

# At the Beginning of a Great Career: Whitman's 1855 "Leaves of Grass" as the Emodiment of Emerson's "The Poet"

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"I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'Leaves of Grass.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed."

*from Emerson's 21 July 1855 letter to Whitman*

"I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."

*Whitman on Emerson*

July 1855. Lydia Jackson (Lidian) Emerson, an ardent abolitionist who had been active in the anti-slavery movement for years, (beginning at a time when her husband was still maintaining his position of "wise passiveness,") stepped outside of their home in Concord, Massachusetts on the route of Paul Revere's celebrated ride, and draped the gate and fence posts in black for the July 4th holiday. It was her personal expression of somber protest against the continued presence of slavery in the United States. Her funereal bunting matched the mood in the Emerson household: Lidian was not in good health; Emerson's brother William continued to struggle with debilitating headaches; even his friend Thoreau was ailing.

Despite his earlier equivocation, by this point it had been 11 years since Ralph Waldo Emerson had relinquished his detached role as scholar-poet and actively assumed the mantle of vocal abolitionist as well. His lectures, in addition to addressing his usual philosophical and aesthetic topics, were now often about the evils of slavery. In response to the passage of the Compromise of 1850 which had included the Fugitive Slave Law, he had unleashed the most acerbic speech of his career, reserving his most ardent vitriol for Daniel Webster who had supported this legislation. And now, five years later, the Union was careening towards dissolution. The imposing clouds of civil war gathered on the horizon. The pall in the Emerson household mirrored a mounting sense of national gloom.

July 1855. In the city of New York, 36-year-old Walter Whitman, Jr., an itinerant newspaper journalist, shopkeeper, house builder, and free-lance laborer, completed the process of writing, revising, editing, proofing, designing, and even partially typesetting his ninety-five page book of poems. He had registered its title, *Leaves of Grass*, with the clerk of the United States District Court, Southern District of New York two months prior. This new volume appeared with a green cloth cover embossed with gold letters entwined with foliage. Inside, the frontispiece offered an untitled Holyer engraving of Whitman, a bearded man in working class garb, left hand in his pocket, the right one on his hip. The facing page repeated the title, added “Brooklyn, New York: 1855,” and credited the copyright to Walter Whitman. The author is not cited, “an omission not unusual in an era when many books appeared anonymously.” (1) The poems themselves appeared without title, the long, initial entry rambling for 1336 lines before giving way to other shorter, but similar efforts.

At this point in his literary career, Whitman had produced an assortment of relatively mundane newspaper accounts, a pulp novel, and a scant body of unremarkable stories and poems. In April 1843, for example, he wrote “Blood-Money,” a poem that begins with these less than memorable lines:

Of olden time, when it came to pass  
That the beautiful god, Jesus, should finish his work on earth,  
Then went Judas, and sold the divine youth,  
And took pay for his body.

Curs'd was the deed, even before the sweat of the clutching hand grew dry;  
And darkness frown'd upon the seller of the like of God,  
Where, as though earth lifted her breast to throw him from

her, and heaven refused him,  
He hung in the air, self-slaughter'd. (2)

Though a shameless self-promoter, there was nothing about Whitman's writings to date to suggest that this new volume would be worthy of note. He brought the first of the 795 original copies of *Leaves of Grass* home to show his brother George. Later, his sibling reviewer would recall: "I saw the book--didn't read it at all--didn't think it worth reading--fingered it a little." (3)

July 1855. Ralph Waldo Emerson goes to the Concord Post Office on the very day of Lidian's dark draping to retrieve an unsolicited package. In it he will find a copy of *Leaves of Grass* sent directly by Whitman. He returns home and, amidst the gloom, reads the unattributed volume. Making his way through the rambling twelve-page introduction and well into the long opening poem, he finally encounters, on page twenty-nine, in the 499th line, an attestation to its source:

Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos,  
Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding,  
No sentimentalist . . . . no stander above men and women or  
apart from them . . . . no more modest than immodest. (4)

By the time he has finished reading this collection, Emerson is ecstatic. Here at last, he believes, is his long-awaited, uniquely American poet.

Despite the attribution within the first poem, Emerson continues to wonder about the real name and location of his enigmatic poet benefactor. A couple of weeks later he reads a newspaper advertisement for the book confirming the name of Whitman and providing the location of Fowler and Wells, a book distributor in New York. On July 21 he pens, in his large script, a five page response to Walter Whitman, Esq., a missive almost always referred to now with veneration: "the most famous letter in American literary history" (5) or some similar such superlative. In it, Emerson is effusive in his praise of Whitman's work, announcing famously:

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying & encouraging. (6)

So enthused was Emerson that he concluded: "I wish to see my benefactor, & have felt much like striking my tasks, & visiting New York to pay you my respects." (7) Of this distinguished letter, Whitman biographer Justin Kaplan writes:

In the annals of literary partisanship and the laying-on of hands, Emerson's words are unmatched for their generosity and force, their shrewdness and simple justice. (8)

Emerson did not stop with this single epistolary homage; he added other words of commendation to friends and associates. He lauded *Leaves of Grass* to those in his immediate circle--Thoreau, Alcott, Furness--and beyond. To Sam Ward, a poet who had been published in the *Dial*, he hailed Whitman as "an American Buddh." He celebrated Whitman to Moncure D. Conway, a young Virginia Unitarian minister. And, to his friend Caroline Sturgis Tappan who was setting sail for Europe he wrote:

One strange book that you ought to see before you go, or carry with you--a thin quarto called 'Leaves of Grass,' printed at Brooklyn, N.Y., apparently not published and sent to me thro the Post Office. 'Tis the best piece of American <philosophy> Buddhism that anyone has had strength to write, American to the bone and with large discourse before and after, and in spite of some crudeness and strange weary catalogues of things like a warehouse inventory, and in spite of an unpromising portrait on the frontispiece, contains fine strokes of genius and unforgettable things. (9)

Two months after his first reading Emerson's enthusiasm had not waned; he is still enthusiastically touting Whitman. In a letter to James Eliot Cabot, dated September 26, 1855, he writes:

Have you seen the strange Whitman's poems? Many weeks ago I thought to send them to you, but they seemed presently to become more known & you have probably found them. He seems a Mirabeau of a man, with such insight & equal expression, but hurt hard by life & too animal experience. But perhaps you have not read the American Poem? (10)

July 1855. Let us now look more closely at this epochal moment in American literary history and at this particular intersection in the lives of two of the nineteenth century's premier men of letters. The one, Ralph Waldo Emerson, was born in 1803, the fourth child and third of six sons of William Emerson, an austere father and Unitarian minister at the First Church in Boston who died when Emerson was but eight, and Ruth Haskins Emerson, a piously religious woman who read extensively and who influenced her son's religious understanding much more than did his distant father. In his childhood he "was thought to be the least promising of the Emerson children." (11) Harvard educated and then ordained in the Unitarian church, he relinquished his own Boston pulpit over theological quandaries and pastoral ineptitude. He thereafter maintained an ambivalent role toward Unitarianism, a relation-

ship however, which he never fully severed. He traded in his ministerial robe for the role of public lecturer and by July 1855 was hailed throughout the United States and Europe.

