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ENTITLED Walt Whitman and the City as Nature

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WALT WHITMAN AND THE CITY AS NATURE

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Chapter One - Introduction

A non-descript, he is not so easily described, nor seen to be described. Broad-shouldered, rouge-fleshed, Bacchus-browed, bearded like a satyr, and rank, he wears his man-Bloomer in defiance of everybody, having these as everything else after his own fashion, and for example to all men hereafter. Red flannel undershirt, open-breasted, exposing his brawny neck; striped calico jacket over this, the collar Byroneal, with coarse cloth overalls buttoned to it; cowhide boots; a heavy round-about, with huge outside pockets and buttons to match; and a slouched hat, for house and street alike. Eyes gray, unimaginative, cautions yet sagacious; his voice deep, sharp, tender sometimes and almost melting. When talking will recline upon the couch at length, pillowing his head upon his bended arm, and informing you naively how lazy he is, and slow. Listens well; asks you to repeat what he has failed to catch at once, yet hesitates in speaking often, or gives over as if fearing to come short of the sharp, full, concrete meaning of his thought. Inquisitive, very; over-curious even; inviting criticisms on himself, on his poems--pronouncing it "pomes". --In fine, an egotist, incapable of omitting, or suffering any one long to omit, noting Walt Whitman in discourse. Swaggy in his walk, burying both hands in his outside pockets. Has never been sick, he says, nor taken medicine, nor sinned; and so is quite innocent of repentance and man's fall. A bachelor, he professes great respect for women.

--Bronson Alcott, Journals
ed. Odell Shepard (Boston, 1938).

In the spring of 1856, Bronson Alcott wrote in his Journal: "presently all Mexico, Cuba, South indefinitely, Canada north; pap and spoonmeats those named; --England intellectually for solids, and the Continental lores. And what else and beyond, who knows? --Then samples a few, most of them living, and last of her striplings: Webster, Greeley, Garrison, Greenough, Emerson. --Let's wait a little and see what shall come of so much promise and such great ambition." Odell Shepard, the editor of Alcott's Journal, comments in a footnote that it "is evident here that Alcott has been reading Leaves of Grass, a gift-copy of which, in the first edition, had been in Emerson's hands for some eight months when this note was written. Never before had Alcott spoken boastfully of America's mere bulk, or of her powers of 'absorption,' and seldom had his writing been so incoherent."¹

Who was this peculiar poet from New York City. Who was this poet from New York City that would make the members of the New England literary culture (even Thoreau) seem respectable by comparison. In the fall of the same year, after taking in a bit of Manhattan society, Alcott and Thoreau, both emissaries from Emerson, journeyed to Brooklyn to meet this curiosity named Walt Whitman. It was the evening of November 9, and Whitman was out,

¹Bronson Alcott, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, ed. Odell Shepard (Boston, 1938) 281.

not surprising considering his mother's description of his activities: "[Walt] has no business but going out and coming in to eat, drink, write, and sleep."² In want of Walt, the New England literati briefly conversed with Whitman's mother, "a stately and sensible matron."³ After allowing Thoreau to help himself to some warm biscuits (Whitman later recalls that "He was always doing things of the plain sort--without fuss. I liked all that about him"⁴), Walt's mother, to whom Walt was tenderly devoted, in warm conceit shared with the misplaced gentlemen "how good he [Walt] was and wise as a boy, how his four brothers and two sisters loved him, and how they take counsel of the great man he is grown to be now. Walt was always...for the weaker against the stronger."⁵ After some time, Thoreau and Alcott left with the promise from Walt's mother that if they returned the next morning, the poet (a late riser) would be sure to be there.

The next morning, Thoreau and Alcott, in the company of Mrs. Tyndall (Alcott's host in Manhattan joining the men in their "curiosity on the demigod") made the long awaited visit with the peculiar Brooklyn poet. Whitman greeted his visitors "kindly,

²Justin Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980) 219.

³Alcott, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 289.

⁴Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, 5 vols. (New York, 1906), I: 212, 213. Quoted from: Henry Seidal Canby, Thoreau (Boston: Beacon Press, 1939) 417.

⁵Alcott, The Journals of Bronson Alcott, p. 289.

yet awkwardly" as they climbed the two flights of narrow stairs in his mother's home. Whitman lived in the attic with his feeble brother. The room, characteristically unkempt, was littered with a few books (probably unopened but much discussed). The beds were not made, retaining the still warm outline of the sleeping Whitman. Over the mantel-piece were pictures of Hercules, Bacchus, and a satyr which prompted Alcott to ask "Which, now, of the three, particularly is the new poet here--this Hercules, the Bacchus, or the satyr?" In reply, Whitman begged Alcott not to put his questions "too close, meaning to take, as I inferred, the virtues of the three to himself unreservedly."⁶

After these polite preliminaries, Alcott was anxious to put Whitman in communication "direct with Thoreau...but each seemed planted fast in reserves, surveying each other curiously, --like two beasts, each wondering what the other would do, whether to snap or run." Alcott speculated that Thoreau perhaps feared "the possibility of Walt's stealing away his 'out-of-doors' for some sinister ends." Alcott guessed that the Brooklyn poet was disoriented by meeting "for once, and for the first time, found his match and more at smelling out 'all nature,' a sagacity potent, penetrating and peerless as his own."⁷

Thoreau and Whitman, both intellectual descendants of Emerson, parted in a confused and tempered recognition of the

⁶Ibid., p. 289, 290.

⁷Ibid., p. 290, 291.

self in the other. The meeting of Thoreau and Whitman is the undisclosed and irreconcilable paradox of American idealism. Whitman, urban bred, lover of the masses, romantic democrat, sensual and sinless lover of flesh, seemed confused by the Spartan moralist from Massachusetts: "Thoreau had his own odd ways...But Thoreau's great fault was disdain--disdain for men (for Tom, Dick, and Harry): inability to appreciate the average life--even the exceptional life: it seemed a want of imagination." Whitman didn't understand why Thoreau "couldn't put his life into any other life--realize why one man was so and another man was not so: was impatient with other people on the street and so forth. We had a hot discussion about it--it was a bitter difference: it was a rather surprise to meet in Thoreau such a very aggravated case of superciliousness. It was egoistic--not taking that word in its worst sense." For Whitman, Thoreau's introversion, his resentful isolation, was a barrier that could not be crossed. Whitman's love of the city and its masses made it impossible for them to "agree at all in our estimate of men--of the men we meet here, there, everywhere--the concrete man. Thoreau had an abstraction about man--a right abstraction: there we agree. We had our quarrel only on this ground." Whitman, as he was wont to do, left the meeting content. Thoreau was a comrade. Like Whitman, Thoreau was a man who was single-minded about his art. Despite their differences,

Whitman remembered Thoreau as "a man you would have to like--an interesting man, simple, conclusive."⁸

Perhaps it was Thoreau that was the more shaken by the meeting. Two progeny of Emerson, Whitman distant and Thoreau dear, had diverged. The prophet of nature, advocate of solitude, rustic partisan of restraint, self-reliance, and Puritan discipline had seen himself in a mirror obscured: "He is apparently the greatest democrat the world has seen. Kings and aristocracy go by the board at once -- they have longed deserved to." Yet of the two intellectual giants, Thoreau remained more confused. Although Whitman was perhaps deliberately eccentric, Thoreau was touched by the unusual magic of the Brooklyn poet. For weeks Thoreau brooded, yet he continued to be "still somewhat in a quandary about him, --feel that he is essentially strange to me...He said that I misapprehended him. I am not quite sure that I do. He told us that he loved to ride up and down Broadway all day on an omnibus, sitting beside the driver, listening to the roar of the carts, and sometimes gesticulating and declaiming Homer at the top of this voice."⁹

⁸Horace Traubel, With Walt Whitman in Camden, 212-213. Quoted from: Henry Seidal Canby, Thoreau, p. 417.

⁹Henry David Thoreau, The Writings of Henry David Thoreau, 6 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906) VI: 291. Quoted from: Henry Seidal Canby, Thoreau, p. 416.

The study of Whitman is a retreat. The study of Whitman is the grossest anomaly, a sort of nostalgic optimism, incongruous and inconsistent as the poet himself. In Whitman we can embrace an unblemished intellectual patriotism--revel in collectivity and brotherhood. In Whitman we recognize our maturity, our national loss. The career of Walt Whitman straddled our collective birth and ruin. It was a brief period of hope (of national plasticity) when a young nation believed in the possibility of a progression from a gross pursuit of material prosperity to religious democracy.

Whitman's career is an attempt to overcome the fragmentation, loneliness, and division of a democratic society. Whitman's career is a persistent attempt to reconcile opposition--the body and the soul, the individual and the community, nature and the city. Walt Whitman was the culmination of the American Romantic period. In one sense, Whitman is the inevitable outgrowth of Emerson, yet the artistic context of his work is entirely unique. Emerson was primarily an individualist, Whitman was a democrat. Although their values were essentially parallel, Whitman's work was more inclusive, drawing not just upon the national mood but also exploring the national environment. Whitman projected Emersonian principles onto his experience in the world. Emerson embraced the full range of experience intellectually, but it was Whitman that fully recreated experience. Emerson embraced the low and the

downtrodden, yet only Whitman imitated their language and imagined their environment.

"The American Poets," Whitman wrote in the Preface to the 1985 Leaves of Grass, "are to enclose old and new for America is the race of races." America, although the cultural descendent of all nations, must find inspiration in new places, in its natural splendor, in its charismatic cities. The American poet is inclusive "to be commensurate with a people...His spirit responds to his country's spirit...he incarnates its geography and natural life of rivers and lakes...To him enter the essences of the real things past and present." But most of all, the American poet must be a populist deriving his form and inspiration from the bottom. It was this beauty that Whitman discovered. The long ignored beauty of "the perpetual coming of immigrants--the wharfhem'd cities and superior marine...the noble character of the young mechanics and of all free workmen and workwomen."¹⁰ For Whitman, America's literature, especially its poetry, should reveal the soul of the nation itself.

¹⁰Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Prose, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982) 6, 7, 8.

Chapter Two - Whitman's Contemporaries

If the labours of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the poet will sleep then no more than at present, but he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of science itself.

William Wordsworth,
"Preface to Lyrical Ballads"

"One's-Self I Sing"

ONE'S-SELF I sing, I'mple 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 Male I sing.

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

Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

William Wordsworth from The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M.H. Abrahms et al., 2 vols. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1986) and Walt Whitman from Complete Poetry and Prose, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of American, 1982).

Perceptions of the city underwent a significant transformation from the age of Jefferson to the age of Emerson. The complexity of this transformation derives from the fact that the dichotomy of the urban and the rural became symbolic of certain oppositions that dominated American culture. The failure of studies like Morton and Lucia White's that place American intellectuals and artists in strict conflict with nascent urban communities is that they do not take into account the subtlety and qualification inherent in the arguments of characteristic figures like Jefferson and Emerson.¹ The debate surrounding the virtue of the country against the virtue of the city was shaped not only by aesthetic impulses, but also was determined by forces of political and literary nationalism.

The United States, especially after the Revolution, needed to search for new metaphors of cultural unity to represent a new nation. The fundamental questions of our culture (What is an American, and what should he do?) were now shrouded by a sense of urgency and uncertainty. Essentially, the character of the debate was shaped by a tremendous impatience to rid America of the last vestiges of European culture. Consequently, much of American literature and thought was interested in the exploration

¹Morton and Lucia White, The Intellectual Versus the City (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962).

of a new kind of life, the role of the American in the greater world, and the historical significance of the republican experiment. The international context of American culture, produced in an atmosphere of cultural insecurity, resulted in a spirit of contrast that attempted to discover and create an American identity that would set the young nation apart from Europe.

The search for new metaphors produced an ideal of rustic simplicity and democratic equality. Nature, thus, became not only an aesthetic ideal, but a symbol of American individuality. In Thomas Jefferson, America found its strongest spokesman for nature's power to produce virtuous citizens: "Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."² Later in his career, Jefferson came to accept the necessity of urban manufacturing as a national necessity. Emerson, like Jefferson, maintained a belief in the purity of nature. But his stance was also qualified by a democratic outlook that included the urban laborer. This qualification, unlike Jefferson's, was not inspired by political nationalism, but by an American artistic nationalism which rejected European elitism.

²Thomas Jefferson quoted in Thomas Bender, Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in 19th Century America (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1975). 3.

Throughout the writings of eighteenth century thinkers, one finds almost no philosophical commitment to the city. The dialectic of city versus country had not been established. About 1800, the American city was not yet characterized by the later phenomena of industry and immigration. Cities at this time were relatively small; Philadelphia had 70,000 people, New York 60,000, and Boston only 25,000. Urban writers, like Franklin, were essentially pragmatists. Franklin's concerns were dominated by civic improvement, economic opportunity, and intellectual discourse. Nowhere in Franklin do we find any sort of sentimental attachment to the attractions of urban life.³

In essence, the choice was not yet necessary. Cities were small enough that they did not inspire the condemnation of rural partisans. As a result, cities did not require the defense of urban dwellers like Franklin.

