

REPRESENTING THE KOSMOS: THE "LYRIC TURN" IN WHITMAN

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AN IMPORTANT TREND in the criticism of the past several decades concerns the changing status of the major modes. Since the New Criticism, lyric—by which I mean not the form but the mode, a desire for and in writing¹—has steadily yielded its position of importance to narrative, and threatens to disappear as a distinct concept altogether. Structuralism converted the New Criticism's ideal of lyric freedom and the ambiguity or even inscrutability of its meaning into the determinisms of narrative. With the deconstruction of narrative closure, the field has been more or less cleared of competing modes; the literary impulse, the urge to write, is seen to begin as a plotting, a construction, an engagement with the multiple and expanding strictures of narrative form. Moreover, the recent trend toward a materially and historically based criticism, while revealing the contingencies of the literary moment, has at the same time tended to evaluate all texts on their ability to reveal the truths of history, ideology, and economics. That is, writing of all kinds is judged by its ability to display either heteroglossic multiplicity, or what Jameson calls the "single great collective story" of the "struggle to arrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity," which is an "uninterrupted narrative [of] fundamental history."² Following Bakhtin, such criticism has identified lyric as the solipsistic and doomed desire for a mode of pure subjectivity, an exploration of the literary or creative moment which demonstrates only the illusion of an autonomous consciousness. In a recent book on Wordsworth, for instance, Alan Liu argues that lyric is a kind of theft, enabling the poet to peddle the stories of other people as mere images, and vaguely pointing to the profundity of the poet rather than the tragic histories he fails to represent. For readers like Liu, lyric marks the artifice of high literary culture. On the other hand, narrative delivers all that lyric cannot, since it attempts to order and to reveal, to make connections that lie beyond the confines of private awareness. It is impersonal, even when it is used for autobiography, because it aims for transparency. Crucially, as Liu argues, narrative is *the* mode of history.³ We only know history when we tell stories about it, when we see the plots that operate over time in our lives, our families, our cultures. Narrative theory has become pervasive too because it allows for no other beginnings, and perhaps because as a kind of conspiracy theory (of the determinism of narrative structure), it is a description of the practice of

criticism as well. Critical theory has tended to favor narrative because in expanding the boundaries of the forms of narrative, it increases its own power and prestige; all writing becomes like its own (though less self-conscious), and the difference between criticism and poetics is elided.

The field in which the devaluation of lyric has most obviously been a focus of attention is English Romanticism, in which Wordsworth in particular has been excoriated for overwriting historical narratives with an idea of lyric that allows him to “displace” or “escape” historical and social awareness. As Jerome McGann and many others have argued, the Romantic ideal of lyric as preceding or transcending ideology is itself ideological.⁴ Curiously, though, the American Romantic poets have not received the genre-based ideological scrutiny that their English counterparts have. This is in part because ideological contestation in American literary studies has tended to expand the canon, rather than replace it. Indeed, many recent readings of Whitman avoid discussion of genre while working hard to reconfirm the soundness of his politics and ethics.⁵ Unavoidably, such criticism replaces the subjectivity of lyric with the heteroglossia of drama or dialogue, or the historical awareness of narrative. It is worth examining the dynamics of lyric and narrative in a figure as important to our understanding of lyric (and the American canon) as Whitman in order to mount a defense of lyric, to show what it can and does achieve. For it seems to me that for Whitman as for Wordsworth, lyric is a mode that aims toward uncovering and representing origins of meaning and is thus in some sense apolitical, or pre-political, because it aims to know only the diversity and multiple potentiality of the initial moments of perception, imagination, or knowledge. Whereas the desire for narrative is to construct order (whether or not it is achieved), the desire for lyric is to represent those moments that pre-exist order, or even, deconstruct it.⁶ That this case can be made for Whitman is crucial, because he has generally been seen as achieving precisely the kind of social and even historical awareness in his poetry that Wordsworth has been found to lack.

While Wordsworth's *Prelude* is largely a story interrupted by lyric moments which reveal an awareness of the inadequacy of narrative to account for either the progression or nature of self-identity, *Song of Myself* is an extended lyric interrupted by narratives. In Wordsworth's poem the organization is clear; it follows a more or less chronological account, both of its own production and of the poet's life. Although the narrator is continually able to demonstrate how the mind of the present “is lord and master” by its very ability to see the self as “two consciousnesses,” the poem is still motivated by the narrative desire to bring past wanderings into a single account (and thus its lyric moments—like the blind beggar passage—arise most successfully in the recognition of the failure to realize this intention). Numerous attempts to posit narrative organization behind the whole of “*Song of Myself*,” however, are striking in

how reductive and banal they appear next to the complexity of the poem.⁷ Narrative impulses in the poem appear rather as moments of discontinuity, pauses to develop a story into an image that crystallizes briefly one of the themes of broader meditation, and is made resonant by being situated in the middle of the diverse and scattered reflections of the rest of the poem.

