

## 14. WHITMAN AND THE VOICE OF NATURE

In 1844, when Whitman was a twenty-five-year-old journalist, Emerson published his essay on 'The Poet'. There he claimed for the poet that

beyond the energy of his possessed and conscious intellect, he is capable of a new energy (as of intellect doubled on itself), by abandonment to the nature of things; that, beside his privacy of power as an individual man, there is a great public power, on which he can draw, by unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him: then he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.

He spoke of the man with such power as '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 a Noah's ark, to come forth again to people a new world.

Such a man, he claimed, would be under the protection of Pan:

Thou true land-lord! sea-lord! air-lord! Wherever snow falls, or water flows, or birds fly, wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds, or sown with stars, wherever are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger, and awe, and love, there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and though thou shouldst walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble.

Whitman felt these words were written to him; they gave him his vocation. His own definition of that vocation was henceforth to be in very similar terms. The Preface to the first (1855) edition of *Leaves of Grass* is full of echoes of Emerson's essay:

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small, it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. ... The land and sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests, mountains and rivers, are not small themes - but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects - they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. ... What do you think is the grandeur of storms and dismemberments, and the deadliest battles and wrecks, and the wildest fury of the elements, and the power of the sea, and the motion of nature, and the throes of human desires, and dignity and hate and love? It is that something in the soul which says, Rage on, whirl on, I tread master here and everywhere - Master of the spasms of the sky and of the shatter of the sea, Master of nature and passion and death, and of all terror and all pain.

Yet even when he is closest to Emerson, there are significant distinctions. It is clear that Whitman's scope is much greater than Emerson's, with his crippling reduction of all meaning to Beauty. Emerson's Nature is altogether more placid and benevolent than Whitman's, and is accorded no value whatsoever in and for itself. Whitman's credo in the 1855 Preface begins 'Love the earth and sun and the animals', and he does not mean what Emerson would have meant by that: value them as 'commodities', that is, for the many ways in which they are useful to man.

Emerson's response to the first *Leaves of Grass* was as warm as if Whitman had written it himself. But Emerson soon cooled as he became aware of the radical differences between his own position, particularly in relation to nature, and that of Whitman. He wrote of Thoreau in a journal entry in 1862: 'Perhaps his fancy for Walt Whitman grew out of his taste for wild nature, for an otter, a woodchuck, or a loon'. And in 1873 Emerson omitted Whitman altogether from his anthology *Parnassus*.

In 'The Poet', Emerson frequently used the word 'nature', but did not define it or explain his apparently high valuation of it, since he had already done that at great length in *Nature* (1836). It is almost inconceivable that Whitman, having read *Nature*, could subsequently address Emerson as 'Master' and attach so much importance to his approval; for Emerson's 'Nature' is a far cry from Whitman's. It is as though Emerson here gathers together, simplifies and systematizes the elements most hostile to nature in the thought of Socrates, Plato, Aquinas, Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Whitman's vision is biocentric or geocentric. Emerson's is blatantly anthropocentric. Nature, he claims, is provision made for the support, delight and profit of man. As in Hopkins, the attempt to demonstrate that all things exist for the benefit of man becomes at times ludicrous: 'Therefore is Space, and therefore Time, that man may know that things are not huddled and lumped, but sundered and individual'. Man is the one perfect being: 'All other organizations appear to be degradations of the human form'. Godlike man 'is himself the creator in the finite'. Emerson echoes Sophocles' Ode to Man: 'Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man?' Nature 'offers all its kingdoms to man as the raw material which he may mould into what is useful. Man is never weary of working it up. ... More and more, with every thought, does his kingdom stretch over things, until the world becomes, at last, only a realized will, - the double of the man'. He even refers specifically to the *Antigone* in terms which suggest a very strange interpretation of that play, linking it with nineteenth-century science: 'a spiritual life has been imparted to nature', 'the solid seeming block of matter has been pervaded and dissolved by a thought':

Thus even in physics, the material is ever degraded before the spiritual. The astronomer, the geometer, rely on their irrefragable analysis, and disdain the results of observation. The sublime remark of Euler on his law of arches, 'This will be found contrary to all experience, yet is true;' had already transferred nature into the mind, and left matter like an outcast corpse.

These attitudes lead to an equally distorted reading of *The Tempest*. Shakespeare, he claims, shares with Prospero 'the power of subordinating nature', of making free with 'the most imposing forms and phenomena of the world', thus asserting 'the predominance of the soul'. The claim that nature is 'a metaphor of the human mind' is rich for poetry and no detriment to nature; but for Emerson it was only that. The male intellect, hungry for knowledge and power, is the ultimate sanction.

Emerson's universe is strictly dualistic, 'composed of Nature and the Soul', and idealistic, every material form pre-existing in the mind of God. He even finds it perfectly conceivable that nature does not exist, and does not see that its non-existence would have any bearing on the existence of man. Only the tyranny of the senses binds us to nature 'as if we were a part of it'. In Emerson's terms, Whitman's is an 'unrenewed understanding': 'To the senses and the unrenewed understanding, belongs a sort of instinctive belief in the

absolute existence of nature. In their view, man and nature are indissolubly joined'.

No poet has ever been less dualistic and idealistic than Whitman ('materialism first and last imbuing'):

Most writers have disclaimed the physical world and they have not over-estimated the other, or soul, but have underestimated the corporeal. How shall my eye separate the beauty of the blossoming buckwheat field from the stalks and heads of tangible matter? How shall I know what life is except as I see it in the flesh? I will not praise one without the other or any more than the other.

By 1881 Whitman went much further, affirming, at the end of his eulogy of all the parts and functions of the human body added to 'I Sing the Body Electric':

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the  
soul,  
O I say now these are the soul!

It was precisely this element in Whitman which made him, for Lawrence, 'a great moralist' and 'a great changer of the blood in the veins of men':

Whitman was the first heroic seer to seize the soul by the scruff of her neck and plant her down among the potsherds. ... Stay in the flesh. Stay in the limbs and lips and in the belly. Stay in the breast and womb. Stay there, Oh, Soul, where you belong. ... The great home of the Soul is the open road. Not heaven, not paradise. ... The soul is neither 'above' nor 'within'. It is a wayfarer down the open road. [Studies 180-1]

The result is 'a morality of actual living, not of salvation'.

Emerson held the Socratic view that to every man who pursues truth and virtue, every form will eventually become 'an open book' revealing its 'inner life and final cause'. Nature is a great schoolroom for the human understanding. Animals, for example, exist to give us lessons. And nature never did betray the heart that loved her. This leads to morally base conclusions, such as that grinding debt is 'a preceptor whose lessons cannot be foregone, and is needed most by those who suffer from it most'. Whitman said that Wordsworth 'lacks sympathy with men and women', and might have said the same of Emerson.

Whitman later came to wonder 'that years ago I began like most youngsters to have a touch (though it came late, and was only on the surface) of Emerson-on-the-brain - that I read his writings reverently, and address'd him as "Master", and for a month or so thought of him as such' ['Emerson's Books (The Shadows of Them)']. By this date, 1880, what struck Whitman most about Emerson was his 'cold and bloodless intellectuality' and his egotism or anthropocentrism: 'His final influence is to make his students cease to worship anything - almost cease to believe in anything, outside of themselves'.