The other, Walt Whitman, the second son of Walter Whitman, Sr., a malcontented, brooding Long Island laborer who spent his free time reading the works of dissenters and critics of Christianity and supernaturalism, and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, a woman given to storytelling and folk wisdom whom Whitman idealized and attributed as his muse. Sixteen years Emerson's junior, he had spent the time leading up to his magnificent literary breakthrough in a series of ordinary professions in and around Brooklyn. It was on that momentous day in July that Whitman would so impact Emerson. But Emerson's influence on Whitman, his bringing him from a simmer to a boil, had begun years before.

So now, as we examine this specific intersection in these remarkable, complex, often enigmatic men's lives, let us do so with two questions in mind. First, why would Whitman send one of the few copies of his new book to Emerson? And secondly, why did Emerson respond with such unabated enthusiasm to these poems?

In order to derive some response to the first of these queries we must consider Emerson's standing in July 1855. In 1832 the young widower Emerson stepped down from his position at the Second Church in Boston after only three years as its minister. A mid-May journal entry of that year asserts his restlessness:

Is it not better to intimate our astonishment as we pass through this world if it be only for a moment ere we are swallowed up in the yeast of the abyss? I will lift up my hands and say Kosmos. (12)

Five months later, his formal resignation having been accepted, he would write:

I will not live out of me  
I will not see with others' eyes  
My good is good, my evil ill  
I would be free. (13)

Despite his exuberant self-declared emancipation, his ecstatic intention to intimate his astonishment, Emerson was, at this point, embarking on an uncharted course that many, including his family,

considered unwise. This daunting prospect unnerved him and for a time rendered him physically and emotionally troubled.

Then, with little planning or forethought, he impulsively set sail for Europe on Christmas Day, 1832. It was as if he needed to make the break complete, leaving not just profession but the very shores of the familiar in his search for some new way. The trip would change him, deepen him, focus his thoughts and ambitions. By the time his ship arrived back in Boston on October 9, 1833, Emerson was ready to embark, with cautious resolve, on a new career as a Lyceum lecturer, essayist and poet.

The young man Emerson, who had turned thirty while abroad, could not possibly have imagined how far this newfound ambition would carry him by the time Whitman's package arrived in Concord in the summer of 1855. Now "Emerson was dangerously famous." (14) He is hailed throughout the United States, celebrated in the English press and journals, touted by the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz and by Edgar Quinet in France. His lectures are delivered to large audiences wherever he goes and reported in detail in the press the next morning.

Emerson's reputation and fame alone would have been reason enough for Whitman to send his poems to Concord in the hopes of a reading. As Moncure Conway assessed it:

Emerson had been for many years our literary banker; paper that he had inspected, coin that had been rung on his counter, would pass safely anywhere. (15)

And in England, a reviewer for the London Weekly Dispatch, William Howitt, declared: "What Emerson has pronounced to be good must not be lightly treated." (16) So, as Whitman no doubt knew, having Emerson regard one's work positively was no small thing, and, of course, Whitman was certainly not averse to trying to attract such attention. While that may, in part, explain why he would have sent his poems to Emerson, the story of these intersecting literary lives is more complex than that. It can be traced back more than a decade before the July 1855 encounter.

In March 1842 the New York Society Library had engaged Emerson for six lectures over a two-week period on "The Times." It was during one of the lowest periods in Emerson's life. Less than two months earlier, his and Lidian's first child, his young son Waldo, had died of scarlet fever. He wrote in his journals mournfully of "the wonderful Boy" and of "this beloved and now departed Boy." Nonetheless, though beset by yet another grief, he carried on.

On March 5 the topic for the second of these lectures was “Poetry of the Times.” In the audience, amidst the fashionable of New York society, was a twenty-two-year-old free lance writer, soon to be chief editor for the New York Aurora, Walt Whitman. That night Whitman heard Emerson voice hopes for the appearance of a truly American poet. Of such a one, Emerson said:

He worships in this land also, not by immigration but he is Yankee born. He is in the forest walks, in paths carpeted with leaves of chestnut, oak, and pine he sits on the mosses of the mountain, he listens by the echoes of the wood; he paddles his canoe in the rivers and ponds. He visits without fear the factory, the railroad, and the wharf. When he lifts his great voice, men gather to him and forget all that is past, and then his words are to the hearers, pictures of all history; and immediately the tools of their bench, and the riches of their useful arts, and the laws they live under, seem to them weapons of romance. As he proceeds, I see their eyes sparkle, and they are filled with cheer and new faith. (17)

The March 7, 1842 edition of the Aurora included this item penned by Whitman:

. . . the lecture was one of the richest and most beautiful compositions, both for its matter and style, we have ever heard anywhere, at any time. (18)

So it is we find an earlier intersection: Whitman in Emerson’s audience, no doubt attending with rapt interest to his prophetic description of America’s poet. Already, the seeds are being planted for their July 1855 encounter.

But, as powerfully impacted as he was, a single evening’s lecture was hardly the totality of Emerson’s personal influence on Walt Whitman’s thinking and eventual poetry. As early as 1835 Emerson had set about to create a wide-ranging series of his essays. It was difficult work for him and would consume years before taking a shape with which he could be modestly satisfied. An October 7, 1840 journal entry bemoans:

I have been writing with some pains Essays on various matters as a sort of apology to my country for my apparent idleness. But the poor work has looked poorer daily as I strove to end it. My genius seemed to quit me in such a mechanical work, a seeming wise--a cold exhibition of dead thoughts. (19)

After several weeks more effort, Emerson would record, on New Year’s Day, 1841:

I begin the year by sending my little book of Essays to the press. What remains to be done to its imperfect chapters I will seek to do justly. (20)

The Essays were finally in print on March 20 of that year and Emerson, as Whitman would do with *Leaves of Grass*, sent out multiple complementary copies.