It can appear that when Whitman engages in narrative most explicitly and straightforwardly (such as in his journalism and in his didactic novel *Franklin Evans*), we are disappointed by the sudden narrowness of the man. Similarly, there are narrative passages in *Song of Myself* which have the bathetic effect of reducing the startling openness and diversity of the surrounding meditations to a single, often sentimental, theme. Such could seem the peculiar effect, for instance, of the "old-time sea-fight" of Section 35, and the "tale of the murder of the four hundred and twelve young men," of Section 34. Following as they do the magnificent vision of the self "speeding through space" to create the enormously inclusive catalogue of Section 33, these narratives are striking not only simply in *being* narratives in a poem which is otherwise so unstructured, but also in their apparent spontaneity. They seem unmotivated by, as well as unconnected to, the exploration of self in which they are situated. In one sense, of course, they may be taken as evidence for the speaker's claim that he is omniscient; his vision includes actual historical events (the Goliad massacre and the sea battle between the *Serapis* and the *Bonhomme Richard*), and he demonstrates that it is indeed within his power to make the "Distant and dead resuscitate, / They show as the dial or move as the hands of time, I am the clock myself" (67).⁸ It can seem too, though, that Whitman turns to narrative here because the sheer brutality of the events he describes (filled as they are with slaughter and mutilation)—graphic displays of man's inhumanity to man—is itself discontinuous with the harmonious image of humanity his vision implies. Whitman aims to be completely inclusive, to "contain multitudes," but narrative here marks the outer boundaries of his imaginative ability to understand or "become" those who participate in the orgy of killing he describes. These tales or histories simply exist, incommensurate with our attempts to understand them, to make them a part of ourselves; "These so, these irretrievable," refers not simply to the "Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream, and long, dull, tapering groan" (Section 36), but also to the tales themselves.

One of the most well-known narrative passages of the poem is Section 11, the tale of the twenty-eight bathers and the woman who "hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window," watching them. The parable tells of the imaginative release of sexual desire by the woman for the men, but for my purposes, the most interesting feature of the section is the peculiar positioning of the speaker. He is not entirely absent from the scene he describes; more strikingly for this poem, he is not

entirely omniscient here either, but is situated oddly at the margins of the story itself. He is able coyly to ask:

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room. (38)

He says this as though he were actually present, hiding behind the bushes, spying on both the men and the woman. He can see the woman, and see as the woman sees. Either the speaker or the woman could be the “twenty-ninth bather. . . dancing and laughing along the beach.” The description of the young men, lingering as it does on their glistening bodies and the “unseen hand” that passes “tremblingly from their temples and ribs” (reminding us of “The Sleepers,” where the speaker’s hands also hover over the bodies of those he observes) presents the desire of both the closeted woman and the marginal speaker. The passage forces us to “ask who seizes fast” to the young men and to “think whom they souse with spray.” The point is not, as Robert Martin argues, that the voyeuristic woman becomes a fiction for the homosexual longing of the poet;⁹ it is rather to represent the multiplying web of desire which is set into motion by the voyeurism of the woman, the speaker, and ultimately of the reader. The parable’s beginning sets up the expectations of narrative fulfillment, setting the scene, perhaps, for a tale of sexual discovery—critics as varied as Miller, Martin, and Stephen Black all read the passage as a concise representation of frustrated hetero- or homosexual desire.¹⁰ The point of the parable is deliberately not, however, to create a static and complete picture of sexual identity that a completed narrative would offer—as Martin puts it, to turn the term “homosexual” from an adjective into a noun, so that the sexual act itself comes to define the self (50–52). The poem eschews reductiveness of all kinds, which in Whitman is homologous to the eschewing of narrative. The self of the poem, and the parable, aims instead simply at a becoming larger, a growing expansiveness in which the reader is directly invited to participate. Narrative functions in the passage then as a means of drawing the reader into the poem’s lyric dynamics. We want to know what happens in the story of the woman watching the twenty-eight swimming men, who themselves are made mythic and ideal through the very unconsciousness of their sexuality. Our desire to overcome our sense of separateness is mirrored in that of the woman/poet, both of whom take life from the desire of and for others. The parable ends, however, not by fulfilling this desire, but by multiplying and interconnecting it in the creation of a lyric image which rivals the image of sexual climax in the 1855 version of “The Sleepers” in its profound diversity and openness:

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge to the sun, they do not
ask who seizes fast to them,

They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and bending arch,
They do not think whom they souse with spray. (39)

The unknowing men have lost all sense of distinctness, which is the case too for the actual nature of the activity described—the seizing fast, arching, puffing, and declining may suggest both fellatio (as Martin insists) or heterosexual intercourse. The point is that we may all join in the openness of the activity, the unselfconscious sousing. Lyric and sexual desire become congruent in these passages, which seem to me to represent the primary impulse of the poem. What is striking about the image in this passage is that it becomes performative; the self of the poet becomes blurred in the final image in a way that it does not in other statements in the poem which attempt to equate sexual exchange and the enlarging of the self (such as that of Section 5, in which the speaker states that “I know . . . that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,” after a fairly explicit scene of oral sex). “Writing and talk do not prove me,” he writes later in the poem; indeed, it is only in the active participation of the reader in the opening of desire (which achieves a kind of climax of its own in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”) that we “prove” Walt, that we fulfill the potential of his lyric.

