

## Daniel Hoffman

### 'HANKERING, GROSS, MYSTICAL, NUDE': WHITMAN'S 'SELF' AND THE AMERICAN TRADITION

There was a child went forth every day;  
And the first object he look'd upon, that object he became;  
And that object became part of him for the day . . . or stretching  
cycles of years . . .

There, *that* is the essential invention which, having been once devised, made possible all the others in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I mean the conception of the Self as the sum of all of its experiences, the Self not conceived—as Emerson would have it—of the soul surrounded by the Not-Me, but the Self flowing into the Not-Me, the Soul into which the Not-Me flows. A stunning contrivance:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (1)\*

My Self, Whitman says, is the same as yours, and yours is interchangeable with mine. The only difference between us, he says, is that the poet can express the convictions that all of his fellows inarticulately feel.

One's Self I sing, a simple separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse. . . .

In this famous 'Inscription' to *Leaves of Grass*, the conjunction *Yet* has the force of *and*, a simple adding of one statement to another; in this context, *Yet* hardly conserves its implication of opposition. Whitman's *Yet* indicates that he has constructed an oxymoron, saying in effect that 'a simple separate person' is indistinguishable from 'the word En-Masse.' The intervening term between these linked poems of his oxymoron is, of course, 'Democratic.' Although Whitman's syntax suggests that 'Democratic' is synonymous with 'En-Masse,' it is in fact

\*Quotations, unless otherwise identified, are from 'Song of Myself.' Parenthetic numerals refer to the sections of that poem.

the mediating term between separate personhood and membership in the 'En-Masse.' How revolutionary a conception this may be is suggested by Whitman's having to rely upon a Franglish neologism; it is as though neither the English language nor any native American usage can supply the appropriate term for the merged consciousness of all citizens, so Whitman must mangle a French term, suggestive of the French Revolution.

*Leaves of Grass* is itself a document of revolution—not political revolt in any explicit way, but, moving us as he says his poem must do, 'by faint clews and indirections,' it mounts a revolutionary change of sensibility. And yet, Whitman writes in *A Backward Glance*,

I know very well that my *Leaves* could not possibly have emerged or been fashion'd or completed, from any other era than the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, nor any other land than democratic America. . . . I consider *Leaves of Grass* and its theory experimental—as, in the deepest sense, I consider our American republic itself to be, with its theory.

The theory of the American republic is that its political institutions should reflect the proposition that all men are created equal. What is experimental in *Leaves of Grass* evolves from Whitman's simply taking that assumption to be fully, unequivocally, and universally true. The theory of the American republic gave every citizen the vote and every person equal protection under the laws. Whitman's theory, however, goes far beyond mere politics. Equality is known, is apprehended, is felt, by the 'simple, separate person.' Completely to know, to believe in, to feel that all persons are equal changes the way one apprehends reality. The invention of Whitman's Self is necessary in order to realize and dramatize this revolutionary feeling.

Whitman's conception of the Self is then not only a metaphor freeing one poet's imagination; it is also a profound expression of deep and widely-felt tendencies in the life of his country in his own time and since. This Self of Whitman's appears throughout as the 'caresser of life wherever moving—backward as well as forward slueing,' and at the same time his Self 'will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.' This Self is omnivorous, demanding to partake of and participate in every conceivable experience—

I pass death with the dying and birth with the new-wash'd babe,  
and am not contain'd between my hat and boots; (7)

His Self demands to be identified with the outcasts and downtrodden. 'I understand the large heart of heroes,' he writes, yet also writes, 'I embody all presences outlaw'd or suffering; / See myself in prison shaped like another man,' and identifies with the mutineer, the thief, the cholera patient, the prostitute, the venerealee. For him, 'Agonies are one of my changes of garments.' Christlike, he takes upon himself the sufferings of all: 'I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.' His Self is designed to make possible the expression of the absolute equality of everyone with everyone else, of everything with every other thing: a world without distinctions.

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me; (14)

At the same time this Self is overwhelmed by the mystery of individual existence:

Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude;

.....

What is a man, anyhow? What am I? What are you? (20)

.....