Though it may have been as much as thirteen years before Whitman would read it, this collection of Emerson's writing and thinking impassioned Whitman. Late in his life, Whitman would claim in a letter that he had not read these essays before starting the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. As with much else that Whitman said as he aged, that assertion is highly suspicious. "Certainly, all the evidence tends to discredit Whitman's letter of 1887." (21)

According to an earlier and more reliable claim from Whitman himself, he not only read Emerson's Essays in 1854, he was dramatically influenced by the thinking put forth in this collection.

John Townsend Trowbridge who would later write of his conversations with Whitman, recalled that, in 1860, Whitman "freely admitted that he could never have written his poems if he had not first 'come to himself,' and that Emerson helped him to 'find himself' . . ." (22) A manuscript excerpt that Richard Maurice Bucke, in his 1890 *Notes and Fragments*, dates from the "early fifties" reveals Whitman's estimation of Emerson:

He has what none else has; he does what none else does. He pierces the crusts that envelop the secrets of life. He joins on equal terms the few great sages and original seers. He represents the freeman, America, the individual. He represents the gentleman. No teacher or poet of old times or modern times has made a better report of manly and womanly qualities, heroism, chastity, temperance, friendship, fortitude. None has given more beautiful accounts of truth and justice. His words shed light to the best souls; they do not admit of argument. . . .  
(23)

Thus, despite certain contradictions from Whitman himself, it seems quite clear that Emerson had rather dramatically shaped Whitman's thinking in the years leading up to his 1855 release of *Leaves of Grass*. Emerson's powerful standing in the literary world, Whitman's opportunity to hear him lecture as a young man, and Emerson's writings all combined, not only to help shape Whitman's writing, but also to help make Emerson an obvious recipient of Whitman's first collection. That Whitman would forward his anonymous package to Concord in July 1855 is, in light of this marked influence, hardly surprising.

But why, then, was Emerson so ecstatic upon receipt of these poems? To try to formulate a response to that question we should examine one particular text of Emerson's. Less than a year after the pub-

lication of his Essays, Emerson envisioned another collection and set to work on what would appear as the opening entry when *Essays: Second Series* was eventually printed in October 1844. This article would be titled simply “The Poet.” Its subject was “Emerson’s oldest and at some level his most urgent.” (24) Though he had recently completed another lecture on this same topic, the one Whitman had heard in New York, he returned to it yet again for what is regarded as one of his most impressive literary contributions. Of this essay Robert D. Richardson in *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* writes:

“The Poet” is arguably the best piece ever written on literature as literary process, and it is the major statement of international romantic expressionism, the idea that expressing our thoughts and feelings is not only one of the fundamental and given aspects about human nature--a basic drive, like sex--but also one of the main purposes of human life. The essay is full of verve and fire . . . (25)

In this acclaimed essay, Emerson offers a sweeping, celebratory image of the poet. He writes both generally of the poet as an ideal, as the one standing “among partial men for the complete man,” (26) and particularly of his unfulfilled longing for the distinctively American poet, bemoaning, “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe.” (TP, p. 336). He continues:

We have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, who knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose pictures he so much admires in Homer, then in the Middle Ages; then in Calvinism. . . . Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. (TP, p. 337).

This was Ralph Waldo Emerson writing in the early 1840s, giving expression to his poetic anticipation. For more than a decade his expectations, though unsatisfied, would not be compromised. So it is that the Emerson of July 1855 did not receive his anonymous poetic benefaction neutrally. While he obviously could not have known to await the completely unconventional poems of a New York newspaperman, he is still on the lookout for a particular and new kind of poetry, one that will attend in both form and content to the spirit and geography of the nation. In no small measure, this long-standing expectancy shapes how he reads Whitman’s work and offers a springboard from which his enthused response takes its exuberant flight.

And yet, it was not just any American poet Emerson awaited. He had in his mind a clear notion of what it would mean to be just that kind of poet particular to the nineteenth century U.S. experience.

At the risk of overstatement, it might even be argued that with “The Poet” Emerson offers, in very broad and itself poetic terminology, something of an outline for whom this poet would be and for how this poet would present the U.S. poetically.

So we come at last to the heart of our matter. I contend that Walt Whitman’s 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* embodies Ralph Waldo Emerson’s notion of what it means in general to be the poet and what it means in particular to be the American poet as described in Emerson’s essay “The Poet.” And, further, I am suggesting that it is this synchronicity between Emerson’s ideals and Whitman’s actual poetry that led to Emerson’s enthusiastic response upon reading those poems for the first time.

Let me be clear: I now am attempting to account for Emerson’s celebrated response to these poems. Though it appears almost certain that Whitman had read Emerson’s “The Poet” before 1855, I am not contending that Whitman simply used this essay as a blueprint for his poetry. While an indisputable case for Emerson’s influence on Whitman can be made, a case I have attempted to offer briefly above, I in no way want to appear to be overstating that case by claiming that Whitman merely transposed the prose of Emerson’s essay into the poetry of *Leaves of Grass*. No matter the influences that may have aided Whitman in his writing of *Leaves of Grass*, it is, on its own, a remarkable and unprecedented sort of poetry. So, just to reemphasize, I am, at this point, attempting to offer a supposition about Emerson’s response to Whitman and not about his influence on Whitman.

Rather than continue to examine the records and resources of secondary accounts, let us now turn to the two documents themselves. Both Emerson’s essay “The Poet” and Whitman’s 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* are rich and complex works. I do not presume in any way to exhaust their meaning herein. Rather, I will attempt to offer certain excerpts from the essay and then to demonstrate ways in which the poem seems to embody what the essay proposes. In this effort, I am now narrowing my focus to the initial poem in the collection, that long, rambling lyric titled, in later editions, “Song of Myself.” While the same case might be made by attending to others of these poems, the scope and content of the yet untitled first offering makes it especially appropriate for this kind of undertaking.

Emerson begins “The Poet” with a tone of disappointment. There are those aesthetes, he observes, whose sense of beauty is secondhand, based on “some study of rules and particulars.” (TP, p. 316) He then extends this judgment to poets who “are contented with a civil and conformed manner of living” and who “write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience.” (TP, p. 317) He further contends that, while “all men live by truth and stand in need of expression,” (TP, 317) “the great majority of men seem to be minors, who have not yet come into possession of their own, or mutes, who cannot report the conversation they had with nature.” (TP, p. 318)

It is these two related and regrettable conditions--the frequent appeal to secondhand experience and the widespread inability to engage in self-expression--that create our need for the true poet, the poet of Emerson's ideals. Of such a one, he writes:

The poet does not wait for the hero or the sage, but, as they act and think primarily, so he writes primarily what will and must be spoken . . . (TP, p. 319)

The key here is the word "primarily." This poet is not writing from some secondhand perspective or from the safety of distance, but rather is offering her own personal witness to her own "conversation with nature."