I am arguing that *Song of Myself* has as its lyric impulse the complex longing described in Section 11, to dissolve the self so that it may inscribe the identity not of “Walt Whitman” singularly, but of a “kosmos” generally, an aim exemplified and symbolized in descriptions of sexual encounter. This in itself is not a new interpretation of the poem; readers of Whitman are now so familiar with this poetics, of Whitman forging a communal identity through the trope of the self “en masse,” that we tend to forget just how radically original this poetics is. Indeed, the concept of self-identity as we normally think of it—a firm understanding of the boundaries and patterns of the self—is hardly a concern in this poem, as it is in many others by Whitman. It exists as a given, what Whitman in *Song of Myself* calls the “Me myself,” which does not open itself to the world, but stands before and outside the multiple exchanges of self and other that the poem sets into motion:

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. (32)

The poem is an extraordinary example of the openness of lyric as it resists or avoids narrative. The poet makes no attempt to link events, voices, or experiences except insofar as they are the product of his figural or literal abilities of perception. The self takes in the world not in the Bakhtinian version of a heteroglossic narrative, in which the self

essentially dissolves under the pressure of multiple external discourses (in which, in effect, the self becomes a kind of vast and spontaneously generated intertext); rather it takes over those voices in acts of interpenetration. Requiring the active will of the self to make the world a mold of itself, and vice versa, the expansion of self is to be achieved in the process of writing:

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.
Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd. (52-53)

Obviously, and yet crucially, the achievement of this interpenetration is not a matter of empirical analysis. Its accomplishment, for the reader and the poet, is a matter of a willing suspension of skepticism, of a *faith* in the power of the voice to contain other voices, and in the power of lyric to mediate the self and other. That is, its meaning is only open to the reader who feels sympathy for the poem's purpose. Narrative offers the appeal of a finished product, so to speak, a course or career of the self that can be repeated by the reader, and an ending which promises the full satisfaction of understanding so that the urge to repeat may be stopped. Lyric offers no repetition; or rather, each repetition of the desire to encompass the world is different. No amount of reading in and around the poem will recreate the poet, an individual will or subject justified by its own existence. Part of the poem's eerie confidence, a mark too of many of the *Calamus* poems, is the knowledge that "life is elsewhere" (as Milan Kundera has put it), entirely apart from the signs of life on the printed page. The openness of lyric can highlight this fact in a way that the self-sufficiency of narrative cannot:

Writing and talk do not prove me,
I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,
With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic. (55)

In his discussion of Whitman's poetic competition with Wordsworth, which manifests itself most clearly in *Song of Myself* as a more or less direct response to *The Prelude*, Robert Weisbuch argues that the former poem is Whitman's best work because it succeeds in being most unlike that of his competitor: "Subsequent poems, successful as many of them are, allow for a Wordsworthian remembering and a developmental notion of the self that mutes Whitman's individuality." This is a curious

explanation of Whitman's decline, even if we agree with the evaluation. One would have thought that a move toward the more conventional autobiographical mode of Wordsworth, with its emphasis on situating the self in a specific present and connecting it to a specific past, would enhance rather than mute our sense of Whitman's individuality. That Whitman in *Song of Myself* "joins Dickinson in refusing any referential situation at all" implies the absence of individuality; a poet who can "roam time as freely as God so that history fits within the self's moment" is one that has merged so fully with the world or a community that it has lost all distinctness (Weisbuch, 184). A self that can become anyone or anything at anytime is no longer, really, a self at all. And yet we know what Weisbuch is getting at. What Whitman loses in the move toward the model that Wordsworth's spot of time provides for lyric is his originality as a poet. The more we get a sense of the historical person in his poems, of the "real him" as opposed to the voice of omniscience we get in *Song of Myself* and many of the oratory "chants democratic" that follow it, the less original and profound Whitman appears to be.

Much as I agree with Weisbuch that later poems (one thinks of the *Calamus* and *Sea-Drift* poems in particular) do indeed involve more explicit rememberings and representations of self, I want to take issue with the implication that this involves a turn away from lyric as I have been describing it. The progression of both poets is indeed marked by a narrowing of the hermeneutic circle, so to speak—a contraction of the horizons of what is felt may be known and explored. They are marked too by a diminishing confidence in the ability of the self to speak for others, and an increasing awareness of the inability of language and texts to represent even figuratively, or as a prominent absence, the life of the self.

That Whitman felt "oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth" (254) needs perhaps to be demonstrated before it is explained. It ought to be stated in the first place, and as a digression of sorts, that I am not making any claims to biographical or historical truth. I want only to attempt to explain a change of tone and confidence in his poetry of 1859 and 1860 and to do so strictly in terms of the dynamics of lyric that I have been discussing. My assumption is that there is a history of the writing self which may or may not coincide with that of the "real" Whitman, that the poet (indeed, that poets in general) can enact a process of self-exploration which is separate from the daily and historically-immersed life of the person. Though 1859 was hardly an ordinary year, it is possible for a "crisis" or change to occur in the poetry which is the product, partly or entirely, of the dynamics of the poetry itself. There exists a history of the *poet*, or of his poetics, that need not be intimately connected to the life of the historical individual. Indeed, to a degree even greater than Wordsworth, who felt that the organizing structure of *The Recluse* would provide the structure and suf-

ficient end as well for his literary career, Whitman seems to have conceived of his literary life or career in strikingly narrative terms. Even if the poems themselves aim toward the figured immediacy of lyric, of representing the self as it is in the present, it seems clear from the energy Whitman put into organizing and reorganizing the order of his poems in the various editions of *Leaves of Grass* that the book was to stand for the *changing* life of the poet. Like Wordsworth, Whitman felt motivated by the need to create a sense of the career of the poet in his poetry. Though this is a perhaps obvious and even banal feature of the life of any artist or producer of artifacts for public consumption, the fact that Whitman publishes *Leaves of Grass* in many changing and expanding and reorganized editions suggests that his desire to have his poetry represent a complete and in some sense unified life is a significant one. Thus narrative desire in Whitman perhaps makes itself felt more as the desire to have his poetics change (to have his changes *signify*), to progress and develop, to create the form of a career, than to have a single poem enact the recreation of the self through a narrative remembering of the past. I do not mean to suggest that the changes in Whitman's poetry from 1855 to 1860 are the product solely of a desire to progress, as it were; rather, I want to suggest in terms of the dynamics of lyric and narrative that I have been discussing that the lyricism of poems like *Song of Myself*, in which the self aims to appear fully in and of the present, produces its own pressures for the self to be different over time. In part, narrative desire in Whitman is displaced to a realm outside or even between individual poems, so that the poems as a whole form a kind of history of the self striving to remain in the present, and to be different from itself in the past.