The anti-urban party that did exist was, most certainly, inspired by the cities of Europe. Jefferson's writings on the virtues of country life and the dangers of the city were inspired by his contact with the industrial revolution in Europe. Jefferson's experiences in Paris led him to believe that cities are "pestilential to the morals, the health and the liberties of man. True they nourish some of the elegant arts, but the useful

³White, The Intellectual Versus the City, p. 79.

ones can thrive elsewhere, and less perfection in the others, with more health, virtue and freedom."⁴

Jefferson's other reservations concerning the city were mainly political. Jefferson believed that property ownership was the foundation of a sound republic. Like Jefferson, Alexis de Tocqueville a third of a century later maintained that "in cities men cannot be prevented from concerting together and awakening a mutual excitement that prompts sudden and passionate resolutions."⁵ Similarly, Jefferson asserts continually in his Notes on the State of Virginia that private property, which is achieved by a rural farming populace, promotes both individual freedom and electoral responsibility.

Jefferson's support of an agricultural nation also served a pragmatic, personal political function. Jefferson's political rivals, the Federalists, supported a more urban platform that aided their political constituency. Consequently, the Federalists consistently opposed western expansion fearing the growth of western (hence agricultural) political power. True to his own political constituency, Jefferson effected the Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of the United States. The Louisiana Purchase helped to create, maintain, and prolong Jefferson's vision of America as a rural utopia. In essence, Jefferson

⁴Thomas Jefferson quoted in White, The Intellectual Versus the City, p. 17.

⁵Alexis de Tocqueville quoted in White, The Intellectual Versus the City, p. 23.

attempted to ignore the city: "the great mass of our people are agricultural; and the commercial cities, though, by the command of newspapers, they make a great deal of noise, have little effect in the direction of the government."⁶

Despite this philosophical opposition to urbanization, Jefferson by 1816 was ready to concede the necessity of manufacturing. In the words of Morton and Lucia White, Jefferson was "first a patriot, then a lover of the soil, and then a lover of chamber music."⁷ Thus, in the famous letter to Benjamin Austin, Jefferson admitted "We must now place the manufacturer by the side of the agriculturist... Shall we make our comforts or go without them, at the will of a foreign nation? He, therefore, who is now against domestic manufacture, must be for reducing us either to dependence on that foreign nation, or to be clothed in skins."⁸

Ralph Waldo Emerson, like Jefferson, was a nationalist early in his career, although his concerns were primarily cultural. Emerson's highest aim was to establish a cultural identity that was independent of British and Continental standards. Emerson's America, after the war of 1812, was now relatively certain of

⁶Thomas Jefferson quoted in Bender, Toward an Urban Vision, p. 6.

⁷White, Intellectual Versus the City, p. 13.

⁸Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to Benjamin Austin - January 9, 1816," The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1989) 662-663.

political and economic self-determination. Faced with the absence of indigenous art and culture (what did exist was indifference, imitation, or imported), Emerson called on his nation to "look from under its iron lids and fill the postponed expectation of the world with something better than mechanical skill."⁹

Toward this end, Emerson proposed that America develop art forms indigenous to this climate and soil. Emerson hoped that American artists would abandon European models in favor of subjects that reflected America's boundless nature and republican form of government. It was in the latter subject that Emerson offered a qualified acceptance of the city. Republican art would be democratic and include both the farmer and the urban laborer. In "The American Scholar," Emerson encouraged the American artist to explore something beyond "the sublime and the beautiful."

Although he didn't embrace the masses to the extent of the radical Jacksonians, Emerson urged and celebrated the American artist's willingness to seek "the literature of the poor, the feelings of child, the philosophy of the street, [and] the meanings of household life."¹⁰ Some critics suggest that Emerson's insistence upon the common and familiar is a departure from the Romantic ideal, but I would argue that this focus upon

⁹Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays, ed. Lazar Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 87.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 101, 102.

the ordinary is simply a new Romantic form unique to the United States. There seemed to be developing among writers in the early nineteenth century a sort of Romantic Realism that idealized commonplace experience. Writers like James Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, Washington Irving, and the frontier humorists seemed to be creating a national mythology not out of knights and kings, but out of the machinist, the carpenter, the trapper, and the prostitute. Emerson comments on this phenomenon in The Dial:

Our eyes will be turned westward, and a new and stronger tone of literature will result. The Kentucky stump-oratory, the exploits of Boone and David Crockett, the Journals of western pioneers, agriculturalists, and socialists, and the letters of Jack Downing, are genuine growths which are sought with avidity in Europe, where our European-like books are of no value."

Although American literature of the period was overwhelmingly concerned with nature, cultural nationalism inspired American writers to seek an egalitarian outlook that necessarily included a tempered acceptance of urban life.

This belief in equality looks forward (perhaps inadvertently) to the mythologization of the common American that we find in Whitman. What made America inherently great, for Emerson, was the basis on which its government was founded, equality and the protection of the natural rights of its citizens. Although Emerson's concerns were largely with the

"Ralph Waldo Emerson from an editorial in The Dial, April, 1843, quoted from Frederic Carpenter, Emerson Handbook (New York: Hendricks House, 1953) 156.

individual, his support of democracy was founded upon the idea that all men possess an equal capacity for wisdom: "the soul knows no person. It invites every man to expand the full circle of the universe."¹²

The supposition, asserted by critics like Morton and Lucia White, that intellectuals stood in strict opposition to the city is overstated. In many ways figures like Emerson were essentially reformers. Reacting to the horrors of European industrialization, Emerson hoped the American city could draw its character from the landscape. Like John Winthrop's "city on a hill" centuries earlier, Emerson believed that the city could be interwoven with nature.¹³ Although Emerson does not embrace the language of the laborer,¹⁴ he does integrate the environment of the laborer into nature and into his aesthetic ideal. In the poem "Merlin," which is essentially about the poet and the proper subjects of poetry, Emerson welcomes a certain roughness from verse. Unlike the "courtly muses" of Europe, the great American poet should be kingly and wild. To give expression to this ideal, Emerson draws his images from an urban world: "[the] bard/ Must smit the chords rudely and hard,/ As with hammer and mace."

¹²Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays, p. 112.

¹³James L. Machor, "Pastoralism and the American Urban Ideal: Hawthorne, Whitman, and the Literary Pattern", American Literature Vol. 54. No. 3 (October, 1982): 329-331.

¹⁴Theodore Gross, The Heroic Ideal in American Literature (New York: The Free Press, 1971) 9.

More importantly, the first stanza celebrates nature and the city equally as the proper subject of the poet:

Merlin's blows are strokes of fate,
 Chiming with the forest tone,
 When boughs buffet boughs in the wood;
 Chiming with the gasp and moan
 Of the ice-imprisoned flood;
 With the pulse of manly hearts;
 With the voice of orators;
 With the din of city arts¹⁵

Certainly Jefferson, Emerson, and their Americas were partisans of nature. Yet both figures found themselves forced by either position or ideology to make a qualified acceptance of the city. Jefferson, as a statesman first and foremost, eventually understood the importance of independent industry. Emerson, likewise, was trapped by his own philosophy. Emerson's insistence upon equality, as part of a distinct national culture, led to the acceptance of the city by later writers. This acceptance of the city by both figures was, in many ways, shaped by either a pragmatic economic nationalism or a cultural nationalism which searched for a new kind of art unique to America.

Although cities were largely responsible for the revolution and European influences laid the political foundations of the new state most Americans believed that their nation drew its character out of the landscape. At best, intellectuals sought a

¹⁵Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Merlin," The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1989) 1056.

reconciliation of opposing values. This perceived opposition is most clearly stated in Emerson's "Nature" where a dichotomy is established between "Understanding" which is man's rational and analytical faculty and "Reason" which is man's intuitive and poetic understanding of the universe. "Understanding," then, being associated with science and manufacturing represents the city while "Reason" is the companion of the country: "the city delights the Understanding. It is made up of finites: short, sharp, mathematical lines, all calculable...The Country, on the contrary, offers an unbroken horizon, the monotony of an endless road, of vast uniform plains, of distant mountains, the melancholy of uniform and infinite vegetation; the objects on the road are few and worthless, the eye is invited ever to the horizon and the clouds. It is the school of Reason."¹⁶ It is this notion that separates Emerson most clearly from Whitman.

Emerson's dualistic approach to the country and the city paralleled that of Jefferson. Emerson values only the cultural polish that cities bestow. Only nature provides for the satisfaction of the spirit: "That uncorrupted behavior which we admire in animals and in young children belongs to him, to the hunter, the sailor--the man who lives in the presence of Nature. Cities force growth and make men talkative and entertaining, but they make them artificial." As Jefferson was faced with the

¹⁶Ralph Waldo Emerson, Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. E.W. Emerson and W.E. Forbes (Boston, 1909-14), V, 310-11.

dilemma of Paris versus the Virginia countryside, Emerson faced what he perceived to be an unresolvable paradox: "I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish city facility and polish."¹⁷

Whitman is most profoundly separated from the legacy of the Enlightenment and Romanticism by the value he placed on the community. Whitman was not interested in division, but in distinction and fusion. In contrast, Thoreau and Emerson broadened the individualism of the Enlightenment into a philosophy of isolation and detachment. Thoreau, commenting on the regenerative spiritual benefit of rural living, becomes the poet and the practitioner of individualistic alienation and fragmentation: "The values it [rural life] espouses are essentially those of the isolated individual, living in nature and free of all social attachments."¹⁸ Emerson, likewise, argues that the nature of society necessarily robs individuals of their virtue:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but

¹⁷Ralph Waldo Emerson quoted in White, Intellectual Versus the City, p. 30, 27.

¹⁸White, Intellectual Versus the City, p.30.

names and customs...Whoso would be a man, must be a non-conformist.¹⁹

Nathaniel Hawthorne, like Emerson, searched for a means to integrate the opposing values of urban and rural life. Although much of Hawthorne's work runs counter to the prevailing intellectual climate, his response to ascendant industrialism was relatively characteristic. Hawthorne however attempts to overcome the opposition of values through a sort of kinetic symbiosis. In The Blithedale Romance, the movement of the protagonist between the country and the city attempts to harmonize the individual with the complete range of his culture: "The best that can be hoped for is that the immersion in nature can form the basis of a life giving return to the city."²⁰ It is in this sense that Hawthorne is able to achieve some degree of reconciliation as suggested by Miles Coverdale's Boston Memory of Brook Farm:

Whatever has been my taste for solitude and natural scenery, yet the thick, foggy, stifled element of cities, the entangled life of many men together, sordid as it was, and empty of the beautiful, took quite as strenuous hold upon my mind...All this was just as valuable, in its ways, as the sighing of the breeze among the birch-trees, that overshadowed Eliot's pulpit.²¹

¹⁹Emerson, Selected Essays, p. 178.

²⁰White, Intellectual Versus the City, p. 347.

²¹Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Blithedale Romance (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) 146-7.

Despite Coverdale's concession, the spiritual division between the city and the country remains. Coverdale's concession is more a psychological resignation than a celebration of urban virtue. Perhaps more characteristically, "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" suggests Hawthorne's difficulty with the paradox of reconciliation. The story's youthful protagonist embodies his young nation's attempt to fuse the ordered and enlightened qualities of cosmopolitan London with the ideals of rural America. Upon entering Boston, the youthful protagonist "with as eager an eye, as if he were entering London city...[anticipates] the stillness of [his] native woods, here in the streets".²²

Unlike in The Blithedale Romance, the ideal of rural and urban integration is never achieved. The American city, in its destruction of Robin, becomes a haunting counterpart of the universally feared European city: "events of the evening: the rude rebuffs and threats he receives, the advances of a 'pretty mistress,' the laughter echoing down the labyrinth of narrow streets, and the ominous appearance of a dual complexion man".²³ Robin's fear suggests America's unwillingness to contemplate or accept urban "low" culture. Like most of his contemporaries, Hawthorne embraces the city only to the extent that its masses conform to the values of rustic America.

²²Nathaniel Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1962-1977), XI, 210, 226.

²³Ibid., p. 243.

Fear of the city in the United States, even into the mid-nineteenth century, was still essentially a premonition of the arrival of the insidious city of Europe. Fear of the city is perhaps best characterized by Thomas Cole's series of allegorical painting entitled "The Course of Empire." The five panel series depicts the inevitable course of the republic from "The Savage State" through "The Arcadian or Pastoral," which suggests a model agrarian state. The third panel, "The Consummation of Empire," depicts an immense and prosperous metropolis. Nature, which is featured in the first two panels is overwhelmed by the appearance of the city in the third. The final panel, entitled "The Funeral Knoll of Departed Greatness," is a desolate painting of a crumbling empire. The theme of the series is obvious. Urbanization inevitably brings ruin upon the nation.²⁴

James Fenimore Cooper's comment upon the Cole series, "the work of the highest genius this country has ever produced,"²⁵ was not surprising considering that one of the central ideas that shapes Cooper's novels is a fear of the rise of an urban democratic mob. Although Cooper ridicules the aristocratic pretensions of Judge Temple in the most popular of his Leatherstocking Tales, The Pioneers, the ridicule is effected in an easy comic manner. Cooper instead identifies the unfettered masses as the true threat to national sensibility and balance.

