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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE OPEN AIR

In the spring of 1979 I took a course from William Heyen in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. I was not an English Major, had never written a poem.

Much of that spring is a blur. But I remember an almost daily epiphany. I remember buds opening — specific buds on specific trees — and I remember the lilacs as if they were here now.

One morning I climbed up into a sunny cupola with a woman. We opened all the windows. I remember eating full, beautiful strawberries one by one, and I remember the woman eating them. We read Whitman all morning. The trees and houses and the white church towers and the smells coming through the windows I remember.

My whole life was falling forward into Whitman then, and is even now. My spirit had chosen the open road as its emblem, and I found myself listening as an apprentice to a new master.

“Listen! I will be honest with you,
I do not offer the old smooth prizes, but offer
rough new prizes,
These are the days that must happen to you...”

There was excitement then, undeniable, as on the day before a great journey, the night before a wedding. “Allons: whoever you are come travel with me.” At the same time, there was a danger I’d not felt before: “...you come alone and you will have to go away alone.” In 1920 Carl Sandburg wrote: “He is likely any time to trip us out of the boat to see whether we swim or sink.”

There is no poetic statement of a man’s life greater than *Leaves of Grass*. “Who touches this touches a man,” said Whitman about his life’s work, compelling his reader to transcend all incomplete notions of poetry (notions that pretend poetry can exist or be created apart from the soul), and to recognize the immediacy of poetry to the poet:

“I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes,
rhymes,
We convince by our presence.”

A development in the poetry must reflect a development in the poet. After Whitman (and Whitman would have me include his), I reexamine all books of poetry. "They may prove well in lecture rooms, yet not prove at all under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents." Here is realization. Here is the poet "who brought the slop pail into the parlour." Here is he who said, "I charge you forever reject those who would expound me." Here, no answers.

Theodore Roethke said, "The right thing happens to the happy man." Whitman's "cosmic optimism," so often questioned and discredited by unhappy men, comes from his belief that we are all, by nature, happy. When we act naturally, essentially, the right thing happens to us, and will.

"The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness,
I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times,
Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged."

It is not accident Whitman parallels "the soul" and "the open air" here by naming them as male and female containers of the charge. Fundamental, more than anything, to Whitman's poetry is the recognition and celebration of the connection between Man and Nature.

I am most unhappy when I betray this connection, happiest when I hold steady to it. What Whitman calls me to is consciousness of and responsibility for my human body, and my planet's body. I betray one, I betray the other. Celebrate one, the other is celebrated.

It is not easy for me to resist the debilitating poetics of the modern world. It is essential. Again and again, Whitman urges those who read and share his wide-ranging vision to action: "Have we not stood like trees in the ground long enough?"

But what action? What for each of us to do? What for me? And yet, even as I ask, I know there cannot be complete answers. There can only be the shared spirit that all the best actions will rise from.

"Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air and to eat and
sleep with the earth."