmic conscience, the fusion of the ego and the universe, the underlying feeling that the grandeur of the universe was more significant than the evils of human life, and last but not least the great breadth of experience of the American continent.

I can vividly remember the thrill running down my spine as I read lines like:

Comrade, this is no book,
Who touches me, touches a man,
for such a statement seemed to embody and succinctly
express my private and secret yearning for turning
life into literature or, preferably, merging life and
literature.

As already indicated, I came late to poetry and was
still groping for my personal voice when I came to
America. In my endeavors to grasp the realities of the
New World I had been impressed by the "Puritan" tra-
dition of American poetry as expressed by poets like
Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allan Poe, Pound and Eliot,
but they seemed to appeal more to my intellect and
that side of my sensibility which was preoccupied with
balance, order, and restraint. These poets and such
prose writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James
were dealing with the limitation of the American
experience, comparing it with European traditions out
of which it grew.

Walt Whitman had an altogether different appeal,
one that cut closer to my inmost feelings and emotional
needs--the urge to participate in the rough life around
me, to re-interpret it, to fill it with new meaning;
in short, he was a poet taking on the original role of
prophet and seer in the Old Testament tradition. He
brought to mind such visionaries as Blake and Rimbaud,
Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, Rilke and D. H. Lawrence,
the last two of whom had no doubt been influenced by
him--writers who speak to young souls as illuminated
prophets with secret powers, writers who are in fact
possessed: "I am somebody else," said Rimbaud. And
Whitman said: "I cannot understand the mystery, but I
am always conscious of myself as two--as my soul and
I: and I reckon it is the same with all men and women."

I believe in you my soul, the other I am
must not abase itself to you,
And you must not be abased to the other.

Among the facets of Whitman that fascinated me from
the beginning was his identification with Nature and
all her elements. Despite occasional affectations and
lapses into poor taste, his poetry expressed a genuine
feeling for the unity and coherence of the universe,
for "the procreant urge of the world." His sympathy
for all forms of life was for me contagious: in some
ways he seemed to have responded to his environment
like a child, which I think is the supreme ideal of
every poet: to experience and express the world with
the immediacy of the child. As a result of this
"childlike" attitude he could talk about everything
in his poems--there are no longer any taboos or "impro-
per" words. This supreme sympathy, frequently
expressed in terms of love of comrades, glorification
of the male body and other somatic images, partakes
of Whitman's great paradox, for few poets have been
more openly and unashamedly self-centered:

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.

Obviously, the sympathies, antipathies or other
attitudes do not suffice to make him a great poet--
neither was his refusal to adhere to established con-
ventions. What made him great was his ability to look
very directly at all things and his gift of expressing
his astonishingly keen visions. As William Troy once
said in a different context: "Great poetry impresses
us with genuineness through its concreteness, its
definiteness, and the exact correspondence between the
object evoked and the full linguistic apparatus used
to evoke it."

Whitman observed everything and in great detail.
He was endowed with enormous sensibility, and one of
the main sources of his poetry was the constant effort

to give order and form to his excessive sensibility. His disorganized, loose and elephantine writing reflects this effort and exhibits at the same time a surprising and fascinating variety of orchestral effects and expressive verbal inventions which arouse a deep and lasting delight in the reader.

It may have something to do with my interrupted theological training that I find it hard to approach Whitman as I approach most poets. I must see his work in relation to his personality in much the same way as I must see the teachings of the Buddha, or of the Old Testament prophets, or of any religious figure of the past (including Mahatma Gandhi), in relation to their personalities, because their writings or preachings are only of relative importance to the total phenomenon they represent. Whitman's writings are a function of his being, or as he himself says once more in "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads": his book had mainly been "an attempt, from first to last, to put a *Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, in America) freely, fully and truly on record. ... No one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism."

Undoubtedly it was this quality in Whitman's work which in the beginning attracted me to him and has through the years drawn me to *Leaves of Grass*. The deeper reasons for the attraction of a particular writer or work of literature are often subconscious and only reveal themselves, if at all, gradually. It has little by little become clear to me, mostly through the reactions and comments of people whose judgment I respect, that my best writing, whether prose or poetry, tends to be highly autobiographical. This would in part explain my intense and immediate response to *Leaves of Grass* and its author. When, many

years later, I read his exposition of his initial literary desire, it became quite obvious why he had so stirred me. There he mentions "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."

Proust and Joyce, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg were yet to appear!

Whitman was a celebrant of the life forms, the creative element in the universe, no doubt about it. But there was also a paradox here, one which in a strange way deepens and enhances the meaning of his work. As if to counterbalance or modify his affirmative statements, he was constantly invoking ambivalent symbols of death, such as earth, night and sea (which also stand for fertility). Conversely, his incessant talk about his good health and virility also indicates some kind of malaise. His obvious fondness of death may well have something to do with his less obvious sexual deviations and erotic failures which he tried to hide. Towards the end there is also a tone of quiet humility, as if the lurking doubts about the inevitable triumph of Democracy have come to the fore. He is really at his best in that twilight of resignation:

At the last, tenderly,
From the walls of the powerful fortress'd
house,
From the clasp of the knitted locks, from
the keep of the wall-closed doors
Let me be wafted.

Let me glide noiselessly forth;
With the key of softness unlock the locks--
 with a whisper,
Set ope the doors O soul.

Tenderly--be not impatient,
(Strong is your hold O mortal flesh.
Strong is your hold O love.)

A phenomenon like Whitman inevitably arouses many kinds of questions in a European mind, because he represents something radically different from what we Europeans are used to. Whitman was a self-made man, uneducated and anti-intellectual. He seems to have had a profound contempt for the intellectual mingled with a kind of awe or fear of him. This is of course very much in the American anti-egghead tradition which has fostered such memorable examples of the self-made man as Will Rogers, Wilbur Wright, Henry Ford, Frank Lloyd Wright, Walt Disney, Harry Houdini, Harry S. Truman, and Mohammad Ali, to name only a handful of non-literary men. In literature and the other arts the self-made man is even more prominent. I really don't know what it signifies, but it certainly is highly interesting, and presumably significant, that America's three outstanding writers of the last century, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, were all self-made men and, by European standards, uneducated.

Even though I didn't really cultivate my relations with Walt Whitman after I left America in 1956, he was soon to cross my path again--now as the subject of a great poem by another author in a foreign tongue. I happened to read Garcia Lorca's *Poet in New York* and was so impressed that with my poor Spanish (aided by an English translation and a Spanish university teacher) I translated "Ode to Walt Whitman" into Icelandic to the general acclaim of its readers. Like so many other European writers of the first order, Garcia

Lorca had been deeply affected by Walt Whitman and used him as an all-encompassing symbol in that great "Ode" about the disintegration of America and the American dream. He decried the corruption of modern man, betrayer of Whitman's faith in a new humanity that would overcome pain and injustice and unite in strength and comradely love. Garcia Lorca's magnificent "Ode to Walt Whitman" is a kind of ironic counterpoint of *Leaves of Grass* and in another sense a twentieth-century extension of Whitman's great work.

I have brought up Garcia Lorca's poem just to indicate one of the many different ways in which Walt Whitman has interfered with my life and enriched it, in spite of the multiple cultural and linguistic barriers.

Walt Whitman has not yet found his way into Icelandic literature, with the exception of a few minor pieces and "A Song of the Rolling Earth." It has for some time now been one of my leisure occupations to endeavor to make amends for this strange negligence by translating "Song of Myself" into Icelandic, thus adding to our literary treasure and tradition one of the great works of World Literature.