

Whitman and the Form Complete · J. L. Duncan

*They talk of his "splendid animality."
Well, he'd got it on the brain, if that's
the place for animality.*

—D. H. Lawrence

IN ONE OF WHITMAN'S late, retrospective letters, we find a quick distinction between the gist of his *Leaves* and of Emerson's pages: "L. of G.'s word is *the body, including all*, including intellect and soul; E's word is mind (or intellect or soul)" (*Correspondence* 70). By *word* Whitman means the nature of each author's essential tidings and imperatives, the notion of reality each authorizes, the sort of Logos each affirms: Whitman (according to Whitman) offers us the inclusive body, Emerson the exclusive mind.

At issue is the nature of self. Both writers assume (Whitman implies) that the self is a function of language, the word, and that like language the self is central, at the very heart of reality, of each and all. But the two writers differ as to the self's composition. In *Nature*, let us recall, Emerson says that one's own body, like every other, belongs to nature and hence to the NOT ME. His word, therefore—Whitman says—amounts to consciousness made manifest without being made flesh. Emerson is an idealist. Whitman, on the other hand, is a self-avowed pantheist. To him, the self negates in person the very distinction he uses in definition: just as a word necessarily and indivisibly includes meaning, so the body includes consciousness. From beginning (1855) to end (1892) Whitman declares himself to be the poet of the Body *and* of the Soul because they are the same. In the first Inscription to *Leaves* ("One's-Self I Sing"), he declares, "Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far"—thus in a phrase he stakes his particular poetic claim.

The identity of body and soul—i.e., the Form complete—is a claim Whitman never tires of working. It is, as he explains in the epigraph to *Leaves*, not only the primary theme of his volume, it is the basic principle of his verse:

Come, said my Soul,
 Such verses for my Body let us write (for we are one,)
 That should I after death invisibly return,
 Or, long, long hence, in other spheres,
 There to some group of mates the chants resuming,
 (Tallying Earth's soil, trees, winds, tumultuous waves,)
 Ever with pleas'd smile I may keep on,
 Ever and ever yet the verses owning—as, first, I here and now,
 Signing for Soul and Body, set to them my name

[signed]

Walt Whitman

The body includes the soul, the soul includes the body—since they are one, the equation is reversible. But for poetry, as Whitman's soul tacitly recognizes, their identity is not simply given, like water's hydrogen and oxygen. One could—like Emerson, presumably—write verses for the mind in high disregard of the body. Hence Whitman's soul orders him, by way of invitation, to write verses specifically for the body. (For *its* body, to be exact.)

But there are verses and there are verses, Whitman's soul implies. One could write verses for the body which remain essentially of the mind, verses in which form and content, medium and message, body and soul, are at odds with one another, the sort of disparity we see, for instance, in Whitman's *other* poem on Lincoln's death: "My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still, / My father does not feel my arms, he has no pulse nor will," and so forth. *Such* verses, being divided against themselves, noisily collapse into silence, and silence is the last thing Whitman's soul wants. It wants verses that it can resume chanting at any time, even after death, and at any place, even in other spheres, and that it can keep on chanting, forever pleased to acknowledge them as its own. Such verses it wants, verses that realize in their very structure the Form complete, the innate identity of body and soul that they are all about. For without such verses, it seems to assume, it will have to spend the rest of its life in absence, silence, oblivion. Whitman's soul brings to mind the wonderful paradox pronounced by Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier":

Beauty in the mind is mortal,
 The fitful tracing of a portal;
 But in the flesh it is immortal.

Whitman's soul wants flesh so it may enjoy eternal life.

In case Whitman should wonder how they are to write such verses—in case he should wonder what such verses will look like, sound like, feel like—the soul informs him, parenthetically, that they will tally natural phenomena, soil, trees, wind, waves, and the like. The soul's body is vast—it includes the earth. Tally is an idiom of Whitman's. It means to record, to count, to label—that is, to take note of something by enumerating or naming. It also has an archaic meaning that Whitman revives, to make two things agree or correspond. Writing verses for the soul's body then involves naming, part by part, the multitudinous earth and thus bringing body and soul together, where they belong. The poet is the Namer, Emerson says (“The Poet”), and no one has agreed more emphatically than Walt Whitman. But their concept of naming has its complications. The toddler's recitation—dirt, tree, wind, water—may be pure poetry in theory, and even in truth, but it falls short in practical reality. No group of mates would listen to such a chant for long, and no mature soul worth its salt would be particularly pleased to own it. Moreover, in ordinary conversation we name things all the time without making essential agreements between body and soul, or at least without being aware of making them. That is the kind of awareness begotten by poetry, the extraordinary use of language in which (and by which) matter and mind engagingly meet. That is why Whitman's soul demands that they write verses, not make small talk. But his soul does not explain how their verses are to tally nature and unify body and soul; it only asserts they should. The question thus remains: what will a poem that meets the soul's demands be like?

As he implies in one of his titles—“Song of the Answerer”—Whitman thinks of poems as answers. And (accordingly) while the epigraph may seem only to raise questions, it also offers answers, not in any statement, but in its very form. It is, in one important respect at least, precisely such a poem as the soul demands. It is *verse*, i.e., it is language that turns, and it turns specifically *in*, back upon itself. The meaning of Whitman's epigraph centers in its own formation: in depicting the soul's demand that they write verses for the body together, he shows us that they are in fact writing verses together, making this particular body, the epigraph. Being about itself, the poem's form and content, its body and soul, are the same.