To be, in any form, what is that? (27)

Insofar as Whitman has answers to these philosophical questions of Being, they are provided not by theories but by demonstrations of his capacity to feel:

The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies;  
It wrenches such ardors from me, I did not know I possess'd  
them. . . . (26)

The proof of being is in the individual, in his awareness of his own sensations. 'I am the poet of the Body; / And I am the poet of the Soul' (21) he writes, as though there were no contradiction. And indeed, for Whitman there is none:

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

His soul, Section 5 of 'Song of Myself' continues, is in his sex:

I mind how once we lay, such a transparent summer morning;  
How you settled your head athwart my hips, and turn'd over  
upon me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your  
tongue to my bare-stript heart,

.....

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge  
that pass all the argument of the earth . . .

Whitman, convinced that his soul is in his body, that his body is equally as holy as his soul, treats sexual passion and physical delight with a frankness unknown in poetry hitherto, as in 'I Sing the Body Electric,' where he writes of 'the female form,'

Mad filaments, ungovernable shoots play out of it, the response  
likewise ungovernable,

Hair, bosom, hips, bend of legs, negligent falling hands all  
diffused, mine too diffused,

Ebb stung by the flow and flow stung by the ebb, love-flesh  
swelling and deliciously aching,

Limitless limpid jets of love hot and enormous, quivering  
jelly of love, white-blow and delirious juice,

Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into  
the prostrate dawn.

.....

Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

Whitman, whose first preface so confidently and famously affirmed, 'The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it,' would have to wait a century for such proof from his countrymen. In 1855 even his fellow-poets were mighty cautious about accepting lines of such imprudent sexual revelation. Whittier threw his copy of *Leaves of Grass* in the fire, James Russell Lowell kept his in a locked bookcase. Thoreau wrote, 'It is as if the beasts spoke'; but, honest man that he was, when a correspondent was outraged by Whitman's sensuality, Thoreau replied, 'Of whose experiences have his poems the power to remind us?' Emerson counselled Whitman to leave out the more provocative stuff, but Whitman felt he could not do that. To do so would destroy the integrity of his *Leaves*.

Sexuality was but another of the changes of garments of his Self, his revolutionary Self. The poet of Body and the poet of Soul proclaims,

Through me forbidden voices;  
Voices of sexes and lusts—voices veil'd, and I remove the veil;  
Voices indecent, by me clarified and transfigur'd. (24)

.....  
I am not the poet of goodness only—I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also.

.....  
What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?  
Evil propels me, and reform of evil propels me—I stand indifferent;  
My gait is no fault-finder's or rejector's gait. . . . (22)

It is in respect of such inclusions in his poetry that Whitman is revolutionary. His inclusions are the natural extensions of feeling of the Self devised as the persona of his poems. And among all these selves, which is the real Walt Whitman? He is elusive, never stopping for long in any one guise, always shifting from one shape to another, poem by poem, strophe by strophe, line by line. Identity is the great mystery. Its solution, it seems, is never to be trapped in one limited skin, but to be protean, shape-shifting, every-changing, a universal Self enjoying its own metamorphic powers. Those powers are the key to the Self's inclusions, to its egalitarianism, for the Self, as we have seen, accepts good and evil as equals, accepts the defeated along with the victors, the outcasts along with the powerful, the sick and the suffering as well as the healthy, the male and the female alike. Each is good, each has its own identity, its own dignity. This is indeed an aesthetic extension of the American political idealism concerning equality.

Whitman's Self, then, is a persona inviting radical departures from established norms in its inclusion of hitherto untouchable subjects, of taboo themes, and in its denial of the moral distinctions between good and evil while subsuming all experience into a greater good. At the same time, this Self of Whitman's is a compelling, culturally valid metaphor. I would like to raise and attempt to address several questions suggested by this overview of Whitman's Self: Why is it that until Whitman so conceived of the Self in 1855, we had no expression

in American poetry of any such theory of being, of any such sensibility? Is there some other tradition in American writing to which Whitman more properly belongs? And what did his governing metaphor of the Self require of Whitman's management of his verse—his rhythms, his structures?

