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ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

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Recommended Citation

Aspiz, Harold. "Whitman's "Poem of the Road"." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 12 (Winter 1995), 170-185. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1449>

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WHITMAN'S "POEM OF THE ROAD"

HAROLD ASPIZ

COMMENTING A CENTURY AGO on "Song of the Open Road" ("Poem of the Road" in the 1856 and 1860 editions of *Leaves of Grass*), the novelist Knut Hamsun wondered how Whitman could get carried away by "his song of the highway": "One cannot conceive that a mere road could make a heart palpitate so. Whitman is intoxicated by it." But Whitman was not alone in his enthusiasm for the road and the great outdoors to which it led; in 1856 the road was still America's symbol of opportunity for personal and spiritual renewal. Henry David Thoreau saw the road as the ancients' Hesperides; he described its lure as a "needle" pointing "between west and south-southwest." Margaret Fuller, in a comment that catches the very theme of "Poem of the Road," saw the unexplored West as a clue "perhaps to foresee a law by which a new order, a new poetry, is to be evolved from this chaos." And the historian George Bancroft thus depicted George Washington whose birth into heroism stemmed from the wilderness: "the forests trained him, in meditative solitude, to freedom and largeness of mind, and nature revealed to him her obedience to serene and silent laws."¹ Not only does Bancroft's hero suggest the spirit of the Whitman persona in "Poem of the Road" but Washington's purported intuition of nature's "serene and silent laws" comes remarkably close to the poem's insistence that opening one's self to the cosmic influences that pervade nature's realm is itself the open road to spiritual growth, self-discovery, and the empowerment to inspire others.

The poem is a celebration of wanderlust. As the English biographer John Bailey pointed out seven decades ago, "Poem of the Road" is "perhaps the best of his [Whitman's] many calls to the life of freedom, open air, and daylight." "Wherever he goes," says Bailey, "he finds a joy that passes understanding in communion with nature and other men. . . . He calls upon his followers to come out into the open, freed once for all of the secret shames of the self in all of us, which is for ever hiding and for ever 'speaking of anything else but never of itself.'" Gay Wilson Allen calls the poem a "carefree, light-hearted . . . universal vision of joy and brotherhood" in which "themes of travel, physical joy, and companionship are happily blended." And James E. Miller, Jr., indicates how the vagabondage motif takes on "layer after layer of meaning" to show the persona's involvement with nature in "its original and uncorrupted form":

The "open road" becomes the symbol of the new way, of a fresh and joyous way of encountering experience whatever it brings, of stepping forth free of customs and traditions and living life fully in accord with instinct and intuitive insight. . . . A rejection of the static and materialistic, the appeal is an affirmation of the joy of transience, of the movement through time in appointed cycles [as opposed to] the static world of *things* in stasis. The spiritual life is not the static life, but the life of the open road.²

Of course, the poem may be read emblematically. In praising Shakespeare (and obliquely his own oeuvre as well), Whitman singles out "that inexplicable element in every highest poetic nature which causes it to cover up and involve its real purposes and meanings in folded removes and far recesses . . . hiding the nest where common seekers may never find it." And in explaining his method of translating ordinary materials into poetry, he enlarges on Emerson's generalization that not only words are emblematic; things are emblematic, too. "A perfect user of words uses things," he says; "they exude in power and beauty from him . . . things, lilies, clouds, sunshine, women, poured copiously [?]-whirled like chain-shot."³ Accordingly, if things can be seen as symbols, then words—through the transformative powers of the poet's utterance—can become reified as "things" which "exude in power and beauty" from him. As the Whitman persona "reads" external phenomena to divine their inner meanings, his declaimed interpretations become versions of reality that are intended to bind comrades and readers to his vision. And for all its seeming tangibility, "Poem of the Road" is decidedly a personal vision. In an approach that one scholar calls "a circular dialectic," the poet-persona filters what he sees through the self rather than through any broader objective context.⁴

Although "Poem of the Road" is loosely structured, it may be divided into three "movements": an essentially first-person account of the persona's absorption of experience and sensations and their translation into a visionary consciousness (sections 1-5); a voicing of his exalted vision (sections 6-8); and a lengthy second-person call to his comrades and readers to join him in pursuing the endless possibilities that await them (sections 9-15).⁵ In arbitrarily dividing the poem into fifteen numbered sections in 1867, Whitman did not necessarily clarify the poem's original structure, in which the stress falls on the characteristically short, often apothegmatic, verse paragraphs which are the poem's essential building blocks. And his revisions also tended to soften the poem's original dramatic impact. Therefore this essay follows the attractive 1856 text.