Then there was the distance Emerson had deliberately put between himself and Nature, the cultivated artificiality of his perceptions and his style, the narrowness of his vision. Thoreau said of the first *Leaves of Grass* 'it is as if the beasts spoke'. Nothing could have been further from the voice of Nature than that of Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Though the author has much to say of freedom and wildness and simplicity and spontaneity, no performance was ever more based on artificial scholarships and decorums at third or fourth removes, (he calls it culture,) and built up from them. It is always a *make*, never an unconscious *growth*. It is the porcelain figure or statuette of lion, or stag, or Indian hunter - and a very choice statuette too - appropriate for the rosewood or marble bracket of parlor or library; never the animal itself, or the hunter himself. Indeed, who wants the real animal or hunter? What would that do amid astral and bric-a-brac and tapestry, and ladies and gentlemen talking in subdued tones of Browning and Longfellow and art? The least suspicion of such actual bull, or Indian, or of Nature carrying out itself, would put all those good people to instant terror and flight.

Had Whitman shared the ideas and attitudes of Emerson, his poetry would necessarily have been as bad as Emerson's.

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No critic, as far as I am aware, has ever denied that Whitman has many and major faults. The later editions of *Leaves of Grass* are overblown and run to seed. Whitman's poetry must, like Blake's, Wordsworth's or Lawrence's, be read selectively. But there remains a substantial quantity of wonderful poetry which Whitman could not have produced had he written in a more craftsmanlike and self-critical way. There are poems, some of them very long poems, which do not suffer from any of his faults, or in which the faults

themselves are transfigured and become virtues. Let us look, for example, at the problem of Whitman's egotism.

Whitman was a notorious egotist in his life; in his art a professional egotist. He made no bones about it, writing, in one of his many anonymous reviews of *Leaves of Grass*: 'There can be no two thoughts about Walt Whitman's egotism. That is avowedly what he steps out of the crowd and turns and faces them for' [Quoted by Zweig, 274]. Perhaps all artists are in this sense egotists. But Whitman is so much more blatant than any other. The first line of the first poem in the first *Leaves of Grass* was 'I CELEBRATE MYSELF', ('Song of Myself' did not yet have a title). And we need go no further than that poem to harvest:

I resist anything better than my own diversity

I have pried through the strata and analyzed to a hair,  
And counselled with doctors and calculated close and found no sweeter  
fat than  
sticks to my own bones.

Walt Whitman ... a kosmos

Divine I am inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am  
touched from;  
The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than prayer,  
This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds.

I dote on myself....there is that lot of me, and all so luscious

I am an acme of things accomplished, and I an encloser of things to be.

All forces have been steadily employed to complete and delight me

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

Many readers can see no reason why they should listen. If Wordsworth is the egotistical sublime, surely Whitman is the egotistical ridiculous. How can anyone take him seriously? Such readers have missed the whole point, and missed it threefold. First, they have missed the humour. Whitman is joyously clowning and teasing. 'Song of Myself' is (among many other things) a great

comic poem. To his over-earnest followers who wanted him to be a prophet or philosopher, Whitman would say: 'Why, I pride myself on being a real humorist underneath everything else' [quoted by Reynolds, 507]. But this is not the crude humour of gross exaggeration and gigantism only. It is Whitman's tricky technique for subverting the normal standards of his readers, luring us, under cover of comedy, beyond the limitations of our usual, narrowly reasonable and realistic secularism and anthropocentrism. It echoes some of the high-spirited conceits of Donne or Marvell, and was rightly recognized by Emerson as wit. Whitman's provocative strategy is similar to Blake's in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, and for ultimately similar purposes. The jester unyokes the imagination of his audience. Underneath the egotist and blusterer is the humorist; but underneath the humorist is the healer and the seer.

Whitman's 'egotism' is the opposite of the hubristic egotism of the Greek heroes. Whitman saw himself as a hero, in accordance with Emerson's lofty prescription for the ideal poet, but not at all the aggressively male and selfish hero of the ancient epics. He tells the Muse to 'cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts, / That matter of ... Odysseus' wanderings' ['Song of the Exposition']. Nothing could be further from the self-honing spirit of Odysseus than the open spirit in which Whitman sets out on his imaginative exploration of the sea of life:

O we can wait no longer,  
 We too take ship O soul,  
 Joyous we too launch out on trackless seas,  
 Fearless for unknown shores on waves of ecstasy to sail,  
 Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, O soul,)  
 Caroling free, singing our song of God,  
 Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.                          ['Passage to India']

Odysseus' self was forged in opposition and contradistinction to everything else in heaven and earth: he does not have the imagination to know or care, still less to feel what others feel. Whitman's self grows by assimilating experience, relationships, not by assimilating others. Such assimilation requires an opening of the self to imaginative identification: 'I am the man....I suffered....I was there'. His pride is exactly balanced by his sympathy, so that it sets him apart, distinct, without setting him above or beyond. His pride is absolute, not relative, a recognition that every part of him is a miracle, and therefore representative of the vast miracle of creation, the wheeled universe. 'Song of Myself' may begin 'I CELEBRATE MYSELF', but it continues: 'And what I

assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you'. Whitman wanted to compel 'every reader to transpose himself or herself into the central position, and become a living fountain' [Matthiessen 1941, 650]. When a man tells us he is wonderful, we recoil. When he tells us we are equally wonderful, we warm to him. When he tells us a pismire or a blade of grass is equally wonderful, we must forget both our egotism and his and listen to a wisdom beyond both:

Come I should like to hear you tell me what there is in yourself that is  
not just as wonderful,  
And I should like to hear the name of anything between Sunday morning  
and Saturday night that is not just as wonderful.  
['Who Learns My Lesson Complete']

Thus the second usual mistake shades into the third, which is to fail to register that the voice speaking to us is frequently, especially in 'Song of Myself', not only the voice of Walt Whitman, a 'single, separate person', or even the all-suffering voice of humanity, but also, as far as he can translate it, the voice of Nature herself, of the earth ('His analogy the earth complete in itself enfolding in itself all processes of growth effusing life and power for hidden purposes'), of the 'kosmos'. In an attempt to make this unmistakable, Whitman added to the 1860 *Leaves of Grass* a poem explaining exactly what he meant by 'Walt Whitman, a kosmos':

Who includes diversity and is Nature,  
Who is the amplitude of the earth, and the coarseness and sexuality of  
the earth, and the great charity of the earth, and the equilibrium also,  
Who has not look'd forth from the windows the eyes for nothing, or  
whose brain held audience with messengers for nothing,  
Who contains believers and disbelievers, who is the most majestic lover,  
Who holds duly his or her triune proportion of realism, spiritualism,  
and of the aesthetic or intellectual,  
Who having consider'd the body find all its organs and parts good,  
Who, out of the theory of the earth and of his or her body understands by  
subtle analogies all other theories,  
The theory of a city, a poem, and of the large politics of these States;  
Who believes no only in our globe with its sun and moon, but in other  
globes with their suns and moons,  
Who, constructing the house for himself or herself, not for a day but for



all time, sees races, eras, dates, generations,  
The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together.  
['Kosmos']

He also later added to the first section of 'Song of Myself' a new passage concluding: 'I permit to speak at every hazard, / Nature without check with original energy'.

These efforts to spell it out would not have been necessary if Whitman had been able to rely on anything better than wilful incomprehension in the majority of his few readers. For example, between two of the most notorious examples of 'egotism' in my list - 'The scent of these arm-pits ...' and 'I dote on myself ...' - is a passage of sixteen lines purporting to describe 'the spread of my own body', which includes 'shaded ledges and rests', 'tilth', 'root of washed sweet-flag, timorous pond-snipe, nest of guarded duplicate eggs', 'hay', 'trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat', 'sun', 'vapors', 'brooks and dews', 'winds', 'fields, branches of live-oak'. This is far too much to be merely metaphor. It is an example of Whitman's consistent refusal to distinguish what he called the 'microcosmic' Walt Whitman from the macrocosm of which his own body was a part containing the whole (since 'all truths wait in all things'). He is always faithful to his sense of his own body as continuous with the earth both in space and time. Under a broadly farcical line such as

[I] am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over

lies a fully developed holistic philosophy such as that of Merleau-Ponty:

Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world. ... Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated into its flesh, they are parts of its full definition; the world is made of the same stuff as the body. [55]

Whitman had no fear of contradicting himself, since nature is full of contradictions. He would have agreed with Blake that 'without contraries is no progression'. 'Song of Myself' is a unique fusion of extreme megalomaniac egotism and extreme self-sacrificial humility, of metaphysical wit and romantic

afflatus, of clowning and high seriousness, of contrivance and inspired prophetic vision.