The poems of *Children of Adam* (called *Enfans d'Adam* until the edition of 1867) and *Calamus* form the bulk of the new poems of the period 1859-1860. There has been much debate about the merit and aims of the two clusters, which I will not rehearse here. At issue is whether or not the poems of either group are lyrics in the naive sense: that is to say, whether or not Whitman's poems celebrating "the passion of Woman-Love" and an "adhesiveness, manly love," represent a genuine outpouring of more or less spontaneous emotion on the part of the poet or are instead furtive attempts at disguise, an escape into demagoguery for the sake of the poet's public persona. The two clusters represent an interesting example of how the poet attempts to represent the self through the dynamics of lyric. We see in all of the poems of 1859-1860, including "Out of the Cradle" and "As I Ebb'd," a significant contraction of focus. The poet can no longer keep separate the "Me myself" from the writing self; the aim, broadly speaking, is no longer to effect the merge of self and nonself, but to delineate precisely the "real Me." This change is characterized by a turning inward (in the great *Sea-Drift* poems), and the bifurcation of the "real Me" into the poet's desires for the produc-

tive and distinct democratic self—loudly represented in such poems as “Song of the Open Road” of 1856—and the private self defined by sexual difference.

The bifurcation which occurs in the two new groups of 1860 is not a simple matter of a separation of the real individual and a false public image. Rather, the poems can be read as a distinctly figurative separation in which one “mode of being” (the phrase is Wordsworth’s) is contrasted to the other. In a manner very like that of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, *Calamus* and *Children of Adam* oppose two ways of conceiving the self’s relation to the nonself. Whitman’s opposition is not of the self as it changes irremediably over time as it occurs in Blake’s poems (in the transition from Innocence to Experience), but as the self changes in its perception of its own domain. The two groups represent as opposed and mutually exclusive the self as it exists in the secrecy of private space and as it exists in the open expanses of oceans, crowds, and great cities. Thus, in the *Adam* poems, the self is described repeatedly as being like all other selves, as paradigmatic and capable of representing the entire community because it can absorb it entirely. Everyone alike is a child of Adam, the poems assert, and so the self can become as a transparent eyeball: “Existing I peer and penetrate still, / Content with the present, content with the past” (90). The self of these poems realizes its fullest potential in a climactic expansion which is typically represented through the unconscious and instinctive drives of the body, the “revolving cycles” of “grossest Nature.” These “mystic deliria” carry the self out of its privacy and bring it to the huge realm of otherness represented for Whitman by the images of oceans, cities, and crowds that are everywhere in these poems. Potent, prolific, and monolithic heterosexuality is the cluster’s defining trope because it represents the union of self and “Other” on a grand scale for Whitman. The mode of *Calamus* is equally singular, but critics have been far more willing to use it to read the figurality of *Children of Adam* than vice versa. Its mode is of the self as its own community, of the solitude of having “Escaped from the life that exhibits itself” to “tell the secret of my nights and days, / To celebrate the need of comrades” (112-113). It seems clear enough that Whitman is writing about the “love that dare not speak its name” in the most literal sense, of the covert signs that identify comrades in a society which publicly does not acknowledge the existence of same-sex love. But homosexuality is clearly a kind of trope for Whitman too, just as heterosexuality (more unequivocally) is. In the poems of *Calamus* it is a trope for a desire to shore up self-identity by finding its likeness in others: “And I when I meet you mean to discover you by the like in you.” The strategy is defensive and is marked by a withdrawal from the world and the reader, a pulling back to a realm of secrecy in which the real self dwells. Thus in the striking poem “Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand” Whitman warns his readers that “before you attempt me fur-

ther, / I am not what you supposed, but far different." A "follower" of the poet must "give up all else, I alone would expect to be your sole and exclusive standard" (115).

The self of *Calamus*, like the self of *Specimen Days*, lies securely outside of the text and textuality. It represents itself almost indifferently, or perhaps, diffidently. The contact that is needed and heralded by these poems is not of these poems, as it is in *Children of Adam*. This cluster aims to produce the faith "that [my] shadow [is] my likeness" (136), that sameness may buttress an identity heightened by its difference from the community. The more profound lyricism of the poems operates in the transition between the two clusters, so that the self of each cluster seems to know its incompleteness even as it creates a faith in the wholeness of community or self-identity. As with Blake's *Songs*, the poems of each group offer a counter-reading of the other, each pointing to the other's deficiencies.