The poem's first 71 lines (corresponding to sections 1 through 5 in the final edition) describe an exercise in "absorption." The road, its objects, and its creatures reveal themselves to the poet-persona in a duplex manner—as material phenomena and as symbols that he must learn to translate into the inspirational language of poetry. This is the Kantian idea of "double consciousness"—knowing the world both through prac-

tical knowledge and through intuition⁶—or what Emerson, in “The Poet,” calls “a very high order of seeing.” Transcendentalists believed that poetic inspiration is available to those whose inner and outer vision is so finely attuned that common objects reveal themselves to them to be translated into inspired words. As Whitman says (“Song of Myself,” Section 20):

To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.

In “Poem of the Road” the stones, trees, and buildings—part of the road’s secret code that the supersensory persona must read in order to gain insight into the world and himself—yield up their secrets to him. As these secrets become internalized, they effect a qualitative change, transforming his perception into visionary seeing, an event which the poem presents as an epiphany that occurs at the very moment (“Now,” repeated in three consecutive lines) when what is perceived by the outer eye appears to be congruent with what is perceived by the inner eye.⁷

These generalizations are borne out in the imagery of the poem. “Afoot and light hearted,” the persona sets off down the “long brown path,” “the open road,” “the public road,” the “unseen” road, on a walking expedition, carrying “my old delicious burdens . . . men and women.” (Whitman’s only other use of “afoot”—“I am afoot with my vision,” in “Song of Myself,” Section 33—confirms that this is both a trip into the world and a visionary excursion.) And his “burdens,” unlike those of John Bunyan’s Christian, are not onerous; rather they are the resonances of those persons with whom he has interacted or will interact. Whitman catalogues the diverse individuals on the road: all are welcomed, the losers equally with the others. (As Emerson suggests in “Experience,” all sights and persons flow inward to develop the observer’s character: “I find my account in sots and bores also. . . . Everything good is on the road.”) The persona picks up the journeyers’ emanations, declaring that “none but are dear to me.” In a similar manner, he salutes the air, the light, the insects, the paths, and (in another short catalogue) the walks, ferries, and facades. The air “that serves me with a breath to speak!” is, of course, emblematic of the poetic afflatus that, once absorbed, can make the persona an inspired utterer. In an apostrophe to the road, he undertakes to probe the “impassive surfaces” of all objects in order to make them disclose their secrets:

From the living and the dead I think you have peopled your impassive surfaces, and
the spirits thereof would be evident and amicable with me.

Once the spirits along the road become “evident and amicable” with him, then surface reality becomes transfigured before his eyes and his inner eye. The vision begins:

The earth expanding right hand and left hand,
The picture alive, every part in its best light,
The music falling in where it is wanted, and stopping where it is not wanted,
The cheerful voice of the public road—the gay fresh sentiment of the road.

The panorama becomes a transcendental video screen that the persona can read; its music is synchronous with the rhythms of his inspired being. To his inner ear, the road becomes the teller of secrets, its “gay fresh sentiment” corresponding to his optimistic reading of the world. The road, the persona insists, can “express me better than I can express myself, / You shall be more to me than my poem.” The road thus becomes the *Ur*-poem—the untainted source of poetry antecedent to the poet’s own utterance. Although (in the poem’s first instance of “adhesive” imagery) the persona hears the beloved “public road” (i.e., the road accessible to all) say to him, “Adhere to me!” he asserts that he can leave it if he wants to; he is an independent journeyer who can follow his own road.

As the persona absorbs light and inhales “great draughts” of inspirational air, he senses his own miraculous growth; he sees goodness in everything. His awareness of this higher consciousness comes to him as an exaltation, an epiphany:

I think I could stop here myself, and do miracles . . .
From this hour, I ordain myself loosed of limits and imaginary lines!
Going where I list, my own master and absolute. . . .

Freed from limitations, he is launched on a journey of self-liberation, self-invention, and self-validation—what one scholar calls “liberation as self-authoring paternity and priority.”⁸ “[L]oosed of limits and imaginary lines,” the persona becomes a seer whose (in)sights obliterate traditional categories and socially mandated distinctions—a self-ordained *vates* or poet-priest, absorbing wisdom and sharing it with his reader-companions.⁹

Scattering “a new gladness and roughness” among men and women as he goes, he vows that “Whoever accepts me, he or she shall be blessed, and shall bless me.” In this elevated state he is ready to behold miracles and cosmic secrets:

Now if a thousand perfect men were to appear, it would not amaze me,
Now if a thousand beautiful forms of women appeared, it would not astonish me.

Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth.

Mysticism and worldly wisdom generally merge in Whitman’s thought, and the secrets presumably revealed to the persona are rooted in Whitman’s own beliefs and stem, in large measure, from the popular

reformist doctrines of the day. His vision of “perfect men” and women recalls his programmatic poems, which envision successive generations of democratic individuals steadily improving themselves and breeding out imperfections in their posterity. Similarly, “the secret” of living in “the open air” was a popular cause. Whitman was, after all, a city dweller, whose journalism in the 1840s and 1850s advocated fresh air, clean water, and living with the earth, or what medical pseudoscientists sometimes labeled ventupathy, hydropathy, and terrapathy.¹⁰

The following 45 lines (sections 6 through 8) are bound together by a series of verse paragraphs (or double paragraphs) which begin with the anaphoric lines: “Here is space—here a great personal deed has room”; “Here is the test of wisdom”; “Here is realization”; “Here is a man tallied”; “Here is adhesiveness”; “Here is the efflux of the soul”; and “Here rises the fluid and attaching character.” Where, however, is the persona’s “Here”? There is a suggestion that the action takes place “under the spacious clouds and along the landscape and flowing currents,” but the poem contains few allusions to flora, fauna, vistas, or the sort of observations of the ground gone over that characterize the nature poems of the Romantics. The poet who in *Specimen Days* could identify all those birds and plants and many of whose poems reveal a close observation of nature here chiefly projects nature as an extension of the self. As Whitman explained some years later, the concept of nature is both objective and subjective: “Nature consists not only in itself, objectively, but at least just as much in the subjective reflection from the person, spirit, age, looking at it, in the midst of it, and absorbing it.” Thus, as all of Whitman’s poetic journeys are said to be *mental* journeys,¹¹ this poem may be read as a voyage into the interior of the persona’s liberated self. And the locus of the poem—its center or “Here”—would appear to be the poet-persona’s expanding consciousness. Each successive “Here” reinforces the image of the persona as a superb poet-hero who reads nature’s secrets and seizes upon “the hearts of the whole race of men” and women to show them “the path between reality and their souls” (1855 Preface) and whose private deeds and thoughts can transform history and fate:

Here is space—here a great personal deed has room,
A great deed seizes upon the hearts of the whole race of men,
The effusion of strength and will overwhelms law, and mocks all authority and all
argument against it.

The “effusion” or exudation of the persona’s “strength and will” is part of the adhesive imagery that runs throughout the poem and that binds his sexual-magnetic self to his readers and companions. The declaration that “Here is the test of wisdom,” which “cannot be passed

from one having it, to another not having it," but which is a spiritual "certainty of the reality and immortality of things," implies that the intuitions of supermen, such as the persona, harmonize with universal laws. Moreover, the declaration suggests that the persona's wished-for vanguard companions of the road are his intellectual and spiritual equals—transcendentalists who can read the emblems inherent in "the float of the sight of things" and provoke the "kernel" of wisdom "out of the soul." If the democratic masses have not yet evolved into this advanced stage of consciousness, the persona holds out the prospect that they, too, may advance along the evolutionary road and eventually attain the sort of sensitivity that will qualify them to become seekers, seers, and poets.

The lines corresponding to sections 6 through 8 form an adhesive bridge between the persona's influx of inspiration and his call for comrades. They demonstrate how his powers of intuition, will, and affection can draw and attach others to him. And because Whitman's "own peculiar affection," as Frederik Schyberg pointed out, requires a new language—a suitable terminology—Whitman coined terms like "adhesiveness" and "The efflux of the soul".¹²

Here is adhesiveness—it is not previously fashioned—it is apropos . . .

Here is the efflux of the soul,

The efflux of the soul comes through beautiful gates of laws, provoking questions. . . .

Although phrenologists used the term "adhesiveness" to designate a more or less neutral instinct of male bonding, the above lines propose "adhesiveness" as an original concept ("not previously fashioned") and call it an appropriate ("apropos") expression of the natural and moral law. (Later editions obscure the implication that male affection conforms to higher laws by deleting the last two words of the phrase, "beautiful gates of laws," from which the "efflux of the soul" issues.) This sticky imagery ("adhesiveness," "the fluid and attaching character") anticipates the homoeroticism of "Calamus" and stresses the magnetism of the persona, from whom "falls distilled the charm that mocks beauty and attainments." If the distilled "charm" (the mesmerists' term for magnetic and hypnotic powers) that oozes from him suggests exuding of human sweat, Whitman was not alone in turning this bizarre idea into a trope for spiritual outreach or what the poem calls "the shuddering longing ache of contact"; in fact, a very popular book of medical theology that Whitman apparently knew had pointed out that perspiration is an emanation or medium through which the soul reaches out to other souls.¹³