²⁴Bender, Toward and Urban Vision, p. 8.

²⁵Ibid., p. 8.

The real threat to the existence of Cooper's hero, Natty Bumppo, is the middle classes in both an economic and a geographical sense. The inhabitants of the western settlements (those that follow frontiersmen westward and that are distinguished in a sociological sense by an agricultural and family oriented lifestyle), without the outward restraint of a nobility or the inward restraint of a characteristic natural man like Natty Bumppo, rape the land and destroy its beauty. Perhaps the most famous episode in the novel, the senseless slaughter of the pigeons in the name of sport, ominously pre-figures progressively more destructive disruptions of the environment by humankind. The Pioneers is in this sense tragic because it presents an irreconcilable paradox. Its heroes are an aristocratic pretender without any formal role in society (and thus diminishing power) and a noble savage that can only redeem society by retreating from it.

Herman Melville, perhaps to a greater extent than any other American writer, explored the dialectic of nature and civilization which is, in essence, a larger manifestation of the division between the city and the country. In one of his less prominent works, "Benito Cereno," Melville contemplates the extreme possibilities of a future America. The story features an act of mutiny which can be interpreted in several ways. First, the ship is of Spanish origin which could be understood as a symbol not only of the decaying societies of Europe, but also as

the very embodiment of a civilization based upon deference and order. The ship's decay represents the decadence and complacency that results from the corruption of man's natural relationship to the earth. It would be easy to understand the mutiny as a heroic rejection of traditional civilization as witnessed by the celebration of the primitive Negroes and repetition of symbols of rejected control. But Melville's work is more complex. The original portrayal of Negroes as "naked nature...pure tenderness and love,"²⁶ eventually evolves into something more terrifying. Toward the end of the story Melville's gentle "savages," although inhabitants of nature, become vicious killers. Essentially, we are faced with one of the most fundamental choices of early nineteenth century America, whether to seek "redemptive experience in nature or a renewed discovery of traditional moral civilization."²⁷

It is interesting to note that despite Melville's social organicism, his work is based upon irreconcilable contradictions. Civilization or the city, representing our rational impulses, is engaged in interminable conflict with the contrary irrational impulses of nature. In Pierre; or, The Ambiguities, Melville employs a strategy similar to Hawthorne, to reconcile what he perceived as the opposing values of the city and the country

²⁶Herman Melville quoted in Harold Kaplan, Democratic Humanism and American Literature (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1972) 17.

²⁷Kaplan, Democratic Humanism and America, 6.

through an integration by parallel experience. Despite Pierre's unkind fate in the novel, Melville does offer a modicum of reconciliation in Pierre's divergent experience: "to have been born and nurtured in the country, surrounded by scenery whose uncommon loveliness was the perfect mold of a delicate and poetic mind...But the breeding of Pierre would have been unwisely contracted, had his youth been unintermittingly passed in these rural scenes." Pierre's upbringing received its complement in his "annual visits to the city; where naturally mingling in a large and polished society, Pierre had insensibly formed himself in the airier graces of life, without enfeebling the vigor derived from a martial race, and fostered in the country's clarion air."²⁸

Despite the perceived barrier between the city and the country, it was precisely the rise of the industrial city that made rustic romanticism possible. The distance of concentrated populations in urban areas allowed an idealized notion of the countryside to surface. The city, which inspired fear of the resulting displacement of social transformation, gave rise to a reactive sense of America as an Edenic wilderness. Whitman, in some ways, was the principle figure in this movement given the

²⁸Bender, Toward an Urban Vision, p. 15.

Adamic nature of his poetic persona. Yet Whitman's Edenic America did not exclude the city.²⁹

Whitman, though, was not alone in his attempt to reconcile seemingly discordant elements in an increasingly colossal and rationalized society. Concern for the growing fragmentation of social life that resulted from the displacement of the traditional and cohesive community inspired a profusion of urban reformers committed to the creation of a new sense of civic identity. Essentially, many reformers simply attempted to bring nature to the city. Dr. Elisha Huntington, the mayor of Lowell, called for the creation of natural reserves within the boundaries of the city: "We have grown up to a city of twenty-six or seven thousand inhabitants, and with a fair prospect of increasing numbers; -we are being hemmed in by walls of brick and mortar, shutting out the pure air of heaven." To remedy the problem, Huntington called for the establishment of a "public mall or promenade...the value of such, I will not say luxury, but such a necessary of life, as free, open public grounds, is incalculable; we cannot estimate it."³⁰

The period of Whitman's "long foreground" was one that witnessed almost a complete transformation of the industrial city's character. Early in the city's development, industry

²⁹R.W.B. Lewis, "The New Adam," Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962) 107-118.

³⁰Bender, Toward an Urban Vision, p. 88.

relied primarily upon temporary labor imported from the countryside. This allowed the city to remain primarily a center of commerce. Nathan Appleton, one of the founders of Lowell, in a letter to his brother reveals in telling fashion the original notion of the role of the city: "We are building a large machine I hope at Chelmsford...merely an aggregate of individuals"³¹ assembled for the purpose of manufacturing. Yet as the American city matured, industry increasingly came to rely upon newly arrived foreign laborers which created a permanent urban population. Consequently, city governments began to feel the need come to terms with the long range concerns of its people. It would require a complete transformation of outlook for the city to evolve from an economic unit to a well integrated social congregation.

Emile Durkheim argues in his The Division of Labor that a transformation in the division of labor radically alters the nature of social bonds. Traditional societies are held together upon the basis of similarity. All of society's members perform the same tasks, confront the same environment, and thus embrace common values. Pre-industrial societies are naturally cohesive which Durkheim terms mechanical solidarity. Industrial societies are based upon diversity. Prosperity is enhanced by each of society's members performing a distinct role. Industrial societies consequently rely upon the diversity and individuality

³¹Ibid., p. 99.

of their people. Although industrial societies are based upon the interdependence of individuals, Durkheim argues that social bonds are eventually conflicting, weakened, or non-existent. The establishment of an organic solidarity, the term Durkheim uses to describe the social bond in industrial societies, requires the formation of abstractions that would serve as the collective environment for a diverse population.

In the United States, the search for a social bond was an especially unique problem. Without even a common history, the heritage of colonial fragmentation, the influx of an increasingly heterogeneous immigrant population, an economic and political system based upon individualism, and with the splintering of religion, the United States lacked the formal institutions necessary for its population to gain a sense of collectivity. Frederick Law Olmstead, the mid-century social reformer, commented that our lives in the rapidly rationalized social world are structured:

to merely avoid collision with those we meet and pass upon the sidewalks we have constantly to watch, to foresee, and to guard against their movements...Our minds are thus brought into close dealings with other minds without any friendly flowing toward them, but rather a drawing from them...People from the country [are] conscious of the effect of their nerves and minds [of] street contact...[The city] has the same tendency--a tendency to regard others in a hard if not always a hardening way.³²

³²Ibid., p. 176.

It wasn't until the arrival of Whitman that the city received a mythology of its own. Reacting to the situation described above by Olmstead (and deeply disturbed by it), Whitman attempted to artistically overcome an urban world based upon fear and suspicion.

Chapter 2 - A Brief Biography

"I Sit and Look Out"

I sit and look out upon all the sorrows of the world, and
upon all oppression and shame,
I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish
with themselves, remorseful after deeds done,
I see in low life the mother misused, her children, dying,
neglected, gaunt, desperate,
I see the wife misused by her husband, I see the treacherous
seducer of young women,
I mark the ranklings of jealousy and unrequited love
attempted to be hid, I see these sights on the earth,
I see the workings of battle, pestilence, tyranny, I see martyrs
and prisoners,
I observe a famine at sea, I observe the sailors casting lots
who shall be kill'd to preserve the lives of the rest,
I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons
upon laborers, the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;
All these--all the meanness and agony without end I sitting
look out upon,
See, hear, and am silent.

--Walt Whitman, Leaves of Grass

From Whitman, Complete Poetry and Prose.

On May 31, 1819 in West Hills, New York (a small town on Long Island) a child was born to Walter Whitman and Louisa Van Velsor. The child, also named Walt Whitman, was the second child in a family of seven children. In 1823, the senior Walter Whitman, sometimes a successful and sometimes an unsuccessful housebuilder, moved the family to Brooklyn hoping to capitalize on the explosion of the construction economy. It was in Brooklyn that Whitman received most of his formal education, attending public schools from about 1825 to 30.

Between 1831 and 1835, the young Whitman was an apprentice printer working at Brooklyn's Patriot and Star. Just fifteen years old, Whitman remained in Brooklyn when his family moved back to Long Island in 1833. After the printing district was destroyed by two fires in 1835, Whitman was unable to find a position which forced him to return to his family on Long Island in 1836. For the next five years, Whitman variously taught and was involved with local publishing. For a brief period, Whitman founded a Long Island weekly called the Long Islander.

In the years between 1842 and 1848, after moving back to Brooklyn, Whitman worked in various positions for several newspapers including the Aurora, the Evening Tattler, the Star, and Brooklyn's Daily Eagle. Whitman's New York newspaper career was interrupted for four months in 1848 by a brief editorship of

New Orleans' Daily Crescent. Homesick, Whitman and his brother Jeff (who also found employment with the New Orleans paper) returned to New York.

The next five years found Whitman in various odd jobs including editing a "free-soil" newspaper (Brooklyn Freeman), running a printing shop, freelance journalism, and at last a serious devotion to poetry. Finally, during the first weeks of July, 1855, Whitman himself published 795 copies of his first edition of Leaves of Grass, most of which were unsold. Although the first edition of Leaves of Grass was not a great popular success, it did capture the attention of New England's literary society. Specifically, Emerson praised the book in a letter to Whitman as "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America has yet produced".¹ The Concord gentleman's enthusiasm for the young poet from New York mellowed when Whitman published the letter along with twenty-one new poems in the 1856 edition of the book. Whitman published Emerson's letter without his consent along with a lengthy response. Despite Emerson's new-found reservations, he still sent Whitman's book to Thomas Carlyle with an uncommonly insecure letter which reveals a critically uncertain Emerson:

One book, last summer, came out in New York, a nondescript monster which yet has terrible eyes and buffalo strength, & was indisputably American, --which

¹Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Letter to Walter Whitman - July 21, 1855," The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1989) 1077.

I thought to send you; but the book...wanted good morals so much, that I never did. Yet I believe now again, I shall. It is called 'Leaves of Grass,' --was written & printed by a journeyman printer in Brooklyn, N.Y. named Walter Whitman; and after you have looked into it, if you think, as you may, that it is only an auctioneer's inventory of a warehouse, you can light your pipe with it.²

It was four years (1860) before Whitman published another edition of Leaves of Grass. From 1857 to 1859 Whitman was involved in various projects that included the editorship of the Brooklyn Times and contemplation of a work entitled "The Great Construction of the New Bible." Much of the rest of Whitman's time was spent at Pfaff's restaurant in the company of New York bohemia that included among others William Dean Howells.

The Civil War changed Walt Whitman's life. Whitman's optimism was made untenable and almost absurd by the events of his world. Whitman became less of a rowdy, transforming himself into a sort of gentle mystic. When Walt's brother George was wounded at Fredericksburg in December of 1862 Walt decided to journey to the front. In 1863, Whitman stayed in Washington, D.C. and volunteered in the military hospitals as a wound-dresser and general companion of the sick. While in Washington, Whitman obtained a series of patronage jobs that were often in jeopardy because of the "obscene" nature of his poems. For example,

²Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Letter to Thomas Carlyle - May 6, 1856," The Norton Anthology of American Literature, ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1989) 1078.

Whitman lost his job in the department of Interior when Secretary James Harlan learned of his authorship of Leaves of Grass.

The fourth edition of Leaves of Grass which was published in 1867 was accompanied by a tremendous rise in Whitman's international stature. William Michael Rossetti's appreciation "Walt Whitman's Poems" in London's Chronicle was quickly followed by an English edition of Whitman's poems selected by Rossetti. In 1870, Whitman published the fifth edition of Leaves of Grass, Democratic Vistas, and Passage to India which solidified Whitman's reputation among European intellectuals inspiring a letter from Tennyson and an adulatory poem from Swinburne.

The rest of Whitman's life was occupied by various readings, traveling, writing and ill health. In 1891 Walt Whitman published the final edition of Leave of Grass. On March 26, 1892 at Mickle St. in Camden, New Jersey, Walt Whitman died at the age of seventy-two.

