

The Making of Whitman's Mind

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Abstract: Walt Whitman, like his contemporary Herman Melville, also a native of New York, had a combination of exuberance and drawnness, of masculine energy and feminine quiescence. Whitman speaks glowingly of the democratic dignity “in the hand that wields a pick or drives a pike.” Whitman also had an abiding in the sea. To Whitman the sea is a great rhythmic pulse with a loose surge to which he compares the movement of his own poetry. Sea and water had a great hold on the mind of the poet when he was growing. Walt Whitman, like his regional contemporary, Herman Melville, had a fullness and vigour that appear foreign to the New England temperament. Intellectually, Melville is closer to Nathaniel Hawthorne than to Walt Whitman. Walt is closer to Ralph Waldo Emerson whose writings meant more to him during formative years than he later acknowledged.

Key Words: Walt Whitman, New York, Leaves of Grass, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The Making of His Mind “In the quiet after storms he heard the roar of the Atlantic surf, half a mile from the house, from the top of Jayne's Hill, the highest point on the island, he could look out over Great South Bay, Jane's Beach and the ocean beyond—to the north he saw Long Island and the Connecticut shore. A sturdy boy with black hair, he soon learned to swim, dig for clams, gather gulls' eggs, fish in the rough ice on the bay. He learned tales of danger and adventure at sea—watching ships set out from the harbour and never returned...”... All his life Whitman had a recurrent dream:

"A stretch of white brown sand, hard and smooth and broad, with the ocean perpetually grandly rolling in upon it, with slow measured sweep, with rustily and hiss and follow as many a thump of low bass drums..."... "Sometimes I wake at night and can hear and see plainly..." The sea shore was an invisible influence on all his poetry, he said, "a pervading image and tally for me."

From the time the symbolising imagination developed in him he believed that he lived always at the water's edge, with his father and mother and the unplumbed sea of self: one could draw there as easily as in water.

From the early years Whitman loved the outdoor life and acted on impulse:

"Often acting on impulse or sudden invitation he went away to see friends in New York and Philadelphia or to stay at a farm nearby, Lowell springs and spend hours alone in the woods and by the pond at Timber Creek. He slept late and he was casual as he had always been about engagements, schedules, meals and the regulated life that George and Louisa cherished. He found it oppressive. He seems to have been a sort of a visitor in life... all his urgency and strenuousness he reserved for his book (The "Leaves of Grass")" writes John Burroughs.

Whitman's parents had a great hold over the poet. During his earlier days he had vehement argument with his father when he resented "undue parentalism". Walt was "hopelessly indolent and stubbornly wayward". In a stormy argument that took place when the poet was seventeen he refused categorically to do farm work. He, instead, chose to teach in school and write stories.

It was only after Walt Whitman Senior, the poet's father, died within a few days of the publication, in 1855, of "*Leaves of Grass*", the poet began to speak at all freely and affectionately about "my dear father", and to acknowledge in however conflicted and grievance-heavy way, of the ties between them and of his desires for reconciliation.

About his relations with his parents—whether he was closer to his father or mother, the poet seemed confused. He writes:

"All through young and middle age... I thought my heredity stamp was mainly decidedly from my mother's side; but as I grew older, latent traits come out I see my father also." For a long time he thought of himself as his mother's child only. Louisa Whitman (the poet's mother) was not a reader like her husband but she was strangely knowing, Walt said. She excelled in narrative—had great mimetic power; she could tell stories, impersonate, she was very eloquent in the utterance of noble, moral axioms— was very original in her manner, her style. In rudely complexion, features, grit, voice, he took after her—"favoured her, "the people on Long Island said. He idealized her extravagantly, overlooked her chronic

peevishness after she became a widow and came to attribute to her every creative and feeling impulse in himself. "*Leaves of Grass*" is the flower of her temperament active in me" "a reflection of her reality", "simplicity" and "transparency" of her unmingled Dutch strain of the practical and materialistic" and the "transcendental and cloudy". "Mothers precede all"—he believed that women of his ancestry had richer natures than their men." The poet venerated feminists and agents of spiritual liberalism. The "I" of "*Leaves of Grass*" is almost as often a woman as a man and the book is a supremely passionate argument for the androgynous vision of strength and tenderness, sagacity and impulse. But he had grown up so bound to his mother that oneness with her and separation from her were equally as terrifying as death and the ocean. "The child who went forth every day...now goes and will go forth every day in his forced recesses that child remained a child".

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman It has already been mentioned above that during his formative years Whitman was intellectually closer to Emerson than to Nathaniel Hawthorne. The jottings from their notebooks will show their affinity:

"I have been writing and speaking what were once called novelties twenty five or thirty years and have not one disciple... I delight in driving them from me. What could I do, if they came to me?- They would interrupt and encumber me. This is my boast that I have no school follower. I should account it a measure of the impurity of insight, if it did not create independence..."