Nevertheless, this celebration of "the efflux of the soul," with its attendant surges of self-confidence, prophecy, and sexual arousal, is tempered by a series of ten rhetorical questions focusing on the persona's

concerns about the nature of his inspirational promptings, his yearnings for others, and the implications of adhesiveness. Of notable relevance to the persona and the poet, these queries anticipate some of the troubled musings in "Calamus":

These yearnings, why are they? these thoughts in the darkness, why are they?
Why are there men and women that while they are nigh me the sun-light expands my
blood?
Why when they leave me do my pennants of joy sink flat and lank?
Why are there trees I never walk under but large and melodious thoughts descend
upon me? . . .
What is it I interchange so suddenly with strangers?

Reformers linked the sun's power to electrify the blood with sexuality; they claimed that sunlight was a source of life, of bodily electricity, of sexual powers, and of what Franz Anton Mesmer termed "animal magnetism." The persona's sunshiny spirit in the presence of others appears to be accompanied by his sexual arousal; his ensuing depression results in the (suggestively punning) reference to his "flat and lank" "pennants of joy." That the passage has homosexual resonances can be seen in closely related lines in "Broad-Axe Poem."¹⁴ Of course, Whitman's sexual language always contains a stratum of spirituality. As Roger Asselineau observes, "In desiring bodies, he communicates mystically with souls." Indeed, most depictions of sexual arousal in *Leaves of Grass* are structured to culminate in a state of spiritual and visionary exaltation.¹⁵ Thus the "melodious thoughts" that descend upon the persona beneath the trees recall the moment in Emerson's *Nature* when the speaker becomes a "seeing eyeball" and a teller of cosmic truths. In the lines that follow this passage, the "fluid and attaching" persona becomes "rightly charged" by the electric energy and the "happiness" of the ambient air that stimulate his powers of insight and prophecy, so that he achieves what mesmerists called an "electro-psychological state" and what Richard Maurice Bucke termed "cosmic consciousness"—the capacity for clairvoyant seeing and exalted utterance. Distilling "the charm that mocks beauty and attainments," this absorber of truths is prepared to become an inspired utterer, the magi of whose voice and words can transform mankind.

The poem's second half (sections 9 through 15) is unified by thirteen lines (generally occurring at the beginning of a verse paragraph), each commencing with the command "Allons!," which C. Carroll Hollis has called the poem's "framing 'Marseillaise' cry." The command is addressed, one critic has said, to call "man out of his literal and metaphoric house to a new view of life and personal relation."¹⁶ Beginning with a democratic appeal—"Allons!," "Whoever you are, come travel with me!"—the persona invites everyone to travel the open road to enlightenment, to learn, as he has, how to penetrate the mysteries concealed

beneath appearances and words, and how to intuit the higher laws that govern their lives. Hence he calls out:

Be not discouraged—keep on—there are divine things, well-enveloped,
I swear to you there are divine things more beautiful than words can tell!

“Allons! We must not stop here!” to enjoy the “laid-up stores” of conventional life, the persona pleads, but, abandoning all relationships that can impede the journey, undertake the uncharted quest joyously and defiantly.

Whitman’s “open road” represents a continuum of development through life and death. But his lingering body/soul dualism is reflected in a potentially disruptive verse paragraph (deleted from the final edition) which implies, in an almost spiritualist vein, that the body may play a subsidiary role in the partnership between the body and the soul:

The soul travels,
The body does not travel as much as the soul,
The body has just as great a work as the soul, and parts away at last for the journeys
of the soul.

Equating the soul with the human potential for self-discovery, D. H. Lawrence recognized that Whitman’s open road, particularly in this poem, stands for the soul’s progress through its life *in* the body, as a physical-spiritual entity, declaring that “The great home of the Soul is the open road. Not heaven, nor paradise. . . . The soul is neither ‘above’ nor ‘within.’ ” Lawrence interpreted the progress of each self-directed wayfarer along the road to be “a morality of the soul living her life, not saving herself. Accepting the contact with other souls along the open way, as they lived their lives.” Lawrence read the poem as an invitation to follow one’s innermost promptings and to discover one’s potential.¹⁷