The attempt to speak with the voice of Nature was described by Whitman as a 'great language experiment'. Of course it has to be much more than that; it has to be also what Zweig calls 'an adventure of personal change' [231], for 'poems of depth' must be, Whitman claimed, 'actual emanations from the personality and life of the writers'. It may be that the change came suddenly, as a visitation, if section 5 of 'Song of Myself' is autobiographical. Whitman is here addressing his own soul:

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;  
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to  
my barestript heart,  
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge  
that pass all the art and argument of the earth;  
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,  
And that all the 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 wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and  
mullen and pokeweed.

A kelson is a bar bolted to the keel holding it and the timbers together. His own oceanic experience initiated him into a world where everything holds together by the power of love, that is sympathy, interaction, mutual dependence, a world therefore of atonement between body and soul, man and God. And the word for that newly perceived indivisible whole is Nature, where love declares itself as limitless leaves of grass. Every weed, ant or worm becomes henceforth a token of that love, a letter from God:

I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by  
God's name,  
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually

come forever and ever.

This is Whitman at his closest to Hopkins, who also found God where 'weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and lush'.

Or it may be that the change took place gradually over the period 1850-1855. (Either way Whitman acquired the 'vision splendid' at about the age at which Wordsworth lost it.) In that case, the first steps would have been necessarily negative, a clearing of the ground, a recognition of and rejection of single vision, a shedding of all the layers of falsity and insulation and complacency and conformity which seal the spirit and prevent us, in Lawrence's words, from coming at 'the real naked essence of our vision'. It is the Romantic tradition of the Aeolian harp or wind-bells. Whitman anticipates Nietzsche's call: 'Not I! Not I! but a *God* through my instrumentality' (which Lawrence rephrased as 'Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!'). But Whitman uses the trope with a disarming comic literalness: 'The sound of the belched words of my voice....words loosed to the eddies of the wind' ['Song of Myself']. And Whitman was so uniquely successful in achieving this freedom and openness and nakedness, this escape from the tyranny of the ego, that he was even able to by-pass, much of the time, that argument with himself which generates the creative energy of Shakespeare and Swift, Conrad and Yeats. He silenced the argumentative self, tense with self-doubt, irritably reaching after facts and reasons. He achieved precisely that 'negative capability' which Keats mistakenly attributed to Shakespeare: 'I have no mockings or arguments....I witness and wait'. In order to relax and listen and watch, he found that he had to 'stop thinking' in the ordinary sense.

What is marvellous? what is unlikely? what is impossible or baseless, or vague? after you have once just opened the space of a peachpit and given audience to far and near and to the sunset and had all things enter with electric swiftness softly and duly without confusion or jostling or jam.

[Preface to 1855 *Leaves of Grass*]

In such a man 'his thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things' [1855 Preface]. It is the 'intuitive reason' which Coleridge hoped would some day accompany the resolving of miracles into laws:

what we now consider as miracles in opposition to ordinary experience, we should then reverence with a yet higher devotion as harmonious parts

of one great complex miracle, when the antithesis between experience and belief would itself be taken up into the unity of intuitive reason.

[*The Friend* vol.i, 519]

Whitman became, in Zweig's words, 'a voice various and broad enough to say "everything"' [249]. It was a voice so different from any heard before that it seemed to Thoreau 'a little more than human'. It may be rather that, if the poet is indeed 'the equable man' - 'Not in him but off from him things are grotesque or eccentric or fail in their sanity' - then it is the other voices which are less than fully human. In *St. Mawr* Lawrence claims that a man in whom Pan is not dead would be 'all the animals in turn, instead of one, fixed, automatic thing, which he is now, grinding on the nerves'. Whitman shares with Lawrence and Hughes this ability to 'be all the animals in turn', to identify with the non-human creation:

The soul or spirit transmits itself into all matter - into rocks, and can live the life of a rock - into the sea, and can feel itself the sea - into the oak, or other tree - into an animal, and feel itself a horse, a fish, or bird - into the earth - into the motions of the suns and stars - A man is only interested in anything when he identifies himself with it - he must himself be whirling and speeding through space like the planet Mercury - he must be driving like a cloud - he must shine like the sun - he must be orbic and balanced in the air, like this earth - he must crawl like the pismire - he must - he would be growing fragrantly in the air, like the locust blossoms - he would rumble and crash like the thunder in the sky - he would spring like a cat on his prey - he would splash like a whale. [quoted by Zweig, 174]

'Song of Myself' was to be 'a poem in which all things and qualities and processes express themselves - the nebula - the fixed stars - the earth - the grass, waters, vegetable, sauroid, and all processes - man - animals' [ibid 211].

Whitman was particularly interested in the voices of animals. When he said that he had been searching for twenty-five years for the right word to express what the twilight note of the robin meant to him, he was not speaking of some Flaubertian *mot juste*, nor of some super-descriptive or onomatopoeic word. Lawrence felt that certain voices, particularly animal voices, were not merely audible, but could 'sound on the plasm direct'. In 'Tortoise Shout' he lists many such sounds, including the song of the nightingale: 'I remember the first time, out of a bush in the darkness, a nightingale's piercing cries and gurgles startled the depths of my soul'. The spirits dictating to Yeats stopped

when an owl hooted outside, saying 'We like that sort of sound'. Hughes comments:

And that is it: 'that sort of sound' makes the spirits listen. It opens our deepest and innermost ghost to sudden attention. It is a spirit, and it speaks to spirit. [*Winter Pollen*, 125]

Many natural sounds, but especially the voices of birds, opened up depths of Whitman's soul, spoke to him nakedly of the fundamentals of life and death.

I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,  
And accrue what I hear into myself....and let sounds contribute toward  
me.  
I hear the bravuras of birds.... ['Song of Myself' 26]

He would summon such voices, like a shaman, to help him enter unfamiliar or forbidding regions of the spirit:

Having studied the mocking-bird's tones and the flight of the mountain-  
hawk,  
And heard at dawn the unrivall'd one, the hermit thrush from the swamp-  
cedars, Solitary, singing in the West, I strike up for a New World.  
['Starting from Paumanok']

These birds are not chosen at random. Preparing himself to 'translate' a story of loss and death, he sings

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,  
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle.

Preparing himself spiritually for his great threnody on Lincoln, he invokes the voice of the hermit thrush:

Song of the bleeding throat,  
Death's outlet song of life ..

\* \* \*

So to the 'great language experiment', as Whitman called it, for such ideas and attitudes have profound implications for style:

But to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art. ...The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writings any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or soothe I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as regardless of observation. [1855 Preface]

The first of the Rules for Composition Whitman laid down for himself in his notebooks was 'A perfectly transparent, plate-glass style, artless, with no ornaments'. He defined the 'Divine style' as 'perfect transparent clearness, sanity and health'.

