

I Sing the Body Electric

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Who was Walt Whitman? Those paying attention lit a candle for the bicentennial of his birthday to weeks ago on the 31st of May. But beyond the facts of his nativity, opinions differ. "I think him the equal, in many respects the superior of the much misunderstood Jesus," declared William Sloane Kennedy, a former student at the Harvard Divinity School, one of the small circle of devotees who surrounded the poet with near adulation. On the other hand, the Unitarian minister Thomas Wentworth Higginson, known for his encouragement of a hidden talent named Emily Dickinson, said of Whitman, "His chief mistake was not in writing *Leaves of Grass*, but that he did not burn it afterwards." Oscar Wilde, one of a number of British admirers that included Tennyson, Robert Louis Stevenon and Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote, "My Dear Walt" to say, "There is no one in this great wide world of America whom I love and honor so much." But among his own countrymen and women, especially among the common people -- the workers and mechanics celebrated in his verse -- the views were mostly similar to those of his brother George, an inspector in a New Jersey pipe factory, who thought Walt's work was "of the whorehouse order."

Whitman was a mystery and a paradox. Claiming to have no care for acclaim or applause, no artist ever did more to puff and publicize his own stuff. While celebrating sex and sensual pleasures like no poet before, his actual liaisons, if any, remained shrouded in secrecy. While embracing the earth as a vast compost of dying and living souls, his final act was to build a massive mausoleum of granite to preserve his mortal remains. Who was Walt Whitman and how are we to understand him?

Walt Whitman am I, an American, one of the roughs,
a kosmos,
Disorderly, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking, breeding,

No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women, or apart from them—no more modest than immodest.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
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,

Through me forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts—voices veiled, and I remove the veil,
Voices indecent, by me clarified and transfigured.

I do not press my finger across my mouth,
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is.

Divine am I inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch or am touched from,
The scent of these arm-pits is aroma finer than Prayer ...

“A stalwart, massive, heavy, long-lived race,” Whitman said of his father’s side. “They appear to have been of democratic and heretical tendencies.” Walter Whitman, Sr. was born on the same day the French stormed the Bastille, and he believed in resisting much, obeying little. He named three of his six sons after heroes of our own revolution, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson, and he trained them as scrappers, on the side of the farmer, the small tradesperson, the little guy. The family revered Frances Wright, Scottish born freethinker and feminist. “The first and last thing I would say to man,” she wrote in her utopian tract *A Few Days in Athens*, “is, think for yourself.” Whitman himself was the poet of equality, the holy communion of each with each and the one with the many, so that my wife and I took his Song of the Open Road to be our wedding vows:

Camerado, 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?

No church or sect seemed broad enough to hold him. “I was never made to live inside a fence,” he complained, and even the Unitarians of the time seemed too confining. The strongest influence on the family came from the Quakers, especially from the figure of Elias Hicks, at that time at the center of a doctrinal storm which split of Society of Friends into its liberal and orthodox communions. “The blood of Christ -- the blood of Christ,” Hicks declared. “Why my friends, the actual blood of Christ in itself was no more effectual than the blood of bulls and goats.” What mattered, to Hicks and Whitman, was not the sacrifice of a supernatural savior, but the inner light of love and wisdom that blessed all beings. But while Christian love was spiritual, ethereal, the love Whitman rejoiced in was earthy and erotic.

A woman waits for me—she contains all, nothing is
lacking,

Yet all were lacking, if sex were lacking, or if the
moisture of the right man were lacking.

Sex contains all,
Bodies, Souls, meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies,
results, promulgations,
Songs, commands, health, pride, the maternal mystery,
the seminal milk,
All hopes, benefactions, bestowals,
All the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the
earth,
All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of
the earth,
These are contain'd in sex, as parts of itself, and justifications of itself.

Without shame the man I like knows and avows the
deliciousness of his sex,
Without shame the woman I like knows and avows
hers.