On April 14, 1887, Charles Eliot Norton, a professor from Harvard attended a reading by Walt Whitman in honor of the twenty-second anniversary of Lincoln's assassination. Norton, who shared a box with James Russell Lowell, attended Whitman's Madison Square Theater reading with such dignitaries as John Hay, Mark Twain, sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, and Andrew

Carnegie.³ Over thirty years before, he had published an early notice of Leaves of Grass, describing it as "a curious and lawless collection of poems." Despite Norton's ambiguous and rather upright response to the collection, he seems to have very quickly understood the essential paradox of the collection:

it is a mixture of Yankee transcendentalism and New York rowdyism, and, what must be surprising to both these elements, they here seem to fuse and combine with the most perfect harmony. The vast and vague conceptions of the one, lose nothing of their quality in passing through the coarse and odd intellectual medium of the other...a fireman or omnibus driver, who had intelligence enough to absorb the speculations of that school of thought which culminated at Boston some fifteen or eighteen years ago.⁴

In essence, Whitman's biography, like his poetry, is comprehensive absorption of a full range of experience. Whitman's background is a curious combination of rural and urban life, and constant movement in between. In a sense, Whitman brought the curiosity, the simplicity, and the creativity of Walden Pond to the city. Unlike most of his Romantic contemporaries, Whitman did not idealize rural life: "there is as much wickedness in country as in towns." Painfully recalling his own experience, Whitman bitterly remembered how "the country child is put to hard work at an early age, he soon loses the elasticity of youth, and becomes round-shouldered and clumsy. He

³Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life, p. 29.

⁴Charles Eliot Norton, "a curious and lawless collection," Critical Essays on Walt Whitman, ed. James Woodres, (Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1983) 19. Reprinted from Putnam's Monthly, 6 (Sept. 1855), 321-23.

learns to smoke, chew, and drink, about as soon as his town prototype...The excessive fatigue of a hurried harvest, in the hottest season of the year, thoroughly breaks the constitution of many a boy and young man." As much as it may seem, Whitman was not a strict partisan of the city. He normally didn't perceive of the two environments as being in opposition. I would expect that this diatribe was only a reaction to urban intellectuals that unusually idealize the country: "No matter what moralists and metaphysicians may teach, out of cities the human race does not expand and improvise so well morally, intellectually, or physically."⁵

As recalled by George Whitman, Whitman's dislike of the country stemmed almost entirely from his aversion to farm work: "Long ago we lived on a farm, Walt would not do farm work. He had things he liked better". Yet it would be erroneous to consider Whitman as standing in strict opposition to rural life. His hostility to the country is more an abomination of work than a hatred of nature. What Walt valued above all other things was the "genuine, inbred, unvarying loafer...the ability to tide over, to lay back on reserves, to wait, to take time...What was Adam, I should like to know but a loafer."⁶

Whitman was easy going. Self-described as "one of the roughs," Whitman associated mostly with laborers like Peter

⁵Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life, p. 157.

⁶Ibid., p. 82, 83.

Doyle, a driver and railroad hand. He relished the idiom described by Norton as a "vocabulary...usually banished from polite society."⁷ In his An American Primer, Whitman included hundreds of American slang expressions like "shin-dig," "spree," "bender," "bummer," and "So long" a delicious American--New York--idiomatic phrase at parting."⁸

Walt Whitman's life was alternately spent between urban and rural scenes. His biography is a kind of passive attraction to "life everywhere active." Where other writers take pains to distinguish and dissect their worlds, Whitman molded his environment be it on the farm or on the city street into a unity of contact with the human spirit. From his days "boarding round...moving from house to house and farm to farm, among high and low" to his habit of staying "perched on the box alongside the driver...[of] the Broadway stage," Whitman experienced the universal life "behind the scenes, and in the masses." For Walt Whitman, a fixture on the Bowery, the city scene was a self-portrait: "Things are in their workingday clothes, more democratic, with a broader, jauntier swing, and a more direct contact with vulgar life."⁹

⁷Norton, "a curious and lawless collection," p. 19

⁸Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life, p. 15, 229.

⁹Ibid, p. 83, 245, 264.

Chapter 4 - Prose Works

I say we had best look our times and lands searchingly in the face like a physician diagnosing some deep disease. Never was there, perhaps, more hollowness of heart than at present, and here in the United States. Genuine belief seems to have left us. The underlying principles of the States are not honestly believ'd in, (for all this hectic glow, and these melodramatic screamings,) nor is humanity itself believ'd in. What penetrating eye does not everywhere see through the mask? The spectacle is appalling. We live in an atmosphere of hypocrisy throughout...The depravity of the business classes of our country is not less than has been supposed, but infinitely greater. The official services of America, national, state, and municipal, in all their branches and departments, except the judiciary, are saturated in corruption, bribery, falsehood, mal-administration; and the judiciary is tainted. The great cities reek with respectable as much as non-respectable robbery and scoundrelism...The best class we show, is but a mob of fashionably dress'd speculators and vulgarians...I say that our New World democracy, however great a success in uplifting the masses out of their sloughs, in materialistic development, products, and in a certain highly-deceptive superficial popular intellectuality, is, so far, an almost complete failure in its social aspects, and in really grand religious, moral, literary, and esthetic results. In vain do we march with unprecedented strides to empire so colossal, outvying the antique, beyond Alexander's, beyond the proudest sway of Rome. In vain have we annex'd Texas, California, Alaska, and reach north for Canada and south for Cuba. It is as if we were somehow being endow'd with a vast and more thoroughly-appointed body, and then left with little or no soul.

--Walt Whitman, Democratic Vistas

From Whitman, Complete Poetry and Prose.

Towards the end of his life, Walt Whitman wrote that:

the most profound theme that can occupy the mind of man--the problem on whose solution science, art, the bases and pursuits of nations, and everything else, including intelligent human happiness...depends for competent outset and argument, is doubtless involved in the query: What is the fusing explanation and tie-- what the relation between the (radical, democratic) Me, the human identity of understanding, emotions, spirit, &c., on the one side, of and with the (conservative) Not Me, the whole of the material objective universe and laws, with what is behind them in time and space, on the other side?'

The overriding principle that not only shaped Whitman's more familiar poetry, but also his prose work is the absolute unity of energy in the universe. Whitman as a writer responded to the rapidly evolving relationship of the individual to transforming social forms. The Whitmanian protagonist is the isolated hero in space. The protagonist is both active and passive in the sense that he both populates this space with objects from perceptive experience and endows those objects actively with an invisible filament transmitting the spirit of the universe. Whitman argued "That the same general and particular intelligence, passion, even the standards of right and wrong, which exist in a conscious and formulated state in man, exist in a an unconscious state, or in perceptible analogies, throughout the entire universe of external Nature." Consequently, Whitman maintained, there is, despite

'Walt Whitman, Prose Works (Philadelphia: David McKay, 1925) 175.

disparate appearances, unity in nature "in all its objects large or small, and all its movements and processes--thus making the impalpable human mind, and concrete Nature, notwithstanding their duality and separation, convertible, and in centrality and essence one."²

It is in the above sense that Whitman is both the first and most relevant American writer of modernity. Although Whitman's intellectual sense was not well developed (the Hegelian influence seen above was essentially recycled through Carlyle), he intuitively integrated the most fundamental issue facing a democratic society, how to resolve the need for interpersonal and environmental communion and solidarity with a culture based upon individualism and movement. The fundamental metaphor Whitman utilized to resolve this essential paradox is water in its various forms: "the whole mass of everything steadily, unerringly tending and flowing toward the permanent...as rivers to oceans." Human movement then does not suggest social dysfunction but is merely a manifestation of "creation's incessant unrest...the processes of growth, of existence, of decay, whether in worlds, or in the minutest organisms, are but motion...indeed, what is Nature but change, in all its visible, and still more its invisible processes?"³ A consequence of the uprooting democratic flux of America, the arrival and departure

²Ibid., 175.

³Ibid., 176, 196, 197.

of foreigners, the unceasing surge westward, Whitman's own life that averaged a new dwelling every year, was that the American current required a sense of stability in movement that Whitman provided. The sweeping character of all of Whitman's writing offered an abstract America, an immense common place of origin, that gave the whole land a feeling of personal history and familiarity.

The diversity and fragmentation of democratic life was evidenced most intensely in the nascent metropolis of Whitman's era. Unlike other writers that withdrew in horror from urbanization, Whitman integrated the city as simply a more recent manifestation of the universe's energy. The city then is an organic entity of steel and science, the natural offspring of the human intellect. Justin Kaplan, one of Whitman's biographers, describes Whitman's book, Leaves of Grass, "a great tree with many growth rings, a cathedral, a modern city like his million-footed Manhattan,"⁴ in a way that remains faithful to Whitman's belief that "the whole earth...full surcharged with modern scientism and facts," endows the modern environment with "infinite variety," creating a beautiful collage of "the past, the surroundings of to-day, or what may happen in the future, the contrarities of material with spiritual, and of natural with artificial." According to Whitman, all of the manifestations of the universe, scientific and natural, are "all...but necessary

⁴Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life, p. 21.

sides and unfoldings, different steps or links, in the endless process of Creative thought, which amid numberless apparent failures and contradictions, is held together by central and never-broken unity."⁵

Throughout Whitman's writings we are confronted with instances when city life is metaphorically linked to nature. This metaphorical link provides the reader with the sense of the unity behind the disparate appearances of the two environments. In the New York Aurora, where Whitman was often at liberty to sketch various urban scenes, he described New York's Broadway and Chatham Streets as "the two great channels of communication." In the same article, "Life in New York," the masses of people are described as "a slight human stream" and the newspapers are said to give off "effulgent light." Also, the activity of the city is portrayed as cyclical implying that the work of the city is of an elemental character: "a little before sunrise...you may behold a slight human stream...As the sun mounts the horizon...the working-day appearance of Broadway is changed...At sunset, the direction of the current is contrary to what it was in the morning--setting upward, that is."⁶ The metaphorical link and the cyclical construction of the article is essentially an argument that the city dweller is not irreconcilably divorced

⁵Whitman, Prose Works, p. 176.

⁶Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman of the New York "Aurora," ed. Joseph Jay Rubin and Charles H. Brown (State College, Pa.: Pennsylvania State UP, 1950) 19-20.

from the natural rhythm and beauty of the universe; only the superficial appearance of his environment has changed.

In Specimen Days, we find the practice of juxtaposing natural and artificial images together to achieve integration to an even greater degree. The section entitled "Hudson River Sights" features a consistent alternation between manmade beauty and uncultivated splendor existing side-by-side. "Hudson River Sights" suggests that both the traditional and modern works of man and created nature can coexist undiminished. The passage begins with a description of the railroad molded into its natural environment: "It was a happy thought to build the Hudson river railroad right along the shore. The grade is already made by nature." Whitman, always entranced by spectacle, was delighted to "see, hear, the locomotives and cars, rumbling, roaring, flaming, smoking, constantly, away off there, night and day...I like both sight and sound. Express trains thunder and lighten along...coming steadily on like a meteor." The locomotive provides no threat to the more traditional lifestyle of the fishermen that next catches Whitman's eye. In the same paragraph, Whitman contemplates "the shad fisherman [who] go forth in their boats and pay out their nets."⁷ The railroad, the potent symbol of industrialization that frightened Henry David Thoreau so, is, for Whitman, only a part of the beauty of the landscape. Although a prelude to industrialization, Whitman

⁷Whitman, Prose Works, p. 132-133.

does not acknowledge the railroad's threat to the more primitive life of the fisherman.

The two disparate contexts of human activity seen above are then counterbalanced by a characteristically Romantic depiction of a natural scene. The image is of an eagle, both soaring above and a part of the rest of the landscape. Like the locomotive which is described in natural terms (as a meteor), the eagle is conceptualized using metaphors whose sources are artificial: "sometimes...a great eagle will appear over the river, now soaring with steady and now overhended wings--always confronting the gale, or perhaps cleaving into, or a times sitting upon it. It is like reading some first-class natural tragedy or epic, or hearing martial trumpets. The splendid bird enjoys the hubbub-- is adjusted and equal to it--finishes it so artistically."⁸ Whitman's Hudson River scene contains the ideal society in miniature; nature and traditional and modern man are not only integrated but mutually dependent.