Emerson continues:

The poet has a new thought; he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet. (TP, p. 320)

Again, the true poet is the one attesting to personal experience. However, that sort of attestation must not be confused with solipsistic prolixity; poetry as mere cathartic confession fails to fulfill this crucial Emersonian ideal. Rather, through risking personal expression this poet also meets the needs of those who "stand in need of expression" so that, through her one telling, all are enriched.

Aware of the challenges of this role, toward the end of the essay Emerson offers encouragement to his poet:

Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say "It is in me, and shall out." Stand there, balked and dumb, stuttering and stammering, hissed and hooted, stand and strive, until at last rage draw out of thee that dream-power which every night shows thee is thine own; a power transcending all limit and privacy, and by virtue of which a man is the conductor of the whole river of electricity. (TP, p. 338)

Anyone at all familiar with Emerson's thinking will recognize in these collective citations his essential notion of self-reliance, an idea that he had long discussed and written about, including in an essay by that title in the first series. An early journal entry offers a succinct synopsis of this concept as he saw it:

Every man has his own voice, manner, eloquence, and, just as much, his own sort of love and grief and imagination and action. Let him scorn to imitate any being, let him scorn to be a secondary man, let him fully trust his own share of God's goodness, that, correctly used, it

will lead him on to perfection which has no type yet in the universe, save only in the Divine Mind. (27)

This is at the heart of Emerson's thinking. Therefore, it ought not to surprise us that extended descriptions of self-reliance appear in "The Poet" as one of his primary means of describing the true poet. With this notion guiding his anticipation of the long-awaited poet, is it also no surprise that Emerson would react with such enthusiasm to a poem that begins "I celebrate myself." (LOG, p.27)

Whitman's "Song of Myself" might just as aptly be entitled, or perhaps subtitled, "Paean to Self-Reliance." This concept appears throughout the poem and no doubt fueled Emerson's delight upon reading it. Just a page into the poem, Whitman invites:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,  
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun . . . there are millions of suns left,  
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand  
. . . nor look through the eyes of the dead . . . nor feed on the spectres in books,  
You shall not look through my eyes either, not take things from me,  
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself. (LOG, p. 28)

The reader is invited to attend to Whitman's expression. But, the value in accepting this invitation is not so that one may learn from him about the way things are *sub specie aeternitatis*. Rather, in this hearing one will be summoned away from secondhand experience, away from what Emerson had bemoaned as "some study of rules and particulars," and toward the capacity to listen and discern for oneself.

Acclaiming his power, with characteristic Whitmanesque bravado, he writes:

I know I am august,  
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,  
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,  
I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house by after all.

I exist as I am, that is enough,  
If no other in the world be aware, I sit content,  
And if each and all be aware I sit content. (LOG, p. 46)

And then:

Behold I do not give lectures or a little charity,  
What I give I give out of myself. (LOG, p. 72)

And:

I know I have the best of time and space--and that I was  
never measured, and never will be measured. (LOG, p. 82)

And:

nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's-self is (LOG, p. 84)

Which he then echoes with:

I hear and behold God in every object, yet I understand God not in the least,  
Nor do I understand who there can be more wonderful than myself. (LOG, p. 85.)

Whitman's grand claims are not for himself alone. He may, as Emerson would have it, enrich those who hear his "Song," but he insists that, in the end, they too must sing for and of themselves.

My right hand points to landscapes of continents, and a plain public road.

Not I, not any one else can travel that road for you.

You must travel it for yourself. (LOG, p. 82)

And again:

You are also asking me questions, and I hear you;

I answer that I cannot answer . . . . you must find out for yourself. (LOG, p. 83)

One can imagine Emerson on that grim July 1855 day reading these lines. He had for so long proclaimed the value of, indeed the necessity of self-reliance. And here, in line after line, he reads long-awaited poetry singing his very song. Were there just this one correlation between his ideals and Whitman's writing, that, in and of itself, may have sufficed to engender his enthusiasm. But, the congruity does not end with this single connection.

In his essay, we find the Emersonian poet characterized in at least three explicit ways. In the first of these, Emerson writes:

. . . the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth. (TP, p. 317.)

After suggesting that “The man is only half himself, the other half is expression,” (TP, p. 317) Emerson contends that the power of nature’s impression upon us should result in our power to attest to that experience. And yet, in “the great majority of men” that, regrettably, is not the case. That capacity, he asserts, is what distinguishes the poet.

The poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance, the man without impediment, who sees and handles that which others dream of, traverses the whole scale of experience, and is representative of man, in virtue of being the largest power to receive and to impart. (TP, p. 318)

The true poet, for Emerson, is a representative person. Again, the poet transcends her own experience in an attestation to the “common wealth.” She is, as it were, a spokesperson on behalf of humanity, giving expression not only to herself but also for all those who are less than whole because of their inability to adequately express themselves.

Once again, we need look no further than Whitman’s opening lines for an intoning of the poet as representative person:

I celebrate myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (LOG, p. 27)

In Whitman, there is a kind of radical representationalism: the self that is being sung is an individual with all of his particular experiences as well as all other individuals who are caught up in that portrayal. As such, the benefit is to the common wealth. Again and again in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman assumes identification with and bears witness to himself as more than himself. In these frequent passages, he assumes the standing of representative person.

In one of his sweeping catalogues, Whitman runs through a widely variant listing of persons, professions, and personalities. Beginning with “The pure contralto,” he includes “the carpenter,” “the married and unmarried children,” “the pilot,” “the mate,” “the duck-shooter,” “the deacons,” “the

spinning-girl,” “the farmer,” “the lunatic,” “the jour printer,” the one with “malformed limbs,” “the quadron girl,” “the machinist,” “the young fellow” driving the “express wagon,” “the half-breed,” “old and young” contestants at the “turkey-shooting,” “the groups of newly-come immigrants,” “the woolypates,” “the overseer,” and at this point is but a third of the way done. On and on it goes, acclaiming everyone from “the dancers” to “the deckhands,” “the canal-boy” to “the conductor,” “the prostitute” to “the President,” “the one-year wife” to “the opium eater,” before concluding with old and young husbands with their wives. (LOG, pp. 39-42.) Without pause, Whitman then acclaim:

And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,

And such as it is to be of these more or less I am.