To go forward, as Theodore Roethke says in “Open Letter,” we often must first go back. In a famous letter to William Godwin, Coleridge declares, “I would endeavor to destroy the old antithesis of *Words* and *Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, and living Things too” (626). In “The Poet” Emerson makes the same endeavor, though he changes the equation to words and actions. I recall Frost making the same point somewhere by saying that poems are acts, not reports. They are not collections of words about things, but are things in their own right, and living things too. In “Ars Poetica” Archibald MacLeish sums up this endeavor in a series of prescriptive couplets, two of which are so familiar they have all the power and comfort of cliché:

A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit

A poem should not mean
But be.

But words have a habit, even in the best-behaved of poems, of making themselves heard as well as seen, and of pointing (whether they are actually pointing at anything or not), and of insisting on being meaningful. Frost’s “Mending Wall,” for instance, seems to refer to two men mending their wall, and it makes their activity mean a great deal. It is easy to forget that the fictitious men and the actual meaning are elements of the poem’s process, that the poem is not about them but is made up (in part) of them. The poem seems like a report even though it is actually (if Frost is right) an exercise in and of pure being. The process of the poem paradoxically diverts our attention away from the poem’s true ontology.

Now one way a poet can direct our attention to a poem’s true ontology—which is also a way of realizing its ontology—is to turn the poem in upon itself. The poet can make certain that his words are acts of pure being by having them explicitly point at themselves, by making their meaning their own activity, as Whitman does in the epigraph and consistently thereafter. *Leaves of Grass* is essentially a self-reflexive work: it calls attention to itself as both the subject and the object of its own action.

Because the self-reflexive form calls attention to itself, it has proven especially useful to writers who think art ought to be impersonal, as empty

of the author's singular self as nirvana. We may wonder if the ideal of selflessness is aesthetically practicable, if it is not in fact a necessary contradiction, since those writers who insist on it most—writers like Flaubert, Eliot, Joyce—usually have such singular, distinctive styles. The style is the man, signed, sealed, and delivered, and few men have written themselves larger.

In the case of Whitman's self-reflexive verses, however, we have no apparent contradiction to fret about, for their primary purpose in life is—as he explains in “A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads”:

to articulate and faithfully express my own physical, emotional, moral, intellectual, and aesthetic Personality, in the midst of, and tallying, the momentous spirit and facts of its immediate days, and of current America.

By writing verses together for the body, the soul and the poet become a body of verse, one voice indivisible. The logic is circular: they realize an identity given from the start. By implication, then, the identity they realize is authentic, true. But they realize it, we must add, in a form of human making, in poetry. Instead of an identity of two—body and soul—we have an identity of three: body, soul, and person. Identity thereby becomes Personality, and hence Whitman signs for body and soul not only in his name, but in his very hand. The poet is the namer, and Whitman names himself. The poet is the answerer, and Whitman answers our perpetual desire for a sign with the literal sign of himself, his signature.

We must remember, though, that a poem, particularly a self-reflexive poem, is an act, not a report. “Whoever you are holding me now in hand,” Whitman says, relating us to him not through the text but in the text, face-to-face, hand-in-hand. His words do not refer to a person who, one December day in 1874, in Camden, New Jersey, signed for soul and body. Of course the poet may have been referring to himself in person, denying the conventional distinction between author and work, as Paul Zweig argues (16). In a letter to Emerson, a contemporary of Whitman's, Moncure Conway, declared the same identity: “He is clearly his Book” (Hindus, 30). But not any more. He is gone—the way of all flesh—so now, whatever Whitman intended, the words compose a voice that goes by the name of the poet, not a person but a Personality who signs here and

now, in the poem's timeless ubiquity. Soul and body, self and verse, poet and poem are one.

But a poem is not a self-composed still-life; it is, to repeat, an act, and the first inscription (which immediately follows the epigraph) is an act typical of Whitman:

One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
Of Physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the
 Muse; I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for the freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

Rather than simply singing his theme—namely, himself—Whitman typically sings about himself singing his theme. To put it another way, his singing is the subject of his singing. He identifies himself as his verses—hence he exists in the eternal now of their present tense—in two ways at once, as the self doing the singing, a separate person simple or not, and as the self the singing makes, the Modern Man. He does, by implication, what he is, and he is what he does—both at once—for being and becoming, like soul and body, are one. The opening line of “Song of Myself”—“I celebrate myself, and sing myself”—makes the point explicit: he is the subject and the object of the verb, the singer and the sung. But who can tell the dancer from the dance? Subject and object join in song, and Whitman is the singing, a celebration that constitutes the Form complete, worthy for the Muse.

The Inscription is typical of Whitman's verse in another respect: it is basically an act of annunciation. He announces that his singing composes the subject of his singing. Of course poets have always made announcements. “To you, Perses,” Hesiod says, “I would describe the true way of existence,” while Homer would sing of Achilles' wrath and Milton would justify the ways of God to men. But they make their announcements in the beginning, as a declaration of intent, a promise which, with the

Muses' help, they hope to fulfill. Then they get to work, as it were. Hesiod starts describing the true way, Homer and Milton plunge headlong in *medias res*. But their work, it should be noted, consists essentially of narration and argument.

