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THE POEM IS THE BODY:

PRONOMINAL RELATION IN "SONG OF MYSELF"

"Walt Whitman"* is, in truth, an
epic of the senses, passions,
attributes of the body and soul.

I approach Whitman hesitantly, not sure of my design, but certain that others who have written about the man have encountered rare mysteries, and, while sometimes succeeding, have found the problems in Whitman for the most part insurmountable. The epigraph from John Burroughs best sums up the first and most obvious difficulty--i.e., the epical proportions of Whitman's work. How does one sit down to study *Leaves of Grass*? The length and breadth alone are intimidating, but the shifts in mood and point of view, the admitted contradictions, and the poem's insistent defiance of structure often leave the reader bewildered, yet delighted, or confused, yet enlightened. Such ground is difficult to travel. The epic journey is Whitman, and, while his name as a title is not nearly as interesting as "Song of Myself," "Walt Whitman," as it appears in the Burroughs epigraph, is altogether appropriate. Indeed, Burroughs makes a connection, albeit chance or intuitive, between Whitman and the other epical intelligence of the day (Melville) when he writes, "The next piece, 'Walt Whitman,' ...abandons itself to a play of power almost unprecedented in authorship, and reminding one of some huge leviathan sporting and darting and rolling in the measureless ocean." *Leaves of Grass* is a peculiarly American piece of literature in its rambling, even ramshackle, form, and in the democratic eclecticism that Whitman demonstrates for the objects and ideas he chooses for the poem. So, how do we find our way in? How do we keep from getting

*Original title for "Song of Myself."

lost without a roadmap? Perhaps the best approach is an emulation of Whitman, which is to say, instead of imposing a predetermined structure or method, we should immerse ourselves in the poem--free associate--and then, using what first catches the imagination as a starting point, try to make connections from there. This is precisely how I have approached the poem with "Song of Myself" as my essential focus.

My sense of Whitman is that of seducer, and the first characteristic of the text that catches my attention is the sensuality of the language and its sexually aggressive subject matter. Indeed, Whitman demands a commitment from his anonymous audience. He asks the reader to enter a personal relationship with him--a relationship that combines a semblance of physical union and an intense, spiritual intimacy. This, of course, alienated many of Whitman's contemporaries and may continue to alienate readers today. On the other hand, this self-same characteristic draws certain people magnetically; clearly, it has the power to attract cult-like followers.

In the opening lines of "Song of Myself," Whitman confronts the reader and, in effect, all of mankind.

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you.

These lines establish an essential relation between writer and reader, between writer and text, and between writer, reader and cosmos. These associations, like vines from the same root, intertwine and grow in complexity as Whitman, through use of the promotional triad--I/myself/you--creates and nurtures what may be the only existing structure (i.e. pronominal

relation) in the poem: specifically, "I" is Whitman, "myself" is the shifting, ambiguous unity of body/soul which for Whitman is the poem, and "you" is the reader. (Although some exceptions can be found--"I" often becomes "us"--these pairings usually apply.) Whitman not only pulls the reader in, but he asks the reader to commit his self/soul to the narrator's (Whitman's) self/soul. In other words, just as we are one with nature and the universe, so are we one with each other. Established then is a natural kinship between human beings operating as the poem's premise along with, interestingly, the antithetic mirror of identity found in the *other* which the seducer plays upon. The poem cannot be understood unless the reader accepts his relation to Whitman, but, paradoxically, "you" as character in the poem does not easily accept identification with "I." Despite natural kinship, Whitman understands the need for individuality and allows "you" the role of reluctant friend or lover, the mirroring other.

Whitman's deliberate use of "I" and "self" in the opening line begins an idea that grows in power with subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman wanted to identify himself with the book so that the reader would believe that the text was the man himself. As he later said, "Camerado, this is no book, /Who touches this touches a man,...." The kinship Whitman feels with his book creates a complex relation between author, text and reader--the I/myself/you--and this relation finds a degree of systematic expression in the work of Martin Buber.

