Maria João Pires
Universidade do Porto

The Self and the World or the Spirit of America in Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself'*

Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.
Lack one lacks both and the unseen is proved by the seen,
Till that becomes unseen and receives proof in its turn.
Walt Whitman

In the Preface to the first edition of ***Leaves of Grass,*** Walt Whitman announced, conventionally enough, a demand that, in the seventy-ninth year of the American Revolution, had become almost a formula. For a new nation there must be a new literature, forsaking whatever traditions were now lifeless, inventing ways to reveal whatever in America was yet unsung. And given the possibilities of the subject, the task seemed one that could be approached directly enough. "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem", he wrote. He began to give examples. The common people – "the picturesque looseness of their carriage", "their good temper and open handedness – the terrible significance of their elections – the President's taking off his hat to them not they to him – these too are unrhymed poetry". He continued, describing the continent itself, its fauna and flora. "So rich and various a subject! A poet who would be truly America's poet need only act reflexively: the land itself, he said, was creative and had "vista". "It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it" (Whitman, 1959: 411-12).

Whitman's words at first summon an essentially descriptive, visualist poetry reciting the grandeur of the continent and the vitality and diversity of human life in the democracy that flourished there.

Depicting American scenes and stories was the trade of Whitman's contemporary, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow a few years earlier had burlesqued Whitman's sort of literary nationalism, with its calls for "a national literature commensurate with our

* Paper presented at the Conference 'Usos da Linguagem: Criação, Investigação e Ensino nas Línguas, Literaturas e Culturas', Fundação Engº António da Almeida, Porto, 26-27 October 2001.

mountains and rivers, ...a national epic that shall correspond to the size of the country, ...a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn" (Longfellow, 1902: 314). Still, his recital of American deeds in European verses – the native Indians, the Puritan settlers, the heroes of the Revolution – asserted modestly the claim with which Whitman begins. Once there had been a Matter of Rome (Troy, Aeneas, Alexander), a Matter of France (Charlemagne and Roland), and a Matter of Britain (Arthur). To this the modern poet would add the Matter of America: its geography, the iconic moments from its history, and the present-day doings of its people:

> The ranges of heroism and loftiness with which Greek and feudal poets endowed their god-like or lordly born characters – indeed prouder and better based and with fuller ranges than those – I was to endow the democratic averages of America. ("A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads", in Withman, 1963-64: 727)

This could all be done with simplicity. "What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me" (Whitman, 1965: 717).

But for Whitman the subject could never be so simply external and objective nor his methods naively reflexive. First of all, America was not a folk nation like the Hellenes or the Britons. "Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations". The phrases that follow this announcement describe a new kind of nation: masses ...space ...crowds ...extravagance; the many, made one by the bond of democracy. Looking back in 1872, he described Leaves of Grass as "an epic of Democracy" (Whitman, 1963--64: 458). America is not simply a people upon a land; it is an ideology.

> I speak the password primeval I give the sign of democracy;
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.
> ("Song of Myself", Whitman, 1959: § 24)

As Alan Trachtenberg has said, democracy for Whitman has more to do with a religious or moral vision than with the mechanics of Federal government, or extensions of the franchise, or popular sovereignty; though the poet might invoke these matters as symbols of his larger idea (Trachtenberg, 1988: 15-31). That idea was egalitarianism. The above mentioned lines from "Song of Myself" state this as a social ideal of opportunity and distribution. In "Song of the Open Road", he says it again: "Nor preference nor denial" (Whitman, 1959: 108, § 2). Nothing must mediate between the individual and the whole, preferring some persons and excluding others:

> All parts away for the progress of souls,
> All religion, all solid things, arts, governments – all that was or is apparent upon this globe or any globe, falls into niches and corners before the procession of souls along the grand roads of the universe. (***idem***, 114, § 13)

No parties, no sects, no groupings by region, race, or gender. Nothing but individuals.

> Underneath all, individuals,
> I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals!
> The American compact is with individuals,
> The only government is that which makes minute of individuals.
> ("By Blue Ontario's Shore", Whitman, 1959: 249, § 15)

As Tocqueville said of American individualism, "Aristocracy had made a chain of all the members of the community, from the peasant to the king; democracy breaks that chain, and severs every link of it" (Tocqueville, 1945: 99).