And it is chiefly in this sense that the Whitman persona challenges his reader-companions to go “after” (that is, to emulate or catch up with) “the great companions” of the road—“the swift and majestic men!” and “the greatest women!” In a passage that Whitman approved—and that he may even have co-authored or composed—“Song of the Open Road”—called “one of the supremely great poems of *Leaves of Grass*”—is said to be

a mystic and indirect chant of aspiration toward a noble life, a vehement demand to reach the very highest point that the human soul is capable of attaining—to join the “great companions,” “the swift and majestic men, the greatest women,” who have from age to age shown what human life might be. This is a religious poem in the truest and best sense of the term . . . this and other chants of *Leaves of Grass* go back to Nature and the soul of man, and derive thence their meaning.¹⁸

Each traveler's journey, we are assured, is unique: "not I—not God—can travel this road for you."¹⁹ Like the "men of subdued minds and conquered passions" described in the *Bhagavad Gita*, Whitman's "traveling souls" may even aspire to become "godly pilgrims" and enter upon the "never-failing" Brahminic path that leads to supreme happiness.²⁰ Each may aspire to "tramp a perpetual journey" to keep an "appointed" "rendezvous" with God "on perfect terms" ("Song of Myself," sections 45, 46).

However, in 1856, the birth year of the poem, masses of men and women, like members of Whitman's own family, had become alienated and dispossessed. His editorials deplored the unhealthy and repressive urban world in which he lived and his angry unpublished tract "The Eighteenth Presidency!" contrasted a corrupt and degraded American society with a vision of a new breed of Western heroes—"American young men"—who would remake and reclaim America.²¹ The hopeful vision projected in "Poem of the Road" is a reaction to the ugliness and corruption and to the circumscribed lives that Whitman knew so well.

Small wonder that "Poem of the Road" acknowledges the physical debility, inertia, and conformism of the democratic masses. The impatient persona warns those who are physically and morally weak that

He traveling with me needs the best blood, thews, endurance,
None may come to the trial till he or she bring courage and health.

In terms often consistent with the tenets of Fowler and Wells—the pseudoscientific publishers of the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, for whom physiological reform undergirded all moral reforms—he declares:

Come not here if you have already spent the best of yourself!
Only those may come who come in sweet and determined bodies,
No diseased person—no rum drinker or venereal taint is permitted here,
I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes,
We convince by our presence.²²

For his front-line companions the persona requires eugenic paragons with "sweet and determined bodies," "the best blood" (charged with the electrical life force) and free from sexual depletion (not having "spent the best of yourself"). "Spending" in the usage of Whitman and his contemporaries implied the debilitating wasting of the semen, which was held to be the finest element in the blood and to embody the source of life. The persona's vanguard companions, the passage warns, must also be uncorrupted by liquor (a popular cause in whose interest Whitman had written *Franklin Evans*), by the venereal scourges that affected many city dwellers (as journalist Whitman often pointed out), and by what Whitman elsewhere called "delicatesse" (the debilitating effects of the soft urban life).

But with an encouraging message of hope, the poem's only extended catalogue chronicles the cycle of human experience to show that each person, no matter how far back in the evolutionary process—even (in lines excluded from the final edition) “Committers of crimes, committers of many beautiful virtues!”—may overcome weaknesses and aspire to personal fulfillment. The catalogue moves from “Forth-steppers from their latent unrealized baby-days,” through youth, maturity, and “sublime old age . . . flowing free with the delicious near-by freedom of death.” The road, “which is endless as it was beginningless!,” thus prefigures each person's cycle of existence and “the start of superior journeys” in this life and beyond. And “since Death is the Great Positive-Seeking Negative,” as Kenneth Burke phrases it, mortal life becomes the similitude of an ongoing existence—“a kind of permanent Saturnalian revel . . . celebrating . . . the present in terms of an ideal future.”²³

In a magnificent passage, the persona proposes that life's supreme adventure is to extract the joy and spiritual nourishment from whatever one comes in contact with—in a word, to become a poet or prophet:

To look up or down no road but it stretches and waits for you! however long, but it stretches and waits for you!
 To see no being, not God's or any, but you also go thither!
 To see no possession but you may possess it! enjoying all without labor or purchase—abstracting the feast, yet not abstracting one particle of it;
 To take the best of the farmer's farm and the rich man's elegant villa, and the chaste blessings of the well-married couple, and the fruits of orchards and flowers of gardens! . . .
 To gather the minds of men out of their brains as you encounter them! to gather the love out of their hearts!
 To take your own lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you!
 To know the universe itself as a road—as many roads—as roads for traveling souls.