I want to turn my attention now to "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," which, in the intensification of lyric desire I have been describing, is climactic. Not coincidentally it is also the poet's most self-consciously literary production. As many commentators have noted, the poem is highly allusive as well as being modeled on the great odes of the English Romantics. It has become a showpiece of *Leaves of Grass* in spite of, or perhaps even as a result of, the fact that its explicit engagement with poetic tradition makes it somewhat of an anomaly in Whitman's oeuvre. The persona of the orator has given way to a seemingly autobiographical self, an intensely introspective awareness in search of the "real Me" which in "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," "stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd . . . before all my arrogant poems" (254). Indeed, one is tempted initially to say that the very idea of the persona has evaporated in the poem, that Whitman has given up the stance of the inclusive public self of *Children of Adam* as well as the guise of *Calamus* which assumed that identity could be reaffirmed through the secret camaraderie of lovers. Abandoning the vision of the self as existing purely in the infinite space of the present moment, the poem comes as close to representing a paradigmatic Wordsworthian spot of time as Whitman gets. The poem represents the self of the present attempting to recover past feeling and understanding; this is to be a fusion not of the self with society, or some other version of the self, but a fusion of past and present, "here and hereafter," as well as a fusion of the bird lyric (for which Keats, Shelley, and Coleridge provide the central examples) and the autobiographical lyricism of Wordsworth.

The poem provides us an essential example in Whitman's poetry of a "lyric turn" which is similar to that which has been identified and loudly denounced in Wordsworth criticism. That "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" is Whitman's most Wordsworthian poem has been noted before, particularly by Weisbuch, who argues that the poem "en-

acts the very process Wordsworth dramatizes in such memories as the Christmas of his father's death in book twelve of *The Prelude*. Whitman's imagination has become, like Wordsworth's, renovative upon a harsh reality existing external to the imagination but available to the mind's transvaluation" (260). Moreover, Whitman's poem has been criticized (though in much more muted tones) for the same reasons that Wordsworth's lyricism has. Kerry Larson, for instance, argues that the poem represents the failure of Whitman's political will:

Banishing the social world from its frame and replacing his chants of Democracy with the ravishing mother of death as its "key" trope of inclusion, Whitman's epiphanic rite of fusion further aestheticizes his poetics of Union. This final reprise, with its unlabored but unmistakable air of tying up loose threads, deepens one's sense that the task of consensus making has turned inward.¹¹

The question this poem raises about its mode, or aesthetics, is one that gets to the heart of my distinction between lyric and narrative. For although the poem exhibits many of the features of the "lyric turn" as Clifford Siskin and others have called it in Wordsworth (and which Larson might call the "aesthetic" or "formalistic" turn), including an apparent escape from the external and the social and an embracing of self-consciousness in an attempt to explain the origin of the poetic impulse (connecting this poem too with Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode"), one of the most distinctive features of the poem is that it tells a disarmingly simple story. Unlike any other of Whitman's important poems, the central structure of "Out of the Cradle" is that of narrative; the poem tells the story—"a reminiscence"—of "that hour" from which "my own songs awaked" (253). This story, moreover, is of the loss of a mockingbird's mate—of death—which Frank Kermode among many others has argued is the central trope for the structure of narrative.¹² The poem of course contains and is "about" much more than either story, but its incorporation of narrative is nonetheless striking since narrative is either absent or only discontinuously present in most of the rest of Whitman's poetry. The fact that the "turns" in Whitman and Wordsworth turn out to be so similar, that both move quite rapidly (in terms of their literary careers) from the social to the autobiographical, suggests in the first place that this turn is less a matter of the essence of lyric, assumed by historicist critics of Romanticism to be the reification of subjectivity, and more a matter of the increasing explicitness of the desire not simply to sing of the self (or to announce it, in Whitman's case), but to come to know it.

In Whitman the autobiographical turn of the two great *Sea-Drift* poems is marked by an interest in the past, in memory. The poet in both poems is willing to accept that he may be "two consciousnesses" not simply in the sense that the "real Me" may stand apart in the present

from the self which aims to incorporate all public selves, but also in the sense that the "real Me" is found instead in the seeming completeness of the past. Here Whitman attempts to account for and represent this "real Me." These are not, in plain terms, public poems. That they do not strive to be socially inclusive or enact a communal drama does not mean that the poet has abandoned this role altogether, of course. Indeed, *Drum-Taps* and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" demonstrate a dramatic return to this aim; and by the publication of *Specimen Days*, it would seem that Whitman has abandoned any attempt at such representation of self as futile. In "Out of the Cradle" and "As I Ebb'd," however, the poet strives to embrace only the self. We might explain the privacy of these poems as the result of a failure of confidence; the ceaseless multiplication of identity enacted in the earlier poems was founded on the belief that the self and the community could be made identical, even as the autonomy of the self to create itself was maintained. This is a mode which clearly can only be sustained in the actual moment of celebration and inclusion. Memory enforces an awareness of difference and separation; it is only in re-envisioning its acts of becoming that the self can truly behold its autonomy and centrality, which is for Whitman the driving force behind the desire for a true democracy. Whitman himself describes a process very like this several years later in a magnificent passage from *Democratic Vistas*:

There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity—yours for you, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth's dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts. In such devout hours, in the midst of the significant wonders of heaven and earth, (significant only because of the Me in the centre,) creeds, conventions, fall away and become of no account before this simple idea. Under the luminousness of real vision, it alone takes possession, takes value. Like the shadowy dwarf in the fable, once liberated and look'd upon, it expands over the whole earth, and spreads to the roof of heaven. The quality of BEING, in the object's self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto—not criticism by other standards, and adjustments thereto—is the lesson of Nature.¹³

While lyric in the earlier poems of Whitman was turned outward, finding the openness and infinite diversity possible within a community, lyric desire can also be directed inward, finding as Whitman puts it the "quality of BEING," which must pre-exist the "hardest basic fact" from the realms of the social, the historical, and the economic.

