

Daniel Aaron

WHITMAN AND THE FOUNDING FATHERS

Late in his life, Walt Whitman, in one of his reflections on *Leaves of Grass*, dared to claim in some sort “a deep native taproot for the book.”

I came on the stage too late for personally knowing much of even the lingering Revolutionary worthies—the men of '76. Yet as a boy, I have been press'd tightly to the breast of Lafayette (Brooklyn, 1825) and have talk'd with old Aaron Burr, and also with those who knew Washington and his surroundings, and with original Jeffersonians, and more than one very old soldier and sailor.

One can never be sure where fact and fancy blur in Whitman's “much practiced” memory (to use Justin Kaplan's phrase). Did Lafayette actually hug and kiss the six-year-old Whitman, the incipient bard of “These States,” or was it an apocryphal embrace invented to signalize his national legitimacy? We know his penchant for centering himself in the panorama of history (“I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.”) Not content to be a mere spectator, he liked to imply a more than casual acquaintance with the great makers and doers and did nothing to discourage a story that President Lincoln had once shot him an admiring glance.

The Founding Fathers were in their graves before Whitman was noticeable, but their exploits were still fresh in the mind of the impressionable boy. Members of his family on both sides had backed the Revolutionary cause, and he remembered the tales his grandmother had told him of the rampaging British soldiery on Long Island. Their “horrible excesses,” he wrote in 1850, were “enough to make one's blood boil even to hear of it now.” The names of three of his brothers—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson Whitman—testify to his father's political loyalties, and as a boy he sought every opportunity to meet and

talk with the living relics of the Revolution, with the men who had seen Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington and had talked to the “double-damnably lied about” Tom Paine, always a hero to Whitman. If the deaths a few hours apart of Jefferson and John Adams on July 4, 1826, and the death of James Monroe on the same day five years later suggested to their countrymen some kind of divine supervision of America’s destiny, it’s unlikely that Walt Whitman, LaFayette’s surrogate child, would have missed the implications of these coincidences.

Young Whitman, an ardent Jacksonian Democrat, reserved a special veneration for one man: not for Alexander Hamilton (a “true patriot,” he conceded, but also a monarchist who “sowed the seeds of some good and much evil”); not for Franklin, Madison, and other “old fathers of our freedom”; not even for Thomas Jefferson, dubbed by Whitman “the Columbus of our political faith,” the promulgator of “widely worshipped doctrines,” the “great apostle of Democracy”—but for George Washington who “never truckled to expediency.” Although the older Whitman was to speak less reverentially to Horace Traubel of the president he had described in 1842 as “a pure upright character” and a “beacon in history,” in the ante-bellum years there was no more ardent devotee of the Washington cult. “The name of Washington is constantly on our lips,” he editorialized hyperbolically for the readers of the *Brooklyn Daily Times* in 1858: “his portrait hangs from every wall, and he is almost canonized in the affections of our people.”

What might be called “Founding Fathers” worship, the historian George Forgie reminds us, was at once the privilege and the duty of the next two post-Revolutionary War generations who lived under the shadow of the great architects of the republic. The obligation could be oppressive. It demanded deference to the past, inhibited the initiative of the ambitious, and encouraged sentimentality and hypocrisy. Affiliates of the “Young America” movement like Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Gilmore Simms resolved the tension between ancestral loyalty and the demands of their own times in different ways. How did Whitman go about it?

Mr. Walter Whitman, not yet the Walt of Mannahatta, started out as a public patriot, a celebrator of the Founders rather than an analyst like, for example, James Fenimore Cooper. He was a strong proponent of anniversaries, holidays, birthdays of national import. He chided the utilitarian, materialistic money-grubbers (“Smile not, O wrinkled men-of-business,” he addressed them) who affected “to despise the celebration of the ‘Glorious Fourth’ and like occasions.” The speechifying and marching and exploding fire-crackers kept alive “the flickering flames of patriotism,” and he called upon his readers to revert their thoughts “to the condition of the American cause at the early time—to its origin, its struggles and the dauntless fortitude that—thanks to Washington, above all men—carried it forward to completion.” Every reference to the Revolution seemed to recall the “sacred days” of the “matchless WASHINGTON.”

Perhaps Whitman’s most operatic performance was a set-piece he wrote for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in December, 1846, in which he painted Washington’s leave-taking of his veterans. On this occasion, according to Whitman, “tears many and moist rolled down his face; one of the few times when his iron-ribbed emotions burst the sway of his great will, and claimed the common outlet of human sorrow!” Washington toasts his officers, most of whom are so choked up that they are “incapable of utterance.” He passes through the lines of infantry, “his head uncovered, his large breast heaving, and tears flowing thick and fast.” Suddenly a “gigantic soldier” who had served under him at Trenton steps out of ranks, extending his hand, and crying, “Farewell, my beloved general, farewell!” Discipline collapses; the soldiers weep copiously as they watch their Leader step on to a barge and disappear into the distance. This touching if stagily reported incident is compressed into four lines of Whitman’s poem, “The Sleepers,” the rapturous tone played down, the tears and kisses considerably moderated:

He stands in the room of the old tavern, the well below’d
soldiers all pass through,
The officers speechless and slow draw near in their turns,
The Chief encircles their necks with his arm and kisses
them on the cheek,

He kisses lightly the wet cheeks one after another, he
shakes hands and bids good-by to the army.