Whitman, on the other hand, rarely narrates, never argues. As C. Carroll Hollis observes (ch. III), Whitman's work consists essentially of lines in the present tense and the declarative mood, of announcements from beginning—"One's-Self I sing"—to end: "The Modern Man I sing."

More than any other poet Whitman sings, he declares, he swears, he says:

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men . . .
(“Song of Myself”)

As large as he is (he contains multitudes), Whitman does not hesitate to make even larger declarations:

And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and
composed before a million universes.
And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God,
For I who am curious about each am not curious about God . . .
(“Song of Myself”)

We should not be curious because he is not curious, he declares, grandly assuming that, just as he promised in the beginning, we shall assume what he assumes. “I swear I think now that every thing without exception has an eternal soul! . . . I swear I think there is nothing but immortality!” (“To Think of Time”) No one has taken and applied more literally the principle that the poet is the sayer.

Because Whitman operates on the principle of annunciation, his verse characteristically makes a promise and makes good on the promise in the same breath. “Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index,” he says, and having said it moves on: “I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy” (“Song of Myself”). He does not, as we have seen, make a declaration then set about to dem-

onstrate it. Rather, he makes a declaration that serves as its own demonstration, and he follows that up with another, and another. In announcing that through him the afflatus surges, the afflatus is in fact surging—inspiration is at work. As far as demonstration is concerned, no more need be said. The line stands as a self-evident truth. In announcing that he speaks the word and gives the sign, he is actually speaking the word, literally giving the sign. In writing about the sort of verse his soul orders, he simultaneously fills the order and delivers the goods, including a tally of Earth's soil, trees, winds, tumultuous waves.

Leaves of Grass's word, let us recall, is the inclusive body: "If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it," Whitman says ("Song of Myself"), and having said it, "shall be" becomes a fact, a truth present and accounted for simply because it has been pronounced. Why he should worship his body—the complex rationale—goes without saying, for Whitman is satisfied to recite his parts and concomitantly to tally Earth's: "Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you! / Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!" And so on. The metaphors are elaborate, but their premise is simple and familiar: the body is of nature. Whitman's recitation is therefore as concrete as his soul could wish: it is innocent of the abstractions of argument, it specifies the parts, it fleshes them out with metaphors that are, as the phrase goes, down to earth. It makes his form and his worship complete.

At the same time, however, Whitman's recitation is curiously abstract. This abstract quality, moreover, is as characteristic of his verse as the body that his soul demands and that Whitman claims to deliver. "You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you! / Winds whose soft tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!" The metaphors are elaborate (and bold) enough to call attention to themselves as *metaphors*, as verbal structures in a verbal structure. They make us aware that words themselves, even the most mundane, are inescapably abstract: they are ideas in the flesh, the embodiments of *concepts*. The self-reflexive structure of *Leaves of Grass* implies that the *Leaves'* actual word—Whitman's claim notwithstanding—is not the body as such, but, to paraphrase the epigraph of this essay, the body on the brain. The actual word is *consciousness*, including all. For all their very real differences, Whitman is, in his fashion, no less an idealist than Emerson.

In the worshipful recitation of his parts, Whitman's metaphors, like his songs in general, make announcements of an essentially self-reflexive nature. And by calling attention to themselves they invite comparison with metaphors from other eras and spheres, metaphors which, even when they have the same form, serve entirely different functions.

For a long time in western culture, when truth was regarded as a matter of resemblance or correspondence between different orders of being, metaphor was regarded as both a means of discovery and a form of proof. Metaphors were (or could be) literally true, and everything was potentially metaphorical. Harvey's treatise on the circulation of the blood was accordingly thought to have significant implications concerning the circulation of the earth's waters. Anatomy recapitulated geology, Sir Thomas Browne's microcosm reflected the macrocosm. Then, when truth came to be regarded as a matter of measurement, of the intangible quantified, metaphor was regarded, logically enough, as a form of illustration. It served by making truth sensible, and like all good servants it was, though necessary, distinctly subordinate, predictably fitting and proper. James Thompson's brooks and dews were never sweaty, his zephyrs did not have genitals.

The romantic revolt against neo-classicism involved a revival of the doctrine of correspondence and the restoration of metaphor to its former station, but with a significant difference from former times. Truth was now regarded as a matter of consciousness in action, the process, human and divine, of creation. Hence correspondence was relative and metaphor self-conscious, as Whitman realized not only in principle but in structure as well.

A child said *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.

(“Song of Myself”)

He answers anyway, by offering several “guesses” — that it is the flag of his disposition, the handkerchief of the Lord, a child, a uniform hieroglyphic, the uncut hair of graves — and each guess is as valid as the other, whether any are actually true or not. For by explicitly guessing, Whitman shifts the issue of validity from the correspondences themselves to the act of corresponding.