So the first stage, stylistically, is also negative, a going naked: to tear down the curtains of received poetic style, the style of Longfellow and Tennyson, even, it seemed to Whitman, of much of Shakespeare. He had to get out from under what Hughes has called the 'suffocating maternal octopus' of the English poetic tradition. Of Tennyson's 'De Profundis' Whitman wrote: 'It has several exquisite little verses, not simple like rosebuds, but gem-like like garnets or sapphires, cut by a lapidary artist'. Had Lawrence come across this when he contrasted the 'treasured gem-like lyrics of Shelley and Keats' with the 'perfect rose' of Whitman's verse, 'only a running flame, emerging and flowing off, and never in any sense at rest, static, finished'? There are many passages in Lawrence's preface to the American edition of his *New Poems* which might easily come from Whitman's 1855 preface:

There must be the rapid momentaneous association of things which meet and pass on the for ever incalculable journey of creation: everything left in its own rapid, fluid relationship with the rest of things. ... Whitman pruned away his clichés - perhaps his clichés of rhythm as well as of phrase. And this is about all we can do, deliberately, with free verse. We can get rid of the stereotyped movements and the old hackneyed associations of sound or sense. We can break down those artificial conduits and canals through

which we do so love to force our utterance. We can break the stiff neck of habit. We can be in ourselves spontaneous and flexible as flame, we can see that utterance rushes out without artificial form or artificial smoothness. But we cannot positively prescribe any motion, any rhythm.

If nothing is being done deliberately, what determines that the utterance shall be verse at all? In the earliest surviving version of his essay on Whitman, Lawrence attempted his own answer to this question:

It takes the greatest soul of all to be quite straightforward and direct. In the long run rhetoric and circuitous elaboration and gorgeous language must take second place. ... If we look at Whitman's verse form, again we see a dual intention. At its best it springs purely spontaneous from the well-heads of consciousness. The primal soul utters itself in strange pulsations, gushes and strokes of sound. At his best Whitman gives these throbs naked and vibrating as they emerge from the quick. They follow, pulse after pulse, line after line, each one new and unforeseeable. They are lambent, they are life itself. Such are the lines. But in the whole, moreover, the whole soul speaks at once: sensual impulse instant with spiritual impulse, and the mind serving, giving pure attention. The lovely blood-lapping sounds of consonants slipping with fruit of vowels is unsurpassed and unsurpassable, in a thousand lines. Take any opening line, almost. - 'Out of the cradle endlessly rocking - ' or again 'By the bivouac's fitful flame' or 'When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd' - it goes straight to the soul, nothing intervenes. There is the sheer creative gesture, moving the material world in wonderful swirls. The whole soul follows its own free, spontaneous, inexplicable course, its contractions and pulsations dictated from nowhere save from the creative quick itself. And each separate line is a pulsation and a contraction. There is nothing measured or mechanical. This is the greatest poetry. But sometimes, again, Whitman dumps us down cartloads of material, cartload upon cartload. All is shovelled out uninspired. How weary one grows of 'A Song for Occupations', for example!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Studies in Classic American Literature*, ed. Ezra Greenspan, Lindeth Vasey and John Worthen, Cambridge U. P., 2003, pp. 368-9.

The course of Whitman's inspiration is not entirely inexplicable; it's shapes and rhythms do not come from nowhere. F.O. Matthiessen suggests that for Whitman 'poetic rhythm was an organic response to the centers of experience - to the internal pulsations of the body, to its external movements in work and in making love, to such sounds as the wind and the sea' [1941, 564]. He was well aware of the effect of the ebb and flow of the Long Island breakers, 'rolling in without intermission, and fitfully rising and falling', upon his style:

Its analogy is *the Ocean*. Its verses are the liquid, billowy waves, ever rising and falling, perhaps sunny and smooth, perhaps wild with storm, always moving, always alike in their nature as rolling waves, but hardly any two exactly alike in size or measure (metre), never having the sense of something finished and fixed, always suggesting something beyond.

[quoted in Matthiessen 1941, 566-7]

It was not until 1879 that Whitman, after travelling through the prairies and the Rockies, suddenly felt that he had discovered the 'law' of his own poems in the spirit of place - 'this grim yet joyous elemental abandon - this plenitude of material, entire absence of art, untrammel'd play of primitive Nature - the chasm, the gorge, the crystal mountain stream, repeated scores, hundreds of miles - the broad handling and absolute uncrampedness' ['An Egotistical "Find"']. The 'untrammel'd play of primitive Nature' he also found in many other forms, but especially in vegetation, which provides him with this commonest analogy for his own lines: 'Drawing language into line by rigid grammatical rules, is the theory of the martinet applied to the processes of the spirit, and to the luxuriant growth of all that makes art' [quoted by Zweig 208-9]. Whitman refuses to train or lop the tendrils of his verse to fit the rectilinear trellis of the printed page. They sprawl, luxuriate, turn back upon themselves. Yet the result is far from a shapeless tangle, and very far from prose:

Whitman's verse - with the exception that it is not metered - is farther removed from prose than is traditional verse itself, for the reason that traditional verse, is, like prose, composed in sentences, whereas  
Whitman's verse is composed in lines. [Ross 363]

Whitman's verse line obliterates the distinction between form and content. The comma at the end of the line is not to mark a grammatical division, but to indicate that the living organism which is the line takes its life and meaning



from its place in the larger pattern (Whitman called it the 'ensemble'), which does in the real world and could theoretically in the poem extend to infinity: 'such joined unended links' - 'I will thread a thread through my poems that time and events are compact'. The commas are his stitches. The poem or verse paragraph breaks into the endless chain at some more or less random point, and drops out when enough examples have been accumulated to suggest the whole. Each poem is an excerpt from 'the only complete, actual poem' which is Nature.

Another characteristic anti-grammatical feature is the absence or deferment of verbs, particularly of transitive verbs:

There is a peculiar force in the true descriptive style, which takes over when one surrenders self in favour of the object; it is the force of unbroken continuity. Verb forms, instead of coming to an end, as transitive action, directed from the agent at the world ... participate instead in a continuum in which every action is reflexive, intermediate between passive and active. [Massey 54]

Zweig suggests that as Wordsworth's steady tread over the Lakeland fells or round his garden paths determined his basically iambic rhythm, so Whitman, also an ambulatory poet, took his poetic rhythms from his walking rhythms, strolling, loitering, with frequent lingering to register and soak in some feature of the scene. There was the powerful influence of music, particularly the operatic aria and recitative. There were the rhythms of Hebrew parallelism mediated by the King James bible.

There seem to be no specifically literary influences. The only earlier free verse I know which is anything like Whitman's is Christopher Smart's in 'Jubilate Agno', which Whitman could not have known. On his cat Jeoffry Smart writes:

For by stroking him I have found out electricity.  
For I perceived God's light about him both wax and fire.  
For the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from  
    heaven to sustain the bodies both of man and beast.  
For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.  
For, though he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.  
For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other  
    quadrupede.  
For he can tread to all the measures upon the music.  
For he can swim for life.

For he can creep.

It cannot be coincidence that Smart, like Whitman, was driven to such verse by an overwhelming need to praise and celebrate the created world, to fuse the physical and the spiritual, treating every creature as a sacred microcosm of the whole. Either could have written, as Whitman did in 'Starting from Paumanok' 'all the things of the universe are perfect miracles, each as profound as any'.

Blake's unfettered verse in the prophetic books should theoretically have been similar to Whitman's, but is so only on the rare occasions when Blake celebrates the colours, sounds and movements of the natural world:

Thou seest the gorgeous clothed Flies that dance & sport in summer  
Upon the sunny brooks & meadows; every one the dance  
Knows in its intricate mazes of delight artful to weave,  
Each one to sound his instruments of music in the dance,  
To touch each other & recede, to cross & change & return. [Milton]

Whitman did not discover Blake in his formative years, and when he did so, was as struck by the differences as by the resemblances:

Of William Blake & Walt Whitman Both are mystics, extatics but the difference between them is this - and a vast difference it is: Blake's visions grow to be the rule, displace the normal condition, fill the field, spurn this visible objective life, & seat the subjective spirit on an absolute throne, wilful and uncontrolled. [Gohdes 53]

When Blake removed the fetters of metrical verse, he had, unlike Whitman and Smart, no other shaping force available to him, no analogies with what Whitman called the 'organic body' and believed to be the necessary shaper of the poetic imagination.