When the chain is broken, there is no way to distinguish between its severed links. As Tocqueville also remarked, in democratic communities men are all very much alike (***idem,*** 73). They forfeit those marks of particular identity once provided by social class, national origin, regional loyalties, religious sect – in a word, by their membership in any group that mediates between the One and the All. Although Whitman wrote in a nation where such discriminators had not at all disappeared, he wrote for a nation that would have put them behind, uniting in an undifferentiated mass. "Song of Myself" proclaimed that the "word of the modern" was the word "En masse" (Whitman, 1959: 40, § 23).

Anticipating some more recent reflections on mass society, Whitman insists that American egalitarianism need not issue in an agglomeration of identical units. In 1867 he began to preface ***Leaves of Grass*** with an "Inscription" that announced two themes, one "the word En Masse" but the other One's Self – a simple, separate person.

To save his individuals from an atomistic solitude, Whitman wished them bonded in some force, which he called love, or comradeship. But his poetry found democracy as unstable as the nation of nations itself, an uneasily shifting balance between the One and the Many: between the Federal constitution and the incompatible claims of its several states; between artisans and wage labourers; between the conformist mob feared by Emerson and the egotists whom Hawthorne portrayed.

Whitman's egalitarianism, however, was more than a social or political doctrine; it was a habit of thought, a way of perceiving, a compositional style. Structured and hierarchical societies were the outward form and consequence of structured and hierarchical thinking. A democratic mind would think and experience without preference, making minute of every individual fact within the orbit of its intelligence. "The American bard shall delineate no class of persons nor one or two out of the strata of interests nor love most nor truth most nor the soul most nor the body most ...and not be for the eastern states more than the western or the northern states more than the southern" (***Preface,*** Whitman, 1959: 418). The poem following the Preface in the 1855 edition was a long free-verse exemplar of American democratic thinking. It revolts against class and against classification. It does this not so much by professions of social egalitarianism as by inventing an egalitarian poetics, admitting every subject from the conventionally heroic to the conventionally obscene, playing with poetic language, modulating his voice from rhapsody to street slang, and founding the poem's rhythms on a line of unlimited variation in length.

Readers look in vain for a structure in "Song of Myself" for Whitman's intent is to break up structure, insofar as structure implies preference – preference for the beautiful over the ugly, the sonorous over the flippant, the graceful over the bumptious; preference by exclusion; preference in order of presentation, beginning-middle-end. A structured intelligence, like a hierarchical society, would provide schemas for sorting and assimilating experience, categories of comparative relevance, a sense of near and far. But the democratic mind stands open against the press of all reality. ln the poem, everything occurs at once; everything demands attention; nothing can be refused. In great unsorted lists the poet ranges his world:

The pavingman leans on his twohanded rammer – the reporter's lead flies swiftly over the notebook – the signpainter is lettering with red and gold,
The canal-boy trots on the towpath – the bookkeeper counts at his desk – the shoemaker waxes his thread,
The conductor beats time for the band and all the performers follow him,
The child is baptised – the convert is making the first professions,
The regatta is spread on the bay, the race is begun how the white sails sparkle!
("Song of Myself", Whitman, 1959: 35, § 15)

What contains all these individual things? America. But also, an egalitarian frame of mind. Partly, "Song of Myself" proclaims the manifold vitality of this nation of nations; partly, it celebrates the democratic consciousness that can admit all this heterogeneity. The Matter of America is not just geography, people, and history, but consciousness itself, playing upon that world. Therefore, the true heroes and leaders of a democratic nation should be not its presidents or its warriors, but those who have learned to think democratically, its poets, he said in the 1855 Preface.

The American hero is not a man of action like Achilles or Roland, but a hero of consciousness. His heroic struggle is to align his inner vision with the outer world; to pioneer the path between reality and the soul. He attempts that alignment in two reciprocal movements, corresponding to the One and the Many in the nation. Whitman called these movements pride and sympathy. In sympathy, the poet gives himself away to his experience, sometimes just so far as a glance of recognition, but at other times, in a self-forgetful flood of empathy:

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones.
(***idem***, 52, § 33)

"I am the man", says Whitman in this mode; "I suffered I was there" (***idem,*** 51, § 33)

But even as he adverts to his suffering, he shifts from sympathy to the other mode, pride. The poet exults in his human power to comprehend the world:

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.
(***idem***, 38, § 2O)

So consciousness becomes self-consciousness. "Poem of Walt Whitman, an American" becomes "Song of Myself". No longer simply in the world, the Self regards everything as its experience and contemplates itself as experiencer.