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise

Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,

Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,

Stuffed with the stuff that is coarse, and stuffed with the stuff that is fine,

One of the great nation, the nations of many nations--the

smallest the same and the largest the same . . . (LOG, p. 42)

Then, he breaks into another catalogue, claiming identity as “A southerner as soon as a northerner” and so on until “A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest.” (LOG, p. 42-43) As if to sum it all up, he attests: “I resist anything better than my own diversity.”

So it is that with this and other similar inventories Whitman places himself in the position of representative man. His is truly a song which “traverses the whole scale of experience.” In this role, he sings, ultimately, not of his own partial perspective, but of the common wealth, of an incredibly wide range of human experiences and expressions:

In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less,

And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them. (LOG, p. 45)

And:

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,

And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,

And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men. (LOG, p. 46)

And:

Whoever degrades another degrades me . . . and whatever is done or said returns at last to me,

And whatever I do or say I also return. (LOG, p. 50)

And, in something of a summary statement of this representative position:

I become any presence or truth of humanity here. (LOG, p. 70)

Emerson offers a second explicit characterization of the poet. “The poet,” he writes, “is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty.” (TP, p. 318) “. . . [S]ome men, namely poets, are natural sayers, sent into the world to the end of expression.” (TP, p. 319) Then, in his fullest explication of this particular description, Emerson explains:

. . . the poet is the Namer or Language-maker, naming things after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another’s, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary. (TP, p. 327)

What does it mean to be the sayer or namer or language-maker? For Emerson this is about much more than simply expressing oneself, giving creative names to things, or playing with language. He makes a sublime, preexistent claim for poetry:

For poetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem. The men of more delicate ear write down these cadences more faithfully, and these transcripts, though imperfect, become the songs of the nations. (TP, p. 319)

To be the poetic sayer or namer then is to be a transcriber, keenly attuned to that profound and primordial poetry sensually available but rarely apprehended. The true poet is celebrated less for unique insights or compelling ideas and more for accurate transcriptions, faithful to the cadences of creation.

With this concept in mind, Emerson must have heard in “Song of Myself” lines that indeed become “songs of the nations.” For all of his bluster, Whitman exhibits a surprising humility, owning his

role as the one saying and naming, the one, as it were, transcribing something more expansive than himself. So, he acknowledges:

These are thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original with me,  
If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing or next to nothing,  
If they do not enclose everything they are next to nothing,  
If they are not the riddle and the untying of the riddle they are nothing,  
If they are not just as close as they are distant they are nothing. (LOG, p.43)  
Whitman heard “those primal warblings” and attempted to “write them down.”  
And I know I am solid and sound,  
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,  
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means. (LOG, p. 45-46)

And:

I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen,  
And accrue what I hear into myself . . . . and let sounds  
contribute to me. (LOG, p. 53)

He assumes the role of Logos, interceding for those persons of less “delicate ear” who may hear but cannot say:

It is you talking just as much as myself . . . . I act as the tongue of you,  
It was tied in your mouth . . . . in mine it begins to be loosened. (LOG, p. 84)

With yet another verse, he sings again of his true source, portraying his words as but an echo of “that region where the air is music:”

If you would understand me go to the heights or water-shore,  
The nearest gnat is an explanation and a drop or the motion of waves a key . . . (LOG, 84.)  
And then, modestly confesses in the waning lines of the poem:  
I hear you whispering there O stars of heaven,  
O suns . . . . O grass of graves . . . . O perpetual transfers  
and promotions . . . . if you do not say anything how  
can I say anything? (LOG, p. 86)

Poets are representative persons. Poets are names, sayers, transcribers. And too, to hear Emerson tell it, there is a third role for the poet: “Poets are thus liberating gods.” (TP, p. 332) So sure is he of this that, a page later he repeats it: “Poets are thus liberating gods.” This time he continues:

The ancient British bards had for the title of their order, “Those who are free, and they make free. (TP, p. 333)

He hails “the magic of liberty, which puts the world like a ball in our hands.” (TP, p. 334) Again Emerson refers to those bereft of the capacity to offer adequate expression. For them, he says, “Every thought is a prison, every heaven is also a prison.” (TP, p. 334) And, out of our need for expression . . . we love the poet, the inventor, who in any form, whether in an ode or in an action or in looks and behavior, has yielded us a new thought. He unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene.

This emancipation is dear to all men, and the power to impart it, as it must come from greater depth and scope of thought, is a measure of intellect. (TP, p. 334)

Just after his identifying lines, “Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos . . . “ Whitman insists:

Unscrew the locks from the doors!

Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs! (LOG, p. 50)

In a very real sense, that is the project of the whole poem. For Whitman it is not enough simply to unlock the door; to bring about full emancipation one must go so far as to remove the door itself.

Like a true Transcendentalist, Whitman literalizes the notion of the poet as not simply a liberator but as a liberating god. In a celebrated passage of almost humorous self-assertion, he proclaims:

Divine I am 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,

This head is more than churches or bibles or creeds. (LOG, p. 51)

And yet, again this kind of assertion, this laying claim to divinity, is not only or ultimately in service of self. As a true liberating god, he becomes the voice of the voiceless:

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 . . . (LOG, p. 50)

The poet of Leaves of Grass exemplifies freedom, models for those yet imprisoned the possibility of complete emancipation.

My ties and ballasts leave me . . . . I travel . . . . I sail  
. . . . my elbows rest in the sea-gaps,  
I skirt the sierras . . . . my palms cover continents,  
I am afoot with my vision. (LOG, p. 59)

And:

I fly the flight of the fluid and swallowing soul,  
My course runs below the soundings of plummets. (LOG, p. 63)

And:

I am a free companion . . . . I bivouac by invading watchfires. (LOG, p. 64)

As the liberating god, the poet acts on behalf of the imprisoned, offering a kind of emotional resurrection or, at least, resuscitation:

I seize the descending man . . . . I raise him with resistless will.  
O despairer, here is my neck,  
By God! you shall go down! Hang your whole weight upon me.  
I dilate you with tremendous breath . . . . I buoy you up . . . (LOG, p. 73)

And again:

Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself . . . . bestowing them freely on  
each man and woman I see . . . (LOG, p. 74)

Then finally, the liberating god's intercession on behalf of those in need turns, once again, into a commissioning, a sending forth. He cannot forever secure their freedom for them; eventually they

must be free for themselves:

Sit awhile wayfarer,  
Here are biscuits to eat and here is milk to drink,  
But as soon as you sleep and renew yourselves in sweet clothes  
I will certainly kiss you with my goodbye kiss and open the gate for your egress hence.