It is unlikely that Whitman was imitating translations of primitive poetry; yet his own has the authentic ring of the genuine primitive. How easily, for example, these lines (or any others) of the Australian Aborigine 'Moon-Bone Cycle' would transpose into a Whitman poem:

A duck comes swooping down to the Moonlight Clay Pan, there at the  
place of the Dugong ...  
From far away. I saw her flying over, in here at the clay pan ...  
'I carried these eggs from a long way off, from inland to Arnhem Bay ...

Because I have eggs, I give to my young the sound of the water.'  
Splashing and preening herself, she ripples the water, among the lotus ...  
Backwards and forwards, swimming along, rippling the water,  
Floating along on the clay pan, at the place of the Dugong.

Whitman's, like Caliban's, is the poetry of facts: 'A fact truly and absolutely stated ... acquires a mythological or universal significance'. Hopkins agreed: 'But indeed I have often felt when I have been in this mood and felt the depth of an instress or how fast the inscape holds a thing, that nothing is so pregnant, so straightforward to the truth as simple 'yes' and 'is'.' It is an attempt to reclaim what our ordinary language and habitual responses have almost killed off, the ability to pay attention to Being, to what is actually and continually offered by life; not the search for deeply hidden underlying meanings, but the simple reception of what is at hand and manifest. The discipline of reducing one's style to that ('the Divine style') is as great as the disciplines of formal artifice and elaboration Hopkins nevertheless more frequently pursued.

What would a poetry of simple 'yes' and 'is' be like? The nearest Hopkins himself got to it was probably in 'Pied Beauty':

Glory be to God for dappled things -  
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;  
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;  
Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow and plough;  
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

Even here there are the usual Hopkins adjectival pyrotechnics (which would surely pass Whitman's test of imperiously proving themselves); but basically it is a list, and for some items in the list - 'finches' wings' - mere naming is enough.

Whitman shared with Hopkins a faith in language as capable of supplying the poet with far more than he needs. Where Whitman fails in expression he does not blame his tools. The English language is 'brawny enough, and limber and full enough' (1855 Preface):

Never will I allude to the English Language or tongue without exultation.  
This is the tongue that spurns laws, as the greatest tongue must. It is the

most capacious vital tongue of all, - full of ease, definiteness, and power, -  
full of sustenance. [An American Primer']

The right words exist. 'Words strain, / Crack and sometimes break, under the burden' [T.S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton'] only when they are severed from substance and turned into concepts. Any such slipping of language was a clear sign to Whitman that he was misusing it, not keeping faith with the denotative roots and human history of language. Words without referends in the world of common human experience are mere marks on the page:

Were you thinking that those were the words, those upright lines? those  
curves, angles, dots?  
No, those are not the words, the substantial words are in the ground and  
sea,  
They are in the air, they are in you. [Song of the Rolling Earth']

Words transcribe experience, and a poet's vocabulary must be the very index of his being:

Latent, in a great user of words, must actually be all passions, crimes,  
trades, animals, stars, God, sex, the past, might, space, metals, and the like  
- because these are the words, and he who is not these plays with a foreign  
tongue, turning helplessly to dictionaries and authorities.  
[An American Primer']

To describe with vivid adjectives may help the reader to see more clearly and may fire the reader's own imagination, but it also puts the poet as word-smith between us and the object. The charge of the poet's own feelings is real and valuable, but it jams the original charge of the unadorned name, which is what Whitman was after. He believed that the poet could, by pristine naming, mime and renew the creation itself.

Many readers shudder at Whitman's catalogues. Even Lawrence called them 'all those lists of things boiled in one pudding-cloth!' [*Studies* 174]; but the proof of the pudding is in the eating. 'They call the catalogue names', said Whitman, 'but suppose they do? It *is* names: but what could be more poetic than names?' [Traubel 324]. In the *Primer* he claimed that '*names* are magic. - One word can pour such a flood through the soul'. Names are magic, the list Divine. Some of Whitman's lists are undeniably tiresome, examples of what Hopkins called Parnassian, attempts to repeat a proven formula without new

inspiration. Others are wonderful, charged, exuding freshness. What distinguishes them?

Clearly any old random list of names will not constitute a poem. There must be something to impart that sense of wonder, a boldness and urgency in the diction, the rhythms, the interrelationships, or all of these, a coherence. The inner logic of the list is at its clearest in 'There Was a Child Went Forth', where it follows the cycles of the seasons, the physical movements of the child as it moves outwards from the cradle and familiar farmstead to the noisy streets of the city and the 'huge crossing at the ferries', and the emotional and spiritual growth of the child through schooldays, adolescence with its doubts and yearnings, independent manhood in the world of crowds and commerce, to the spiritual maturity of the man now capable of imaginative self-projection and self-abnegation, of relating to and taking its spiritual orientation from Nature, of writing this poem and the first *Leaves of Grass*, of justifying in the telling, the tallying and witnessing, in the ultimate visionary fullness and calm, the claim made at the poem's beginning and end:

The village on the highland seen from afar at sunset...the river between,  
Shadows ... aureola and mist ... light falling on roofs and gables of  
white or brown, three miles off,  
The schooner nearby sleepily dropping down the tide .. the little boat  
slacktowed astern,  
The hurrying tumbling waves and quickbroken crests and slapping;  
The strata of colored clouds...the long bar of maroontint away solitary  
by itself...the spread of purity it lies motionless in,  
The horizon's edge, the flying seacrow, the fragrance of saltmarsh and  
shoremud;  
These became part of that child who went forth every day, and who now  
goes and will always go forth every day,  
And these become of him or her that peruses them now. [139]

A more complex example would be 'Spontaneous Me'. We need look only at the opening to see what Whitman is up to.

Spontaneous me, Nature,  
The loving day, the mounting sun, the friend I am happy with,  
The arm of my friend hanging idly over my shoulder,  
The hillside whiten'd with blossoms of the mountain ash,  
The same in autumn, the hues of red, yellow, drab, purple, and light and

dark green  
The rich coverlet of the grass, animals and birds, the private untrimm'd  
bank, the primitive apples, the pebble-stones,  
Beautiful dripping fragments, the negligent list of one after another as I  
happen to call them to me or think of them,  
The real poems.

Certainly this is a list, entirely lacking in main verbs, but it is by no means as negligent or accidental as Whitman would have us suppose. We cannot say how conscious Whitman was of the shaping imagination at work, but at work it certainly is, in accordance with his claim that 'imagination and actuality must be united'.

The grouping of the items into lines is, as always, highly significant. To distribute the first five other than two and three would wreck the delicate web of meanings. In the first line, 'spontaneous me' and 'Nature' are not just items one and two in a random list. The usual dualistic distinction between self and not-self is fudged by the possibility that 'Nature' is not item two at all, but in apposition to 'spontaneous me', another way of saying the same thing. Whitman has the knack of expressing distinction and identity simultaneously ('always a knit of identity, always distinction'). 'Spontaneous me' is me at my most natural, and, (this poem coming shortly after 'Song of Myself') we are already familiar with the idea of self as a microcosm of Nature. The second line has a similar rich ambiguity. Are the three items also one? Is the sun also the friend? That the day is 'loving' suggests that it is; and 'mounting' has a sexual connotation.