## II

Whitman's America was the pre-industrial country of small landowners, farmers, tradesmen, and frontiersmen which Alexis De Tocqueville visited during the poet's youth. This French observer found the reigning ideology was the assumption of egalitarianism and a rejection of the aristocratic culture of Britain from which independence had been won only half a century earlier. Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* in 1840 predicted with uncanny accuracy the kind of poetry that Whitman would publish fifteen years later. In his analysis of the effects of democracy upon all political and cultural institutions, Tocqueville outlines the fate of poetry in democratic ages. "Democracy," he maintains, "gives men a sort of instinctive distaste for what is ancient." In a society without class distinctions, egalitarian feeling depopulates the heavens; for men cease to believe in the intermediate supernatural powers which ancient poetry traditionally addressed, and fix their attention only on the Supreme Power. "After having deprived poetry of the past, the principle of equality robs it in part of the present," for if all persons are assumed to be alike, "each man instantly sees all his fellows when he surveys himself," and poetry loses the variety of imaging the conditions of human existence. With neither gods, heroes, nor a range of social classes available to their imaginations, the poets of democratic ages are forced to regard, as their sole subject and principle theme, the self of the ordinary individual.

I have necessarily truncated Tocqueville's subtleties, yet, without having done his argument full justice, let me point out both its virtues and its limitations. Tocqueville's analysis is not to be taken as a literal description of the United States, in 1830 or at any time, but rather, like Plato's *Republic*, it is a typology of possibilities, too consistent to represent an actual culture. Its value is its identification of strong tendencies; its shortcomings is the absoluteness with which it obviates the presence of countertendencies. At any rate, Tocqueville's egalitarian poet resembles nobody writing verse in America before 1855, but,

being based on his analysis of the cultural consequences of democracy, predicts certain poets to come, most notably Whitman.

If the protean Self of *Leaves of Grass* is unparalleled in American poetry, perhaps the tradition to which it belongs is to be found elsewhere. We might begin with reality, with life itself. From the earliest settlements in the 17th century, American conditions required, for many, a bursting free from the ascribed status which life in Europe imposed. In Massachusetts Bay, as on later frontiers, the same man might have to fell trees, build his house, plant corn, harvest his crops, cobble his own shoes, milk his own cow, defend his farmhouse or village against the Indians, read the lesson at Church, hold office in the government of his town or colony. Metamorphosis is a necessity in a society where an individual's economic function is variable; where his status is attained, not ascribed or inherited; where a man can always burst free from his rut by going to sea, or by settling farther west, or by migrating to the city.

The lives of several American writers show how protean were their actual selves, how varied their circumstances. Herman Melville was by turns a schoolteacher, a merchant sailor, a captive of a cannibal tribe in the South Seas, a passenger on a naval vessel, a crewman on a whaling ship, an author, a lecturer, a customs inspector. Mark Twain was successively, a printer's devil, cub pilot on a riverboat, a guerilla soldier in the Civil War, a civil servant, a silver miner, journalist, travelling lecturer, newspaper correspondent, publisher of a newspaper, proprietor of a book publishing company, investor, debtor, and sage. Emerson may appear not to have led a life of such vicissitudes; but his metamorphoses are none the less real for being vicarious: in his essays Emerson is by turns the Poet, the Scholar, the Hero, the Philosopher, the Skeptic, the Mystic, the Man of the World. Though ostensibly writing about Plato or Swedenborg, about Montaigne or Napoleon, it is he himself who participates in their separate routes to the perception of the unity in all experience. Walt Whitman, too, played many roles in his life—dandy, political reformer, temperance lecturer, newspaper editor, Poet, Christ-like carpenter, tender nurse of the wounded, prophet. In his *Leaves of Grass*, the Self of protean power and omnivorous appetite is a boldly imagined extension of the circumstances he and his contemporaries felt to be their opportunities, their fate, their lot as Americans.

