

WHITMAN'S EAGLES

The eagles' flight in "The Dalliance of the Eagles"—"these ten pictorial lines worthy of Aeschylus," as Whitman's defender William Douglas O'Connor called the poem¹—is one of several instances in *Leaves of Grass* in which the flights of mighty birds into the rarefied atmosphere represent the poet's excursions into the realm of philosophical idealism. The appropriateness of eagles, like the Catskill eagles in this poem, as symbols of the lofty artistic spirit was recognized by Whitman's great contemporary Herman Melville, who described "a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he forever flies within the gorge, the gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than the other birds upon the plain, even though they soar" (*Moby-Dick*, chapter 96). In a similar way, the celebrated closing lines of "Song of Myself" assert the Whitman person's fellowship and identification with high-flying birds whose utterances of nature's primal secrets sound like a "barbaric yawp" only to uninitiated ears. The poet-persona's "gab" and "loitering" are, after all, a sort of dalliance, in sharp contrast to the exalted flights which he, like the eagle, is able to perform:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of my gab and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Similarly, the closing lines of "By Blue Ontario's Shore," in the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, link Whitman's "barbaric yawp" with the words of heroic bards and "the swooping eagle's scream," implying that the king of birds is indeed the fitting muse and emblem for America's vatic poet:

Bards of pride: Bards tallying the ocean's roar,
and the swooping eagle's scream:
You, by my charm, I invoke.²

Democratic Vistas (1870) demonstrates the profound implications in the poet's thinking of the eagle's flight metaphor. America, Whitman asserts, requires "high literary and esthetic compositions," not "the smooth walks, trimm'd hedges, poseys and nightingales of the English poets." In imagery hinting that he is a poetic eagle viewing America's destiny from the high reaches of philosophical idealism, he calls for other poets to become the interpreters of "elevating and etherealizing ideas of the unknown and of unreality:" "To the heights of such estimate of Nature indeed ascending, we proceed to make observations for our Vistas, breathing rarest air. What is I believe called Idealism seems to suggest, (guarding-against extravagance, and ever modified by its opposite,) the course of inquiry and desert of favor for our New World metaphysics, their foundation of and in literature, giving hue to all." As a democratic thinker, Whitman challenges his fellows to undertake such eagle flights into the aerial realm of idealism. "Intitute the flight; fathomless the mystery. Man, so diminutive, dilates beyond the sensible universes, competes with, outcopes space and time, meditating even one great idea. Thus, and thus only, does a human being, his spirit, ascend above, and justify, objective Nature, which, probably nothing in itself, is incredibly and divinely serviceable, indispensable, real, here."³

Similar ideas, together with the eagle-poet identity, appear in several of the later poems. The 1872 Dartmouth commencement poem "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood" again rejects "the conceits of poets of other lands" in favor of Whitman's skyeey flights into the regions of idealism, from which he brings back songs. In deference to the academic audience to whom the poem was addressed, the poet has tamed his "eagle's scream" to a polite "recitative":

A strong bird on pinions free,
Joyous, the amplest spaces heavenward cleaving,
Such be the thought I'd think of thee America,
Such the recitative I'd bring for thee.

The eagle's flight symbol recurs in "Song of the Universal" (1874), in which the poet asks God to make him the singer of love, immortality, and the revelations of "Nature's amelioration blessing all":

pared Whitman to the "Golden Eagle, sick to death, worn with age or famine, or both, passing with weary walt of wing from promontory to promontory, from peak to peak, pursued by a crowd of rooks and crows, which fall back screaming whenever the noble bird turns his indignant head."⁵

Obviously, the eagles' flight imagery in "The Dalliance of the Eagles" exists in a rich context of symbol and idea. Although the poem makes no explicit connection between the eagles' flight and vatic poetry or philosophical idealism, the selections cited above indicate that such an association may be pertinent. The poem follows:

Skirting the river road, (my forenoon walk, my rest,
Skyward in air a sudden muffled sound, the dalliance of
the eagles,
The rushing amorous contact high in space together,
The clinching interlocking claws, a living, fierce,
gyrating wheel,
Four beating wings, a swirling mass tight grappling,
In tumbling turning clustering loops, straight downward falling,
Till over the river pass'd, the twain yet one, a moment's lull,
A motionless still balance in the air, then parting, talons
loosing,
Upward again on slow-firm pinions slanting, their separate
diverse flight,
She hers, he his, pursuing.⁶