Essentially, Whitman was interested in the visual spectacle. Color, light, glitter, and movement are an assertion of life, be it in the city or in nature. Toward the end of his life Whitman had gradually begun to retreat into the quiet contentment of the country, yet he remained attracted to the same phenomena in nature that captured the fancy of his youth in the city. Consequently, Whitman's New York sketches sound remarkable

⁸Ibid., p. 132-133.

similar to his country chronicles: "forty-thousand finely-dress'd people, all in motion, plenty of them good-looking, many beautiful women...close-spread, thick-tangled, (yet no collision, no trouble,) with masses of bright color, action...[a] prodigality of locomotion, dry goods, glitter, magnetism." The above quote, although obviously from the city, relies almost entirely upon images of color and motion. Whitman's eye is drawn to the same marvels in nature: "Such as play of colors and lights, different seasons different hours of the day...an incomparable sunset shooting in molten sapphire and gold, shaft after shaft...The rich dark green of the tulip-trees and the oaks, the gray of the swamp-willows, the dull hues of the sycamores and black-walnuts, the emerald of the cedars (after rain,) and the light yellow of the beeches."⁹

Essentially, Whitman is the greatest of spiritual democrats. The entire universe is pregnant with mystical energy. Whitman is a deceptive writer in the sense that his work, especially in the long catalogues that appear throughout his poetry and prose, suggests static observation in the external world. Approaching Whitman, though, from this perspective is not only faulty, but it is debilitating. More precisely, the catalogue and the objects that inhabit it are merely suggestive of the unity between not only the various objects in the neutral environment, but the perceiver and the perceived. Consequently, while "restlessly

⁹Ibid., p. 133, 93.

haunting" around on the banks of the Potomac, Whitman makes virtually no distinction between the cosmic departure of "Venus, large to the last, and shining event to the edge of the horizon...[and] all the stars of Orion" and the "many lamps twinkling --with two or three chimneys...[or] the fisherman's little buoy-lights." Both stars and lamps are "so pretty, so dreamy--like corpse candles-- undulating delicate and lonesome on the surface of the shadowy waters, floating with the current."¹⁰ Stars and lamps are equivalent; flickering light surrounded by darkness. That one emanates from the universe and one from man is of little importance. For Whitman, mankind exists still in a kind of unfallen state. Consequently, there is a sort of innocence and earthy authenticity in all of mankind's productions. The street-light is as much a part of the natural universe as the sun, the townhouse as uncultivated as the cave.

For Whitman, the city is the achievement of the democratic ideal. The city is the birth-place of cultural diversity, a community of communities where the immigrant, the rich and the poor, and the Protestant and the Jew live in model circumstances under one civic identity. Even while writing for the relatively aristocratic Aurora, Whitman's perspective remained democratic: "let us open the flood gates of our charity, and give the youngsters a half dime, that they may revel in the tid bits that have evidently so taken their fancy. There! the fashionable may

¹⁰Ibid., p. 128.

laugh our notions to scorn--but we feel more satisfaction from having bestowed on those awkward boys a ten minutes' joy, than if we had received sunny greetings from the proudest belle in Broadway".¹¹

The city's public life is what almost entirely concerns Whitman. The city's public institutions (the markets, the avenues, the parks, the ferries, the boarding houses, etc.) level distinctions of class and origin. Descending upon the park, Whitman invites the "gentle lady, or busy merchant, or indolent idler, or working man, or student" to lock arms and circulate the park. Strolling among the gentle grasses, Whitman and his readers encounter a delightful group of young boys intent upon a game of marbles. Not only does Whitman admire the spiritedness of their youth, but he also exclaims the virtue of their "heterogeneous mixture."¹²

Apart from his attempt to develop the sense of abstract community, Whitman also shares the manner in which the citizens of the city work to reduce the feeling of anonymity within the sprawling metropolis. Although Whitman does not discuss the importance of neighborhoods, he does maintain that the institution of the boarding house replaces the support structure that is provided by family and community in small towns. Not only does the keeper of a boarding house offer "solid

¹¹Whitman, Aurora, p. 22.

¹²Ibid., p. 42.

accommodations, for a moderate price,"¹³ but she also oversees the morality and affairs of her patron. The boarding house is a universal feature of urban life whose presence is felt within every economic class.

In a short story for the Aurora, Whitman tells of a young man from the country "whose face seemed to carry a letter of recommendation" who applied to one of the more "fashionable" boarding houses near city hall. Given the young man's genteel manners and cheerful demeanor, the landlady accepted him into her home genially. The young man, employed as a clerk in the office of a well known chemist and apothecary, was accepted happily into the family of residents, and the landlady was pleased that the newcomer's transition into the home was uneventful. Also, Whitman points out, "he was modest and polite in his deportment, and his youth, delicacy, and good looks made him a special favorite with the ladies."¹⁴ One day the landlady, after serving breakfast, left her gold watch (which was relatively valuable) upon her table upstairs. Being engaged in housework, the landlady did not think to retrieve her watch. Besides, she trusted her boarders implicitly. When she finally returned to the second story to find her watch, it was gone. After a long and thoughtful consideration of possibilities, the landlady

¹³Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 28-29.

determined that the new boarder was probably behind the disappearance.

Like a mother, "the lady was grieved, perhaps, quite as much at thought of the youngster's wickedness, as of her own loss." After dinner, the landlady confronted the young man in private with her suspicion. The young lad confessed, and "he did so, trembling, and his lip evidently quivering...Tears started into the youth's eyes...[and] the terrified creature...shook like one with an ague." After a brief enquiry, the landlady was able to determine the location of the watch, and with the help of the terrified boarder, it was returned. The landlady, after questioning her young boarder, discovered "that this youth was the son of a very respectable and wealthy farmer in a western county of New York."¹⁵

The young clerk left the country with both the consent and encouragement of his parents who, Whitman dryly confesses, were "no doubt under the influence of that mischievous idea which makes country people think it better for their sons to be counter jumpers than American farmers." Like many young men from the country, the contrite clerk "had come to New York, without a home, and ignorant of all the arts and tricks of city life." Unfortunately, the landlady ascertained, he became victim of "a clique of designing sharpers." Whitman's story concludes with the landlady engaging the young man in "another conversation with

¹⁵Ibid., p. 28-29.

the young novice in wickedness. She spoke to him as a sorrowing mother would speak to a beloved son. He expressed contrition, and made vows of amendment. He left the house, promising to return again at dinner."¹⁶

On the surface, Whitman's little story would seem like a warning for naive visitors from the country about the dangers of the city. And at one level this is accurate. Whitman was often condescending toward "'people from the country,' (you can always tell a rustic in Broadway, from his ill-at-easeness)."¹⁷ But in a deeper sense, Whitman's tale is essentially an allegory that suggests the city as a place where morality can thrive and where wayward youth are cared for. In Whitman's story, the youth's temptations are strictly external; the boarding house as a surrogate family is inviolate. Apart from the anonymous and cryptic tempters, whose presence is only spectral, human nature is essentially moral. When confronted with his sin, the youth becomes penitent and is returned to the moral fold. The most important feature of the story is the character of the landlady. As the keeper of the boarding house, she becomes the extended family of an uprooted youth. In the absence of family and without the conforming pressure of small town life, the keeper of the boarding house becomes the moral pillar of the community. Her concern not only for her property, but for the moral standing

¹⁶Ibid., p. 28-29.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 49.

of the young clerk suggests that the immense size of the city can be broken down into more personal parts. Finally, the boarding house offers a kind of middle ground. What Whitman terms the "ill-at-easeness" of the country visitors is contrasted with the fearlessness at which the keeper of the boarding house confronts the young clerk's tempters. City life within the support structure of a personal community recommends a joyful ease among the crowd and with one's fellow men as opposed to the implied misanthropy and distrust of the isolated country visitor.

In a sense, Whitman was reacting to the prevailing notion that the city was a haven for immorality and chaos. In his various excursions as the editor of the Aurora, Whitman visited a whole host of institutions dedicated to the upkeep of traditional morality. As evidenced by the story of the country clerk, Whitman seemed especially concerned with the welfare of youth confronted with the urban setting. Although Whitman identifies several areas that desire reform, the reform impulse itself is predicated upon optimism and hope. In his visit to the Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents, Whitman shares a reform success in lifting a group of "incipient thieves, and all, perhaps, more or less steeped in that vice, which runs through the Atlantic cities--loaferism--reduced to a state of the most perfect discipline." The two hundred lads, under the direction of the keepers of the reform society, all "marched in their dining hall with the most admirable precision...took their

places, standing at the table, until all were mustered, and then, at a signal from the chief officer of the establishment, grace was said, and the boys all sat down to a plain but plentiful meal." The lesson of the juvenile reform effort is that the city requires and can achieve new solutions to overcome the decay of the social order that urban life seems to inspire. The Society for the Reformation of Juvenile Delinquents seems to work upon the same principle as the new economic order that arose with industrialization. As in the economic sphere, the socialization of children, which was once only the realm of the family, now requires the intervention and aid of large public institutions. Unlike an agrarian society that presents few temptations and choices, the urban world must educate its youth and prepare them for a variety of roles. The Society for Reform was successful, according to Whitman, because it has taken boys "recognized by their countenances as having been paraded in the Sessions and before the Police...[and made] a marked improvement. For the meager hand dog look of the loafer, they have exchanged that of the student, and instead of the physiognomy of the incipient abstractionist, we beheld the orderly demeanor of the rising mechanic."¹⁸

Whitman's reform impulse did not merely concern itself with delinquent youth. A radical Democrat for much of his life, Whitman fought against the rampant materialism that threatened to

¹⁸Ibid., p. 49.

destroy the humanity of his beloved city. The city was a special problem because its inherent size led to a lack of accountability. Whitman, as an editor, devoted sizable space to what he termed "the disgraceful proceedings in relation to the Baptist grave yard in Chrystie street." Whitman understood the special responsibility of the newspaper as the collective organ of the people. Like Whitman the poet, Whitman the editor understood his voice as an aggregate of voices. In the graveyard case, Whitman attempted to protect the voiceless multitude from "this unholy spirit [which] seems to have no bound or check." Industrialism had rendered the people powerless against a faceless and colossal corporation of interests that "form insolent and selfish cliques, that stand out against the government itself, and laugh at punishment." In characteristic fashion, Whitman reiterates that he speaks not just for himself, but for an aggregate of voices: "It imbues the popular mind with a disposition to connive at villainy, if joined with wealth--to palliate crime, if its consequences are estate--to smile gently at a swindler, if he has only been a swindler of millions." Whitman, in this sense, was the protector of his city's humanity. In an environment where size forces anonymity, Whitman's requests were characterized by a kind of collective individuality appealing to his readers' emotional sense:

Even the battle spots where our old soldiers fought and died, are not beyond the reach of this pollution...But it has been reserved for our city [Whitman's italics] to put the damning climax to these deeds that disgrace

humanity. A set of miserable wretches...rendered themselves infamous by desecrating the very grave, in order to add something to their ill won heaps of gold. We are almost at a loss for terms of opprobrium severe enough to characterize the conduct of these man and brutal money worshippers.¹⁹

Whitman's insistence upon the humanitarian over the commercial suggests not only his concern for the spiritual well-being of the urban populace, but also offers hope for the possibility of the creation of true political solidarity within the city which could protect the powerless against organized interests.

Most of all, though, the city was a place, in Whitman's imagination, that could be enjoyed. The city was a place where children didn't always require reform, but a place where they could play carelessly in the park. One gains the impression from other intellectuals of the era that urban life was a nightmare for all but the cultivated classes. Whitman, though, shows the other half of the city. The city where "troops of children, large and small, appear on every side!" The city where "with an independent air the mason looks around upon the fleshy wares...servant women; cooks; old maids...careful housewives of grades high and low; men with the look for a foreign clime; all sorts and sizes, kinds, ages, and description." Whitman disputes the city characterized by others as a haven for pestilence and ill health. Whitman visits the marketplaces and walks the streets eyeing "clear complexions, healthy look, [and] bright

¹⁹Ibid., p. 41.

eyes." Taking in "an array of rich, red sirloins, luscious steaks, delicate and tender joints, mutttons, livers, and all the long list of various flesh stuffs," Whitman is led to exclaim "the condition of the republic is not so grievous after all; we cannot be on the verge of despair, when such spectacles as these may be witnessed in the land!"²⁰

In September of 1855, Moncure Conway, a friend of Emerson's, bought a copy of Leaves of Grass to read on the steamer from Boston to New York. With the encouragement of Emerson, Conway, while in New York, decided to make the short trip to Brooklyn to pay Whitman a visit. After much searching, Conway found Whitman at the Romes printing office "sitting of a chair without a back." Whitman was wearing a "blue striped shirt, opening from a red throat...His manner was blunt enough also, without being disagreeably so." Walt, pleased to receive his first literary visitor, decided to travel to Manhattan by ferry with Conway. Conway was amused by Whitman's "swagger" and his habit of walking with his hands in his pockets. Walt saluted various fruit peddlers, ticket-takers, and other curious characters he met along the way. He professed to be a part of the "laboring class...by choice, [and] that he is personally dear to some thousands of such...who love him but cannot make head or tail of his book." Conway's experience with Whitman in his various circumstances, especially riding the ferry, left Conway both

²⁰Ibid., p. 21, 22, 20.

intrigued and with a broadened perspective: I went off impressed with the sense of a new city on my map, just as if it had suddenly risen through the boiling sea."²¹

The ferry (and the city street) commonly represents in Whitman's prose the inclusive, forward moving and diverse quality of American urban life. Whitman was friendly with the various characters that haunted such spots. He visited his "old pilot friends, the Balsirs, Johnny Cole, Ira Smith, William White, and my young friend Tom Gere." He frequented the "Fulton Ferry" and other urban gathering places to circulate among "New York's crowded and mixed humanity." Whitman's ferries are a kind of communal circus where the ordinary distance and mistrust between strangers is abandoned. It is a dream for modern humanity, free of suspicion, open to encounter the exposed mystery of their fellow travellers. The ferry offered contact with the infinite variety of city dwellers, all of whom engaged Whitman's imagination: "Lizzie, the pleasant-manner'd waiting-room woman...mothers with beves of daughters, (a charming sight)-- children, countrymen--the railroad men in their blue clothes and caps--all the various characters of city and country." As evening begins the ferry becomes a sort of bacchanalian festival when urbanites, liberated from work, begin to stream toward the ship. Whitman wanders "inside the reception...[witnessing] business bargains, flirting, love-making, eclairsissements,

²¹Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life, p. 212-213.

proposals--pleasant, sober-faced Phil coming in with his burden of afternoon papers--or Jo, or Charly (who jump'd in the dock last week, and saved a stout lady from drowning), to replenish the stove."²²

For Whitman, city institutions provide an excellent opportunity for the removal of not only social barriers, but also of economic and cultural barriers to interpersonal communion. Even a mere private institution, the boarding house, allows people of various backgrounds to live under one roof and share their lives. In what Whitman offers as the typical boarding house, the residents come from almost every economic class and cultural circumstance: "Mr. K...is a good humored New Englander...W. is a dry goods keeper in Greenwich street, and H. an elderly bachelor who has a clothing store down town. A. is a Jewish gentleman of Chatham street...N., a salesman in a shop nearby."²³ Whitman's experience in the New York area even placed him in contact with "old Mose," one of the liberated West Hills slave. "Old Mose," (freed by a friend of Whitman's grandfather), because he reached ninety-four before he died, attracted the curiosity of the young Whitman. Late in his life, Whitman remembered the ancient Negro as "very genial, correct, manly, and cute, and a great friend of my childhood."²⁴

²²Whitman, Prose Works, p. 17, 126.