The old man of Camden who chatted with his friend Horace Traubel many years later hadn't lost his admiration for Washington and the Founding Fathers, but a good deal of water had flowed under the national dam since the early days when he "promulgated" his views on that heroic generation. The "American revolution of 1776," he told Traubel, was "simply a great strike, successful for its immediate object—but whether a real success judged by scale of centuries, and the striking balance of Time, yet remains to be settled." As for Washington, he had become "essentially a noble Englishman, and just the kind needed for the occasions and the times of 1776-'83," in short, a historical monument, a marble Moses, but not a "Camerado." That title would be reserved for the autochthonous Abraham Lincoln, thoroughly western and bearing "a certain sort of outdoor or prairie stamp." The two great presidents were conjoined in a chromo Whitman placed on the mantle piece of his Camden house. It represented, Traubel records, "Lincoln as being welcomed into the cloudland and throwing his arms about Washington, who with a disengaged hand offers to put a wreath on Lincoln's brow."

So far as I know, Whitman never devoted a whole poem or substantial prose work to the Constitution or to the men who designed and defended it and agitated for its adoption. To be sure, he could speak of the Constitution as "a perfect and entire thing" but not, I think, because he thought of it as a remarkable piece of social machinery or because he considered its framers as shrewd and practical men. He likened them, rather, to "some mighty prophets and gods," the architects of "the greatest piece of moral building ever constructed," and honored them for their involvement in "the organic compact of the first day of the first year of Independence, sign'd by the Commissioners, ratified by the States, and read by Washington at the head of the army." The Federal Constitution was "good" and "grand." It put into words the spirit that engendered it. The Declaration of Independence for Whitman, I think, was the spirit itself, the adhesive that held together the Union of the States, and it was "holy."

"Organic" is the key word both for Whitman's politics and poetry, the Union a living organism susceptible to the blessings and blights effected by its caretakers. The Founders had planted the seed but then "pass'd off to other spheres," leaving "terrible duties" to an incompetent posterity. The lesser men who followed them only aggravated the approaching secession crisis that filled Whitman with the deepest anxiety. Would it explode his vision of a national brotherhood of brawny mechanics and farmers moving "in magnificent masses careless of particulars"? He had cheered on the war against Mexico until convinced that it was a Southern plot to open up new territories to slavery. By the 1850s, he was evoking the ghosts of Revolutionary veterans to gape at the perversion of their efforts in '76, as Boston yielded to Federal power and returned Anthony Burns to his masters.

If you blind your eyes with tears you will not see the
President's marshal,
If you groan such groans you might balk the government
cannon.

Whitman wasn't an abolitionist and held no brief for incendiaries like Garrison who were ready to burn the Constitution if it were used to justify filthy enactments, but he was a fierce libertarian all the same, an advocate of strict construction who believed that government could do "an immense deal of harm" but little positive good. If the Constitution guaranteed slavery, so be it: not men but Providence (here he agreed with Hawthorne) would decide the issue. In the meantime he was prepared to keep the Union ship on an even keel and to condemn the fire-eaters, north and south, who were trying to sink it—that is, until the blasphemy at Fort Sumter and the resulting sacrilege of disunion. It was then that Whitman became "Lincoln's man," for in his eyes Lincoln embodied a virtue "unknown to other lands . . . Unionism, in its truest and amplest sense." An authentic scion of the Founding Fathers, Lincoln was dedicated, like Whitman himself, to "that immortal emblem of Humanity—the Declaration of American Independence."

To what extent then (I borrow David Reynolds' words in his announcement of this conference) did "Whitman's mythologizing of

American's legendary heroes become a powerful force in poetry"? Or, to put it another way, could *Leaves of Grass* have sprouted and flourished unfertilized by the ideas and spirit of the Declaration, the Revolution, and the Federal Constitution? By his own testimony, it was the Civil War—"the most profound lesson of my life," he called it—not the Revolutionary war, that provided the ultimate logic for his exfoliating book of poems. Yet how could "Drum-Taps" be "pivotal to the rest entire," as he claimed, when so much of *Leaves of Grass*, in fact the most original parts, was composed before the outbreak of the "Four Years' War."