Later—and with far greater certainty—he declares, “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,” and the metaphor performs wonders. It makes the old distinction between micro- and macrocosm utterly relative—he is a cosmos, as if there is more than one (the word has no plural) and as if they are all of a size—and it strikes the humorous self-conscious pomp and strut of hyperbole. (“Earth! you seem to look for something at my hands, / Say, old top-knot, what do you want?”) He is a cosmos in a manner of speaking. His sweat may run in streams, he may have title to broad muscular fields, but the resemblances do not pretend to be veritable correspondences, any more than the fanciful resemblances Thoreau draws out between geological formations and the human face: “The nose is a manifest congealed drop or stalactite. The chin is a still larger drop, the confluent dripping of the face” (“Spring,” *Walden*). Whitman’s figures, like Thoreau’s, are possessed by the excited air of discovery and proof, but we must understand that what they are discovering and proving is their own imaginative vitality. They celebrate their own success in making original juxtapositions and thereby generating fresh meaning, in creating this new and marvelous and living thing right before our eyes, in participating in what Owen Barfield regards as the very essence of the poetic, “the springs and freshets of Becoming” (132). Hence their excitement.

But hence too the way these texts call attention to themselves as verbal constructs, figures of speech. In Whitman’s case this attention-getting behavior is peculiarly fitting and proper because he is himself a figure of speech, a manner of speaking, a voice singing itself into being as it goes. “The Maker of this earth but patented a leaf,” says Thoreau (“Spring,” *Walden*), and Whitman operates (far more literally than Thoreau) on the same principle, creating page by page, year by year, his *Leaves of Grass*, a cosmos that embodies consciousness in action, human and divine. “We are symbols,” says Emerson, “and inhabit symbols” (“The Poet”), and Whitman shows us what he means. For as Charles Feidelson has explained, “The ‘I’ of Whitman’s poems speaks the world that he sees, and sees the world that he speaks, and does this by *becoming* the reality of his vision and of his words, in which the reader also participates” (18).

The critical consensus is that the reality Whitman speaks is of the body, for the body, and by the body, just as he claims. His catalogs are the crucial case in point. According to one of Whitman’s acutest critics, James E. Miller, the catalogs amount to “an ecstatic and extended engagement

with—delight in—the physicality of the universe”(46). They presumably lead us not into the highly complex and tempting structure of consciousness and symbol, but directly to the things of this world, concrete facts and events, as the following recitation, innocent of figure, plain as pavement, should demonstrate:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane
whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their
Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the kingpin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are
ready,
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
The spinning girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big
wheel . . .

and so on (“Song of Myself”).

We may not actually be born story-tellers, but it seems we are, and we customarily tell our stories in the past tense (or, if the language provides it, in a specifically narrative tense). Hence it is that of all the sorts of order possible in a literary work, the one that calls the least attention to itself is the narrative. Even when the sequence involves the complication of cause-and-effect, it is unobtrusive. Change the formula only a little—just put the narration in the present tense, for example, or in the second person—and the reader immediately becomes aware not only of the story being told, but of the telling itself.

Now the events in Whitman’s catalogue may have an order, but it is not narrative. They do not constitute even a simple sequence in time, much less of cause-and-effect. Instead, all of these events are occurring simultaneously, now, and they are beyond the ken of a single empirical point of view. “I am afoot with my vision,” Whitman declares, but he does not mean he can literally see the contralto in the loft and then four lines and five seconds later the mate in the whale-boat. It is doubtful, in fact, that Whitman ever saw a mate braced in a whale-boat, but we do not

really care, for we know that he does not mean physical vision at all.

Whitman indeed speaks the world that he sees, but he sees primarily with his mind's eye. The "air of immediacy" that David Cavitch cites (51) is not of the world that the person Whitman ate and slept in, but of the world that the Personality Whitman imagines, images forth. (And thus it is that he speaks the world he sees.) Of course all writers image forth worlds, but there are differences. Thoreau, for instance, however elaborately he spins a fancy, always begins with and remains faithful to his particular empirical point of view, to physical facts he actually witnessed. As high as he soars, he keeps his feet on the ground. Whitman, on the other hand, cuts completely loose—"My ties and ballast leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps, / I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents"—and as a consequence his speaking, even at its simplest and most concrete, does not even feign to lead us directly to the things of this world, to deliver us empirical reality, the world of common sense.

For Whitman's vision amounts, essentially, to a reverie, and in a reverie, as Gaston Bachelard has written, "The whole being of the world is amassed poetically around the *cogito* of the dreamer" (162). Hence it is that Whitman's cosmos resembles the ancient cosmologies that Bachelard has described as "audacious reveries" (177). Hence it is that the world Whitman envisions and speaks comes across as abstract, remote from the physical, because it makes us stop and contemplate its own processes, to ponder the nature of its order, to wonder just what sort of mind it is that puts duck-shooters, deacons, and spinning girls, all of them independently minding their own business, side-by-side without transition, explanation, or apology.

We all agree, I think, that the basic principle informing Whitman's catalogs is psychological association, or as William James was to call it, stream-of-consciousness. But we must recognize that the current of that stream, as the very phrase implies, carries us away from the physical to the mental. It floats us not among things, but in a consciousness of things. To tally earth's soil, trees, winds, and waves, therefore, means in effect to transform the material into the ideal, to transubstantiate body into soul. Thus they are one. Thus is the form complete.

It can be argued that while I am assuming reality comes in pairs—subject and object, mind and matter, and the like—Whitman himself makes reality a matter of one:

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red
 clover, and the song of the phoebe bird,
. . . all became part of him.