Whitman's reminiscence in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" begins clearly in the present moment, a "sanest hour" in which the memory of an intense awareness of identity "rises, lifted out from all else." The first long sentence of the poem suggests how, like Wordsworth's beginning of "Tintern Abbey," the poet is recreating a scene from "the scene revisiting" (15).¹⁴ Also like "Tintern Abbey," the frame of the remi-

niscence figures a seemingly precise present, a “now” in which the “man [is] yet by these tears a little boy again” (18). Yet the speaker acknowledges that the facts of the narrative are neither entirely of the present nor of the self, asserting that they are in part taken “from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if they were alive,” and that he is “Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them” (21). The frame thus asserts the writing self’s autonomy in recreating and interfusing present with past identity, that this is not to be a literal record of past facts but a self-conscious act of taking in the offerings of memory into the present. The narrative desire to see the self as the product of the past is already diffused by an awareness that the past is meaningless unless it is recreated and re-experienced in the present, and that a re-projection of the past can only be figural and tentative—that words themselves can be, as the poem says, “arous’d.”

The act of re-experiencing is signaled throughout the reminiscence by the slippage of tense and identity in the speaker’s voice (as opposed to the bird’s) up until the final verse paragraph, which returns us unequivocally to the adult voice of the present. The recollection of the boy, the nonitalicized portion of what follows the opening sentence, shifts from the present tense—“I, a curious boy, never too close, never disturbing them, / Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating” (30-1)—to the past tense—“I saw, I heard. . . . I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair, / Listen’d long and long” (50, 67-68)—and back to the present—“Following you my brother. . . . / The aria sinking, / All else continuing” (70, 130-131). This slippage perhaps explains the speaker’s peculiar insistence on reminding us that it is the “boy’s soul” and not the man’s which is speaking, even as such repetitions remind us of the adult poet’s speaking voice (as though this were an oral recollection, a dialogue not just between bird and boy but between man and boy). Indeed, by the end of the poem the parenthetical reminder that it is the boy who said “Demon or bird!” (144) is immediately forgotten by the speaker himself, who is now to be heard speaking in the voice of the child in the present of the poem:

Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
 For I, *that was a child*, my tongue’s use sleeping, now I have heard you,
 Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake.... (145-147; my emphasis)

The confusion of identity between the boy and the man suggests that the reminiscence is less a recollected narrative than the recreation of spots of memory; a past moment is made a present one as the adult’s voice fuses with the projected voice of the boy. This fact in itself does not necessarily represent an epiphany or a moment of self-transcendence. It does show, however, that the narrative drive behind an act of recollection, which aims to see the self of the present as a product of the

selves of the past, is already being subverted—since we can see the opposite happening here. Moreover, this re-creation is one of many signs that the poem is intensely figurative, that its meaning is self-consciously recreated and projected, and not literally brought forth, or uttered.

But I am getting ahead of myself. The poem's central and most obvious interplay of lyric and narrative is the account of the story of the boy witnessing the separation of the two birds, and "translating the notes" (69) of the lamenting song of the "he-bird." That the poem mimics the alternating form of aria and recitative has been widely noted, but the comparison to my mind is not particularly helpful because it simplifies, and in some ways sentimentalizes, the relation between the speaker's story and the bird's lament.¹⁵ Together with the italicization, the explicitness of the translation reinforces the artificiality of the song, the sense that it exists merely as a projection relative to the realism of the speaker's memory of himself as a boy, and his (their) perceptions of the bird. The poem is centrally about the rise of the desire to create projections, and of the self's ability to forge a relation with an absent other. The boy's projection of the bird's song, indeed of the bird's consciousness, is equivalent to the adult speaker's projection of the boy. The bird itself is represented as struggling to make the poem's final and most starkly drawn projection in longing for, and failing to make contact with, its dead mate. Reading inward from the external frame (that is, from the perspective of the adult speaker), we see increasingly the failure and artificiality of projection, as language is increasingly supposed to resemble music, speech turns increasingly to apostrophe, and the "little black thing . . . there in the white" (80) which is imagined to be the returning mate turns to complete darkness. The poem here forces us to recognize the total isolation of the self:

*O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!
O troubled reflection in the sea!
O throat! O throbbing heart!
And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.*

*O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!
In the air, in the woods, over fields,
Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!
But my mate no more, no more with me!
We two together no more. (121-129)*

Put another way, the poem undermines simplistic and merely oppositional distinctions between lyric and narrative as modes of pure subjectivity or objectivity respectively. The poem creates a series of contexts for understanding the song, increasingly naive as we read in toward the lyrical center, and increasingly complex and contradictory as we read out from the center toward the external narrative frame. Not simply is

the italicized portion of the poem supposed literally or actually to be the pure music of birdsong, but it can also be the spontaneous voice of the bird speaking to and for itself (motivated by the immediacy of the loss of its mate), as well as the spontaneous translation of that voice by the boy-poet. Further, it can be read, with only a slight diminution of our sense of its immediacy, as the spontaneous projection of meaning onto the meaningless song of the bird, with its content being determined by the story of loss that the boy creates. The context surrounding this is of the adult speaking spontaneously for the boy, motivated in turn by the sense of loss of his own past self. As we read in this outward direction, the center is made to seem increasingly artificial, increasingly *only* a projected lyric, so that the broader context of the adult speaker's desire to recreate his past comes to appear the real locus of the self and its immediacy. At the same time, that the center is a statement of the permanence of loss and isolation (the bird's despairing last notes) suggests how the poem as a whole can remain an elaborate construction of unfulfilled desire. The song, that is, has been produced by "the trio, each uttering" (140), and gravitating toward the same tragic end.

