

NOTE

WHITMAN'S *BEL CANTO SPIDER*

Anyone who has read aloud Whitman's lyric poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," must have wondered at the contradiction of the title evident in the poem. The use of "noiseless" lies at the heart of the contradiction, for the word when sounded—*noizless*—is anything but what it connotes. One thinks of synonyms Whitman might have chosen—silent, quiet—the sound of either one better suggests the quality he apparently aims for. To sound "noiseless," particularly if one must project the voice to be heard by a number of persons, the central "z" is underscored by the terminal doubled "s," prolonging and emphasizing the contradiction between meaning and diction, between signifier and signified.

Once aware of this contradiction it comes as no surprise, as one reads on, to note the gentle plosive of "patient" turned almost immediately into the hiss of "spider" and made harsh in the blended "promontory" where the wide, open-throat "o" is sharpened by the final "ry." Indeed, lines two and three of the poem reiterate such prominent sounds as "m" and "r" in the repetition of "mark'd" and in "promontory," adding to these the explicit (a word offered here as a means of emphasizing the effect of a plosive preceded by the Latin prefix) sound of the spider's action, "to explore." The doubled "r" of "surrounding" acts as a closure to this portion of the two-stanzied poem, as Whitman introduces in the alliterative "vacant vast" the marvelous effect achieved in the next line with "It launched forth filament, filament, filament. . . ." The action described is indeed a soundless one, that of a spider weaving a web out of the content of its own body; yet in the final line of the first stanza the process is far from noiseless: "Ever unreeling them, / Ever tirelessly speeding them."

Almost all readers of this poem have recognized in it the correspondence between the work of the spider and of the poet, a correspondence to which Whitman draws attention in the second stanza by addressing his soul and urging it on in its imitation of the spider "Till the gossamer thread [of poetry] you fling catch somewhere, O my soul." In this correspondence, brought so markedly to the reader's attention, may lie the answer to the contradiction between the poem's sounds and the creature it describes, for the work of the poet can hardly be noiseless if it is to form a bridge between the soul of the poet and the world. There is nonetheless something incongruous here in this soundful depiction of the spider, something that points to the "two Whitmans," the Bardic and the lyric poets. "A Noiseless Patient Spider" belongs to the productions of the lyric Whitman as does "I Saw in Louisiana A Live-Oak Growing," where the work of another natural phenomenon is described in a word connotating sound, "uttering joyous leaves. . . ." But the "Spider" is truly a lyric poem, one of but a few in which Whitman employs a stanzaic form and a recognizable meter.¹ In its lyricism then may lie the answer to the riddle of Whitman's having offered a description of a noiseless spider in diction that is far from noiseless.

The recent revival of interest in "*bel canto*" singing suggests an answer to the riddle of the spider. *Bel canto* operas were what Whitman knew and enjoyed most in

the New York City years when he regularly attended opera productions. These pre- and early Verdi operas included those which Whitman himself proclaimed his favorites: *Ernani*, *La Favorita*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Norma*, *I Puritani*, and others of this genre. In "Proud Music of the Storm" he confesses that from early childhood "to me all sounds became music," and in that poem he brings us many and varied examples of such transcriptions culminating in the effect on him of operatic singing, with specific references to the *bel canto* repertoire.

Bel canto singing (literally "beautiful singing") depends for its effect on the ability of the singer to sustain long, undulating lines of music in a controlled, seamless *legato*, much as if the sound were being woven in the air from the singer's physical substance. A perfect example occurs in Whitman's favorite operatic scene, in the last act of Donizetti's *La Favorita*. The tenor aria "Spirto gentil" ("Spirit so fair") is universally acclaimed for its expressiveness, and when sung by a tenor capable of sustaining the length of line (not unlike Whitman's long poetic line) there is a lushness to the sound that swells and fills the air as it reaches out toward the audience.

