The Gift

Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property

Lewis Hyde
CHAPTER NINE

A DRAFT OF WHITMAN

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of "Leaves of Grass."
EMERSON TO WHITMAN, 1855

I • THE GRASS OVER GRAVES

... I guess [the grass] is a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
... I give them the same, I receive them the same.
"SONG OF MYSELF"

In an 1847 notebook Walt Whitman, then about twenty-eight years old, recorded a short fantasy concerning food. "I am hungry and with my last dime get me some meat and bread, and have appetite enough to relish it all.—But then like a phantom at my side suddenly appears a starved face, either human or brute, uttering not a word. Now do I talk of mine and his?—Has my heart no more passion than a squid or clam shell has?"

But in truth he feels no desire to share his meal. He's hungry. No law forbids a man to feed his stomach. "What is this then that balances itself upon my lips and wrestles as with the knuckles of God for every bite I put between them, and if my belly is victor... follows the innocent food down my throat and turns it to fire and lead within me?—And what is it but my soul that hisses like an angry snake, Fool! will you stuff your greed and starve me?"

I am reminded of the story of Saint Martin of Tours, one of the earliest saints of the Western Church. Martin had a vision as a young soldier serving in the Roman army. Having torn his cloak in half to cover a naked beggar, he saw, the following night, an image of Christ wrapped in the garment he had given away. There are spirits that appear as beggars in our peripheral vision; what we bestow upon them draws them into the foreground and joins them to us. "Song of Myself," Whitman's greatest poem, begins with an invitation to the "starved face" of his hunger fantasy. "Loafe with me on the grass," he says to his soul, "loose the stop from your throat, /... Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice."

Somehow—it is not recorded—he gave the soul its bread. It came toward him as a lover then, not as a beggar or beast. It stretched him on the grass and entered his body. Its throat opened and it began to sing.

Whitman was born in 1819 into a large family. His father appears to have been a man of independent spirit, a devotee of Thomas Paine and the Quaker dissenters. At one time he had been a farmer on Long Island, but he soon turned his hand to carpentry after moving the family to Brooklyn, where he built plain houses for working-class families. He never made much money. The Whitmans moved from house to house as each was finished and sold to pay the mortgage. Whitman himself began to work when he was eleven, first as a lawyer's boy, then as an apprentice in a print shop. Like many printers, he developed an interest in journalism. In his late teens he taught school for several years; in the 1840s he wrote for and edited, with some success, newspapers in and around New York. He wrote sentimental fiction and conventional poetry.

The mystery of this life, or at least its surprise, was that in 1855 this previously run-of-the-mill writer came to publish Leaves of Grass, a book remarkable both in content and in style. The turn in Whitman's life has been explained in many ways—that he was inspired by a trip to a phrenologist, that he cribbed it all from Emerson, that he fell in love on a trip to New Orleans, that he'd been reading Carlyle on heroes, that he became enthusiastic over a modern version of Hermes Trismegistus found in a George Sand
novel, and more. Each of these explanations is true to some degree (except for the New Orleans love affair). After Whitman died, a friend of his, Maurice Bucie, put forward yet another—that in June of 1853, when Whitman was thirty-five, he had an awakening, a rebirth, a moment of “cosmic consciousness.” Whitman himself never explicitly corroborated Bucie’s thesis, but he does describe such an epiphany in Section 5 of “Song of Myself.” Having invoked his soul, he addresses it:

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn’d over upon me,
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-strap’d heart,
And reach’d till you felt my beard, and reach’d till you held my feet.

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a kelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap’d stones, elder, mullein and poke-weed.

It is of little account for the story I wish to tell whether this infusso, this lovemaking between the self and the soul, happened in fact or in imagination; either way we may begin. We have two gifts already. The sequence of events implies that Whitman shared the bread with his soul, and now the soul has given him a return gift, its tongue. Their commerce is an exact parallel to the one I described earlier between the Roman and his genius, an interior give-and-take between a man and his tutelary spirit. In this case, though, the man is a poet and the spirit is a poet’s soul. Whitman’s account of their commerce constitutes the creation myth of a gifted man. In the circulation of gifts Whitman becomes a poet, or, to put it another way, through the completed give-and-take he enters a way of being, a state, in which an ongoing commerce of gifts is constantly available to him.

Whitman’s hunger fantasy differs from all later accounts of his intercourse with the soul in its underlying tension. And one of the first things we can say about the gifted state which his epiphany initiates is that this tension, the “talk of mine and his,” falls away. As gift exchange is an erotic commerce, joining self and other, so the gifted state is an erotic state: in it we are sensible of, and participate in, the underlying unity of things. Readers are usually struck by Whitman’s bolder, more abstract assertions of unity—“I am not the poet of goodness only, / I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also”—but the real substance of the state Whitman has entered lies in the range of his attention and affections:

I . . . do not call the tortoise unworthy because she is not something else,
And the jay in the woods never studied the gamut, yet trills pretty well to me,
And the look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me.