Long enough have you dreamed contemptible dreams,  
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,  
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment of your life

Long have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,  
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,  
To jump off in the midst of the sea, and rise again and nod to me and shout, and laughingly  
dash with your hair. (LOG, p. 83)

With this triune characterization of the poet grounding Emerson's thinking about poetry and informing his expectations about the arrival of the true poet, we can see again why Whitman's poetry would have excited him so. Where Emerson offers a sweeping idealization, Whitman offers line after line fleshing out those ideals in one image after another. Emerson sounds the claim for the poet as representative man and Whitman echoes with his song of "I am . . ." encompassing an amazingly wide spectrum of humanity. Emerson hails the poet as the namer and sayer, the transcriber of "primal warblings," and Whitman sings then to the stars and the sun and the grass whose saying enables his song. Emerson acclaims the poet as a liberating god and Whitman, touting his divinity, trumpeting his freedom, first gives a voice to those deprived of a voice, and then releases his emancipated ones to live out their own freedom.

Emerson's "The Poet" also reflects on the source of poetic inspiration. He writes:

So the poet's habit of living should be set on a key so low that the common influences should delight him. His cheerfulness should be the gift of the sunlight; the air should suffice for his inspiration, and he should be tipsy with water. That spirit which suffices quiet hearts, which seems to come forth to such from every dry knoll of sere grass, from every pine stump and half-imbedded stone on which the dull March sun shines, comes forth to the poor and hungry, and such as are of simple taste. (TP, p. 332)

In the grand and sweeping conclusion to the essay, Emerson presents the result of this sort of “habit of living.” This wonder-filled exultation must be quoted at length:

And this is the reward; that the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome to thy invulnerable essence. Thou shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor, the sea for thy bath and navigation, without tax and without envy; the woods and rivers thou shalt own, and thou shalt possess that wherein others are only tenants and boarders. Thou true land-lord! sea-lord! air-lord! Wherever snow falls or water flows or birds fly, wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds or sown with stars, wherever are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger, and awe, and love,--there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and though thou shouldst walk the world over, thou shalt not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble. (TP, p. 339-340)

Even a cursory reading of Whitman’s initial poem in *Leaves of Grass* would elicit a sense of the symmetry between these passages in Emerson’s essay and that poem. Whitman attests in line after line, image after image to those “common influences:” sunlight, air, water, and, of course, grass. Emerson’s ideal was indeed real to him, evidenced in his manifold “impressions of the actual world.”

From the outset he rejects domestic settings in favor of a different “habit of living:”

Houses and rooms are full of perfumes . . . . the shelves are crowded with perfumes,  
I breathe the fragrance myself, and know it and like it,  
The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

The atmosphere is not a perfume . . . . it has no taste of the distillation . . . . it is odorless,  
It is in my mouth forever . . . . I am in love with it,  
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (LOG, p. 27)

Echoing Emerson’s high valuation of “common influences,” Whitman attests “The insignificant is as big to me as any,” (LOG, p. 56) and reports with regularity throughout the poem on his delight in such things. “A morning-glory at my window,” he proclaims, “satisfies me more than the/ metaphysics of books.” (LOG, p. 52) In awe-filled amazement, he writes, in the section from which the collection draws its title:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? . . . . I do not know what it is any more than he.  
He reports on the “common” sights and sounds of his sauntering:  
My tread scares the wood-drake and wood-duck on my distant and daylong ramble,  
They rise together, they slowly circle around.  
. . . . I believe in those winged purposes,  
And acknowledge the red yellow and white playing within me,  
And consider the green and violet and the tufted crown intentional;  
And do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else,  
And the mockingbird in the swamp never studied the gamut, yet trills pretty well to me,  
And the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me.

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,  
Ya-honk! he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation;  
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listen closer,  
I find its purpose and place up there toward the November sky.

The sharphoofed moose of the north, the cat on the housesill, the chickadee, the prairie-dog,  
The litter of the grunting sow as they tug at her teats,  
The brood of the turkeyhen, and she with her halfspread wings,  
I see in them and myself the same old law. (LOG, p. 37-38)

I will not attempt to offer an exhaustive accounting of Whitman’s delight in these “common influences” which Emerson commends to the poet for such examples appear in one form and another on every page of this poem. Perhaps one more example will suffice. In the heart of the poem, Whitman offers his own credo, bearing witness to the source of his faith:

I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars,  
And the pismire is equally perfect, and a grain of sand, and the egg of the wren,  
And the tree-toad is the chef-d’ouvre for the highest,  
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlors of heaven,  
And the narrowest hinge in my hand puts to scorn all machinery,  
And the cow crunching with depressed head surpasses any statue,

And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels,  
And I could come every afternoon of my life to look at the farmer's girl boiling her iron tea-kettle and baking  
shortcake.  
I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits and grains and esculent roots,  
And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over,  
And have distanced what is behind me for good reasons,  
And call any thing close again when I desire it. (LOG, p. 57)

For all of his celebration of nature, Emerson did not limit poetic influence to the natural. In his well-known essay 1836 "Nature," he makes a clear distinction between "the stick of timber of the wood-cutter and the tree of the poet." (28) He also writes:

The tradesman, the attorney, comes out of the din and craft of the street and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again. In their eternal calm, he finds himself. (29)

And yet, the Emerson of "The Poet" did not perceive nature as the sole domain of the poetic nor did he see urbanism as a threat to the poetic. Instead he asserts:

Readers of poetry see the factory-village and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive or the spider's geometrical web. (TP, p. 326)

Yet again we hear Whitman singing of Emerson's ideals. He too, as we discussed above, found great inspiration in the natural world. But, like a true Emersonian poet, he does not limit his scope to nature's arena. From the outset he will celebrate "The delight alone or in the rush of the streets . . ." (LOG, p. 27) In an extended section he particularizes that delight:

The blab of the pave . . . the tires of carts and sluff of bootsoles and talk of the promenaders,  
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,  
The carnival of sleighs, the clinking and shouted jokes and pelts of snowballs;  
The hurrahs for the popular favorites . . . the fury of the roused mobs,  
The flap of the curtained litter--the sick man inside, borne to the hospital,

The meeting of enemies, the sudden oaths, the blows and fall,  
The excited crowd--the policeman with his star quickly working its passage to the centre of  
the crowd;  
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,  
The souls moving along . . . . are they invisible while the least atom of the stones is visible?  
What groans of overfed or half-starved who fall on the flags sunstruck or in fits,  
What exclamations of women taken suddenly, who hurry home and give birth to babes,  
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here . . . . what howls restrained by deco-  
rum,  
Arrests of criminals, slights adulterous offers made, acceptances, rejections with convex lips,  
I mind them or the resonance of them . . . . I come again and again. (LOG, p. 33-34)  
He celebrates the butcher-boy, blacksmiths, and "those ahold of fire engines" and then, in  
much the same way that he earlier identified with the tree-toad, the running blackberry, and  
the mouse, he attests:  
This is the city . . . . and I am one of its citizens;  
Whatever interests the rest interests me . . . . politics, churches, newspapers, schools,  
Benevolent societies, improvements, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories, markets,  
Stocks and stores and real estate and personal estate.