²³Whitman, Aurora, p. 23.

²⁴Whitman, Complete, p. 1174.

In the Preface to the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass,

Whitman writes:

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies...but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors...but always most in the common people. Their manners speech dress friendship--the freshness and candor of their physiognomy--the picturesque looseness of their carriage...their deathless attachment to freedom...the President's talking off his hat to them not they to him--these too are unrhymed poetry.²⁵

Democrats did exist before Walt Whitman (impossible as that is to imagine), but no writer before him fully involved himself in the world of the common man. Whitman understood his writing to be so entirely authentic that he refused to acknowledge his literacy descendants. Of the writers of local color, Whitman hesitantly demurred to the fact that "it is very grim, loves exaggeration, & has a certain tartness & even fierceness,"²⁶ but he still reserved his experience with real laborers as pure poetry: "You get more real fun from half an hour with them [common men] than from all the books of all 'the American humorists.'"²⁷

Like the American humorists, though, it was slang (especially urban slang in Whitman's case) that shaped Whitman's work. Whitman's true love was language which led to his inclusion of unelaborated words and phrases throughout his

²⁵Ibid., p. 6.

²⁶Kaplan, Walt Whitman: A Life, p. 27.

²⁷Whitman, Complete, p. 1170.

writing. November Boughs, a series of miscellaneous reflections Whitman published late in his life, features a lengthy chapter upon the American idiom, "Slang in America," which is described as an "attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism, and express itself illimitably, which in highest walks produces poets and poems." Whitman goes on more explicitly to tie slang, and consequently poetry, to the democratic mass: "Language, be it remember'd, is not an abstract construction of the learn'd, or of dictionary-makers, but is something arising out of the work needs, ties, joys, affections, tastes, of long generations of humanity, and has its bases broad and low, close to the ground." Poetry then is the outgrowth of laborers, from both city and country, "the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with the actual land and sea."²⁸

Whitman's fascination with slang, born out of a love for common humanity, led his opportunistic ear to discover the essential character of a people. Slang suggests for Whitman a common point of departure where the laboring classes bond through a reliance upon a common language. Recalling late in his life a conversation between two "young fellows," Whitman reveals how idiom can engender a sense of sympathy and understanding among working people: "I heard this among the men of the city horse-cars, where the conductor is often call'd a 'snatcher' (i.e.

²⁸Ibid., p. 1166.

because his characteristic duty is to constantly pull or snatch the bell strap, to stop or go on.)" With that introductory note, Whitman goes on joyfully to detail the rest of the conversation, and offer a translation: "Two fellows are having a friendly talk, amid which, says 1st conductor, 'What did you do before you was a snatcher?' Answer of 2d conductor, 'Nail'd.' (Translation of answer: 'I work'd as carpenter.')." In slang, Whitman found a subject long concealed in "its numberless submerged layers and hidden strata." Dialect is the robust genius of the working classes. Whitman's appropriation of slang was the long awaited elevation of the laboring classes in their own right. This separates Whitman in the sense that he offers a kind of cultural pluralism that recognized the inventiveness of all peoples.²⁹

The American Romantic movement was essentially a rural phenomenon. American Romanticism, though, presented a rather difficult paradox. On the one hand it was democratic in that it embraced the common and familiar while on the other hand in its language and subject it was elitist and overly intellectual. Perhaps the best example (although Emerson's essays are ridden with contradiction) is James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo. Here we have an almost savage character that variously alternates from almost indecipherable dialect to elevated verse. Likewise Emerson, although professing the virtue of "the hoe and the spade," maintained that "among eminent persons, those who are

²⁹Ibid., p. 1168, 1170.

dear to men are not of the class which the economists call producers".³⁰ In fact, of the six men termed great in "Representative Men," only one, Napoleon is of a vaguely democratic character and none are involved with industrialization or the modern city.

Whitman, however, canonized "producers" in epic terms. Perhaps insecure with his argument, Whitman made reference to workmen in relation to the classic heroes of Western literature. During a visit to Central Park, it dawned upon Whitman that "few appreciate...the Ulyssean capacity, derring-do, quick readiness in emergencies, practicality, unwitting devotion and heroism, among our American young men and working-people--the fireman, the railroad employees, the steamer and ferry men, the police, the conductors and drivers--the whole splendid average of native stock, city and country."³¹

Among working people, Whitman found the kind of easy camaraderie absent in the formality of the elevated classes. Laborers consistently displayed characteristics Whitman was wont to celebrate. The early Whitman, exaggerating his crudity, modeled his public persona after the urban working classes. Sketching the typical Broadway omnibus driver, Whitman's portrayal looked largely like a self-portrait: "They had immense

³⁰Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Representative Man" quotes in Gross, Heroic Ideal, p. 12.

³¹Whitman, Prose Works, p. 134-135.

qualities, largely animal--eating, drinking, women--great personal pride, in their way." Regardless, Whitman once again lionized his beloved laborers in terms once considered appropriate only to the aristocratic heroes of the ancients. Writing in 1881, Whitman recalled a more unaffected and fleshly New York populated by "a strange, natural, quick-eyed and wondrous race." Whitman mourned the disappearance of the "old Broadway stages" and their drivers who were so noble "not only Rabelais and Cervantes would have gloated upon them, but Homer and Shakespeare would." Whitman, as was his habit, wrote of their language, remembering "how many exhilarating night-times I have had--perhaps June or July, in cooler air--riding the whole length of Broadway, listening to some yarn, (and the most vivid yarns ever spun, and the rarest mimicry)." Whitman, in response, spent the evening "declaiming some stormy passage from Julius Caesar or Richard, (you could roar as loudly as you chose in that heavy, dense, uninterrupted street bass)." Recalling the scene, Whitman maintained that he sought the drivers "not only for comradeship," but he also found that they made "great studies." Perhaps a little embarrassed, Whitman acknowledged, despite how much he thought "the critics might laugh," that "those Broadway omnibus jaunts and drivers and declamations and escapades undoubtedly entered into the gestation of 'Leaves of Grass.'"³² One often leveled criticism of Whitman on the city is his neglect

³²Ibid., p. 18-19.

of the horrible living conditions faced by the poor. This criticism is largely accurate but it must be remembered that Whitman's was a highly poetic imagination that often refused to acknowledge circumstances that did not subscribe to his literary scheme. For example, it is largely thought that the series of sicknesses and strokes Whitman suffered after the Civil War was a crisis of confidence in a nation whose division shattered temporarily his idealism. Consequently, it is not surprising that Whitman's only mention of poor living conditions is an isolated sentence within a long piece on a healthy New York. Whitman's real purpose in the passage was to argue that contrary to popular belief, that the city "even the height of the dogdays, there is a good deal of fun about New York, if you only avoid fluster, and take all the buoyant wholesomeness that offers." Faithful as ever to his city, Whitman maintains that "People forget when it is hot here, it is generally hotter still in other places. New York is so situated, with the great ozonic brine on both sides, it comprises the most favorable health-chances in the world." Whitman concludes with the sole somber note in the passage: "If only the suffocating crowding of some of its tenement houses could be broken up."³³

Despite this blindly optimistic focus on the city's strengths Whitman's sympathy, at root, was always with the laborer. Whitman was highly aware (as his own life indicates) of

³³Ibid., p. 186.

the restorative value of nature. Recuperating himself from a stroke, Whitman hoped the leaves of his own book could "carry ray of sun, or smell of grass or corn, or call of bird, or gleam of stars by night, or snow-flakes falling fresh and mystic, to denizen of heated city house, or tired workman or workwoman...to serve as cooling breeze, or Nature's aroma, to some fever'd mouth or latent pulse."³⁴

It was his concern for the urban laboring classes that prompted Whitman to make a qualified endorsement of the materialism that was shaping the culture of his nation. Whitman understood American history to be an inevitable progression from economic prosperity to spiritual democracy. The city, then, was a necessary instrument advancing the growth toward a cultural revolution that would effect universal brotherhood. Recalling an interview with a St. Louis newspaper, he maintained that a distinctive American literature had been delayed because "our work at present is to lay the foundations of a great nation in products, in agriculture, in commerce, in networks of intercommunication, and in all that relates to the comforts of vast masses of men and families." It was only after "materialistic prosperity in all its varied forms...inter-communication and freedom are first attended to" that the United States could achieve a more reflective community based upon the genius "in the bulk of our people." This cultural transformation

³⁴Ibid., p. 82.

would be unprecedented because of the unique position of the United States as the only nation implicitly founded upon ideals of equality: "Other lands have their vitality in a few, a class, but we have it in the bulk of the people. Our leading men are not of much account and never have been, but the average of the people is immense, beyond all history."³⁵

Whitman, though, celebrated industry in its own right. The city with its concentration of factories is the amalgamation of exponential energy. The machine is the outgrowth of human zeal made infinite. Industry gathers unto itself masses of "hurrying crowds, vehicles, horse-cars...[and] rich goods." Industry, in this sense, does not devour humanity, but is an extension of it. Whitman's journey west was not filled with horror at the massive stock yards, but amazement. His reaction was one of childlike wonder and celebration of ingenuity discovering the "immense establishments for slaughtering beef and sheep, 5000 in a flock. (In Kansas city I had visited a packing establishment that kills and packs an average of 2500 hogs a day the whole year round."³⁶

Throughout Whitman's prose one witnesses the articulation of the city not only as a positive feature of America's social development, but also as a canvas of modernity on which Whitman attempts to re-cast his nation's conception of the individual in an industrial society. Part prophecy, part imagination, Whitman

³⁵Ibid., p. 153.

³⁶Ibid., p. 155.

envisions a city (whether real or ideal) based upon love of brother and sisterhood, diversity, and energy. This was the active Whitman. The Whitman who, by assertively impressing his vision of life upon the larger environment, attempted to recreate his world from his own image. This was his role as a poet. This was his role when there shall "be no more priests." "Their work is done," he exclaimed in the Preface to Leaves of Grass, "they may wait awhile...perhaps a generation or two...dropping off by degree. A superior breed shall take their place...the gangs of kosmos and prophets en masse shall take their place. A new order shall arise and they shall be the priests of man, and every man shall be his own priest." The poets becoming the priests of the republic [shall] be interpreters of men and women and of all events and things. They shall find their inspiration in real objects today...They shall arise in America and be responded to from the remainder of the earth."³⁷

It was Whitman the poet then, interpreter of all objects and things, that was left to explain and resolve the contradictions within and between the individual and society. In this role, Whitman confronted the problem of urbanization and industry in a nation that was once a natural paradise. It was in this role, as a poet, that Whitman constructed an ordered mystical system that would reintegrated the individual with the mass: "To-day, I should say--defiant of cynics and pessimists, and with a full

³⁷Whitman, Complete, p. 24-25.

knowledge of all their exceptions--an appreciative and perceptive study of the current humanity of New York gives the directest proof yet of successful Democracy, and of the solution of the paradox, the eligibility of the free and full developed individual with paramount aggregate."³⁸

³⁸Ibid., p. 824.

Chapter Five - Poetry

Through me many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and
dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars--and of wombs,
and of the fatherstuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.

-Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

More and more, too, the old name absorbs into me--MANNAHATTA,
"the place encircled by many swift tides and sparkling
waters." How fit a name for America's great democratic
island city! The work itself, how beautiful! how
aboriginal! how it seems to rise with tall spires,
glistening in sunshine, with such New World atmosphere,
vista and action!