(“There Was a Child Went Forth”)

And simultaneously, Whitman declares, the child became them. As his soul says, the two are one. But as Howard Waskow has pointed out (20–1), as often and as emphatically as Whitman insists on the identity of body and soul, he also insists on the distinction between body and soul. And it is not a merely theoretical distinction, the sort that any monist must use in order to make his singular point, the sort that seems to be built into the very structure of the language and that is necessary for thinking about reality even though it may not obtain in reality. It is a distinction Whitman affirms. For rarely do the things he sees (including those he sees only with his mind’s eye) simply become part of him. Rather, he is usually aware of himself seeing them, acutely conscious of them becoming part of him: “And such as it is to be of these I more or less am, / And of these one and all I weave the song of myself.” He is so aware, in fact, that he makes the process a matter of degree, of more or less, something he calculates and measures, just as he now self-consciously makes it not just part of his song, but of his very singing.

It is a distinction built into the very structure of his verse, into his self-reflexive form: “I celebrate myself, and sing myself.” He offers us an identity of poet and poem, an identity that is simultaneously self-composed and self-composing. Thus he offers himself to us immediately, and involves us (as Feidelson points out) in his process: just as he becomes the things he sees and they become him, so we become the poem in hand and it becomes us. But we must notice that by explicitly involving us in his verse—by pointing out, for instance, that what he assumes we shall assume, and that we are holding him now in hand—he calls our attention to what we are doing. Instead of simply reading his verse, or becoming one with it, of becoming absorbed, as we say, and staying there, we also become self-conscious, aware of what we are doing, and thus of ourselves as apart from the verse. He puts us in the same divided frame of mind that he celebrates in himself:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain
rest,
Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.
("Song of Myself")

And so, as he makes certain, *we* relate to the push and haul of his verse, both a part of it and apart from it. Thus Whitman proves by structure what he assumes in principle, and thus again he makes us assume what he assumes, that the what I am, the Me Myself as he later calls it, is, like his verses, indeed like reality itself as he conceives it, essentially a matter of consciousness.

Over and over again Whitman defines his major task as two-fold and paradoxical: to sing the simple separate person, and to utter the words democratic, en-masse. He celebrates both the singular self and society, both uniqueness and likeness. That paradox is obvious, but it entails a couple of others not so obvious. The self Whitman sings, the nineteenth-century American Personality he puts on the record, is singularly spare of personal particularity. It is of Manhattan, it enjoys riding the Brooklyn Ferry, it was once a child that went (and still goes) very generally forth and that heard a mocking bird one night, it once saw somewhere or other in Louisiana a live-oak growing, it once passed through an unnamed populous city but now only remembers some unspecified woman (or, according to the manuscript, some unspecified man) and their nights and days of love—a few facts, if facts they are, of that general sort. As Richard Chase reminds us (76–7), the personality of Whitman's *Leaves* is immensely impersonal, abstract. If we define the self as consciousness embodied, we must say that the body of Whitman's self—afoot with its vision, skirting Sierras and continents—is stretched thin to the vanishing point.

The second paradox logically follows: the society Whitman celebrates, the love of women and comrades, is equally impersonal, abstract. Now insofar as Whitman is concerned with social/political structure, with Democracy, such abstraction is inevitable. The relationship we enjoy (or despise, as the case may be) with our fellow man cannot be personal. But as

we see in both the Children of Adam and the Calamus poems, the sorts of relationships that are usually personal—sex and camaraderie—are as abstract as Democracy itself, as impersonal as lust. “I am he that aches with amorous love,” he says, not with desire for somebody in particular, but for anybody in general, for as he goes on to say, all matter attracts. His comrades are consistently featureless, often taking the form of “you,” the abstract reader.

Emerson declares that “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind” (“Self-Reliance”). Whitman declares that “If anything is sacred the human body is sacred” (“I Sing the Body Electric”). Thus the difference between the two may seem to be as complete as Whitman claims. But “the human body” is no more tangible and no less ideal than “the mind.” We experience bodies or a body, not the body, just as we see an apple falling, not gravity. Strictly speaking, then, Whitman and his soul write verses celebrating the idea of camaraderie, the idea of sex, the idea of body, a point that Anne Gilchrist missed to Whitman’s dismay.

Mrs. Gilchrist (the widow of Blake’s first biographer) thought that Whitman’s verses meant body in the flesh, the self in person, and she responded in kind, offering him her body, her person. “Real effects,” she wittily explained, “imply real causes.” Whitman corrected her:

You must not construct such an unauthorized and imaginary figure and call it W. W., and so devotedly invest your loving nature in it. The actual W. W. is a very plain personage and entirely unworthy of such devotion. (Allen 440)

But of course it was Whitman himself who constructed (and thus authorized) the imaginary figure that aroused her—in his verses. As he described himself in one of his self-promoting reviews,

One of the roughs, large, proud, affectionate, eating, drinking, and breeding, his costume manly and free, his face sunburnt and bearded, his postures strong and erect, his voice bringing hope and prophecy to the generous faces of young and old. (*In Re Walt Whitman*, 13)

This reads like a personal ad for *The New York Review of Books*—it’s too good to be true—because Whitman is imagining what M. Wynn Thomas

calls “an exemplary life” (278), a Personality that is as ideal in its way as classical sculpture. To be sure, as an ideal it is supposed to be true in a normative sense: this is what a real man should be, Whitman indirectly says, and would be if the flesh were able. And as Zweig points out, Whitman tried himself to realize his ideal in his own flesh. But he knew there was a difference—he knew, for example, that he was “breeding” metaphorically at best. Whitman’s real point was not to offer himself the actual man, but to offer a new ideal of manhood and culture, and to suggest that the ideal is true in a way the actual never can be.