- **RW. Emerson**

"I will not be a great philosopher, and found any school...but I will take each man and woman of you to the window...and my left arm shall hook you round the waist and my right shall point you to the endless and beginningless road... not I-not God-can travel this road for you.

- **W. Whitman**

These two utterances are not identical but, at the same time, they go a long way in showing a marked resemblance.

The critics usually praise Hawthorne and Melville for their "awareness of evil" and point contemptuously to the lack of awareness by the transcendentalists: and by Emerson in particular. Such a view and stand of the critics, is, to say the least, unfair.

The praise of Hawthorne should not amount to denigration of Whitman. He is not Hawthorne's opposite in every respect, as it is made out to mean. Such die-hard critics of

Whitman hold that Whitman "did as much to ruin American poetry and prose as any single influence in America". We must, and have to remember that "Whitman, like any other great writer, is unique: he is nobody's opposite, except in an approximate way. It is, however, true that Whitman's work is extremely uneven, and it is in general, vulnerable to attack at the same points where New England transcendentalism is vulnerable."

Transcendentalism, according to **Mrs. Marius Bewley** (in her *The Complex Fate: Hawthorne, Henry James and some other American Writers* London, 1952), means "a little beyond". Whitman explained, in an anonymous review of his own poetry "that the lines never seem "finished and fixed", but are "always suggesting beyond". Like Emerson, Whitman is accused of being "indiscriminately optimistic and formless". Whitman's purpose, in his own well-known words, was "mainly... to put 'a person', a human being (myself, in the latter half of Nineteenth Century in America,) freely, fully and truly on record". He was to be "the bard of personality", speaking for all Americans (and for all mankind), since he knew all other human beings were essentially the same as himself. **Santayana** objected that the doctrine was too elementary, and that there was no "inside" to Walt Whitman's perceptions. **D.H. Lawrence**, while praising much in Whitman, condemns his transcendental pretensions, making him say (in words that recall Poe's "Supernal Oneness");

"I am everything and everything is me and so we're all one in One Identity like the Mundane Egg, which has been addled quite a while."

Others have disliked aspects of Whitman which one does not find in Emerson: his (Whitman's) flamboyant patriotism, for instance (which may have been a family matter, since his father christened three of his brothers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson: a not uncommon American habit), and his equality of quantity with quality.

Whitman, The Poet, His Critics and Contemporaries

Sidney Lanier, the southern poet ridiculed Whitman, "Whitman's argument seemed to be that because a prairie is wide, therefore, debauchery is admirable, and because Mississippi is long, therefore every American is God." Lanier's ridicule is, presumably based on statements from the 1855 preface to 'Leaves of Grass': "Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations. Here is action untied from strings necessarily blind to particulars and detail magnificently moving in great masses."

Whitman's 1856 letter to Emerson:

"Of the twenty-four modern mammoth two-double, three-double and four double cylinder presses in the world, printing by steam, twenty one of them are in the United States."

Samuel Butler commented that America should not have been discovered all at once, but in pieces, each about as big as France or Germany.

Emerson reflected: "I expected (Whitman) to make the songs of the nation but he seems content to make the inventories". Whitman's poems (inventories, in the words of Emerson) have been ridiculed and parodied over and over again. So has his vocabulary, which Emerson described as "a remarkable mixture of the 'Bhagwat-Geeta and the New York Herald'.

Whitman's Way with Words Words are the basic material with which the poet works. They are the vehicle to convey his message, his meaning. As such the words are very significant, central to the art and craft of poetry. Whitman overworked some words like 'copious', 'orbic'; he made howlers (using 'semitic' where he meant 'seminal'). He invented strange terminations: promulge, philosophs', literats. He borrowed from other languages, especially French: 'formules', 'delicatess', 'trottoir', 'embouchure', 'Americano', 'cantabile'. He took words from phrenology: 'amative' adhesive'. The results are often ludicrous:

"The freshness and candour of their physiognomy, the copiousness

anddecision of their phrenology...

In thy resplendent coming literati, thy full-lung'd orators, thy sacerdotal

bards Kosmicsavans ..."

The same doubtful enthusiasm that led him to admire a large painting of Custer's Last Stand permitted him to include lovely and laughable epithets within the same line, and prevented him from pruning them in subsequent editions. He revised constantly but not always for the better.

It has been noted and pointed out that Whitman at his worst is unbelievably bad. And this brings to mind the beautiful verse from the nursery rhyme:

"When she was good, she was very very good;

But when she was bad, she was horrid."

(Whitman) Flaunts his queer style as a savage might flaunt a top-hat retrieved from somebody's dustbin."

His Many Failings Contribute Towards His Achievements

Whitman was a puffer and a poseur. He was bearded and a Christ-figure adored and admired by disciples who were only less odd than Whitman himself had been. It was revealed, on a closer acquaintance of this man that his failings threw his achievements into a bolder relief. Whitman, ex-carpenter, was mediocre journalist, the writer of pieces on Manifest Destiny and Decent Homes for working-Men. He conceived his scheme of celebrating Man and America in what he decided was to be a thoroughly new and appropriate form.