The poems of ***Leaves of Grass*** pulse between other-consciousness and self-consciousness, between United States and state of mind. "Starting from Paumanok" begins with a celebration of persons and places, from Canada to Cuba; but by its end the poem has swallowed its subject:

See! steamers steaming through my poems!
See, in my poems immigrants continually coming and landing;
….

> See, on the one side the Western Sea, and on the other the Eastern Sea, how they advance and retreat upon my poems, as upon their own shores.
> (Whitman, 1959: 23, § 18)

M. Wynn Thomas drew attention to this passage in ***The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*** (1987), saying that the lines bespeak Whitman's fear that his writing will simply be autotelic, self-referential rather than referential, self-enclosed rather than affecting the real world. In Whitman's destabilized world, the Matter of America must shift continually from reality to the soul and back again. And with it shifts the poet.

As mediating institutions had once stood between the individual and the all, so a cultural tradition had once mediated between consciousness and the objects of consciousness. But in Whitman's America, the inherited culture was of doubtful value, for it perpetuated a European hegemony that bound America to colonial dependency. To inaugurate a modern-frame of thought, America would have to abandon all reliance on the mediations of culture, for that culture was not only hierarchical, but it had assumed an air of completeness. America would always stand on the margin of the Old World; modern times would always seem a further lapse from some lost classical or medieval unity. The culture would always come first, and the single individual humbly seek his place within it. The modern American would have to reverse the priority, asserting first of all his own autonomy and his power to establish an independent, original relationship with the universe; then he could draw unto himself whatever he found useful in the culture of the European past.

Whitman proclaimed this reversal of priority in the first paragraph of the first edition of ***Leaves of Grass:***

> America [...] is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms ...perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house ...perceives that it waits a little while in the door ...that it was fittest for its days ...that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches ...and that he shall be fittest for his days. (Preface, Whitman, 1959: 411).

Some years earlier, in his own first book, ***Nature,*** Ralph Waldo Emerson had begun with a still more radical gesture of emancipation. He wanted to free himself and his age from a "retrospective" culture so that "we also might enjoy an original relation to the universe". To empower this deliverance from tradition, he invoked a tradition, Idealism, both in its classical platonic form and in the thought of the British and German Romantics. To establish the priority of the inspired autonomous Self, he drew a new line of demarcation, separating "I" from "Not-Me". I was consciousness; all else – "nature and art, all other men and my own body" – was Not-Me: no interpreting culture, no mediating institutions between Self and Other. He then spent the rest of his book, and the rest of his life, seeking to reconcile what he had so absolutely divided.

As Whitman in his Preface distinguished "reality" from "the soul", he embraced the same division, and with it the Romantic struggle to reunite mind and world. As yet unresolved, it is the modern struggle too: to comprehend how the human spirit dwells in the physical order, what place the solitary individual finds among the millions of our kind, and how we humans live mutually in spirit and in matter, in self-consciousness and in other-consciousness.

Thomas Carlyle's ***Sartor Resartus*** – following the example of Fichte – had phrased the agon of his proto-modern hero Diogenes Teufelsdrõckh, in terms of "Me" and "Not-Me", and Emerson adopted his terminology. (For Carlyle, this was a turn from the 'Everlasting No' to 'The Centre of Indifference'). Whitman in his turn employed "I" and "You" self-consciously, as defined the relationship of one consciousness with another. All these writers recognized that it is not things that change – not the mind, not what the mind encounters – but rather the relationships that change; and so it is appropriate to explore a world of relations through a vocabulary of relationships, a vocabulary of pronouns. In this age, the subject is always I and my doings, as Thoreau remarked on the first page of ***Walden.*** Everything else exists only as the object of those doings: so, Not-Me rather than Not-I.