The poem lacks an independent clause and makes no grammatically complete statement but relies on a virtuosic array of participles as if rapidly photographing an intense and transitory moment in nature's dazzling show. In contrast to the dazzling orbital gymnastics of the birds, the action of the observer-persona is simple, almost linear. During his stroll, he is attracted by the sound of eagles mating in the air. They remain in his field of vision, hurtling earthward in a fiercely gyrating circle; then, their coupling done, each bird mounts skyward on its separate way, "she hers, he his, pursuing." And if one respects Robert Frost's precept that a good lyric poem, like a cake of ice atop a hot stove, rides on its own melting, then this final detail—the separate upward flight of the eagles—becomes the climax and the clarification toward which Whitman's poem has been developing all along.⁷ The

Over the mountain-growths disease and sorrow,
An uncaught bird is ever hovering, hovering,
High in the purer, happier air.

Another variation appears in "To the Man-of-War Bird," first published in England in 1876. Like "The Dalliance of the Eagles," it sets up a visual polarity between the observer-poet ("Myself a speck") and the "prodigious" bird ("Now a blue point, far, far in heaven float-ing"). Significantly, "To the Man-of-War Bird" describes the great bird as "gyrating" through space and "sporting amid the lightning-flash and thunder-cloud." ("Gyrating" is, of course, a key term in "The Dalliance" and "sporting," even in its sexual sense, can be synonymous with "dalliance." And, finally, a brief 1887 lyric implies that Whitman's old-age poems—"scaly and bare, like eagles' talons"—may one day blossom like inspirational seeds.⁴

Before "The Dalliance of the Eagles" was written (1880), Whit-

man and his friends had elaborated upon the notion that he was an eagle among poets. John Burroughs's review of *Drum-Taps* alleged that "Walt Whitman possesses almost in excess a quality in which every current poet is lacking. We mean the faculty of being in entire sympathy with nature, and of rude, abysmal man; and appalling directness of utterance theretfrom, without any intermediate agency or modification." In 1875 O'Connor thus recorded the half-paralyzed Whitman's appearance at the commemorative ceremony for Edgar Allan Poe: "We saw slowly limp our loftiest poet, broken with his hospital service to the wounded and dying of both sides in the war, and grand in his old age and infirmity, like a crippled eagle." Two years later, Burroughs composed, with Whitman's editorial help, a powerful defense of the poet, significantly titled "The Flight of the Eagle." The lengthy essay repeats the statement about Whitman's "faculty of being in entire sympathy with nature." Having survived poverty, sickness, paralysis, and abuse, this homely and simple bard has pitched "his literary expression...on scales of...unexpected breadth and loftiness." (The decorous language again suggests that he is describing the Whitman of "recitatives" rather than "screams" and "yawns.") Implying that Whitman is an eagle-like poet of idealism, Burroughs says that Whitman "never fails to ascend into spiritual meanings." If he stops short of calling Whitman an eagle in this essay, he nevertheless quotes the Scottish poet Robert Buchanan who, in 1876, had specifically com-

for the highest flights, for the poem was composed a decade after *Demonstrative Vistas* which, in keeping with Whitman's evolving feminism, proclaims woman's right and eligibility to pursue every avenue of human endeavor. Attaining the heights of prophecy and poetry has ceased to be man's sole prerogative.

Now, perhaps, we may understand why Whitman implied that the awesome mating of the eagles was a mere dalliance, contrasting what Gertrude M. White calls "that dainty, mincing noun" with "the violent action of verbal adjectives" which depict "the irresistible power of the sexual drive."⁹ If Whitman's eagles objectively noble beings pursuing the zenith of idealism, then their brief sexual union is only a dalliance, a casual encounter in the cosmic scheme of things. However awesome or sexually dynamic the eagles' mating may be, it remains a dalliance, a diversion, in the sense that poets and eagles may have something more important to do with their lives. One recalls the poet's venturesome soul, in "Passage to India," setting off alone on its journey into the infinite, without bodily concerns and without comrades; for the soul's journey cannot be accomplished while locking talons or—like the Whitman persona and his Calamus lovers—while "wandering hand in hand." (Aware that his lovers can never comprehend the mystery of his soul, the persona admonishes them: "release me and depart your way.")¹⁰ Done with their mighty but momentary amours, the poem's eagles must take "their separate diverse flight"—depart for the realms where truth and poetry are born, where celestial songs may be heard by those who are attuned to hear them and can bring them back to earth.