What characterizes Melville's Ishmael, like Whitman's Self, is his accessibility to experience. This capacity of Ishmael's to encompass the outlooks, the emotions, the very being of all of his shipmates is tellingly dramatised in the chapter in which each member of the crew in turn steps up to the mast of the Pequod to interpret the emblems on the gold doubloon which Captain Ahab has nailed there as a reward for the first who sights the whale, Moby-Dick. The mates, the seamen, the Negro cabin boy each in turn interprets the meaning of the figures on the coin—we know this because it is Ishmael who observes and tells what they say. His own interpretation is not given, but implicitly embraces all of theirs, the truth of Meaning being a larger, more inclusive truth than any of them can see. This chapter is an epitome of Ishmael's role in the entire book. Again, we see that Huckleberry Finn, like Whitman's Self, has the power to change his identity at a moment's notice, and he shares with Whitman the power of human sympathy. For while he gives himself a different name and life-story each time he is questioned by a stranger, what is constant in Huck Finn is his capacity to sympathize with, to suffer for, and to love others. Even the unworthy: for Huck risks his life to save the thieves on the sinking steamboat, and when the Duke and Dauphin, those swindlers who have so mistreated him and Jim, are humiliated and run out of town by an angry mob, Huck feels pity for them nonetheless.

I suggest that the qualities of protean identity, the capacity of the individual again and again to recreate himself anew, to merge into new identities, and the sympathy of the man who, as Melville says, has "his humanities," his active sympathy with his fellow-man, are typical of the great American fictions of the mid-nineteenth century, as they are of Whitman's poems. How is it that Whitman alone among our poets of that time possesses and dramatizes these qualities of the national character?

"Do you call those genteel little creatures American poets? So you term that perpetual pistareen, paste-pot work, American Art, American drama, American verse?" Whitman demanded in *Democratic Vistas*. The coin of their realm was debased, their verses imitative, stuck together from the existing conventions of other countries, other cultures. Whitman could be more generous than this in speaking of Bryant, Longfellow, Whittier in *Specimen Days*, praising them for bringing sweetness and cultivation into our poetry, but what Whitman

quoted elsewhere in an article from the London *Times* is true of these poets: they wrote as though they were Englishmen who happened to live in Massachusetts, they were awed by the long history and great achievements of their English predecessors. None of these poets responded with Whitman's prescience to their situation as Americans—no doubt because their situation was not as typical of their countrymen as he felt his to be. The American poets of reputation in Whitman's day were members of the genteel class: Longfellow and Lowell were Harvard professors of Romance Languages; Emerson was Harvard-educated as a minister; Oliver Wendell Holmes, a physician. The other two leading American bards, Bryant and Whittier, were more egalitarian in their sympathies, Bryant as a courageous liberal journalist, Whittier as a Quaker abolitionist, yet in their poems they tried to please the same audience as did their more genteel contemporaries. Whitman, like Whittier, was born into the working class and came from a Quaker background. Yet it was Whittier who became the poet the farmers and shopkeepers read, treasured, and memorized, because, like Robert Burns in Scotland, he told them tales of their own lives in the forms of language they were accustomed to recognize as poetry. Whitman, more deeply grasping the spirit of common lives, had to alter sensibility by changing style.

### III

Whitman's visionary Self is inconceivable apart from the poetics in which it is embodied. In his repudiation of rhyme, meters, stanzaic organization, regularity, of all the formal conventions of the Anglo-American verse of his century, Whitman is our most innovative experimenter. Yet, as T. S. Eliot reminds us in his "Reflections on *Vers Libre*," "There is no freedom in art . . . freedom is only truly freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation . . . There is no escape from metre; there is only mastery . . . The division between Conservative Verse and *vers libre* does not exist, for there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos." Having discarded all conventionalities, Whitman had of course to substitute for what he had thrown away a new means of organizing the sounds, the patterns, the sense of his verses. And in so doing he subjected his poetry to a new set of necessities just as demanding as those he discarded because they were tinged with the practise of king-ridden and feudal times.