In the context of Whitman’s verses, accordingly—in the work of his imagination, the world he images forth—the figure is not merely imaginary. It is the real toad in the imaginary garden, “the real I myself,” as he says elsewhere, “An image, an eidolon” (“Eidolons”). When therefore he says “Who touches this touches a man” (“So Long!”), he means a real man, an image, an authorized ideal. By mistaking the ideal figure for the plain actual personage, Mrs. Gilchrist inadvertently unauthorized it, making it merely imaginary.

The flesh cannot bear too much reality, not even the poet’s body of verse:

Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground toward a real heroic man?

Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya, illusion?

(“Are You the New Person Drawn toward Me?”)

Hence the identity of self and song that Whitman celebrates is complete—touch one and by definition you touch the other—but temporary, lasting only as long as the poem does:

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

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

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

(“Song of Myself”)

In other words, the identity he expresses, the eidolon he calls the Me Myself, survives its particular expression. It is an image we carry around with us, consciously and unconsciously, long after we put the book down, long after we have forgotten, except for a few phrases, the words and lines of its composition. (“The words of my book nothing, the drift of it every thing” — “Shut Not Your Doors.”)

Thus Whitman’s identity is, just as he says, both in the game—in the verse, the lines and words—and out. It is in me, filtering and fibering my blood, and it is out of me, in you, and you. It is, like any other idea, in the world, in the air we breathe, in the very ground we stand on. (For the idea of Whitman can make a great difference in the way we construe such things as air and dirt and grass.) But like any other idea, Whitman’s eidolon is also out of the world, beyond space and time, waiting immutably for us somewhere or other, anywhere, everywhere, nowhere, if we should want it again. Finding it, however, will not mean understanding Whitman. Identity is not a subject matter that is intelligible, apart; it is a subject matter as such, the divine tautology “I am that I am,” the mystery of being in form. Finding Whitman will mean, therefore, engaging in a vital relationship with him, intimately enjoying his mystery, much the way we enjoy friends and lovers. Hence he will be good health to us.

But of course the W. W. of *Leaves of Grass* is not exactly the same as actual friends and lovers, as the actual W. W. finally got Mrs. Gilchrist to understand. The Whitman who waits for us is a function of language self-consciously wrought, of self-reflexive verse. And it is the self-reflexive structure that explains why the poet regarded his *Leaves* retrospectively as primarily a language experiment, and why he said prospectively, in the 1855 Preface, that “the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic.” Instead of singing directly about himself (like Wordsworth, for example, in *The Prelude*), he sings about himself singing himself into being. Instead of directly reporting a perception or arguing a thesis or telling a story about

himself and the world he lives in — instead of being descriptive or epic — he sings about himself saying, like God, Let there be, and assuming that it is simultaneously there — light, heavens, waters, earth, a cosmos in his own image, himself in the image of a cosmos.

In the beginning — which is always now — is the Word, and the Word, according to Heidegger, is *logos*: “It speaks simultaneously as the name for Being and for Saying,” for Being, in a way we can never fully understand, requires Saying. “Saying . . . lets beings appear in their ‘it is’” (80). Moreover, the Word according to Whitman is with the self and is the self: “Each man to himself and each woman to herself, is the word of the past and present, and the true word of immortality . . .” (“A Song of the Rolling Earth”). This is the self that he realizes and demonstrates in his own creation, the self that waits for us. Hence the poet’s expression, as Heidegger helps us to see, is transcendent, and hence too the poet-self that is expressed is transcendent, justifying Whitman’s promise, “Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,” and not just poems but also, as he goes on to say, “the good of the earth and sun . . .” We shall enjoy, as Emerson urges in *Nature*, an original relation with the universe, for all creation, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, is a kind of poem, the primal and ceaseless expression of consciousness.

“A song of the rolling earth, and of words according,” Whitman announces, and he means of course his song now underway about the earth and about words that accord with it, that harmonize, tally. But the word *accord* also means to grant, to bestow upon: he will, accordingly, sing about the words that bring the earth as we know it into being, that grant its reality. But Whitman’s announcement also means that this is the earth’s song of itself, that words (and thus poetry) are not other than and about the earth, but are of it, integral and innate, that earth and language are functions of one another. Together, by implication, they compose the poem we call reality.

Simultaneously, though, the announcement makes us wonder what the nature of that poem really is, as Whitman anticipates. That is why he immediately follows the announcement with a quick catechism on transcendental linguistics:

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.

Were you thinking that those were the words, those delicious
sounds out of your friends' mouths?
No, the real words are more delicious than they.

We should not identify the real words with their mere symbols, the sounds we articulate, the marks we make. We should not confuse their true substance with their merely physical manifestation, speech and writing. The real words, perforce, must be the meanings of the symbols. They have the true substance of the ideal. Hence they are in us, the matters and affairs of consciousness.