This paean to the life of the imagination is reminiscent of the passage in *Walden* in which Thoreau imagines *himself* “abstracting” (note Whitman's inspired pun) the quintessences of the farmer's farm and landscape without being encumbered by them. In the above passage, prospective travelers are assured that they may eventually learn to savor the connubial “blessings of the well-married [i.e., compatible] couple” and to “abstract” the emotional and intellectual riches of their fellows without being tied down by mundane commitments. The paradox of taking one's “lovers on the road with you, for all that you leave them behind you!” recapitulates the persona's carrying his “old delicious burdens . . . men and women” with him wherever he goes on his mental journey (“Poem of the Road,” lines 10-12).

In delineating the endless and inexorable “procession of souls along the grand roads of the universe” Whitman translates the nineteenth-century idea of Progress into a vision in which general human advancement is paralleled by the progress of the individual man and woman,

liberated from hindrances and hang-ups, developing into democratic, imaginative, and spiritual beings. A passage from the closely related poem, "To You, Whoever You Are," promises that amelioration in "an unflagging sufficiency" is available to each and all, however "rude, low, rejected by the rest" (*LG 1856*, pp. 209-210). This profound faith in the efficacy of progress represents not so much a political program as a tendency which (according to Jan Christian Smuts) Whitman "identified with the tides and pulsation of that hidden force that flows eternally through all things" and that Frederik Schyberg called "a mystical pantheistic vision on the theme of the succession of the generations."²⁴ Like a true believer, the Whitman persona cries out:

They go! they go! I know that they go, but I know not where they go,
But I know that they go toward the best—toward something great.

After all, Whitman maintained that it was ultimately the poetic vision—not natural science or political science—that would point the way to progress. Embedded in this reasoning was a strong strain of mysticism. "Mystery," he said, "is not the denial of reason but its honest confirmation; reason, indeed, leads inevitably to mystery—but, as you know, mystery is not superstition: mystery and reality are two halves of the same sphere."²⁵ To benefit a society in which the human condition was deplorable, Whitman created a vision—a dream—of an America where amelioration, universal truths, and moral heroism were enticing possibilities. Thus Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* argues at length that a socio-political-poetic *vision* must precede the attainment of wholesome democracy and personal independence. As one scholar recently phrased this sort of literary stance, "Our response to works of the imagination has a great deal less to do with political or social relations as such than with an imaginative identification with heroism, courage, nobility, and so forth."²⁶ Consistent with this idea, works like "Poem of the Road" are intended to inspire men and women to penetrate what (in "Eidólons") Whitman calls "the ostent evanescent" and to enable them to realize their powers to live satisfying lives.

Thematically the poems end in Section 15 with a rallying cry to the persona's (potential) companions: "Allons! Whoever you are! come forth!"²⁷ But the persona sounds a final warning that the proposed journey requires a total commitment. None may take to the road before overcoming their "secret silent loathing and despair!" disguised as social decorum and hollow merriment. In public places, "among their families at the table, in the bed-room, everywhere":

Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death under the breast-bones,
hell under the skull-bones . . .
Keeping fair with the customs, speaking not a syllable of itself. . . .

Although “No husband, no wife, no friend, no lover” can be “so trusted to hear the confession” of his fellow creatures, the persona implies that he, of all men, can empathize with them because he has experienced the full range of human existence. He challenges them to be heroic, to be battle ready, to be prepared for agonizing defeats as they persevere in what Arthur E. Briggs calls a Nietzschean element of self-testing:²⁸

Now understand me well—it is provided in the essence of things, that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary.

The struggle is both ideological and personal. Having twice interrupted the flow of the poem’s bracing gospel of hope to voice doubts about the susceptibility of his fellow travelers to physical and spiritual corruption and having questioned the sources of his own unfathomable “yearnings” and “thoughts in the darkness,” the persona reaffirms the importance of the “greater struggle” necessary to pursue and achieve the vision of an ideal personal and national happiness.

The poem concludes with a double flourish. The penultimate verse paragraph—set in the pulsating rhythm of “Beat! Beat! Drums!”—summons the persona’s fellow travelers to abandon their hollow routines and set off on their life-journey. By way of contrast, the final verse paragraph achieves a quiet, almost intimate, closure as the persona proposes to walk hand in hand down the road with his reader-companion:

Mon enfant! I give you my hand!
I give you my love, more precious than money,
I give you myself, before preaching or law,
Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