All the poet's miscellaneous tastes and experiences went into its development: the Quakerism of his mother's family; Shakespeare and the opera--the excitement of the sung or spoken word, communicated in a public place; phrenology which reanured him as to his own disposition; the more permanently respectable sciences in which he—somewhat like Emerson-discovered cosmic patterns; the trending verse of Martin Farquhar Tupper; George Sand's 'Consuelo' and its sequel, 'The Countess of Rudolstadt', which may have helped him to visualize his role of spokesman for mankind; Poet who pointed out for him the impossibility of the long poem; the crowds on Broadway, or on the Brooklyn Ferry; the tides washing in from the Atlantic; the sweet modulation of the season in the countryside; the feel of the great continent, rolling interminably westward from the sea-board where he lived; all these and many other ingredients went into the first edition of "*Leaves of Grass*", which appeared (on July 4, Independence Day) when he was thirty six. It contained twelve poems, of which the most considerable was '*Song of Myself*'.

The preface and poems alike (Whitman's prose is very close to his verse) insisted on truths similar to those propounded by Emerson: the divineness of ordinary men and women, and their share in the miraculous cyclical patterns of life. Otherwise their flavour was not Emersonian. Nor was that of all the subsequent, modified, and expanded editions of the book. True, they sometimes reveal the Emersonian complacency, especially in the early editions of "Leaves of Grass". But it is expressed differently: sometimes more stridently, sometimes with joviality that repels us almost as much as Emerson's wintry summons, but almost always with a sensuous warmth to which one cannot remain indifferent. And at their best, they (the poems of "Leaves of Grass"), are incomparably more radiant; there is a morning gladness about some of Whitman's lines that Emerson hardly ever manages to infuse into his work:

"To behold the daybreak!

The little light fades the immense and diaphanous shadows, The air

tastes good to my palate ...

I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of flames, Clock of

sticks cooking my meals ...

The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and hearings on

The walk in the street and the passage over the river-"

The beauty of these lines is irresistible. No care to Quibble whether these can be defined as verse? With Whitman, we feel that his is the meal and the meat for natural hunger. The message here is not less profound than that of Hawthorne and this poetry is only one aspect of Whitman.

“Leaves of Grass” Walt Whitman, in the first editions of “Leaves of Grass” is much quieter than his critics made him out to be. He is a little detached, curiously secretive. “Suggestiveness” is the word that expresses the mood of his poems in which every sentence and every passage tells of an interior not always seen. Possibly there is an instinctive desire to camouflage his homosexual tendencies and his accounts for the obscurity of some of these passages. At any rate they have nothing to do with the extroverted Whitman of legend.

Death and Walt Whitman When “Leaves of Grass” was first published, on July 4, Independence Day in 1855, the poet was young and full of spirits. He wrote in Song of Myself (The opening poem of the first edition):

“ ...

*I, now thirty seven years old in perfect health begin, Hoping
to cease not till death.*

... ”

—*Song of Myself*

As Whitman grew older, death occupied his thoughts increasingly—but only as an interlude between one life and another. For him death has no sting: and indeed he began to make his 'adieux' to life at a remarkably early age. In ‘Wound-Dresser’ he observes (when he was in his forties): “An old man bending I come among new forces.” Perhaps the hospitals of the Civil War hastened this process; for as a Greek historian wrote, in time of peace the sons bury fathers; in time of war the fathers bury the sons.

With Herman Melville, Walt Whitman is almost alone among American writers of the time in grasping the tragic significance of the war. He felt himself a father, and as he saw America stretched the surgeon's knife after enduring the torment of the battlefields, he recorded his emotions in elegiac line of magnificent dignity:

“Word over all, beautiful as the sky,

Beautiful that war and all its deed of carnage must in time be utterly lost,

That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly wash again

and ever again, this soil'd world."

The same tranquil maturity and majesty pervades Whitman's great and noble elegy on the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, "*When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*".

In the preface to "*Leaves of Grass*" (1855) the poet declares that "of all mankind the poet is the equable man". "Equable" is the word which best sums up the peculiar temper of Whitman. Pride, the poet thinks, can and should be accompanied by humility.

Whitman's Theory of the Poet's Function According to Whitman, the poet does not judge as the judges do but as the sun falling around a helpless thing. This is Whitman's personal statement about the theory of the poet's function but it is more diffuse and, according to Whitman's critics, it is a dangerous counsel to follow, if it encourages the would-be American poet to rely too exclusively on a rapt and bardic intuition.

Whitman's most "public" poetry is his weakest but there is something characteristically American and not at all silly in his effort to appeal to the multitude. If he cannot speak **to** mankind he speaks **for** mankind and this is what he does and splendidly too.

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