But just because they are in us does not mean that they are ideas about (and are therefore apart from) the things they denominate. Rather, says Whitman, they are in the things they denominate, in ground and sea and air, and thus he seems to fill William Carlos Williams' prescription, "No ideas but in things" ("A Sort of a Song"). But he quickly goes Williams a step further, asserting that words are not just in the things they denominate, they actually are those things: "Air, soil, water, fire—those are words, / I myself am a word with them—my qualities interpenetrate with theirs. . . ." Words made up the body of the old world: composed by consciousness, by the human I am, the four elements and their cognates the four humors (air/blood, soil/black bile, water/phlegm, fire/yellow bile) included all, the physical, the physiological, the psychological. And so, by implication, words make up the ever-changing new world of post-Renaissance physics and chemistry and psychology.

According to a line by Stefan George that Heidegger loves to quote, "Where word breaks off, no thing may be." Without a word a thing is not a thing, it is a dumb show of the senses, a blank in the mind's eye. It has no identity. And the same thing is true, as Whitman points out, of human identity: he himself is a word among all the other words that make up his world. But he immediately reminds us that we should not confuse the word, the real word, with its symbol: "my name is nothing to them, / Though it were told in the three thousand languages, what would air, soil, water, fire know of my name?" The real or true words of

the earth are “inaudible,” they are “untransmissible by print,” they are “the unspoken meanings of the earth,” and they are unspoken because they are unspeakable. The true word, then, is the unnameable source of both name and thing. It is the pure idea. Thus it is that while Whitman seems to fill Williams’ prescription, he actually stands it on its head: “No things but in ideas.”

The song of the rolling earth is a perfect poem because it is composed, not of names, but of true words:

To her children the words of the eloquent dumb great mother
never fail,
The true words do not fail, for motion does not fail and reflection
does not fail,
Also the day and night do not fail, and the voyage we pursue
does not fail.

The earth’s poem has two basic attributes, motion and reflection. By reflection Whitman means self-reflection, for a few lines later he imagines the earth “Holding a mirror day and night tirelessly before her own face.” Like God, she creates by contemplating herself, and she is her own creation, a composer whose true words make up herself (and of whom, let us recall, we, as true words ourselves, are parts). By reflection Whitman also means indirection—we see not the true words themselves (they are invisible) but their faithful reflection in phenomena, in the things whose existence unfailingly bears witness to the reality of ideas, “the unspoken meanings of the earth.”

The other attribute of this perfect poem that we have named earth is motion. “The divine ship sails the divine sea” through space and time (both day and night), not in order to get anywhere but for the sake of the going, of pure motion *per se*. Indeed, the idea of a destination for such a voyage, of a purpose or goal, is vulgar and contradictory: it implies an end, as if the divine voyage were merely a means. It also implies an ending, closing up shop, cosmic shutdown, a failure in the works. But the earth’s motion is unfailing, absolute. The perfect poem, the poem with the form complete, does not consist of beginning, middle, and end. Rather it is endless, always in the middle of beginning, in the midst of now. In the beginning *is* the Word.

Human poems, on the contrary, consist of beginning, middle, and end. They are composed of names, of written and audible words rather than the “true words” that make up the earth. The poet is the Namer, but names cannot “tell” the “best of the earth,” its “unspoken meaning” and “truths.” They cannot put their fingers on the point they would make, much less compute its value. Whenever he attempts to tell the best, Whitman says, he becomes utterly inarticulate, dumb.

But lest poets find this inherent shortcoming cause for despair, Whitman swears at the same time that it is actually better “to leave the best untold,” and that “The best of the earth cannot be told anyhow, all or any is best,” and in the last section of the poem he exhorts poets to keep writing poems with the faith that he now swears by, “That faith that leaves the best untold.” Their work, he promises, “will certainly come in use,” and they themselves will certainly be remembered, understood, justified, and glorified in and by the “architects” who are certain to appear when, according to Whitman, “the materials are all prepared and ready.” The architects, I presume, are those who will house humankind in some grand synthesis now beyond human ken, and the poet’s words, however inadequate they now are, will prove indispensable to that synthesis.

Thus in offering consolation and encouragement to poets, Whitman does not slight the disparity between their efforts and the incomparable accomplishment of the earth. Human song is finite in form. And self-reflexive though it may be, nevertheless it is not self-contained. Instead it is a means to and end beyond itself, and it is referential, pointing at the true words of the earth, the ideas that constitute reality.

For his labors, though, the poet needs quicker returns than some remote future justification, and Whitman offers a few. “All merges toward the presentation of the unspoken meanings of the earth,” and the presentation takes place specifically for the poet who (like Whitman, naturally) “sings the songs of the body and of the truths of the earth.” The process is circular—by singing of the truths the poet shall be presented those truths—but not merely tautological. Whitman means that by seeking the poet finds, by knocking he gets to enter that which he cannot tell but which he can participate in, namely, “the best of the earth.” That participation, which also goes by the names of becoming and enlightenment, does not change anything, Whitman points out:

Things are not dismiss'd from the places they held before,
The earth is just as positive and direct as it was before,
Facts, religions, improvements, politics, trades, are as real as
before.