It was doubtlessly their subjection to such conventional poetics (whether feudal or king-ridden) which inhibited the two most powerful poetic temperaments among Whitman's contemporaries from expressing successfully in their verse a wide range of experience and feeling. Both Emerson and Poe are much more far-reaching in their prose than in their poems. Emerson, whose essay, "The Poet" seems a prediction of Walt Whitman, as well as of so much else in American poetry, calls for "meter-making arguments that make a poem": meters alone do not make a poem, but even in his visionary trance Emerson does not foresee poetry without them. It was meters surely that crippled his own poems. His essay is a stirring declaration of the challenge to the poet of the new subject, American life, and of the eternal verities of the spiritual truth which the poet must ever express afresh; yet his prefatory verses are hobbled in tetrameter couplets; most of his poems are devoid of the surprises of diction and rhythm which animate his prose.

As for Poe, who wrote that "With me, poetry has been not a purpose but a passion," yet left us only some fifty poems, we find that his verse is severely subjugated to the rigid orthodoxies of metrical, rhymed, and stanzaic repetition. So too is it limited, thematically, to the reiteration of his single subject, grief for the death of a beautiful woman, because Poe, who aimed at absolutes, required the most poetic subject; indeed, he would treat of no other. Or perhaps we should say, he *could* treat of no other—in his poems. In prose, in those tales he called "Arabesques," where his mind is freed from the format and programmatic constraints of the poem, Poe's range, though always constricted, nonetheless includes the emotions of exhilaration, curiosity, terror, as well as grief, the chief burden of his poems. Elsewhere I have at length investigated Poe's range and the consistencies of his work within that range.

For Whitman, the constraints of conventional versification were the shackles of enslavement to outworn modes of feeling. Poetry begins in a mode of feeling which must find its appropriate verbal form. Despite the broad variety of meters and poetic forms in the tradition of poetry in English, all such forms and meters decreed that feeling be expressed and contained in preordained shapes and strophes. Metrical practice is based on limitation: limitation of the line to a certain count of beats, limitation of the sound pattern to a repetition of certain terminal rhymes; limitation of the shape of the experience to the regular

recurrence of stanzas. What Whitman required was freedom from these end-stopping limits—not absolute freedom, there is no such thing in art—but a radically other way of embodying feeling in language.

The single simple device with which Whitman swept away all the versification he couldn't use is of course anaphora. Where metrical, rhymed, and stanzaic verse is end-stopped, anaphoric verse is a poetry of beginnings. The element of repetition or similarity, so necessary as the norm against which all variations and departures are measured, occurs at the inception of each line; what follows is varied, the parallels and contrasts among the ensuing words, phrases, and clauses lending the verse its delicacy, its charm, its power, as the case may be. Indeed the line is infinitely elastic, although in practice Whitman in 'Song of Myself,' for example, does adopt a normative line from whose lilt and length deviations mark special emphases. That normative line has usually 7 accented beats (sometimes 6, sometimes 8), and uses a free triple meter with many substitutions:

A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me  
with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what  
it is any more than he.  
I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out  
of hopeful green stuff woven.

A verse strophe may commence with a shorter line and continue with normative lines—and longer lines—

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,  
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners,  
that we may see and remark, and say, *Whose?* (6)

Or an anaphoric series may commence with a longer line, followed by normative lines and shorter lines, concluding with again a longer one:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and  
knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth;  
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own;

And that all men ever born are also my brothers, and the  
women my sisters and lovers;  
And that a kelson of the creation is love,  
And limitless are leaves, stiff or drooping in the  
fields;  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them;  
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, and heap'd stones,  
elder, mullen and poke-weed. (5)

This style allows Whitman to vary the tempo or the feeling, to build to climaxes or drop off in diminuendos. It invites the exact particularization of the experiences listed:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,  
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his  
foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,  
. . . . .  
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance  
and harpoon are ready,  
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,  
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of  
the big wheel . . .

There is much art in such catalogues as this one, which lists 62 identities (in #15), concluding,

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend  
outward to them  
And such as it is to be of these, more or less I am.