One of the effects of reading Whitman’s famous catalogs is to induce his own equanimity in the reader. Each element of creation seems equally fascinating. The poet’s eye focuses with unqualified attention on such a wide range of creation that our sense of discrimination soon withholds for lack of use, and that part of us which can sense the underlying coherence comes forward:

The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending lisp,
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,
The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready . . .
The spinning-girl retires and advances to the hum of the big wheel,
The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafer and looks at the oats and rye,
The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm’d case, (He will never sleep any more as he did in the cot in his mother’s bed-room). . . .

Whitman puts hierarchy to sleep. He attends to life wherever it moves. He would be useless in that ethic’s-class dilemma men-
mentioned earlier in this book: deciding which member of the family to throw from the sinking lifeboat. All things carry equivalent worth simply by virtue of their existence, be they presidents or beetles rolling balls of dung. The contending and reckoning under which most of us suffer most of the time—in which this thing or that thing is sufficient or insufficient, this lover, that lover, this wine, that movie, this pair of pants—is laid aside. You may relax,

The moth and the fish-eggs are in their place,
The bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their place,
The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.

Having fallen into this state, Whitman resists being drawn back into that part of the mind which reckons value or splits things apart. He refuses commerce with what we might call “the brain that divides” or with any spirit which might divorce him from his newly wedded soul, or which might—to fill out the list with Whitman’s typical unities—divide men from women, human beings from animals, the rich from the poor, the smart from the dumb, or the present from the past and the future. In a striking passage toward the beginning of “Song of Myself,” Whitman declares his satisfaction with his awakening and asks rhetorically:

As the hugging and loving bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of the day with steady tread,
Leaving me baskets cover’d with white towels swelling the house with their plenty,
Shall I postpone my acceptation and realization and scream at my eyes,
That they turn from gazing after and down the road,
And forthwith cipher and show me to a cent,
Exactly the value of one and exactly the value of two, and which is ahead?

In the first edition of the poem it is God who shares the poet’s bed and leaves the baskets of rising dough. In an early notebook, Whitman, thinking of various heroes (Homer, Columbus, Washington), writes that “after none of them . . . does my stomach say enough and satisfied.—Except Christ; he alone brings the perfumed bread, ever vivifying to me, ever fresh and plenty, ever

welcome and to spare.” Each of these breads, like that of the hunger fantasy, is a gift (from the god-lover, to the soul), and Whitman senses he would lose that gift were he to “turn from after gazing after” his lover and reckon its value or peek to see if the baskets hold whole wheat or rye.

Showing the best and dividing it from the worst age vexes age,
Knowing the perfect fitness and equanimity of things, while they discuss I am silent, and go bathe and admire myself.

In abandoning the brain that divides, Whitman quits as well all questioning and argument (what he calls “talk”). I do not mean he is silent—he affirms and celebrates—but his mouth is sealed before the sleepless, pestering questions of the dividing mind. “Master,” Whitman wrote in a preface addressed to Emerson, “I am a man who has perfect faith.” Faith does not question. Or, to give the matter its proper shading, faith is the aftermath of questioning—not the answers but the quitting of doubt. It is an ancient wisdom that questioning itself postpones or prohibits faith. In a Buddhist sutra a monk comes to the Buddha saying he shall abandon the religious life unless the master can answer his questions. Is the world eternal, or isn’t it? Does the saint exist after death or doesn’t he? Are the soul and the body identical or are they two things? The Buddha says he does not hold to either side of any of these questions, for they are “questions which tend not to edification.” Two lines from Kabir, the fifteenth-century mystic poet, make the same point:

The flavor of floating through the ocean of deathless life has quieted all my questions.
Just as the tree is inside of the seed, so all our diseases are in the asking of these questions.

Several times in Leaves of Grass Whitman tells us of periods in his own life when he could not feel his perfect faith. “I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,” he confides to the reader in one poem, “I too knitted the old knot of contrariety.” One of the love poems suggests the content of Whitman’s questions—and tells how they were quieted. The poems gathered under the heading Calamus address themselves, in Whitman’s terms, to “the passion of friendship for men,” to “adhesiveness, manly love.”
They are quite clearly the record, sometimes frank and sometimes veiled, of Whitman’s frustrated love affair with a man in the late 1850s. A poem called “Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances” lists the doubts he suffers when he cannot feel “the equanimity of things”:

... That we may be deluded,
That may-be reliance and hope are but speculations after all,
That may-be identity beyond the grave is a beautiful fable only,
May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters, ... are ... only apparitions ...