Whitman's questionable assertion, it seems to me, makes better sense if it is considered in a broader context. He certainly saw the War as a "pivotal" event in his personal history, as well as in the nation's, but he also made it the climactic act in a historical pageant which dramatized the old drawn-out struggle between feudalism and democracy. The American Revolution had been an earlier episode in that conflict and a prelude to the greater one a half-century later. Given his faith in the future delivery of mankind from tyranny and his dream of uniting the States "into the compact organism of one nation," a bardic prophet like Whitman might have accommodated, as only temporary setbacks, a defeat of the colonial patriots by the British, or a failure of the Founders to enact a Constitution (and thereby leave the states temporarily detached entities), or even a victory of the Secessionists. Yet it's hard to imagine a *Leaves of Grass* based on that scenario.

In its finished state, it throbs with history, and the rearranging of the poems in successive editions, as well as the topics of his prose discourses, corresponds in some way to his perception of shifting historical currents. The sons of the Founders, Jackson excepted—the Websters, Clays, Calhouns, and most certainly the Franklin Pierces and James Buchanans—are pygmies compared to their legendary sires. They lack the dignity and serenity of the Founders, are inadequate models for the turbulent democracy. As the country drifts toward irrevocable schism, Whitman's contempt for sleazy politicians intensifies and his prospects for becoming the redemptive poet of America, encloser of the old and new, reconciler of sectional antagonisms, grow cloudier.

We can watch the hero-poet dictating plans for his own ascension in the 1855 preface of *Leaves of Grass*. He declares himself the heir of the Fathers and proceeds to justify his boast—"Washington made free the body of America . . . Here comes one who will make free the American soul." The Poet Whitman incorporates "the first settlements north and south . . . the haughty defiance of '76, and the war and peace and formation of the constitution." He cheers up slaves and horrifies despots, is undaunted by failure and discouragement, and is confident in a union "always surrounded by blatherers" yet "always calm and impregnable." Sustained by "the memories of the old martyrs" and defending the "large names of patriots" when "they are laughed at in the public halls," he is not abashed by "swarms of cringers, suckers, doughfaces, lice of politics, planners of sly involutions for their own preferment." He shouts for "Libertad" and for "union impossible to dissever."

But for all his swagger, Whitman was disturbed by secession talk ("O a curse on him that would dissever this Union for any reason whatever!") and by the tactics of its grave-diggers. Premonitory notes can be heard behind the crashing affirmative chords of his harangue. Two years later (filled, he later confessed, with doubt and gloom), he was hinting of moral and political convulsions ahead and calling for the rank and file to sweep away the "office vermin" from "un-named by-places where devilish disunion is hatched at midnight." Under Lincoln's leadership, the Union survived what Whitman referred to as "the real parturition years (more than 1776-'83)," but during the Gilded Age he was looking back with a certain wistfulness (I quote from *Democratic Vistas*) to the "First Stage" of "the American programme" set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution when feelings of personal liberty and selfhood merged with love of country in general. The material prosperity that marked the technological "Second Stage" and the as yet unrealized literary or "Religious Democracy" of the third were rooted, he affirmed, in the foundations of the Republic. The poet for whom "Union" was the "kelson" of his religious, philosophic, and aesthetic formulations could not have felt otherwise.

We come at last to the central question. Granted Whitman's "tap-root" sunk deep in American soil, did the politics and history

of his country really seep into the "chyle" of his verse? Plainly he trotted them out in his obstreperous apostrophes, his far-ranging catalogues and geographical references. The self-proclaimed laureate couldn't restrain himself from mounting the soap-box and defending his candidacy for that office. "These States," he announces, "are the amplest poem," and he expands into every region of the land, lists the myriad occupations of his countrymen, defines the physical and mental attributes required of one who would "talk or sing of America" and represent it. "The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferred, till his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it."

These tub-thumping yawps are hushed in his great elegies and threnodies and hymns to death. Even so, I think Whitman wasn't simply blathering when he offered himself as the connector of history past and "history yet to be" and spoke in his admittedly theatrical piece, "Death of Abraham Lincoln," of "those climax-moments on the stage of universal Time" that brought the "historic Muse" and the "tragic Muse" into creative conjunction. Lincoln's funeral cortege in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" as it passes through "the show of the States," condenses Nationality, and Lincoln himself incarnates "Union" in both a literal and mystical sense.

As I've said, "Union" for Whitman is always a resonating word. It denotes the Revolution and Washington and the nation-binding Constitution; it connotes a blending of civic order and personal liberty, of body and soul. It's "the sign of democracy," he says, of fraternity. And perhaps most revealing of all, "Union" always suggests to him something elastic and progressively developing yet never fulfilled, a perpetually arising shape, so to speak. That is the way he perceived his own personality as well. "Union" is thus a metaphor for his own psychological integration attained during those mysterious years when his poems were gestating and when he managed to escape from his sexual repressions, reject old authorities, and accept his democratic identity. Read in this spirit, *Leaves of Grass* is Whitman's Declaration of Independence and Emancipation Proclamation all in one.