Thus in his finest passages our selves expand with Whitman's as we take part in the adventures of his Self. It is in the perceptions, the ecstasies, the griefs, the satisfactions of the "single, separate person" that Walt Whitman works his changes upon our sensibilities. Thus as he becomes the trapper, the hounded slave, the red Indian bride, the swimmer buffeted by the cruel sea, the bather soused with spray, we enter into these selves which are guises of his Self. His anaphoric line is an equalizing device, precisely appropriate to the presentation of Whitman's egalitarian feelings. Each line is syntactically parallel to all

of the others in its series; there is no subordination, no "hiatus of singular eminence."

But the anaphoric style is ever in danger of begetting its own rigidities. It can become as mechanical as verses subject to arbitrary meters. It can degenerate into a mere listing of objects or places. When Whitman attempts to write from the sensibility of the "En-Masse" instead of from that of "a single separate person," the resulting lists are lifeless, abstract, lacking the handprint of necessity. For instance, in answer to the query, "What do you see, Walt Whitman,"

I see Vesuvius and Etna, the mountains of the Moon,  
and the Red mountains of Madagascar,  
I see the Lybian, Arabian, and Asiatic deserts,  
I see huge dreadful Arctic and Antarctic icebergs,  
I see the superior oceans and the inferior ones,  
the Atlantic and Pacific, the sea of Mexico, the  
Brazilian sea, and the sea of Peru. . . .  
(Salut au Monde! #4)

None of these places is really seen, is distinguished in any sensory or emotion-arousing way from any others, nor will the passage be harmed by substituting an Alp or an Ande for the mountains of Madagascar. Here, and in many other places in Whitman's work, the will is trying to do the work of the imagination, ideology has replaced inspiration, and the result is a list no more poetry than that in a telephone book. Such is the result when the "En-Masse" tries to write a poem. The fact is, the "En-Masse" is itself an abstraction which is given life only as it is apprehended to be an extension of the "single separate person." The "En-Masse" can be one of the subjects of the single person's poems, but it cannot be their author.

Whitman's idealized sense of unity embraces brotherhood with all peoples, all places, all things. In "A Song for Occupations" he writes a truly democratic and egalitarian poem celebrating the equal dignity of all workers, whatever their jobs. Yet there is a root sense in which Whitman's ejaculations of brotherhood are personal rather than political affirmations. In Whitman there is a purposed, half-proclaimed, half-concealed confusion between universal brotherhood and "the love of comrades." Justin Kaplan's recent biography has validated the per-

ceptions of earlier critics like Richard Chase, that Whitman's sexuality was widely diffused; he struggled against what he called, in the vocabulary of phrenology, "amativeness," trying to resist its pull toward a single person as love-object. It was the astonishing diffusion of his sexual feelings that endows Whitman's work with its intensity, for he proclaims the brotherhood of man with the passion another poet would reserve for love of one person. And Whitman's impassioned fervor finds other objects besides men—

Smile, O voluptuous, cool-breath'd earth!  
Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees;  
. . . . .  
Far-swooping and elbow'd earth! rich, apple-blossom'd earth!  
Smile, for your lover comes!  
  
Prodigal, you have given me love! Therefore I to you give love!  
O unspeakable, passionate love! (21)

And so he addresses the sea—"Dash me with amorous wet—I can repay you" (22). The created universe and all of its elements and peoples become his love-objects. As Mark Van Doren has said, Whitman "is a great love poet because love is necessary to his understanding of the universe."

It is clear that whatever Walt Whitman loves, he loves also its opposite with equal ardor. He must celebrate not only the vitality, the thrust, the enterprise and affirmation and variety in American life, as well as his delight in sensory experience and in frank sexuality. He must also celebrate, equally, the passive, regressive, and threatening impulses. If Whitman is the great poet of love, he is also the great poet who celebrates death. The death-wish, too, is a part of life; it cannot be denied without diminishing the life of which it is an essential portion. Whitman's egalitarian sensibility accepts body as well as soul, sex as well as spirit, defeat as well as victory, and does not shrink from embracing the onanist, the mutineer, the slave. Not only embracing them but becoming them, merging with them as with the victors, the healthy, the perfectly formed.