In addressing the fictive co-journeyer as “Mon enfant!” the persona retains his fatherly *vates* pose and his fellow may be perceived as a disciple, as one of the country-boy stalwarts of “The Eighteenth Presidency!” or as the “dear son” whom the persona is holding by the waist, offering the bread of life, and starting down the road in “Song of Myself,” Section 46. (The line was revised in 1881 to “Camerado! I give you my hand!” to imply that he is addressing an equal.) And as C. Carroll Hollis has shown, the expected response to the persona’s questions, in terms of nineteenth-century rhetoric, should be: “Yes, I *will* give you myself”; “Yes, I *will* come travel with you”; and “Yes, we *shall* stick by each other as long as we live.”²⁹ Thus, by implication at least, the poem ends with the prospect of communion between the wayfarer and his (or her) inspired mentor. But their communion may be only rhetorical; in point of fact, all of the persona’s answers and assertions have gone unanswered in the poem. There has been no actual dialogue between the

persona and his "eleve"; the poem, as Howard Waskow suggests, may be read as a "monodrama," in which the dialogue is only imagined.³⁰ At the poem's end, however determined his outreach may be, the persona may still be companionless, still reaching out for comrades. The transcendentalist's quest, as Emerson pointed out, is bound to be a lonely one.

The poem's tone of passionate persuasion may account for what one Whitman scholar has called its "stridency." But in an era when Henry Ward Beecher's sermons made him a superstar, exhortation was a popular literary form. Thus Thoreau's assessment of the 1856 edition—"I do not believe that all the sermons, so-called, that have been preached in this land put together are equal to it for preaching"—suggests that the poem may have accomplished what Whitman set out to do with it.³¹ Time alters literary tastes, of course, but those who are willing to encounter "Poem of the Road" on its own terms may concur with Gay Wilson Allen's estimate that it is one of the "more important poems of the second order" or may even embrace John Burroughs's assertion that it is one of Whitman's "great poems"—one of the "out-flashings, out-rushings, of the pent-up flames of the poet's soul." Taking brilliant advantage of the fact that the pronoun "you" is both singular and plural, the poem blends the poet's "public" and "private" voices, melds ideology and intimacy, and affords a dynamic projection of his self-image. It encapsulates themes and attitudes of the first two editions of *Leaves of Grass*, as Paul Zweig observes, "into a single assertion."³² Indeed, "Poem of the Road," despite its lapses of tone and focus, is an essential element of the Whitman canon—a triumph of creative exuberance, profound sympathies, and self-portraiture.

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NOTES

1 "Knut Hamsum on Whitman—1889," in *Walt Whitman—The Critical Heritage*, ed. Milton Hindus (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 218-219; Thoreau and Fuller are cited in Guy Cardwell, *The Man That Was Mark Twain: Images and Ideologies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 32-34; Bancroft is cited in Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 181.

2 John Bailey. *Walt Whitman* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1926), 158-160; Gay Wilson Allen, *The New Walt Whitman Handbook* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), 86; James E. Miller, Jr., *Walt Whitman* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962), 102-103.

3 "What Lurks Behind Shakspeare's Historical Plays?" In *Prose Works 1892*, ed. Floyd Stovall (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 655 (hereafter: *PW*); "The Primer of Words," in *Walt Whitman's Daybooks and Notebooks*, ed. William White (New York: New York University Press, 1978), 729-730.

4 N. Katherine Hayles, "Turbulence in Literature and Science: Questions of Influence," in *American Literature and Science*, ed. Robert J. Scholnick (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 234.

5 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the poem are taken from *Leaves of Grass* (Brooklyn, 1856; facsimile reprint, Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International, 1980), 223-239 (hereafter *LG 1856*). The original text and a record of textual changes are also accessible in *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*, ed. Sculley Bradley, et al. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 1:225-238 (hereafter *LG Var.*).

6 See Leo Marx, *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 241.

7 See Hyatt Howe Waggoner, *American Visionary Poetry* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 25-65.

8 Cleo McNelley Kearns, "The Limits of Semiotics," in Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 123-124.

9 "Vates" is frequently used for 'poet'—the British Vates were priests and physiologists": *Walt Whitman's Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*, ed. Edward F. Grier (New York: New York University Press, 1984), 1899.

10 Whitman credited his partial recovery from paralysis to the healing properties of air (the "air cure" of nineteenth-century medical practice), water, and earth. The naked poet basked in the breezes at Timber Creek, bathed in the fresh waters, and waded in the mud, and suggested that urban dwellers could benefit by doing likewise. See *Specimen Days* in *PW*, 150-152; Harold Aspiz, "Specimen Days: The Therapeutics of Sun-Bathing," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 1 (December 1983), 48-50.