That Whitman experienced such singing in a sexual way is evident from that portion of "Song of Myself" in which he describes his emotions at hearing opera and says of the tenor, "A tenor large and fresh as the creation fills me, / The orbic flex of his mouth is pouring and filling me full."² The homoeroticism of the description is echoed in the early notebook version of "A Noiseless Patient Spider" (1862–1863) where the imitation of the spider's action is homoerotic and the throwing out of the filament becomes a "cruising" experience with a resulting eye contact between the poet and a male stranger as the focal point of the poem:

The Soul, reaching, throwing out for love,
 As the spider, from some little promontory, throwing
 out filament after filament, tirelessly out of
 itself, that one at least may catch and form a
 link, a bridge, a connection
 O I saw one passing alone, saying hardly a word—
 yet full of love I detected him, by certain signs
 O eyes wishfully turning! O silent eyes!
 For then I thought of you oer the world
 O latent oceans, fathomless oceans of love!
 O waiting oceans of love! yearning and fervid!
 of you sweet souls perhaps in the future, delicious
 and long:
 But Dead, unknown on the earth—ungiven, dark here,
 unspoken, never born:
 You fathomless latent souls of love—you pent and
 unknown oceans of love!³

This early version, so open in its meaning, is not lyrical, not stanzaic, nor does it contain the pronounced diction of the later work.

These differences are not surprising, however, for when Whitman recast the poem the homoerotic emotion was sublimated and turned into a self-admonitory charge to continue in the creative process and by such means fill the void that in the earlier version had seemed so limitless. Part of the sublimation is the dismissal of such notions of communication as might accompany a casual exchange of glances. In

its place is the control and discipline of artistry, such artistry as that of a great singer like those who so moved Whitman in the years when he regularly attended the opera.

Robert D. Faner has demonstrated the influence of such operatic devices as the recitative and aria on Whitman's poetic structures, and has pointed to the two tenor *romanzas* in *La Favorita* as specific examples of the aria form.⁴ But Whitman provided an account of operatic accomplishment that so parallels the poetic achievement he hoped to realize in the later version of "A Noiseless Patient Spider" that it must have remained unconsciously a part of him, to surface in the reconstruction of the poem. Remembering a performance of *La Favorita* in which the tenor role was sung by his favorite tenor, Bettini, Whitman described the final act where "Spirto gentil" is sung:

With his pale face at the foot of the cross kneels the returned novice, his breast filled with a devouring anguish, his eyes showing the death that has fallen upon his soul. The strains of death, too, come plaintively from his lips. Never before did you hear such wonderful gushing sorrow, poured forth like ebbing blood from a murdered heart. Is it for peace he prays with that appealing passion? Is it the story of his own sad wreck he utters?

Listen. Pure and vast, that voice now rises, as on clouds, to the heaven where it claims audience. Now, firm and unbroken, it spreads like an ocean around us.⁵

True, the story of the opera which so moves Whitman is trite and sentimental, but it is not the *scenario* to which he responds. It is, rather, to the ability of the singer to turn his anguish into art that can command the ear of heaven. "Listen," Whitman directs us, pointing us in the direction later to be taken in the reformulation of "A Noiseless Patient Spider" where we will similarly be directed, though more subtly, by the poem's diction.

It seems obvious from Whitman's account of *La Favorita* that in the love/death notes of the aria the power of the attendant emotion was fully communicated to the poet. Here is no sudden meeting of "wishfully turning . . . silent eyes" as in the Calamus-styled version of "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Instead, there is the purposeful imitation of the spider's effortless reeling out of filament as Whitman heard it in the voice that rises not only to heaven but "firm and unbroken, it spreads like an ocean around us." "And you O my soul where you stand / Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space, . . ." Whitman later exhorted himself, recalling from some level of memory the effect of the *bel canto*, the beautiful singing as it spun out and caught hold within him.

The apparent contradiction, then, between the claimed noiselessness of Whitman's spider and the pronounced sound of its poetic description is in part the contradiction between the poet's desire to chant his nation's praises and his equal need to whisper a lover's lyric. But even more it is the result of the conflict between Whitman's desire to imitate the naturalness of tree and spider, and his very human need to know that the artistic effort will take hold and the gossamer thread of his song "catch somewhere."

NOTES

- 1 Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 240.
- 2 "Song of Myself," Section 26, ll. 20-21.
- 3 *Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, Emory Holloway, ed. (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1921), 2:93.
- 4 Robert D. Faner, *Walt Whitman and Opera* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1951), 181.
- 5 *Uncollected Poetry and Prose*, 1:258.