-Walt Whitman, Memoranda

From Whitman, Complete Poetry and Prose.

To an even greater extent than in his prose works, Walt Whitman's poetry was concerned with the problem of individualism and the aggregate in a fragmented and industrialized society. Walt Whitman in his poetry achieved both an identification between the writer and the reader and a union of the individual objects (both animate and inanimate) within the poem. Writing from the perspective that there is a universal soul behind individual appearance, Whitman attempted to imagine the relationship between distinct entities: "Out of the dimness opposite equals advance....Always/ substance and increase,/ Always a knit of identity....always distinction..../ always a breed of life."¹

In "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun," one is essentially presented with an unresolved poem that still manages to capture, in miniature, the reconciliation of opposites (between nature and the city in this case) that appear throughout Leaves of Grass. The poem is divided into two cantos. The first canto opens with an invocation to nature: "Give me the splendid silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling,/ Give me juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red from the orchard,/ Give me a field where the unmow'd grass grows,/ Give me an arbor, give me the trellis'd grape,/ Give me fresh corn and wheat, give me serene-moving animals

¹Whitman, Complete, p. 28.

teaching content." Nature in its autumnal abundance is the portrait of serenity and peace. Included among the Drum-Taps collection, the first canto of "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" is the gloated and violent aftermath of war. Nature is the weary refuge of the dispassionate, an Edenic homecoming for the tired soldier: "Give me solitude, give me Nature, give me again O Nature your primal sanities!/ These demanding to have them, (tired with ceaseless excitement, and rack'd by the war-strife)."²

Nature's quiet equilibrium, though, is an incomplete symbolic element of a round personality. The second canto of the poem complements the unfulfilled whole of the first section. In a series of fragments and undeveloped ideas, the second canto asserts an eclectic urban world that feeds a frenzied passion that envelops its citizens: "Give me faces and streets--give me these phantoms incessant and endless along the trottoirs!/ Give me interminable eyes--give me women--give me comrades and lovers by the thousand!/ Let me see new ones every day--let me hold new ones by the hand every day/ Give me such shows--give me the streets of Manhattan!."³

The two cantos, through parallel yet contradictory imagery (both cantos have an almost identical development), achieve a unity of salutary experience imprinted upon unified opposites.

²Ibid., p. 446.

³Ibid., p. 447.

"Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" can be interpreted on several levels. As touched upon above, the contradictory elements of the poem, abstracted into an environmental metaphor, represent the elements of a divided personality and conclude in a structurally implied unification. The poem's structure is uncertainly affirmative. Both cantos conclude without any definite resolve. Consequently, reunion is implied rather than explicit. Yet the certain kinship of nature and the city is apparent, through the use of parallel imagery. Both environments offer an abundance of sensual delights. The richness and color of the sun and fruit in the first section is duplicated by the sights and sounds of faces and music in the second: "Give me the splendid silent sun with all his beams full dazzling,/ Give me juicy autumnal fruit ripe and red" and "Give me faces and streets--give me these incessant and endless along the trottoirs...Give me Broadway, with the soldiers marching--give me the sound of the trumpets and drums." Although still proffering unity, the poem's two halves express contradictory moods. In the first canto, nature's suggestion of serenity is presented in terms (among others) of sexual satiation: "Give me for marriage a sweet-breath'd woman of whom I should never tire." Conversely, the city intimates a tension and vitality that is accented through a kind of unfulfilled sexual electricity and infinite passion: "give me women--give me comrades and lovers by the thousand."⁴ The environment is both

⁴Ibid., p. 446, 447.

suggestive of and interminably woven into the subjectivity of the single narrator which achieves a kind of total completion and unity.

As a Civil War poem, "Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun" is a symbolic reunion of violently divided halves. The unacknowledged reconciliation of distinct environments suggests the now incomplete, but destined unity of divided halves.

For many critics of Whitman on modernity (see Machor and Tanner),⁵ issue is taken upon whether Leaves of Grass is a program of development or a homogeneous artistic world (this is a critical dispute determining how seriously we take the book as a relevant historical document). I would argue that it is neither. The impulse that led Whitman to the substance beyond the reality (the visible and the hidden spirit of an object) forced him to assert a dual reality. Attempting to grapple with the Civil War and its ensuing greed, Whitman found himself pigeonholed into a complex metaphysical position. Whitman needed to find a tenable way to resolve his optimistic notions of human nature with the more unsavory "reality" of post-Civil War America. The answer he came up with is a kind of division between a person's being and a person's actions. This division allowed Whitman to write both celebratory poems of the human spirit while also writing prophetic poems that decry the perversion of the human spirit. A

⁵See Stephen L. Tanner, "Whitman as Urban Transcendentalist," South Dakota Review, Vol 14, No. 2. (Summer, 1976) and Machor, "Pastoralism and the American Urban Ideal."

division of this sort renders Machor and Tanner's dispute irrelevant. Whitman created both a homogeneous artistic world that celebrated the communal spirit of individuals while still lambasting the corrupting influence of the social customs and the self-restraint that prevents this spirit from surfacing.

This separation explains the dichotomy between the lonely and the social Whitman. A convenient example of these two phenomena would be the dramatic difference between two short poems, "To You" and "To Him That Was Crucified." "To You" is a relatively un-assertive two line poem that tends to get swallowed up in the collection, yet I think it expresses the characteristic qualities of pathos and despair that are evinced by Whitman's poems of solitude. "To You" is a less self-confident poem illustrating the anonymity of the loner in a crowd: "Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me, why should you not speak to me?/ And why should I not speak to you?"⁶ The shortness of the poem evinces an innocent simplicity that speaks of a frustrated separateness. In essence, "To You" is about the loneliness engendered by customary suspicion and remoteness in the modern city.

"To Him That Was Crucified," although ostensibly written to Jesus Christ, is at a deeper level addressed to an abstract other. Apart from the title, the poem could be about almost any intimate relationship. "To Him" is characteristic of Whitman's

⁶Whitman, Complete, p. 175.

communion poems where singular and universal kinship is achieved. The narrator of the poem attains a singular connection ("My spirit to yours dear brother"), but this relationship is not exclusive. The singular communion that introduces "To Him" is later expanded into a more universal fellowship: "We, enclosers of all continents, all castes, allowers of all theologies, / Compassionaters, perceivers, rapport of men, / We walk silent among disputes and assertion, but reject not the disputers nor any thing that is asserted."⁷ While the sentiments in "To Him" are inauthentic and inhibited, they represent a timeless and fundamental urge. While "To You" represents the surfaces of life in the city (the maintenance of cold isolation between people), "To Him" depicts the inner life, the universal drive to overcome fear and introversion.

The issue of communion drove one critic, John Snyder, to compose a list of connecting terms in Leaves of Grass which are reproduced here in abbreviated form:

contact	folding	enveloping
embrace	counterpart	fibre
knit	accrue	circling
entretied	fused	cope ⁸

⁷Ibid., p. 510.

⁸John Snyder, The Dew Love of Man. (Paris: Mouton Press, 1975) 13.

That Snyder goes on to list twenty-seven other terms (which he describes as a "cursory glance") is a testament to the importance of union in Whitman's poetry. For Whitman, fragmentation was probably the most important issue facing a modern urban society.

"The Sleepers" suggests a passage from the isolated individual to the collective world of the spirit. The poem opens with a single narrator embarking on a journey into the night-world of dreams. Throughout most of the first section, the narrator remains voyeuristic, and yet, the theme of collectively is introduced. Sleep is stressed as a universal activity that removes the barriers of individuality: "The sisters sleep lovingly side by side in their bed,/ The men sleep lovingly side by side in their bed,/...The blind sleep, and the deaf and dumb sleep,/ The prisoner sleeps well in the prison, the runaway son sleeps." Sleep already is the refuge of consummated love: "The married couple sleep calmly in their bed, he with his palm on the hip of the wife, and she with her palm on the hip of the husband/... And the mother sleeps with her little child carefully wrapt."⁸

As the first section progresses, the boundaries of the narrator's identity begin to dissolve. The speaker joins the other sleepers in their intimacy: "I go from bedside to bedside, I sleep close with the other sleepers each in turn." Gradually the narrator's dreams become interwoven with the collective: "I

⁸Whitman, Complete, p. 543.

dream in my dream all the dreams of the other dreamers,/ And I become the other dreamers." The first section concludes with complete submission to a composite otherness symbolized by darkness. The narrator's identity becomes resigned to a frenzied dissolution as the self jettisons its material individuality: "I am the actor, the actress, the voter, the politician, the actress, the voter, the politician,/ The emigrant and the exile, the criminal and stood in the box."¹⁰ The speaker, at the end of the first section, is sexless and darkness is his/her lover. The narrator, now pure spirit, "spreads forth" and returns to the original source of his creation.

The narrator's return to the original source is an experience with death ("I descend my western course, my sinews are flaccid"). Death is the realm of the spirit where souls intermingle: "I am the shroud, I wrap a body and lie in the coffin." The narrator remains very briefly in the world of death, returning to the more human struggle between the material and the spiritual. Section three witnesses "a beautiful gigantic swimmer swimming naked through the eddies of the sea"¹¹ which is a recurrent symbol in Leaves of Grass. The shoreline, in Whitman, is the meeting place of the material and the

¹⁰Ibid., p. 543, 544.

¹¹Ibid., p. 545.

spiritual.¹² The swimmer, under the gaze of the narrator, struggles against his inevitable re-birth into the world of the collective spirit: "Steady and long he struggles, /...Swiftly and out of sight is borne the brave corpse."¹³

The narrator's not very lucid experience with the pure spirit is ended with a reminiscence. It is obvious that the narrator is more comfortable in the more rooted world of spirituality of night dreams. While the ocean is an uncorrupted world of the over-soul, night is tempered by the material realm of day. In section five and six, time is abandoned in the world of sleep. Section five features a reversion to Revolutionary "war-days," and "the defeat at Brooklyn." Whitman celebrates the communal impulse of war, lionizing the nation's collective father George Washington. Washington is mourning the loss of his soldiers, "he cannot repress the weeping drops." Washington completes the ceremony by encircling the observing officer's "necks with his arm and kisses them on the cheek"¹⁴ which James Miller terms the "ritualistic act of democracy in Leaves of Grass signifying spiritual love."¹⁵

¹²James E. Miller, A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1957) 136.

¹³Whitman, Complete, p. 545-546.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 546.

¹⁵Miller, Critical Guide, p. 137.

National brotherly love is followed directly by sisterly love embodied in the contact between the narrator's mother and a squaw. Although the act of sisterly communion is conducted, the importance of a cross-cultural union between a Caucasian and a Native American cannot be underestimated. In Whitman's world humanity is the vital link standing above all others. Although they look upon each other with amazement, there is a silent understanding between the two. The narrator's mother and the squaw exchange no words. It is just each other's presence that engenders an irrevocable bond: "The more she look's upon her she loved her,/...All the week she thought of her, she watch'd for her many a month,/ She remember'd her many a winter and many a summer, But the red squaw never came nor was heard of there again."¹⁶

The last two sections, seven and eight, are the return from the mystical state. This is effected with a kind of reprise, reviewing the various characters from the night: "The beautiful lost swimmer...the female that loves unrequited, the money-maker." Also, the seventh section catalogues a series of homecomings: "The fugitive returns unharm'd, the immigrant is back beyond months and years." The return is democratic. Oppositions are dissolved as the mythical spirit welcomes the sleepers into its shade. Everyone is invited: "The antipodes, and every one between this and them in the dark,/ I swear they

¹⁶Whitman, Complete, p. 16.

are averaged now--one is no better than the other." Differences of race, occupation, and gender (differences Whitman still acknowledges and celebrates) are diluted in the oceanic world of sleep: "They flow hand in hand over the whole earth...as they lie unclothed,/ The Asiatic and African are hand in hand, the European and American are hand in hand,/ Learn'd and unlearn'd are hand in hand, and male and female are hand in hand/...The diverse shall be no less diverse, but they shall flow and unite."¹⁷

"Song of Myself" is a vast and unwieldy poem primarily concerned with a religious experience, but no discussion of Whitman would be complete without some reference to perhaps the greatest American poem ever written. The city, in "Song of Myself," is important as a part of a larger effort in the poem to reconcile opposition (primarily the body and the soul). Also, as in "The Sleepers," "Song of Myself" attempts to dilute the importance of separate identities maintaining that each individual comes from the same original spiritual source. This belief leads necessarily to an assertion of the equality of all things.