They who piddle and patter her in collars and tailed coats  
. . . . I am aware who they are . . . . and that they are not worms or fleas,  
I acknowledge the duplicates of myself under all the scape-lipped and pipe legged conceal-  
ments. (LOG, p. 76)

In his amazing amalgam of rural and urban, of the call of the wild and the cry on the streets, of the  
appeal of nature and the attraction to the heart of the city, Whitman indeed offers an expansive vision  
of what Emerson called "the great Order." His quiet, solitary song alongside the grass gives way  
to an operatic cry amidst the masses thereby encompassing the fullest possible spectrum of human  
experience and expression. He transcends either/or thinking by bringing widely variant elements into  
some greater synthesis, as he wrote:

Do you see O brothers and sisters?  
It is not chaos or death . . . . it is form and union and plan  
. . . . it is eternal life . . . . it is happiness. (LOG, p. 87)

Emerson acclaims that work of synthesizing, of fashioning some new union as one of the tasks of the poet:

For as it is dislocation and detachment from the life of God that makes things ugly, the poet, who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole,--reattaching even artificial things and violation of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight,--disposes very easily of the most disagreeable facts. (TP, p. 325–26)

The poet, through poetic insight and by engaging in the act of re-attachment, fashions a new Whole which represents a reunion of the divine, the natural, the artificial, and even that which is in “violation of nature.”

Whitman takes quite seriously this summons to the task of re-attachment and responds by calling upon his immense sexual energy. In so doing, he fully embodies both senses of the word “intercourse:” he employs both communication and sexual union to aid him in the poetic task of mending dislocation and detachment. With a kind of literalizing of the work of creating reconnection, he describes a series of acts of physical union. For example, Whitman recalls a curious instance of fellatio that occurred between himself and his soul:

I believe in you my soul . . . . the other I am must not abase itself to you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.

Loafe with me on the grass . . . . loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want . . . . not custom or lecture, not even the best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;  
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my barestript heart,  
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all the art and argument of the earth . . . (LOG, p. 30)

He also engages in a series of explicit sexual unions with nature:

I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me. (LOG, p. 27)

And:

Smile O voluptuous coolbreathed earth! . . .  
Smile, for your lover comes. (LOG, p. 47)

And:

You sea! I resign myself to you also . . . . I guess what you mean,  
I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers,  
I believe you refuse to go back with feeling of me;  
We must have a turn together . . . . I undress . . . . hurry out of sight of the land,  
Cushion me soft . . . . rock me in billowy drowse,  
Dash me with amorous wet . . . . I can repay you. (LOG, p. 47–48)

Even God becomes one of Whitman's sexual partners:

I am satisfied . . . . I see, dance, laugh, sing;  
As God comes a loving bedfellow, and sleeps at my side all night and close on the peep of  
the day . . . (LOG, p. 29)

In his call for the poet to fashion an all-inclusive new union, Emerson asserted that no element ought to be excluded. Whitman responds:

Welcome is every organ and attribute of me, and of any man hearty and clean,  
Not an inch nor a particle of an inch is vile, and none shall be less familiar than the rest.  
(LOG, p. 29)

And proclaims:

I am the poet of commonsense and of the demonstrable and of immortality;  
And am not the poet of goodness only . . . . I do not decline to be to poet of wickedness also.  
(LOG, p. 48)

Then, in his broadest sweep of all, he launches into another of his catalogues:

By the city's quadrangular houses . . . . in log-huts, or camping along with lumbermen,  
Along the ruts of the turnpike . . . . along the dry gulch and rivulet bed . . . (LOG, p. 59)

He will continue this ramble between the city and nature, between animals: the panther, buck, rattlesnake, otter, alligator, black bear, beaver, and then plants: sugar, cottonplant, rice, persimmon, corn, flax, buckwheat, rye, and then a diversion into more animals, a brief scene of domesticity, then to industry. As exemplary of his inclusiveness, in consecutive lines he writes:

Where the she-whale swims with her calves and never forsakes them,  
Where the steamship trails hindways its long pennant of smoke,  
Where the ground-shark's fin cuts like a black chip out of the water,  
Where the half-burned brig is riding on unknown currents . . . (LOG, p. 60)

From Manhattan to Niagara, "a good game of base-ball" to the "lonesome prairie," from "the sweating Methodist preacher" to the "print of animal's feet," this amazing catalogue continues in the Emersonian act of re-attachment, bringing widely disparate elements back into some greater Whole.

Finally, we recall again that Emerson's essay concerned not just his thoughts regarding the ideal poet, but his expectations regarding the truly American poet. These expectations yet go unmet:

Time and nature yield us many gifts, but not yet the timely man, the new religion, the reconciler, whom all things await. (TP, p. 336–337)

And, in a passage cited above, he laments: "We have yet had no genius in America . . ." (TP, p. 337) But, hope remains strong in Emerson:

Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres. If I have not found that excellent combination of gifts in my countrymen which I seek, neither could I aid myself to fix the idea of the poet by reading, now and then in Chalmer's collection of five centuries of English poets. (TP, p. 337)

There are those explicit portions of *Leaves of Grass* to which we can now refer to exemplify how distinctly American Whitman's poetry is. He identifies himself as:

A southerner soon as a northerner, a planter nonchalant and hospitable,  
A Yankee bound my own way . . . . ready for trade . . . . my joints the limberest joints on

earth and the sternest

joints on earth,

A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deerskin leggings,

A boatman over the lakes or bays or along coasts . . . . a Hoosier, a Badger, a Buckeye,

A Louisianian or Georgian, a poke-easy from the sandhills and pines . . .

and then

At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine or on the Texas ranch,

Comrade of Californians . . . . comrade of free northeasterners, loving their big proportions . .