Even so, he goes on to indicate, participating in the best makes all the difference:

But the soul is also real, it too is positive and direct,
No reasoning, no proof has establish'd it,
Undeniable growth has establish'd it.

The best of the earth is, in a word, the soul, and one of the best sorts of growth to establish it is the motion of poetry.

Poetry is, let us recall, the soul's idea in the first place ("Come, said my Soul . . ."), and while it may be written for the body, it is an exercise of the soul, the purpose of which is to manifest or establish the soul. For poetry is part of the "all" that "merges toward the presentation of the unspoken meanings of the earth": Whitman's song of the earth is part of the earth's song of itself, typically enough. His verse—the self-reflexive verse of consciousness in process, in motion—reflects, however partially, the perfect motion and reflection of the song of the earth. It is a contributing factor, as the phrase goes, to the earth's perfection.

When Whitman announces the Form complete as his theme, he does not claim that his *Leaves* actually constitute it, only that they celebrate it. The body of verse that his soul and he write—self-reflexive verse that unites body and soul—remains in and of itself incomplete, a fact that finally causes Whitman frustration and satisfaction alike:

O book, O chants! Must all then amount to but this?
Must we barely arrive at the beginning of us?—and yet it is
enough, O soul;
O soul, we have positively appear'd—that is enough.
("As the Time Draws Nigh")

They have made their appearance, of course, in the body of their verse, and it has been a positive one: they have, after all, celebrated the form com-

plete, and their appearance has real existence in and of itself. Here the book positively and indisputably is, in hand. And yet it is at the same time, paradoxically enough, only an appearance, real, to be sure, but not entirely real, not absolutely quintessentially completely real. Even though they unite body and soul, his chants do not themselves compose the form complete for the very simple reason that the body is not final.

Beauty in the flesh may be immortal, but as Steven's Peter Quince immediately goes on to say,

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing.

Here Whitman's book indisputably is, yet as Whitman points out (and as we have already observed) we read the book through beginning, middle, end, then put it aside. We may pick it up again whenever and wherever we wish—Whitman's soul may at any time and any place resume the chants, just as it wishes—and yet the book remains finite in form. It is finished. But its beauty, which is to say its essential form—the wave of Sussanna's green evening, the self of Whitman's singing—survives its body's finishing:

So I pass, a little time vocal, visible, contrary,
Afterward a melodious echo, passionately bent for, (death making
me really undying)
The best of me then when no longer visible, for toward that I
have been incessantly preparing.

(“So Long!”)

The best of him—a melodious echo, the image of his song, the pure idea—survives his body's death not just as a memory but (by analogy) as an absolute. For he will have / he now has undying life, an existence having its own reality, having indeed, as Whitman goes on to say, a greater reality than his appearance in flesh and song:

An unknown sphere more real than I dream'd, more direct, darts
awakening rays about me, *So long!*

Remember my words, I may again return,
I love you, I depart from materials,
I am as one disembodied, triumphant, dead.

In comparison to the wide-awake absolute of death, this sphere (flesh and song) is but a dream, an apparition, a mere appearance, maya. It is a positive appearance because, as a process of self-definition, it is a passionate preparation for death, and it is enough because Whitman and his soul do get to die. And dying is “lucky” (as Whitman so happily puts it in “Song of Myself”) because in the disembodiment of death they will enjoy the form complete, their undying identity, pure consciousness in pure reflection, pure motion, a divine ship on the divine waters:

O my brave soul!
O farther farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! are they not all the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail!

(“Passage to India”)

In “Scented Herbage of My Breast” Whitman discovers that he sings essentially for death’s sake, for death is “the real reality” beyond “this entire show of appearance.” Death is reality absolute, the underlying eidolon.

In the beginning is the Word, and in the beginning is the end. But the end is actually the beginning of endlessness. Hence it is that in “Out of the Cradle,” Whitman, true to his vision, explicitly identifies the Word as death. Each of us is, according to his song of the rolling earth, “the true word of immortality,” but only because the Word as such, the Word *per se*, is death. For it is by virtue of death, of course, that we may enjoy immortality. In fact, if I may take a phrase out of context (specifically, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”), it is fair to say that the song of the rolling earth, in all its versions, is itself “death’s outlet song of life.” It is by virtue of death that we have existence in any form, mortal as well as immortal. And it is existence in form that constitutes reality, motion realized in reflection. In E, for instance, equalling MC^2 .

Reality then is a creation of consciousness and language, which are functions of one another and which, taken together, are functions of death. For they constitute that rage for order that only death could beget.

We crave reality because of death, and our craving is finally satisfied by death. It would seem therefore that *Leaves of Grass's* true word is death, which includes all.

But as it turns out, Whitman knows exactly what he is talking about, even though poets are not supposed to. He knows that not only does the conditional require the absolute, but that the absolute requires the conditional. Without death there could be no body, but it works the other way too: without the body there could be no death. By the same principle, without mere names there could be no true words, without flesh no soul. Hence his soul and he loving incorporate in verse to sing the body's praises. For the body—a temporary conformation of flesh, some arbitrary symbols arranged on paper, sounds pronounced in thin air, a material appearance for the nonce—the body miraculously includes all, including death and the Me Myself's undying life.

How lucky can we get?

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