"Song of Myself" opens with a declaration of communion inviting the reader to take part in the poem: "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." There is

¹⁷Ibid., p. 548, 549, 550.

a kind of double consciousness at work throughout the poem where the narrator is both an individual and a part of the collective. Whitman's optimism allowed both cohesion and independence. This contradiction not only applies to the narrator but is a part of a larger philosophical system that Whitman makes universal. The fourth section of "Song of Myself" begins with an assertion of the cohesive self: "Trippers and askers surround me./ People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation." The above is the narrator in the collective. Surrounded by people, confronted with ideas, and taking part in a natural environment, the narrator recognizes his connection to the external world. Yet the external collective is never considered the complete self. At the end of the above stanza, the narrator confesses that sensory influences "come to me days and nights and go from me again,/ But they are not the Me myself." The fourth section is resolved when the narrator realizes that his identity straddles the outward and the inward: "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 an out of the game and watching and wondering at it."¹⁸ The narrator is both the observer and the observed, both an individual and part of the crowd.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 188, 191.

In a similar manner to that in which Whitman overcomes the opposition between the individual and the collective self, he dissolves the absolute division between the city and nature. As with the self, this division is dissolved while still allowing each part to retain its own diversity. "Song of Myself" integrates nature and the city in the same way that "The Sleepers" merges individual identities. In the twelfth and fourteenth section of "Song of Myself" we are confronted with parallel images, identical apart from their environments. In the twelfth section, the narrator's omniscient eye descends upon a butcher's stall: "The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens his knife at the stall in the market, / I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and break-down." Following closely his visit to the city market, the narrator journeys to the countryside: "I am enamour'd of growing cut-doors, / Of men that live among cattle or taste of ocean or woods, / ... I can eat and sleep with them week in and week out."¹⁹

Differences in the environment are really only trivial. The true object of concern for the narrator of "Song of Myself" is the creative energy of the universe. The work of the cattlemen and the butcher are but mere manifestations of "Nature without check with original energy." The Whitmanian narrator is interested in movement and change. All of the movement within the poem, though, is in a state of suspended animation which

¹⁹Ibid., p. 198, 200.

suggests timeless and constant energy. This mood, evoked by Whitman's avoidance of active verbs (i.e. "Of the builders and steerers of ships and the wielders of axes"), allows the narrator to circulate among different identities. Vicarious circulation engenders equivalence among the various objects of the narrator's fancy. In a series of poetic shifts of identity, "Song of Myself" integrates nature and the city through the parallel impulses of their inhabitants. This union is reduced, essentially, to the narrator's assertion of the equality and his assimilation of all life: "In me the caresser of life wherever moving, backward as well as forward sluing, / To niches aside and junior bending, not a person or object missing, / Absorbing all to myself and for this song."²⁰

Essentially, the shaping idea of "Song of Myself" is the equality of all life be it a Virginia patrician or a Virginia slave. This equality is implied in the vast catalogues that fail to attach importance to social status. In fact, Whitman's sympathies (as seen in his prose writings) tend to lie with the laboring classes: "What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me." Whitman was interested in activity. Whitman, although a poet himself, essentially rejected the role of the artist. Whitman could not limit his role strictly to that of an observer (or artist). Consequently, he imagined himself in a variety of different situations: "Me going in for my chances,

²⁰Ibid., p. 188, 200, 199.

spending for vast returns,/ Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me." In the capacity, then, Whitman took part in the eternal activity of the universe. By recognizing the diversity of the self (physically and imaginatively), Whitman invites a full range of characters into his circle:

This is the meal equally set, this the meat for the
 natural hunger,
 It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous,
 I make appointments with all,
 I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
 The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited;
 There shall be no difference between them and the
 rest.²¹

Human equality, in "Song of Myself," leads logically to a kind of infinite equality that includes all material things in the universe. Although this would seem like a fundamentally conservation notion (give that the acceptance of everything as it is divinely ordered would suggest a resistance to change), the most vital structural principal of Whitman's universe is unalterable plasticity. According to Whitman's scheme, the universe's order is inviolable but not static. Although "everything is in its place," the narrator welcomes the natural evolution of the universe: "I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also./ What blurt is this about virtue and about vice?/ Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent,/ My gait is no fault-

²¹Ibid., p. 200, 205.

finder's of rejecter's gait,/ I moisten the roots of all that has grown."²² Everything that exists, including what is made by man, is a part of the procreant urge of creation.

Equality is critical in "Song of Myself," not only as a theme of democratic literature, but as the key to the achievement of transcendent union. Equality becomes essentially the reconciliation of oppositions, the determination to overcome the deceptive differences of appearance apprehending instead the divine reality behind every object. An intuitive sense of this discovery is accomplished through a marriage of contrarities:

The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
 The living sleep for their time, the dead sleep for their
 time,
 The old husband sleeps by his wife and the young husband
 sleeps by his wife;
 And these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,
 And such as it is to be of these more or less I am,
 and of these one and all I weave the song of myself.²³

In "Mannahatta," a poem that is relatively characteristic of Whitman on the city, a specific urban entity (in this case New York) is endowed with an organic origin. Whitman prefers the name Mannahatta over New York because it is "aboriginal" which grants his city a sort of precedence and history. The birth of the city is naturalized, a progeny of the earth established in its uncultivated habitat: "I see that the word or my city is that word from of / Because I see that word nested in nests

²²Ibid., p. 209.

²³Ibid., p. 203.

of water-bays, superb." Not only is the city set in its geographical context, but its artificial features are softened by their association with their counterparts in nature. For example, the "high growths of iron, slender strong, light, splendidly uprising toward clear skies" seem to share characteristics with the majesty of a tree-filled forest. Also, the contemporary city (as opposed to the historical city that introduces the poem), bears the qualities of a sensuous Romantic landscape: "Tides swift and ample, well-loved by me, toward sundown,/ The flowing sea-currents, the little islands...The summer air, the bright sun shining, and the sailing clouds aloft,/ The winter snows, the sleigh-bells, the broken ice in the river, passing along up or down with the flood-tide."²⁴

Yet the most important feature of Whitman's city is its people. Whitman's urbanites, as one might surmise considering his sketch of their environs, are a robust and jocular people: "The mechanics of the city, the masters, well-form'd,/ beautiful-faced, looking you straight in the eyes." Their morals are pure and their friendship freely given. A far cry from the commonly held perception of the city as the scene of suspicion and degradation, "Mannahatta" is characterized by restless activity. Receiving a regular infusion of "Immigrants arriving, fifteen or twenty thousand in a week," the city's energy feeds off of itself. A concentrated population gives birth to immense

²⁴Ibid., p. 585, 586.

production that parallels the endless creative vigor of the universe: "The down-town streets, the jobbers' houses of business, the houses of business of the ship-merchants and money brokers...The carts hauling goods, the manly race of drivers of horses, the brown-faced sailors."²⁵ That a metropolis is man-made is never sacrificed, and yet, in "Mannahatta" this does not preclude the city from taking part in the natural scheme of the earth.

Whitman's intention of naturalizing the artificial is even more explicit in "To a Locomotive in Winter." Immediately one is struck with the fact that the poem is addressed to a locomotive, as if it had its own conscious identity. The association is continued throughout the poem as the locomotive is endowed with human qualities that include a head, "Thy great protruding head-light fixed in front"; a heart, "thy measur'd dual throbbing and thy beat convulsive"; lungs, "Thy metrical, now swelling pant and roar"; voice, "Fierce-throated beauty"; and sense of humor, "Thy madly-whistled laughter." The locomotive is almost a characteristic American hero, a free-spirited and determined wanderer fiercely moving forward ("Law of thyself complete. thine own track firmly holding"). Certainly, the "black cylindrical" locomotive is a Whitmanian hero, rough and exploding with energy, singing its "barbaric yawp" over the wide expanse of America: "(No sweetness debonair of tearful harp or glib piano thine,)/

²⁵Ibid., p. 586, 585.

Thy trills of shrieks by rocks and hills return'd,/ Launch'd o'er the prairies, wide, across the lakes,/ To the free skies unpent and glad and strong." Like the city, the locomotive is transformed into a single organic entity and embodies not the corruption of the countryside, but an evolutionary leap within nature: "Type of the modern--emblem of motion and power--pulse of the continent."²⁶

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is perhaps Whitman's most critical poem for our discussion in that it is concerned with a full range of issues facing the city and modernity. Like many of the other poems in Leaves of Grass, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" overcomes the division of nature and the city through an integration of images. The first section opens with an invocation to nature: "FLOOD-TIDE below me! I see you face to face!/ Clouds of the west--sun there half an hour high--I see you also face to face." This is quickly followed by a parallel image from the city: "Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes...[cross] On the ferry-boats." Whitman's avoidance of active verbs achieves this integration to an even great degree. In his use of gerunds and participles, Whitman endows the activity of nature and men with a similar spectral quality which renders their movements equivalence: "sea-gulls...high in the air floating" and "sailors

²⁶Ibid., p. 583.

at work in the rigging...The large and small steamers in motion."²⁷

The narrator also fuses the two environments by the simple power of his observation. Like other Whitmanian narrators, the narrator of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" identifies completely with the contemplated object. Consequently, through the narrator, two environments are unified: "Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt...Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I loci'd."²⁸

In the land and the water, the narrator perceives the dual nature of the universe. The opposition of land and water becomes symbolic of all oppositions, the body and the soul, the city and nature. Like all contradiction in Whitman, this conflict is overcome. In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," the contrariety is demolished in the climax of the poem with the perception of a timeless transcendent reality. But also like most of Whitman's poems, this transcendent reality is not achieved through a mortification of the senses, but through an active penetration of the physical world:

Appearances, now henceforth, indicate what you are,
 You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
 About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung
 out divinest aromas,
 Thrive cities--bring your freight, bring your shows,

²⁷Ibid., p. 307, 308, 309.

²⁸Ibid., p. 309

ample and sufficient rivers,
 Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more
 spiritual,
 Keep your places, objects than which none else is more
 lasting.²⁹

"Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is also about the unity of individuals. The narrator of the poem actively seeks an identification with the reader and thus acts as a surrogate presence. Throughout the middle sections of the poem, the narrator relates his observations indirectly. Instead of sharing with the reader directly what he sees, the narrator records his observations as a kind of response to the reader's experience: "Just as any of you is one of the living crowd, I was one of a crowd,/ Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd." As the poem progresses, the theme of communion becomes more abstract. Whereas in the early section of the poem the narrator and reader share physical experience, the latter sections of the poem confront the question of communion more precisely: "What is it then between us?/ What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?"³⁰

This critical question is answered not with a catalogue of physical experience, but an introverted confession of mutual sin: "Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,/ I am he who knew what it was to be evil,/ I too knotted the old knot of contrariety." The progression from a unity in the environment to

²⁹Ibid., p. 313

³⁰Ibid., p. 309, 310.

a unity of emotion achieve a universal and timeless communion that transcends time and place. Specific geographical references begin to fade as they no longer matter (all places have an equal share in the universe). The poem begins to look increasingly forward to a future reader: "Closer yet I approach you,/ What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you--I laid in my stores in advance,/ I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born." Eventually, the reader perceives the ferry growing symbolically beyond Brooklyn and finally resting as a cosmic refuge from the alienation and the solitude of an individual identity; the new Eden of a democratically fragmented culture where each individual is lovingly submerged into the abstract other: "The simple, compact, well-joined scheme, myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,/ The similitudes of the past present and future...The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,/ The certainty of others, the life, love sight, hearing of others".³¹

Attempting to survey the poet's life, Whitman's good friend Richard Maurice Bucke recalled that the poet's life seemed to be shaped by "those twelve and a few immediately following years" when Whitman worked as a printer and newspaper man around New

³¹Ibid., p. 331, 308. And for my analysis of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," I am indebted to James L. Machor's "Pastoralism and the American Urban Ideal" and especially to James Miller's Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass.

York and Brooklyn. It was during those years that Whitman "acquired his especial education" by simply "absorbing into himself the whole city and country about him." Like no other writer before him, Whitman breathed the life of city spectacle. He led an exterior life, dissolving his identity into the "sidewalks, ferries, factories, [and] taverns that surrounded him." Celebrating both the "sunlight" and the "open streets," Whitman was able to resolve the increasingly remote realities of nature and the city.³²

Bucke recalled Whitman's populism, his wandering among "hospitals, poorhouses, [and] prisons." He recalled how Whitman came to understand the interior life behind the "vice, and ignorance" of common men and women. Whitman "saw the good." Bucke maintained that "perhaps only those that knew him personally" could really understand "the peculiar magnetism of his presence," and yet, reading Leaves of Grass over a century later, one still intuits Whitman's unshakable involvement with his city. It is unmistakably apparent that Whitman's intimacy with laborers was born not out of "reading trade reports and statistics, but by watching and stopping hours with the workmen (often his intimate friends) at their work."³³

³²Richard Maurice Bucke, Walt Whitman (Glasgow, Wilson & McCormick Press, 1884) 19-20.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 20.

It was the city, then, in all of its variety and color that shaped Leaves of Grass. Whitman was absorbing and shaping a new reality beyond the insulated solitude of Walden Pond. The "long foreground" of Walt Whitman was centered around an attempt "to absorb humanity and modern life."³⁴ Civilization had arrived in the garden, and it desired its spokesman. The tumult of industrialization and rampant individualism produced in Whitman alone a thoroughly modern reaction that attempted unite a fragmented humanity and naturalize the machine.

³⁴Ibid., p. 20.

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