11 "Poetry—To-Day in America—Shakspeare—The Future," in *PW*, p. 485; Gay Wilson Allen, "Walt Whitman's Long Journey Motif," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 38 (1939), 82.

12 Frederik Schyberg, *Walt Whitman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 153.

13 John James Garth Wilkinson, *The Human Body in its Connection with Man* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, and Co., 1851), 266-267; on Whitman and Wilkinson, see *Notebooks and Unpublished Manuscripts*, 146. Dr. Wilkinson declared "that heart touches heart with magnetic fingers, and indeed that organisms are linked in their similar parts by sympathetic columns of emanations. The reason for this is that the soul is not only included in but also includes the body, or not only lives beyond the brain, but also beyond the skin; being the omega as it is the alpha of the microcosm."

14 "... the shapes of full-sized men . . . taciturn yet loving, used to the open air, and the manners of the open air, / Saying their ardor in native forms . . . / Take what I have then, (saying fain) / . . . Take the white tears of my blood if that is what you are after" (*LG 1856*, p. 157; *LG Var.*, 1:188). These "native forms" are several times hinted at in "Poem of the Road," but never in terms of fellatio or any other overt sexual act.

On sexuality, electricity, and celestial influences, see Harold Aspiz, "Sexuality and the Pseudo-Sciences," in *Pseudo-Science and Society in Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Arthur Wrobel (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 144-165; M. Jimmie Killingsworth, "Whitman's Love-Spendings," *Walt Whitman Review* 26 (1980), 145-153; Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

15 Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Book* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 7; Harold Aspiz, "Sexuality and the Language of Transcendence," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 5 (Fall, 1987), 1-7.

16 C. Carroll Hollis, *Language and Style in "Leaves of Grass"* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 118; Thomas LeClair, "Prufrock and the Open Road," *Walt Whitman Review* 17 (1971), 25.

17 D. H. Lawrence, "Whitman," in *Modern Critical Views: Walt Whitman*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 12-13, 18-22. *LG 1856* reprints a review from the *Christian Spiritualist* crediting Whitman with being one of the "mediatorial natures who are in mental and heart-sympathy with man" (366).

18 *Walt Whitman's Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass for Dr. R. M. Bucke's Walt Whitman*, ed. Quentin Anderson and Stephen Railton (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 88-89.

19 *The Unpublished Poetry and Prose*, ed. Emory Holloway (Garden City: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1921), 2: 66-67; also quoted in Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 188.

20 T. R. Rajahsekhariah, *The Roots of Whitman's Grass* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 401.

21 "The Eighteenth Presidency!" in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), 1307-1325; *I Sit and Look Out: Editorials from "The Brooklyn Daily Times,"* ed. Emory Holloway and Vernolian Schwartz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932); William White, *Walt Whitman's Journalism: A Bibliography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 32-61.

22 For similar sentiments, see *LG 1856*, 208; *LG Var.*, 1:216. On Whitman and Fowler and Wells, see Madeleine B. Stern, *Heads & Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 99-123.

23 Kenneth Burke, "Policy Made Personal," in *Modern Critical Views: Walt Whitman*, 40-41, 44.

24 Jan Christian Smuts, *Walt Whitman: A Study in the Evolution of Personality*, ed. Alan L. McLeod (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), 72-73; Frederik Schyberg, *Walt Whitman*, 90-91.

25 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (1906; rpt. New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1961), 1:468.

26 Tom Quirk, *Coming to Grips with "Huckleberry Finn": Essays on a Book, a Boy, and a Man* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 149.

27 In the 1867 and 1871 editions, this line was the beginning of (then) Section 15 (*LG Var.*, 1:236).

28 Arthur E. Briggs, *Walt Whitman: Thinker and Artist* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952), 127.

29 C. Carroll Hollis, *Language and Style in "Leaves of Grass,"* 119-120.

30 Howard J. Waskow, *Whitman's Exploration in Form* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 138-139. E. Fred Carlisle, *The Uncertain Self: Whitman's Drama of Identity* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1973), 5-8, maintains, however, that "Song of the Open Road" is dialogic and "speaks of a real possibility for reciprocal communication with others."

31 Ezra Greenspan, *Whitman and the American Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 168; "Thoreau on Whitman," in *Walt Whitman: The Critical Heritage*, 67-68.

32 Gay Wilson Allen, introduction to *Leaves of Grass: Facsimile of the 1856 Edition* (Norwood, Pa.: Norwood Editions, 1976), xvii-xviii; John Burroughs, *Birds and Poets* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1891), 135-136; Paul Zweig, *Walt Whitman: The Making of a Poet* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 285.