As C. Carroll Hollis has shown in ***Language and Style in "Leaves of Grass"*** (1983), Whitman's conception of himself as poet-orator required him to address an audience explicitly identified as "you" – the plural, public "you". None of the classic American writers confronted with more anxiety the cultural consequences of reducing life to subjective experience and private consciousness. There was in Whitman a public self – a civil self – that could not be satisfied by the private discourse of a Poe or a Dickinson, and that sought a common ground on which he could address an imaginable readership. People expected that the poet would trace the path between reality and the soul. He looked for ways to affirm the reality of what he experienced and to incorporate himself with his readers upon that reality.

But because he had forsworn the mediation of social alliances and of traditional culture in order to ground his poetry on the I, Whitman frequently was beset by that Cartesian doubt of which Emerson had spoken in "Experience". Consciousness offered him not a common ground, but rather the likelihood of his complete isolation. Both of its movements, sympathy and pride, led back to a solitary self, more truly out of the game than in it. Sympathy might become the ego's wilful imposition upon some object. Out of what it took to be love, the Self might devour the World. In the line before he proclaimed "I suffered. ...I was there", Whitman wrote, "All this I swallow and it tastes good. ...I like it well, and it becomes mine" ("Song of Myself", Whitman, 1059: 51, § 33). For the isolated I, sympathy is an emotion, the voyeur's caress, ultimately a kind of predation.

The skepticism that undermines the Not-Me, acting reciprocally, dissolves the I as well. When consciousness becomes self-consciousness, a mirror is held up to a mirror, and an endless regression begins, each new image of the Self accusing the previous of bad faith. In some of the poems, this self-recognition brings joy; but in others it attunes him to illusions and deceptions both past and future, both public and private. However, this acknowledgment is just the immediate and personal situation through which Whitman confronts the problem of duplicity and illusion endemic to absolute selfhood. In a passage in "Song of the Open Road", Whitman writes:

> Another self, a duplicate of every one, skulking and hiding it goes,
> Formless and wordless through the streets of the cities, polite and bland in the parlors,
> In the cars of rail-roads, in steam-boats, in the public assembly,
> Home to the houses of men and women, among their families, at the table, in the bedroom, everywhere,

> Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form upright, death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones.
>
> (Whitman, 1959: 114, § 13)

In any poetics founded on the primary authority of the Self, what is perceived may be illusion, not reality. Efforts to disclose the spiritual world within the visible may end in proclaiming not the spiritual but merely the imaginary. Whitman always treated speech as the deliverance from isolation. To do this, however, speech cannot be thought of as the lyric expression of the I or as "direct" description of the Not-Me, for this would only perpetuate a divided and illusory world. Language must address another person, a Listener or Reader, who is able to corroborate the poet's experience by comparing it with his own. In "Song of Myself", Whitman undertakes to stabilize the poem's constant fluctuation from inner to outer consciousness. He introduces a 'Listener:' someone whom he can address as "you", and who can test independently the truth of the poet's utterance. All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own,/ Else it were time lost listening to me" (***idem,*** 38, § 20). This Listener may be the god whom the Romantics devised to co-sign their poetic drafts upon the universe, to guarantee the universal truth of each private vision. But for Whitman, it is also the reader, "up there" above the book he holds. To be delivered from the isolation of I, to pass through "you" to "we", the American bard had to match his words and his reality – his Not-Me – with his reader's. Furthermore, he must pass from the singular You to the plural. The Whitman of 1860, abandoning his poems and advancing "personally" from "behind the screen where I hid" would address his reader as a lover ("Is it night? Are we here alone?/ It is I you hold" – "So Long!" ***[idem,*** 349]). Through an audience's corroboration, the Matter of America (politics and histories alike, poems and behaviour) might be objectified and made mutual.

When, at the end of his Preface, he wrote that "the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it", he meant exactly this.

Things wouldn't be like this for Whitman. As he wrote in his public letter to Emerson, less than a year later, "the people, like a lot of large boys, have no determined tastes". Many critics have pondered Whitman's failure to gain general appreciation. Jeffrey Walker (in ***Bardic Ethos***) has charted the perils of the American "bard", beginning with Whitman, whose "aboriginal and orphic discourse" went unheard by the mass audience he had hoped for; while Ezra Greenspan, in ***Walt Whitman and the American Reader*** has shown how Whitman's career as journalist and printer encouraged him to look beyond any actual readers to an idealized reader and a "new literary culture he hoped to create for and through that reader. In 1855 and 1856, Whitman might sometimes have been willing to concede that there were few actual readers whose sensibilities were truly democratic; but they constituted the readership that he imagined and addressed, and he hoped that someday they would be not the few but the mass. It was only later that he would modify his way of writing poetry to accommodate the actual taste of his time.