We are not allowed to know (perhaps Whitman does not know) to what extent the language is metaphorical, or which items in the list are metaphors for which others. There is a striking example of this in 'I Sing the Body Electric':

Bridegroom night of love working surely and softly into the prostrate  
dawn,  
Undulating into the willing and yielding day,  
Lost in the cleave of the clasping and sweet-flesh'd day.

It is impossible to tell whether this is love-making as a metaphor for dawn, or dawn for lovemaking. The distinction is eliminated between the creative acts of man and those of Nature.

Once we are tuned to this sort of language, we realize that the arm of the friend is also a blossom-heavy branch of mountain ash hanging over the hill's shoulder. The flora and fauna can be a 'coverlet' only if we abandon the

distinction between the earth itself and a recumbent human body. The list of autumn colours begins predictably enough, but the word 'drab', used as a colour, alerts our attention to the less common observation that, even in late autumn, shades of green still predominate. Four adjectives, 'private', 'untrimm'd', 'primitive' and 'dripping', condition our response to the subsequent images. When we remember that the title of the section of *Leaves of Grass* to which 'Spontaneous Me' belongs is 'Children of Adam', and that the first line of that section is 'To the garden the world anew ascending', everything falls into place. The apples are the apples of Eden, here cleansed of all association with sin, and restored to an unfallen world heavy with 'real poems', created things in rich 'clusters' (the original title of the poem), dripping with dew, renewed every day with the sun. The feeling is identical with Hopkins' response to spring:

What is all this juice and all this joy?  
A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning  
In Eden garden. ['Spring']

The poem seems to answer less to its own title than to Whitman's uncharacteristic reference to 'the curious chess-game of a poem'.

Most of Whitman's lists are less carefully shaped than this. Even some of the more blatant of them seem to me to succeed, partly by the provocation of their very blatancy, which becomes at last a kind of heroic simplicity and candour, and partly by the astute placing, here and there, of equally simple but unexpected words, partly because of Whitman's ability to juxtapose and relate the items in such a way that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, not an inert linear catalogue, but a living organism.

Malcolm Cowley claims that 'I Sing the Body Electric' suffers from 'the addition of a final section that is not in the least electric, being merely a long anatomical catalogue' [xxxvi]. I do not find it so. Nearly every line has its unexpected word or perspective - 'drop and tympan of the ears', 'the waking or sleeping of the lids', 'neck-slue', 'hind-shoulders, and the ample side-round of the chest', 'man-root', 'knee-pan'. The list moves downwards starting at the top of the head. The words for the parts of the body are particularly strong, and Whitman lets them do their work, sometimes the delicate words, iris, lids, nostrils, the hard words, jaws, knuckles, ribs, the shapely words, shoulders, scapula, sinews, the flexible words, wrist, joints, sockets. Having reached the heel, he moves to the internal organs, and it is here that we meet the typical Whitman refusal to discriminate between one organ and another, between organs and their functions, between those functions and the emotions

associated with them, between the basic emotions and the life that is in us,  
between that life and the soul:

Sympathies, heart-valves, palate-valves, sexuality, maternity,  
Womanhood and all that is a woman, and the man that comes from  
woman,  
The womb, the teats, nipples, breast-milk, tears, laughter, weeping, love-  
looks, love-perturbations and risings ...

Thirty-six long lines without a stop and without a verb between the third line  
and the penultimate. The flat list - 'Head, neck, hair, ears ...' gradually  
modulating to include 'all attitudes, all the shapeliness, all the belongings of my  
or your body or of anyone's body, male or female', to include features common  
to all yet expressing unique character: 'The continual changes of the flex of the  
mouth, and around the eyes', all culminating in 'the exquisite realization of  
health' in a living human-being not anatomized or vivisected but assembled  
before our eyes:

O I say these are not the parts and poems of the body only, but of the  
soul,  
O I say these are the soul!

\* \* \*

'Song of Myself' was a poem addressed to America at a particular  
moment in its history, a poem with large political and cultural pretensions.  
These have been fully discussed by others. In any case, Whitman's own  
priorities are clear enough:

After you have exhausted what there is in business, politics, conviviality,  
love, and so on - have found that none of these finally satisfy, or  
permanently wear - what remains? Nature remains; to bring out from their  
torpid recesses, the affinities of a man or woman with the open air, the  
trees, fields, the changes of seasons - the sun by day and the stars of  
heaven by night. ['New Themes Entered Upon']

Democracy itself he sees as dependent on 'a living and enthusiastic sympathy  
with Nature':



I conceive of no flourishing and heroic elements of Democracy in the United States, or of Democracy maintaining itself at all, without the Nature-element forming a main part - to be its health-element and beauty-element - to really underlie the whole politics, sanity, religion and art of the New World. [Nature and Democracy - Morality']

Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833) was Whitman's holy book:

Carlyle's 'Natural Supernaturalism,' by means of an unassisted transaction between the ordinary object and the dishabituated eye, effects authentic miracles. 'Custom blinds us to the miraculousness of daily-recurring miracles.' 'The true use' of his book, he reveals at its end, has been 'to exhibit the Wonder of daily life and common things.' His hero, when his 'mind's eyes were ... unsealed, and its hands ungyved,' had awakened 'to a new Heaven and a new Earth.' Now if the reader would only 'sweep away the Illusion of Time,' 'how were thy eyesight unsealed, and thy heart set flaming in the Light-sea of celestial wonder!' Then all would be brought to the enduring vision of the glory in the grass - the recognition that 'through every grass-blade ... the glory of a present God still beams.' [Abrams, 384]

'I know of nothing else but miracles', wrote Whitman. And the breaking of the customary human limits of space and time is perhaps the most striking feature of 'Song of Myself':

My ties and ballasts leave me ... I travel ... I sail ... my elbows rest in the  
sea-gaps,  
I skirt the sierras .... my palms cover continents,  
I am afoot with my vision.

In the first pages of his first notebook Whitman wrote: 'Bring all the art and science of the world, and baffle and humble it with one spear of grass'. The first poem in the first *Leaves of Grass* opens with the self 'observing a spear of summer grass'. Grass is a recurring motif throughout 'Song of Myself' and has the sixth section to itself.

Whitman does not presume to explain the grass. He knows what it is no more than a child. But it suggests many analogies, metaphors and hints. One of these is much the strongest, and anticipates the ending of the poem - the hint of death. Behind the whole of *Leaves of Grass* stands the biblical text:

All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away.

[*The First Epistle General of Peter* i. 24]

'Song of Myself' is an attempt to define and substantiate a material Divinity which is 'more than churches or bibles or creeds'. It is a running dialogue with the Bible, challenging Judeo-Christian attitudes. Often Whitman starts from an unspoken biblical text, such as 'all flesh is grass', and then gives his own anti-biblical commentary or development:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere;  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to  
arrest it,  
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward....and nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

'What is the grass?' could be said to be the question to which the Eleusinian Mysteries were the answer, and Whitman's answer is much the same.

Whitman admits from the outset the losses, leakage and wastage of time, 'time the destroyer' as Eliot calls it, time 'like the river with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops'. But he does not conclude that death owns everything. That vision has been traditional from the Greeks to Eliot and Beckett. Behind it is the assumption that nothing which does not last for ever is of real value, that the achievements of man are mocked by time and cancelled by death. It has never been more forcefully expressed than by Hopkins:

Million-fueled, nature's bonfire burns on.  
But quench her bonniest, dearest to her, her clearest-selved spark  
Man; how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone!  
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indignation! Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, death blots black out; nor mark  
Is any of him at all so stark

But vastness blurs and time beats level.