It is in these countermovements that the poem is produced and that the poet discovers his own productivity:

Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer, louder and more sorrowful
than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me, never to die.

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before what there in the night,
By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
The unknown want, the destiny of me. (147-157)

The "unknown want" is a sense of permanent incompleteness which has its source both in the story of the bird's lost mate and in the speaker's ability to transform his own consciousness to become a semblance of the bird's (anthropomorphized in good Romantic tradition, and repeated almost precisely in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"). Absence and presence are inextricably intertwined in the projection, in the movement to represent the connection which the adult makes with the boy, and the boy made with the bird. The bird's song thus projects the speaker in that its mournful strain simultaneously anticipates, and aids in creating, the boy-man's sense of his own incompleteness. For the boy, the recognition of the bird's loss presents him with an awareness of his own immediate inadequacy even as it extends powerfully his aware-

ness of the world. A sympathetic transposition of consciousness, as it opens the self to an awareness of others, reveals one's isolation on the return flight to self-consciousness, presenting the finiteness of one's place in the world and the vast expanses of subjectivity (and intersubjectivity) beyond one's reach. This very Keatsian theme is matured, so to speak, by its being put in the context of Wordsworthian remembering. The bird's song, the adult speaker recognizes, anticipates too the loss of past self from present, even as it represents the means to a partial recovery of that self, a recovery achieved in the blurring of identity of the two speakers that is the reenactment of the union of bird and boy.

At this point in the poem, past and present are so completely fused that the identity of the voice is lost; it is "in the night here somewhere" (158), like the bird's lost mate, and like the "clew" for which the speaker now searches that will fill in all final absence and make the "destiny of me" complete. The final "episode" of the poem (which begins at line 160) could represent either the boy on the beach after the bird's song has faded away or the mature poet returning to the same place—or better yet, an imagined flight back to the spot, a refiguring of childhood memory whose significance is only now being worked out. This seems to me to be the climax of the poem's lyricism, set up by the counter-movements I described above, and marked again here by unobtrusive mixing of past and present tense. The "word final, superior to all," the question of the origin of meaning and voice which the speaker asks in lines 160-164, is a repetition of the bird waiting for the voice of his mate, a sign that all longing and absence may somehow be filled. This is a desire for a supreme ending, an epitome of narrative desire, that will bestow final meaning on the speaker's life and the poem itself. The answer is Miltonic not just in syntax, but also in its ability to cast this desire in absolute terms:

Whereto answering, the sea,
Delaying not, hurrying not,
Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before day break,
Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
And again death, death, death, death,
Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd child's heart,
But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
Death, death, death, death, death. (165-173)

The sea is made to speak here just as the bird was made to speak earlier. That which is purely inarticulate ("hissing melodious") has been made articulate. The final word, "death," is the word supplied by the speaker, an act of consciousness in the face of the formlessness of the night, the sea, and the indistinct sound of the waves. This is not, as E. Fred Carlisle and others have argued, a scene of self-transcendence in which the poet

fuses with the vast realm of the nonself by "accept[ing] death unconditionally . . . ; [he] realizes that death is the ultimate limit which one must face in order to live."¹⁶ Such a reading sees the poem too purely as an autobiographical story, a tale of a single episode which is to have its own sufficient ending. The scene is rather a repetition of the act of lyric creation. That the sound of waves may be onomatopoeically represented by the repetition of the word "death" is clear enough. But the sound is only made to *mean* at all, just as the idea of annihilation is only made to mean at all, by the active creating consciousness of the perceiver. The sea's whispering is an explicitly figural representation of an awareness that meaning can spring entirely from the self in the face of total absence. Any act of fusion exists only in the private act of speaking, of bringing meaning forth, of giving life to inanimate signifiers. That "The sea whisper'd me" (183) is predicated on the self whispering the word "death" over the sound of the waves.

Bringing forth "the word up from the waves, / The word of the sweetest song and all songs" (179-180) is the central act which the poem attempts to represent and explain as the origin of Whitman's poetic impulse. The poem's narrative impulse is to represent this idea as having arisen in past experience and as a potential explanation for the pressures Whitman feels in producing and yet concealing himself in a poetics which for the most part aims to be "democratic." Until the *Sea-Drift* poems, that is, Whitman seems not to have thought of lyric as a feigned internal conversation only overheard by the public. "Out of the Cradle" represents an attempt to understand why creativity might matter for the individual as well as the community. It is lyrical in the way that it makes past experience figurative and demonstrates that, in tracing the origins of meaning, we are drawn inexorably to the borders of the self and the immediacy of the present moment. "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" explores the flip-side of this impulse, that meaning and identity can fail to exist because of the immateriality of consciousness. If in *Song of Myself* the self can expand into a universal form, in "As I Ebb'd" the self shrinks before an awareness of the infinity of time and space. The self on the shore here is not a sign of the possibility of standing "out from the main" and merging with a polymorphous otherness, as in "The Sleepers"; it is rather a sign of the smallness of the self, its inconsequentiality in the face of the ebb and flow of the "ocean of life." Next to the immensity of history and the material, the self is like the drifts of debris on the shore. Consciousness is reduced to "chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea-gluten, / Scum, scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt-lettuce, left by the tide" (11-12). The poet, "seeking types" for the self in the external, finds that that world fails to speak, and that even the self can fail to speak adequately for itself. The "real Me" has thus "with-drawn 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. (29-31)