. (LOG, p. 42)

And:

We walk the roads of Ohio and Massachusetts and Virginia and Wisconsin and New York and New Orleans and Texas and Montreal and San Francisco and Charleston and Savannah and Mexico,

Inland and by the seacoast and boundary lines . . . . and we pass the boundary line. (LOG, p. 71)

We can also cite his references to clearly American phenomena like the “Yankee clipper,” “the runaway slave,” “the Wolverine” setting traps on the Huron, “the cleanhaired Yankee girl,” the President holding a “cabinet council,” “the Fourth of July,” the Tennessee and Chattahoochee and Altamahaw, Manhattan, Niagara, “the fall of Alamo,” “Mount Vernon,” and “the Brooklyn boy.” And, of course, most explicit of all is that identifying line: “Walt Whitman, an American.”

But, in addition to these more explicit passages, perhaps there is another way in which Whitman becomes Emerson’s much anticipated American bard in *Leaves of Grass*, one that has less to do with content than with form. When Emerson called America “a poem in our eyes,” he added “its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres.” It is this sense of America’s “ample geography” and her “incomparable materials” that rendered old forms of poetry inadequate. The song of this pluralistic, multi-faceted and still wild nation could not be sung by way of the usual form, it demanded some new way.

Emerson had suggested such a form earlier in the essay:

For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,--a thought so passion-

ate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. (TP, p. 320)

In an extended passage, he amplifies that suggestion:

The poet knows that he speaks adequately then only when he speaks somewhat wildly, or “with the flower of the mind;” not with the intellect used as an organ, but with the intellect released from all service and suffered to take its direction from its celestial life . . . For if in any manner we can stimulate this instinct, new passages are opened for us into nature; the mind flows into and through things hardest and highest, and the metamorphosis is possible. (TP, p. 330-31)

This is Emerson, true to his Romantic influences, in the full flush of Transcendentalism. The poet must not be constrained by dispassionate rationalism, must not allow the intellect to hold the reins. Instead, the poet’s mind should be led by passion and instinct thereby adorning “nature with a new thing.”

This view must surely account for a portion of Emerson’s enthusiasm upon reading Whitman’s poem “which spills erratically down the page in long flaglike lines, shifting elliptically from theme to theme, image to image, over fifty undivided, apparently indigestible pages.” (30) Emerson only had to see the poem on the page to realize this was a new kind of poetry, unconstrained by the fixed form of prior poetry, virtually unprecedented in its vast and ebullient presentation.

At the end of the poem Whitman attests to just the sort of wild passion Emerson anticipated:

The past and the present wilt . . . I have filled them and emptied them,

And proceed to fill my next fold in the future.

And, as if representing the whole nation, he proclaims:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then . . . I contradict myself;

I am large . . . I contain multitudes.

And then, admitting what is, by this point in the poem, quite obvious:

I too am not a bit tamed . . . I too am untranslatable,

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. (LOG, p. 87)

Here indeed is an “architecture of its own,” a new creation sung into being by an impassioned poet saying, as Emerson had urged, “It is in me, and shall out.” Is it any wonder, then, that Emerson would hail Whitman’s poetry in that famous letter by writing:

It meets the demand I am always making of what seemed the sterile and stingy nature, as if too much handiwork, or too much lymph in the temperament, were making our western wits fat and mean. (31)

Things would not remain as they were in July 1855. The celebratory tone in this mid summer intersection of the lives of Emerson and Whitman would give way to a complex and ambivalent relationship. Emerson would, with time, question his early enthusiasm for *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman would, without Emerson’s permission, print Emerson’s letter in the 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and would even emboss an excerpt on the book’s binding. In a walk together on the Boston Common, Emerson would urge Whitman to edit out some of the more sexually explicit portions of the third edition. Whitman would eventually equivocate about Emerson, downplaying his influence on the writing of *Leaves of Grass*.

A century and a half later, that complexity still does not obscure the fact that, on that dark day in Concord, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s spirits soared, carried aloft on the wings of his belief that, in the pages of *Leaves of Grass*, he, at last, had encountered both a true poet and his long awaited American poet.

At the conclusion of the Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote: “The proof of the poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.” (LOG, p. 26) Walt Whitman would have to wait years before being affectionately absorbed by his country and, in truth, he would never really receive the kind of affectionate outpouring that he both wanted and needed. But, in July 1855, no less a critic than Ralph Waldo Emerson, a beneficiary of a complementary copy of his newly published *Leaves of Grass*, would respond “I find incomparable things said incomparably well.” No matter what Whitman would later claim, that affirmation would help initiate a thirty-six year old itinerant newspaper journalist on his journey toward becoming a great poet. No matter how Emerson would later alter his opinion, true to his initial inclination, Whitman would, in time, become the first U.S. poet to gain an international reputation. And, due in no small measure to Emerson’s influence on Whitman and blessing of Whitman, “*Song of Myself*” would become not just a national ode but a hymn for all of humankind.

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### *Endnotes*

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2. Justin Kaplan, ed. *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, (New York: Library Classics of the United States, Inc., 1996), p. 1155.
3. Justin Kaplan, *Walt Whitman: A Life*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1980), p. 184.
4. *Walt Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, p. 50. All citations from *Leaves of Grass* are hereafter cited as LOG and page number.
5. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 527.
6. Whitman, p.1350.
7. Whitman, p. 1350.
8. Kaplan, p. 203.
9. Carlos Baker, *Emerson among the Eccentrics*, (New York: Viking, 1996), p. 365.
10. John Q. Anderson, *The Liberating Gods: Emerson on Poets and Poetry*, (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971), pp. 87–88.
11. Richardson, p.19.

12. Richardson, p. 122.
13. Richardson, p. 126–127.
14. Richardson, p. 522.
15. Kaplan, p. 203.
16. Kaplan, p. 203.
17. Kaplan, p. 101.
18. *The Collected Writings of Walt Whitman: The Journalism Volume 1: 1834-1846*, ed. by Herbert Bergman, (New York: Peter Lang, 1998), p. 44.
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23. Kaplan, p. 210.
24. Richardson, p. 371.
25. Richardson, p. 371.
26. Reginald L. Cook, ed, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Poetry and Prose*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 317. All citations from “The Poet” are hereafter noted as TP and page number.
27. Quoted in Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), p. 47.
28. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Reginald L. Cook, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 5.
29. “Nature,” p. 10.
30. Paul Zweig, “The Generation of Whitman” in *Emerson and His Legacy: Essays in Honor of Quentin Anderson*, ed. Stephen Donadio, Stephen Railton, and Ormond Seavey, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 110.
31. Whitman, p. 1350.