Nor did Whitman approach his task with any naive confidence in the power of poetry to evoke a mutually credible world. From the outset, he was troubled by the gap between language and reality. "Speech is the twin of my vision", he said in "Song of Myself"; but he continued, "it is unequal to measure itself./ It provokes me forever"

(Whitman, 1959: 43, § 25). Words expand insight for poet and for reader; but because they never fully express it, the gap between I and Not-Me is never altogether closed.

> There is that in me –. I do not know what it is – I know it is in me.
> [...] I do not know it – it is without name – it is a word unsaid,
> It is not in any dictionary or utterance, symbol.
> ("Song of Myself", Whitman, 1959: 67, § 5O)

"Do you see O my brothers and sisters? " he pleads; but the finale of "Song of Myself", shifting to images of future time and of endless pilgrimage, suggests that the path between the soul and reality may be long and dimly marked.

Further, for all his demand for immediate contact with his experience and with his reader, he was dependent on an instrument, language that was effective only insofar as it had been made communal by a tradition of usage. The poet understood the mediate nature of language: he compiled vocabulary lists, wrote a pamphlet on the history of the American language, and in the 1855 Preface endorsed English as the medium of "American expression" on philological grounds:

> On the tough stock of a race who through all change of circumstances was never without the idea of political liberty, which is the animus of all liberty, it has attracted the terms of daintier and gayer and subtler and more elegant tongues. ***It is the powerful language of resistance ...it is the dialect of common sense.*** (Whitman, 1959: 418-27)

Yet, even as he recognized the dependence of language on tradition and culture, he exhorted himself: "Poet! beware lest your poems are made in the spirit that comes from the study of pictures of things – and not from the spirit that comes from the contact with real things the[m]selves". "Poems distilled from other poems pass away", he said in "By Blue Ontario's Shore" (***idem,*** § 13, V, I, 203); but he knew the difficulty, the impossibility involved in making words refer to reality rather than to poems and pictures; in using words to convey the thing itself rather than ideas about things.

To his contemporaries, he often seemed to have created that sense of immediacy. "It is as if the beasts spoke", Thoreau wrote in 1856 of ***Leaves of Grass***. But he continued, "If we are shocked, whose experience is it that we are reminded of?" Our own, of course. Whitman's words must match, not only with reality, but also with his reader's experience of reality. The reader who can offset Whitman's experience with his own must be one who has learned how artistic images can be made to tally with experience – one who has studied pictures and perused other poems. Between the inherent significance of objects and the inborn sensitivity of human subjects, words are a necessarily conventional medium, conductors of the flash of insight that would make I and Not-Me one. So Whitman required the American "poet" to pass over, from words as tokens of an inner and possibly solipsistic consciousness, to words as indicators of substantive beings:

> Not words of routine this song of mine,
> But abruptly to question, to leap beyond yet nearer bring;
> ("Song of Myself", Whitman, 1959: 60, § 42)

BIBLIOGRAFIA

EMERSON, Ralph Waldo (1957), ***Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson***, Ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Boston.

GREENSPAN, Ezra (1990), ***Walt Whitman and the American Reader***, Cambridge, Eng.

HOLLIS, C. Carrol (1983), ***Language and Style in "Leaves of Grass"***, Baton Rouge.

LONGFELLOW, Henry Wadsworth (1902), ***The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow***, Boston.

THOMAS, M. Wynn (1987), ***The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry***, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis de (1945), ***Democracy in America***, Trans. Henry Reeve, 2 vols., New York.

TRACHTENBERG, Alan (1988), "Whitman's Visionary Politics", ***Mickle Street Review*** X, pp. 15-31.

WALKER, Jeffrey (1989), ***Bardic Ethos and the American Epic Poem***, Baton Rouge.

WHITMAN, Walt (1959), ***Complete Poetry and Selected Prose***, Ed. James E. Miller, Jr. Boston.

_____ (1963-64). ***Prose Works***, Ed. Floyd Stovall, 2 vols., New York.

_____ (1965), ***Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition***, Eds. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley, New York.