['That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection']

Nature is an everlasting bonfire. It can be redeemed only in terms of a reality elsewhere, outside space and time, for Hopkins the Resurrection, which transforms the matchwood of this world into the 'immortal diamond' of eternity; for Eliot 'the timeless' which intersects our mundane 'reality', transfigures it, and redeems the time. 'East Coker' gives us a vision of time without any such redeeming intercession:

Two and two, necessary conjunction,  
Holding each other by the hand or the arm  
Which betokeneth concord. Round and round the fire  
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,  
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter  
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,  
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth  
Mirth of those long since under earth  
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,  
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing  
As in their living in the living seasons  
The time of the seasons and the constellations  
The time of milking and the time of harvest  
The time of the coupling of man and woman  
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

The imagery circles and sinks from the dance around the bonfire which celebrates the 'dignified and commodious sacrament of marriage', through bestial coupling to the grave. The language sinks from the humane Elizabethan prose of Thomas Elyot to the ultimate reduction of 'dung and death'. But such a passage entirely loses its charge in the context of Whitman, for whom such words as 'loam', 'earth', 'coupling', 'beasts', 'dung' and 'death' have none of the pejorative weight, the suggestion of despiritualization, which Eliot takes for granted.

For the writer like Beckett without belief in any such alternative reality, Nature becomes absurd and disgusting. Beckett's Watt launches into a comic parody of Whitman:

The crocuses and the larch turning green every year a week before the others and the pastures red with uneaten sheep's placentas and the long summer days and the new-mown hay and the wood-pigeon in the morning and the cuckoo in the afternoon and the corncrake in the evening and the wasps in the jam and the smell of the gorse and the look of the gorse and the apples falling and the children walking in the dead leaves and the larch turning brown a week before the others and the chestnuts falling and the howling winds and the sea breaking over the pier and the first fires and the hooves on the road and the consumptive postman whistling *The Roses Are Blooming in Picardy* and the standard oil-lamp and of course the snow and to be sure the sleet and bless your heart the slush and every fourth year the February débâcle and the endless April showers and the crocuses and then the whole bloody business starting all over again. A turd.

Beckett specifically rejects the grass, as a symbol of Nature at its most seductive and dangerous:

'I am the cow, which, at the gates of the slaughterhouse, realises all the absurdity of pastures. A pity she didn't think of it sooner, back there in the long lush grass. Ah well. She still has the yard to cross. No one can take that away from her.' [*Eleuthéria*]

That moment of total lucidity, awakening from the sleep of life, is for Beckett the only meaning and dignity and justification of it all.

But the implied rebuttal of Whitman misfires, since the negative elements Watt introduces with such Irish venom are all there in Whitman, even in 'Song of Myself' - the dead leaves, the howling storms, the consumptive postman, the circularity ('faithfulness') of Nature. Late in his life Whitman attended a sermon in which the preacher used the Whitmanesque phrase 'the rounded catalogue divine complete'. Whitman strongly objected to the sermon because the catalogue 'entirely ignored ... the following':

The devilish and the dark, the dying and diseases'd,  
The countless (nineteen-twentieths) low and evil, crude and savage,  
The crazed, prisoners in jail, the horrible, rank, malignant,  
Venom and filth, serpents, the ravenous sharks, liars, the dissolute;  
(What is the part the wicked and the loathsome bear within earth's orbic  
scheme?)  
Newts, crawling things in slime and mud, poisons,

The barren soil, the evil men, the slag and hideous rot.

['The Rounded Catalogue Divine Complete']

Whitman's catalogue is complete because it by no means leaves out these things. Even in 'Song of Myself', his most buoyant and optimistic poem, they have their place, not only in whole sections such as the story of the murder of the four hundred and twelve young men, but in every catalogue with any pretension to completeness. The very long section 15 offers a fair sample of human activities in America. It does not depict nineteenth-twentieths 'low and evil, crude and savage' (that is partly a debating point against the preacher, partly a measure of Whitman's darker vision in later life). Nineteen-twentieths are morally neutral or unevaluated. The President is juxtaposed to the prostitute, with no discriminating judgement implied. The list is long enough and inclusive enough and carefully balanced enough to ensure that whatever moral evaluations individual readers might supply, they will span the whole gamut from the universally pleasing ('The regatta is spread on the bay....how the white sails sparkle!') to the universally abhorrent:

The malformed limbs are tied to the anatomist's table,

What is removed drops horribly in a pail.

[37]

This completeness of Whitman's catalogues makes it difficult for him to put his thumb in the balance either against the tragic vision (Lawrence) or in favour of it (Hardy, Beckett, early Hughes). The dark side is acknowledged, brought into sharp focus, given its full emotional and moral weight, yet never allowed to fill the frame, to supplant one's awareness of all that is not dark. The sea, for example, is not simply the destroyer, perfecting its killers, polishing its bones, casting ashore its wreckage and wastage, as in Eliot's 'Dry Salvages' or Hughes' 'Relic'. This is only one of its faces:

Sea of stretched ground-swells!

Sea breathing broad and convulsive breaths!

Sea of the brine of life! Sea of unshovelled and always-ready graves!

Howler and scooper of storms! Capricious and dainty sea!

I am integral with you....I too am of one phase and of all phases. [46]

Whitman will not, however high or low his own feelings, detach any list from its context in Nature: 'Shall I make my list of things in the house and skip the house that supports them?' The house is the house of life, in which death has its

honoured and essential place, but no more honoured or essential than, for example, sex. We have seen that Whitman cannot speak for long about the earth without mention, directly or indirectly, of sex. In the third section of 'Song of Myself' he expresses this in the lines:

Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world.

Out of the dimness opposite equals advance....Always substance and  
increase,  
Always a knit of identity....always distinction....always a breed of life.

For a man whose very thinking was now a matter of the marriage of opposites, the knitting of identity out of distinction by means of analogies and correspondences ('the subtle knot that makes us man'), the most striking and close correspondences between human experiences and the larger processes of the natural world were exactly those experiences which seemed to Eliot to reduce human life to animality and spiritual barrenness, 'birth and copulation and death' ['Sweeney Agonistes']. These are the great themes of 'Song of Myself', the chief means of sharing in those larger processes, and therefore the chief sources of spirituality. Like Lawrence Whitman felt that copulation was participation in the divine 'sexuality of the earth' ['Kosmos']. Writing a poem was the imaginative equivalent of making love, which was in turn the human equivalent of the sunrise or of creation itself:

Something I cannot see puts upwards libidinous prongs,  
Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven.

Such lines gain part of their force by their daring inversion of some of the greatest lines of religious poetry. I am reminded here, for example, of Vaughan's lines:

But felt through all this fleshly dress  
Bright shoots of everlastingness. [The Retreat]

In the religious tradition it is always the dull earth which is suffused by bright shafts of spirit from above.

Whitman felt with Blake that puritanical religion had an appalling burden of guilt. Whitman claimed that it had 'led to states of ignorance, repressal, and covered over disease and depletion, forming certainly a main factor in the world's woe'. The subject of sexuality 'should be redeemed from the pens and tongues of blackguards and boldly brought into the demesne of poetry - as something not gross and impure, but entirely consistent with highest manhood and womanhood and indispensable to both'.

The woman who watches in hiding the twenty-eight young men bathing naked does so in a spirit which is the opposite of that in which the insane Pentheus watches the Bacchantes. She is like the Lady of Shallott as she 'hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window'; but her looking is not fatal to her. On the contrary, her imaginative participation renews her sanity, initiating her belatedly into her own womanhood, in an inversion of baptismal rites. What Reynolds calls the 'purifying fusion of sex and nature' in the diction and imagery and rhythms works so well that this remarkable passage retains its innocence even if we read it as suggesting that the woman is masturbating.