The image of the unrepresentable self here pointing silently to the whole body of Whitman's poetry might be taken as an epigraph for the concept of lyric, since it succeeds in signifying the self's desire to create meaning even as it disparages its ability to do so, stung "Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all" (34). The poem is its own counter-statement, becoming "A limp blossom or two, torn, just as much over waves floating, drifted at random" (66). The transformation of thought from rotting chaff washed on shore to a blossom riding the waves is an act purely of the imagination. The self, its musings, and their representations are still just an infinitely small amount of stuff, but that they are turned from indistinguishable debris to something distinct riding above the waves is a matter, crucially, of the desire that it be so. The first and last step of Whitman's lyric is to initiate a dialogue between the self and the "ocean of life," the nonself, history and nature transformed from the third person to the second: "You up there walking or sitting, / Whoever you are" (70-71).

We can then answer those readers who see lyric as an escape into the illusory autonomy of introspection by pointing out that the material foundations of consciousness, which are felt by these critics to be elided in what they call the lyric turn, themselves create pressure for an *other* vantage point from which to evaluate them. A narrative revealing the determinisms of history, or of social and economic forces, only means something to us, itself becomes more than chaff and debris, when we understand what is at stake. And what is at stake is an origin in the self pointed to by lyric, however indistinctly, that takes part in the creation of meaning and is able in some way to resist these other determinations. Why indeed should we care about any self unless, as Whitman demonstrates, it has some core that desires to produce meaning for itself? It is this core, and lyric's ability to give it a place in writing, that I take to be that "realm of Freedom" wrested from Jameson's "realm of Necessity." Narratives may deliver an understanding of the constraints upon that Freedom, but lyric reminds us where it may be found and why it matters.

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NOTES

1 The form is the short poem which we may call "the lyric." Lyric desire can be expressed in various forms. The distinction between the form and the mode of lyric has been fruitfully discussed by Thomas McFarland, "Poetry and the Poem: The Structure of Poetic Content," in *Literary Theory and Structure*, ed.

Frank Brady, John Palmer, and Martin Price (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 81-113.

2 *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 19-20.

3 *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 348-352, 50-51.

4 Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See also Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

5 Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Michael Moon, *Disseminating Whitman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) and M. Jimmie Killingsworth, *Whitman's Poetry of the Body* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) are good examples of this. An exception is Karen Sánchez-Eppler, "To Stand Between: A Political Perspective on Whitman's Poetics of Merger and Embodiment," *ELH* 56 (1989) 923-949, who nonetheless makes lyric subordinate to what she sees as the poet's inclusive and democratic political goals. Thus Sánchez-Eppler argues that Whitman's combination of lyric and narrative allows him to "merge" with various forms of the Other while still being able to recognize difference.

6 That the act of interpretation often reduces lyric to narrative or dramatic situations does not make lyric a second-order narrative (though some examples of lyric clearly allow or invite this kind of reading). My aim is not to define a specific form of the lyric, so much as to draw attention to a desire in writing that is different from the desire I see in narrative for constructed and completed meaning.

7 See Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 74-77 for a summary of the various defenses of the logic and structure behind the whole poem. In spite of the fact that Allen notes that critics such as V.K. Chari, *Walt Whitman in the Light of Bedantic Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), have denied that there is any real narrative order in the poem (a conclusion affirmed too by John Lynen, *The Design of the Present* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969] and Robert Weisbuch, *Atlantic Double-Cross* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986]), he concludes his survey with the statement that "there is general critical agreement that . . . 'Song of Myself' has a structure and an order of development" (76). James E. Miller, *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), has offered an influential argument for a narrative structure to the poem as an "Inverted Mystical Experience" which enacts the reunification of the self (7).

8 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations of Whitman's poetry refer to page numbers of the *Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: Norton, 1965).

9 *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 21.

10 Stephen Black, *Whitman's Journey into Chaos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

11 *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 196. Killingsworth argues similarly that in the poem's struggle to present the theme of self-transcendence, it enacts a turn away from the ecstatic merging of the earlier poetry and a "desperate retreat into the self." Killingsworth, however, allows that the self may be "opened up" in the poem's embrace of death, which "becomes the metaphor for the psychological processes by which the self is transcended" (Killingsworth, 96).

12 *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966). Walter Benjamin makes a similar case in his essay "The Storyteller," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 101.

13 *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 960.

14 Because my reading of "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life" is intensive, I shall depart from my previous practice of citing page numbers from the *Comprehensive Reader's Edition* and cite line numbers instead.

15 Leo Spitzer, for instance, calls the poem "a straightforward narrative interrupted by the lyrical songs or 'arias' of the birds." "Explication de Texte" Applied to Walt Whitman's Poem 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,' *ELH* 16 (1949): 239.

16 *The Uncertain Self* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973), 156.