One of the first to recognize Whitman's genius was the Unitarian essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Receiving an anonymous copy of the first edition in 1855, he responded to the author: "Dear Sir, I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'Leaves of Grass.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy. I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere." Yet the foreground of Whitman's youth gave little indication of an author of epic proportions about to burst forth. At the age of eleven, all the formal education he would receive was behind him, with good riddance. The birch rod, the cowhide strap and stupifying regimentation were the chief features he remembered of the Brooklyn schoolroom where a single teacher had to resort to "ingenious methods of child torture" to maintain discipline among

two hundred pupils. From the age of twelve onward, Whitman worked, first as an apprentice typesetter for a Long Island newspaper, later as a journalist and sometime editor of deservedly short-lived tabloids: the *Tattler*, the *Plebian*, the *New Mirror* - by 1845 Whitman had worked for at least ten such publications whose names would blur in his memory. In 1842, he published his first novel, *Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate*, an embarrassingly bad morality tale he later claimed had been dashed off in three days under the influence of gin and whiskey. And so he reached his thirties, a tall, heavy, rough-looking man with grizzled beard, a slouch hat and cheap clothes, with little to suggest any extraordinary promise

Leaves of Grass appeared in Walt's thirty-fifth year, without prelude or precedent. It may be, as the psychologist Carl Jung suggests, that this age, the mid-point of life, represents a spiritual pivot and crisis point, when consciousness turns in upon itself. "Where the top of this arch of life may be, it is difficult to know," mused Dante, yet "I believe that in the perfectly natural man, it is at the thirty-fifth year.' It was at that age that Dante himself wrote of awakening in a dark, pathless, wood, in the middle of his journey, and then finding his way to paradise. Who am I? What is this Self, this precious, irreplaceable personal identity, so transitory and insubstantial, so incandescent, glowing like a shooting star and then disappearing into night? These are perennial questions, becoming increasingly insistent as the years pass and an awareness of mortality crowds in. "What is a man anyhow?" asks Whitman. "What am I? What are you?" And he answers,

I know I am deathless,
I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass,
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick at night.
I know I am august ...
My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite,
I laugh at what you call dissolution,
And I know the amplitude of time.

Whitman said he had the capacity to “stop thinking” at will, to go “negative” and cease all conscious striving and it was in these moments of what the Taoists call *wu-wei* or “creative non-action” that he received his primary revelation - of the infinitude of the individual soul. Emerson had shocked his contemporaries with his proclamation, “I am part and particle of God.” For Whitman, this sense of cosmic oneness was a living, mystic experience. When he uses the first person singular in “Song of Myself,” it is not the little me of “mine, mine, mine,” this skin-encapsulated ego, this cranium-encased cerebrum. What Whitman understood, like all great seers and sages, is that however you answer to the question, “What’s it all about?”, it’s ultimately not all about me. The Self he speaks of is oceanic, an “I” that transcends dualisms of male and female, life and death, body and soul.

“I have said that the soul is not more than the body, And I have said that the body is not more than the soul. And nothing, not God is greater than one’s self is ... And as to you Death, and your bitter hug of mortality, it is idle to try to alarm me.” Whitman saw death frequently, and came to not only accept but embrace what he saw. As a child his most vivid memory was of the day the frigate *Fulton*, the first steam vessel in the U.S. Navy, blew up in the Brooklyn Navy Yard with a blast heard for miles, leaving dozens of sailors dead. In 1832, cholera swept through New York and at the height of the epidemic over a hundred succumbed each day. In befriending death, Whitman also found compassion for the dying; as a nurse during the Civil War, he made over six hundred hospital tours, distributing fruit, pickles, tobacco, socks and shirts and ministering in other ways to nearly a hundred thousand of the sick and wounded on both sides. The war’s dead turned to grass on forgotten battlefields, but for Whitman they remained somehow alive and always young.

This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,
Darker than the colorless beards of old men,
Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.
What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?
They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death ...

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposes, and luckier.

Walt Whitman himself died almost penniless, dependent on friends and well-wishers. Like Vincent Van Gogh, who was reading *Leaves of Grass* when he painted "Starry Night," Whitman's art was not appreciated during his own lifetime. He sometimes regretted ever writing his most popular poem. "It's My Captain again, always My Captain," he exclaimed when Harper publishers asked his permission to reprint it in a school reader. "My God! When will they listen to me for whole and good?" But Walt Whitman could not be totally ignored. He defied conventional taste to speak in his own voice. He defied religious authority to trust in his own body and heart. He invited each man and woman who read him to join him on a marvelous journey.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.
It is not far, it is within reach,
Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did not know ...

There's time to travel the scenic byway even now, camerado. Go by train, plane or automobile or afoot if you can. You don't need a ticket. The ride is free. No fare is required. And a train is always leaving now.