Notes

¹Quoted in Jerome Loving, *Walt Whitman's Champion: William Douglas O'Connor* (College Station, Texas: Texas A. & M. Press, 1978), p. 220.

²*Leaves of Grass: Authoritative Texts, Prefaces, Whitman on His Art, Criticism*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 89; *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Bradley, Blodgett, et. al. (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1980), I: 211.

speaker-observer's field of vision creates a pictorial or spatial frame for the action; the frame serves also as a time frame. Within it the birds mate, then mounting on their divergent skyward paths, they empty the frame. Like the flight of the mighty birds, the action of the poem moves downward with the birds' mating; then upward again in the masterly closing lines. The poem begins with the observer (subject) but culminates in the flights of the eagles (object), as if observer and eagles had become momentarily fused.

The pattern of the poem may be compared to that of "Calamus 38" (1860), in which the drama of heterosexual mating is followed by the eagle-like flight of the male lover into a rarefied spiritual realm. In moving from coupling to separation to reattachment, the "Calamus" poem sets up a sensual polarity between earthbound heterosexual passion and "ethereal" homosexual comradeship:

Primal my love for the woman I love,
O bride! O wife: more resistless, more enduring than
I can tell, the thought of you!
Then separate, as disembodied, the purest born,
The ethereal, the last athletic reality, my consolation,
I ascend—I float in the regions of your love, O man,
O sharer of my roving life.

In a comment that seems to be focused on the mating-separation polarity in the foregoing verse, D. H. Lawrence asserts that Whitman has "reduced" woman "to a submissive function," alleging that "the mystery of manly love" or "the ultimate comradeship" is "more strictly sacred" than marriage "since it has no ulterior motive whatever, like procreation," and observing that "the ultimate comradeship flowers on the brink of death. But it flowers from the root of life upon the blossom-ing tree of life."⁸ Of course, Lawrence's sentiments do not clearly apply to "The Dalliance of the Eagles," for the differences between Whitman's two poems are no less instructive than their similarities. Thus in "Calamus 38" man rises to a higher sphere where woman is apparently ineligible to follow, but "The Dalliance" exhibits a tempes-tuous mating followed by a separation between male and female eagles in which the female as well as the male mounts on a separate but implicitly equal course toward the empyrean. "The Dalliance" does not discriminate between the female and male eagles: each seems fledged



³*Democratic Vistas*, in *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1964), 2: 416-19.

⁴*Leaves of Grass* (Norton), pp. 456, 227, 257-58, 332-33.

⁵John Burroughs, "Walt Whitman and His 'Drum-Taps,'" *The Galaxy*, 2 (1866), 615; Florence B. Freedman, "New Light on an Old Quarrel: Walt Whitman and William Douglas O'Connor, 1872," *Walt Whitman Review*, 11 (1965), 49; John Burroughs, "The Flight of the Eagle," in *The Complete Writings of John Burroughs* (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1924), 6: 192, 196, 232, 234. On Whitman's editorial role in "The Flight of the Eagle," see Clara Barrus, *Whitman and Burroughs, Comrades* (1931; rptd., Port Washington, N. Y.: Kennikat, 1968), pp. 110, 162-63.

⁶*Leaves of Grass* (Norton), pp. 273-74. The poem is based on Burroughs's sighting of mating eagles above the Hudson River, an occurrence he probably told Whitman about several years after the event. This is one of several poems founded on another person's story but told from the perspective and through the "voice" of the Whitman narrator-persona. For an example of a reworked oral narrative, see Charles I. Glicksberg, *Walt Whitman and the Civil War* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1963), pp. 123-25.

⁷Gregory M. Haynes, "Reading Whitman's Meanings and 'The Dalliance of the Eagles,'" *Walt Whitman Review*, 27 (1981), 159-61, has argued that the poem lacks both "a determinate meaning" and the "final tagline which we expect from Whitman."

⁸*Leaves of Grass: Facsimile Edition of the 1860 Text* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1961), p. 375; D. H. Lawrence, "Whitman," in *Leaves of Grass* (Norton), pp. 847-50.

⁹"The Dalliance of Whitman's Eagles," *Walt Whitman Review*, 25 (1979), 73-76.

¹⁰*Leaves of Grass* (Norton), pp. 122, 117.