To do all this, the poet cannot merely will himself to be inclusive. He must have access to the powers of his own unconscious, his most

private and deepest feelings, which he brings to consciousness and articulation. In a passage at the end of his essay "The Poet," Emerson, having exhausted all of his arguments and exhortations, has one last persuasion to animate the poet who is to be awakened to the possibilities for expressing the life of spirit in the present time:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say, "it is in me and shall out." Stand there, balked, dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooting, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. Nothing walks, or creeps, or grows, or exists, which must not in turn arise and walk before him as exponent of his meaning. Comes he to that power, his genius is no longer exhaustible. All the creatures, by pairs and by tribes, pour into his mind as into Noah's ark, to come forth again to people a new world. This is like the stock of air for our respiration, or the combustion of our fire-place, not a measure of gallons, but the entire atmosphere if wanted. And therefore the rich poets, as Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Raphael, have obviously no limits of their lifetime, and resemble a mirror carried through the street, ready to render an image of every created thing.

It is this dream-power which makes possible the transformations of Self, and which brings to his hand the unexampled delicacy and subtle strength of the language by which he moves us:

I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles. (52)

Such are among the adventures of the Self as Whitman conceived of it. Overspreading all of the other dichotomies which his Self embraces and reconciles is the inclusion of both reality and visionary truth. Whitman's anaphoric catalogues, at their best, present the closely observed, felt, tasted, smelt, and touched experiences of the world he lived in. Yet his vision of equality, of universal love, of the

soothing release of sweet death, is of a different order of experience from these.

Less the reminders of properties told my words,  
And more the reminders they of life untold, and of freedom  
and extrication,  
And make short account of neuters and geldings, and favor  
men and women fully equipt,  
And beat the gong of revolt, and stop with fugitives and  
them that plot and conspire. (23)

And now this rebel among outcasts and conspirators introduces himself anew—"Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son"—and proclaims,

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,  
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their  
counterpart of on the same terms. (23)

So the Self is at once a plotter conspiring against the status quo of reality and a proclaimer of "the pass-word primeval . . . the sign of democracy." And yet this Self participates in the reality it would also escape from, for Whitman's words, as we have seen, are "reminders of properties told." Then again they are also "reminders of life untold . . . of freedom and extrication." The Self both embodies reality and embraces the ideal of transcendence in an egalitarian absolute. Over seventy years ago Van Wyck Brooks pointed out how at the end of the eighteenth century the two most characteristic strains of the emergent American experience were typified by the pragmatic, realistic Benjamin Franklin and by the visionary, spiritual Jonathan Edwards. These strains were combined in Emerson (whom Lowell, in *A Fable for Critics*, had characterized "a Plotinus-Montaigne"); they were further braided, as in the twisted double movement of the genetic helix, in Whitman's Self.

'Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude . . .'

Hankering for the love of comrades, hankering to feel and understand the messages spoken by the leaves of grass, hankering to merge with everything he touches or is touched by. Gross, gross, for is he not the



poet of the Body, whose every organ, inch and attribute is holy?—  
“The scent of these armpits, aroma finer than prayer.” Mystical he is  
too, for he beholds the “wing’d purposes” in all of nature, and to him  
“the smallest sprout shows there really is no death”; “I hear and  
behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least.”  
Nude, the Self in its pristine and primeval innocence strides through a  
universe it conceives with the wonder, the love, and the joy of Adam  
opening his eyes for the first time to behold the Garden of Eden, his  
earthly paradise.



## **Michael Holstein**

### **A PRIMAL SCENE**

Walking along the reedy shore, stirring  
Bleached sticks in the water, skipping stones,  
Two boys came at last to an old boat.  
Its bow slouched in the sand where, sated  
With water, it lolled heavily to one side.  
Crazed paint flaked off wood gaping  
With cracks, while under the waterline,  
Swollen boards grew a plush green slime  
In which fingers traced their paths.

When a jagged oar pried and pushed, the boat  
Gave up its secrets. What a world  
Of strangeness beneath. Black feelers everywhere.  
Bodies wriggling back to the safe dark.  
Small things rippling desperately down into swirling  
Sand. Green legs kicking at the light that shone  
For a moment on something unforeseen.