The same cleansing rhetoric operates also on a much larger scale throughout Whitman.

'Nothing can jar him', Whitman said of the poet in his 1855 Preface, '- suffering and darkness cannot - death and fear cannot'. Though Whitman's sympathy is genuine, and amply demonstrated in the passages about suffering, darkness, death and fear in 'Song of Myself', the suffering and fear of the hounded slave and the mashed fireman is not his own, and he is able to remain unshaken by it only within the conceit which controls the whole poem, that agonies are one of his changes of garments: 'My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe'. But there is a moment in 'Song of Myself' when Whitman's god's-eye vision makes him desperate. He has just described the terrible sea-fight:

Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves....dabs of flesh upon  
the masts and spars,  
The cut of cordage and dangle of rigging....the slight shock of the soothe  
of waves,  
Black and impressive guns, and litter of powder-parcels, and the strong  
scent,  
Delicate sniffs of the seabreeze....smells of sedgy grass and fields by the  
shore....death-messages given in charge to survivors,  
The hiss of the surgeon's knife and the gnawing teeth of his saw,  
The wheeze, the cluck, the swash of falling blood....the short wild

scream, the long dull tapering groan,  
These so....these irretrievable.

In spite of his efforts to extend the scene to take in the soothe of the waves and the assurance of the grass, he is for the moment mastered by a fit of nausea, stunned by 'the dull unintermitted pain'. He feels the full force of Eliot's recognition that 'time is no healer: the patient is no longer here'. But he recovers, discovering himself to be 'on a verge of the usual mistake', that is, the mistake of lapsing into partial vision, separating the crucifixion from the resurrection:

That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody  
crowning!

I remember....I resume the overstaid fraction,  
The grave of rock multiplies what has been confided to it....or to any  
graves,  
The corpses rise....the gashes heal....the fastenings roll away. [38]

Like Hopkins, Whitman finds comfort in the resurrection, but his resurrection is not to another world redeemed from time and with a body of immortal diamond.

The fear of death in Eliot and Beckett is part of a larger fear of everything which might threaten self-possession. It is essentially fear of the not-self, rationalized as disgust. It extends to cover sex and love, the whole life of the body, which, unlike the mind, cannot maintain itself aloof from the rest of the physical world. Thus the hatred of copulation and procreation in Eliot and Beckett is not only on account of its cyclic nature ('We give birth astride of a grave'), but also on account of its sheer physicality. To such temperaments matter itself is corrupt and insupportable. For Eliot Nature is reducible to 'dung and death', for Beckett to 'a turd'. But in Whitman's poetic vocabulary even these terms are transfigured; dung and death are part of the miracle and holy. He accepts the 'perpetual transfers and promotions' of mortality:

And as to you corpse I think you are good manure, but that does not  
offend me,  
I smell the white roses sweetscented and growing,  
I reach to the leafy lips....I reach to the polished breasts of melons,



And as to you life, I reckon you are the leavings of many deaths,  
No doubt I have died myself ten thousand times before. [49]

Hence he finds 'dung and dirt more admirable than was dreamed, / The supernatural of no account'. In 'This Compost' he again inverts the traditional terror of the grave, fearing not what the earth will do to his body, but what his body might do to the earth. He wonders that 'the resurrection of the wheat' appears out of the graves of men, and fears that what men put back into the earth, including their 'distemper'd corpses', must at last poison the earth and halt its procession of miracles:

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,  
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,  
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions  
of diseas'd corpses,  
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,  
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous  
crops,  
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from  
them at last.

His highest ambition is the fullest possible atonement with the earth:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles. [52]

This is Whitman's serio-comic version of Christ's words: 'Lift up the stone and there thou shalt find me'. It is also, perhaps, an expression of the same spirit Baring and Cashford detect in one of the famous Lascaux cave paintings, where, while a bison dies, a rhinoceros drops his dung:

The dung of the rhinoceros ... is given such prominence as to suggest that, even in the act of apparently passing out of the life cycle, the dung still contains the seeds of fruit or grain that will begin a new cycle. [37]

\* \* \*

It would be misleading to suggest that 'Song of Myself', written at the outset of his long career, could be taken, alone, to speak for Whitman. In later

life Whitman experienced plenty of suffering and fear in his own person, and could no longer maintain the omnivorous optimism of his thirties. In 1860 it seemed that no-one wanted his work, no-one would employ him, no-one return his love. Whitman has his equivalent of the 'Immortality' and 'Dejection' odes, and of Hopkins' terrible sonnets: it is 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life'. Here Whitman is 'baffled, balked, bent'. All the effort and high expectations of *Leaves of Grass* has come to nothing, 'a few ... dead leaves'. As Hopkins came to feel himself reduced to 'chaff', 'mortal trash', 'matchwood', so Whitman feels that his life, like the beach at low tide, is strewn with husks, lines of débris underfoot, 'chaff, straw, splinters ... scum'. It needed a great imaginative effort to hold together the Walter Whitman who was as capable as other men of crimes and complacencies and despiriting failures, and the 'microcosmic' Walt Whitman afoot with his vision and blessed with universal atonement. At those times when he could not lift his vision above the beach detritus he doubted whether he had ever really achieved any of it. Perhaps the earlier ecstasies had been merely, in Hopkins' words 'self-yeast of spirit', or in his own 'all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me':

But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd,  
untold, altogether unreach'd,  
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows,  
With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written,  
Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.  
I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and  
that no man ever can,  
Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart upon me  
and sting me,  
Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all.

Of these lines R.W.B. Lewis has written:

It is an image of immeasurable effect. And it is, so to speak, a triumph over its own content. Anyone who could construct an image of the higher power - the one he aspires toward - standing far off and mocking him with little satiric bows and gestures, comparing and consigning his verses to the sandy debris under his feet: such a person has already conquered his sense of sterility, mastered his fear of spiritual and artistic death, rediscovered his genius, and returned to the fullest poetic authority. Within the poem, Whitman identifies the land as his father and the fierce old sea as his

mother; he sees himself as alienated no less from them than from the real Me, and he prays to both symbolic parents for a rejuvenation of his poetic force, a resumption of 'the secret of the murmuring I envy'. But the prayer is already answered in the very language in which it is uttered; Whitman never murmured more beautifully; and this is why, at the depth of his ebbing, Whitman can say, parenthetically, that the flow will return. [28]

There is frustration, loss, humiliation, dereliction, but never despair, never repudiation or a desire to become immortal diamond. The sea-drift has its own beauty, and even in the ooze exuding from his dead lips he sees 'the prismatic colors glistening and rolling'. The effect is comparable with 'those are pearls that were his eyes', or the sea-change which transfigures the broken body of Simon in *Lord of the Flies*.

And Whitman does continue to sing, no longer with 'barbaric yawp' but softly and poignantly. Like the 'noiseless patient spider' he sends out filament after filament into 'the vacant vast surrounding'. The later years yielded not only the great elegies, but such lovely sparkles from the wheel as 'To the Man-of-War Bird' and 'The Dalliance of Eagles', poems such as 'Passage to India' which fearlessly explore the deeps, the incomparable prose of *Specimen Days*, through all the suffering of premature old-age and paralyzing illness to that serene valediction 'Good-Bye My Fancy!':

Long indeed have we lived, slept, filter'd, become really blended into  
one;  
Then if we die we die together, (yes, we'll remain one,)  
If we go anywhere we'll go together to meet what happens,  
May-be we'll be better off and blither, and learn something,  
May-be it is yourself now really ushering me to the true songs, (who  
knows?)  
May-be it is you the mortal knob really undoing, turning - so now finally,  
Good-bye - and hail! my Fancy.