Whitman's use of pronouns acknowledges his being-with-others-in-the-world. When "I" appears the "you" is assumed. Related to Whitman's pronouns in the context of being-with-others are the remarks made by Martin Buber in the opening pages of *I and Thou*. He introduces "primary words"--"I-Thou" and "I-It."

These primary words imply our being-with-others-in-the-world. "If 'Thou' is said, the 'I' of the combination 'I-Thou' is said along with it." In this context, language is always communication. "Primary words do not signify things, but they intimate relations. Primary words do not describe something that might exist independently of them, but being spoken, they bring about existence." These statements illustrate the fundamental function of language as relating the speaker to the other person. Buber also says, significantly, that speech is not made possible by a pre-existing relation to the other, but that language creates the relation.

Occasionally, Whitman's "I" evolves into "us" or "we."

I step up to say that what we do
is right and what we affirm is
right...and some is only the ore
of right,
Witnesses of us...one side a balance
and the antipodal side a balance,
Soft doctrine as steady help as stable
doctrine,
Thoughts and deeds of the present our
rouse and early start.

This type of progression does not contradict the "I-you" relationship. Quite to the contrary, it reinforces the physical and spiritual communion of the "I" and "you," which is to say, it is a communion en masse. The "I" as seducer and narrator of the poem is simultaneously specific and general, a microcosm containing all the elements of the whole--in a sense, an absolute average. It must be said, however, that the voice is not average. It is, instead, the voice of a maniac, impulsive radical--a truly American character.

"Myself" is the most difficult third of Whitman's triad to qualify since "I" and "you" share, overlap and contribute to the character of the "gray area" labeled "myself." Further, Whitman, as author, keeps "myself" ambiguous by thinking of it as the mysterious unity of body/soul and as the poem itself--the text and the world it represents via his imagination. (Recall that he constantly identifies the reality of the poem with his body.) Whitman makes these connections by seeing the poem, like anything else in the world, as simultaneously inside and outside of man, of the poet. Then through what might be called essential or primary insight, especially his sense of the concrete, Whitman transcends the ordinary form of things, and transforms those things into something more real, more useful, than conventional reality.

Gentlemen I receive you, and attach
and clasp hands with you.
The facts are useful and real....they
are not my dwelling....I enter
by them to an area of dwelling.

Whitman, dissatisfied with ideas in abstract form, made his life's work an attempt to realize and live ideas through his body/soul and poem, the "myself."
The poem is the body.

"You," as noted, is the other half of Buber's "I-Thou," and for Whitman, the reader. "You" shares the same universe and, therefore, shares Whitman and the poem. The "you" is sometimes characterized as a depressed or unenlightened type.

Do you not know how the buds beneath
are folded?
Waiting in gloom protected by frost,
The dirt receding before my prophetic
screams,.....

In such instances Whitman seems to project his own insecurities and self-doubts onto the other. The entire triad then, although it is not apparent at first, works as a model for facets of the personality which, when generalized, become the constituents of the universe. Whitman, the reader, and the text all share common elements which offer the opportunity for a common or intuitive, mutual understanding.

The common elements are, of course, the atoms mentioned in line three of "Song of Myself." Our bodies and souls come from the "stuff" of nature: we contain the elements of the cosmos. If we have done what Whitman wants us to do, which is to say, allow our self/soul a oneness with the universe, then we assume what he assumes. We are one with him as we are one with the book as we are one with the cosmos. We are not experiencing these revelations second hand but as lovers in our common universe.

You shall not look through my eyes either,
nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter
them from yourself.

Since a person should not live vicariously through another person's experience, the act of reading the poem at first seems a contradiction. But in the lines above and in others, Whitman purges the reader of the common guilt felt in literary liaisons: I cannot live this, so I only know it second hand. This, of course, is impossible if you live and breathe Whitman's universe.

A discussion of Walt Whitman, like Whitman's writing, does not end easily--it does not conclude itself. Somehow, the correlation of terms and the attempts to impose a system of thought on Whitman is not altogether satisfying. One senses a lack of completeness or, perhaps, the feeling that Whitman remains,

after all, elusive. I hope so. Our greatest joy is his refusal to be isolated, reduced and defined.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop some where waiting for you.