But, like Kabir, Whitman found something to dissolve his doubt:

When he whom I love travels with me or sits a long while holding me by the hand, ...
Then I am charged with untold and untellable wisdom, I am silent, I require nothing further,
I cannot answer the question of appearances or that of identity beyond the grave,
But I walk or sit indifferent, I am satisfied,
He ahoof of my hand has completely satisfied me.

We have now seen three situations in which Whitman falls into a gifted state. Reckoning and dividing, talking and doubt, all leave him when his lover holds his hand, when the god-lover shares his bed and gives him the baskets of rising dough, and when the soul plunges its tongue into his breast. Note that in each of these cases Whitman’s body is the instrument of his conversion. The intercourse that leads him to the gifted state is a carnal commerce, one of bread and tongues, hands and hearts. Whitman is what has traditionally been known as an enthusiast. To be “enthusiastic” originally meant to be possessed by a god or inspired by a divine afflatus. The bacchants and maenads were enthusiasts, as were the prophets of the Old Testament, the apostles of the New, or, more recently, Shakers and Pentecostal Christians. Enthusiasts, having received a spirit into the body, have never been hesitant to describe their spiritual knowledge in terms of the flesh, to speak of “a sweet burning in the heart” or of a “ravished soul.” Whitman is no exception, as all our examples so far illustrate. He takes his own body to be the font of his religion:

If I worship one thing more than another it shall be the spread of my own body, or any part of it,
Translucent mould of me it shall be you!
Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you!
Firm masculine colter it shall be you!
You my rich blood! your milky stream pale stripings of my life! ...
My brain it shall be your occult convolutions!
Root of wash’d sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded duplicate eggs! it shall be you!

This is the enthusiastic voice, both its subject and its breathlessness.

Enthusiasm has recurrently fallen into disrepute because there have always been those who claim they are filled with the spirit when they are only full of hot air (or worse, full of malice, self-will, or the Devil). And where the enthusiast, sensing a spirit is near, might invoke its powers, the critics of enthusiasm proceed with caution and forbearance. “Enthusiastic wildness has slain its thousands,” they rightly warn. The passions of the flesh, even if inspired by the gods, are prone to error. Those who are wary of enthusiastic religion prefer their spiritual knowing to be purified by the cooler light of reason.

In the summer of 1742 a Massachusetts clergyman, Charles Chauncy, preached “A Caveat Against Enthusiasm.” The text is instructive in our approach to Whitman, for it bears an uncanny resemblance to the caveat that were later to be published, or at least spoken, against Whitman. In Chauncy’s day, a wild-eyed Christian, James Davenport, had emerged from the woods of western Massachusetts and started to stir up the Boston faithful, accusing the local deists, like Chauncy, of not really knowing the Word

* In the trajectory of Whitman’s life one can discern a tendency toward a more dis-incarnate spirituality. As an old man he wrote that Leaves of Grass was a collection of songs of the body and that he had thought of writing a second book to indicate that “the unseen Soul governs absolutely at last.” And yet, he says, “It is beyond my powers,” adding that “the physical and the sensual ... retain holds upon me which I think are never entirely releas’d.”
of God. Chauncy's sermon warns his congregation against the dangers of enthusiasm in general and Davenport in particular. His critique returns again and again to the question of how we are to know the true meaning of Scripture. When two men differ in their sense of the Word, how are we to settle on the truth? Chauncy would submit divergent views to reasonable debate. "Nay," he declares, "if no reasoning is made use of, are not all the senses that can be put on scripture equally proper?" (The enthusiast would reply that it is reason itself which leads us to differing conclusions—that in matters of the spirit we must be guided by an inner light. The enthusiast waits for a sensation of truth.)

Chauncy gives his flock instruction on how to recognize the enthusiasts in their midst. That you can't reason with them is the first sign, but, interestingly enough, all the others have to do with their bodies: "it may be seen in their countenance," "a certain wildness... in their general look," "it strangely loosens their tongues," "throws them... into quakings and tremblings," they are "really beside themselves, acting... by the blind impetus of a wild fancy." It is precisely the feeling that one's body has been entered by some "other" that Chauncy wishes to warn against.

With this dichotomy between spirits that move the body and a prophylactic "reasoning," we come to an issue we touched on in the last chapter, the destruction of the esemplastic powers by an overvaluation of analytic cognition and the related destruction of gift exchange by the hegemony of the market. The deist's attachment to reasonable discourse and his caution before the trembling body place the spirit of his religion closer to the spirit of trade than to the spirit of the gift. In gift exchange no symbol of worth need be detached from the body of the gift as it is given away. Cash exchange, on the other hand, depends upon the abstraction of symbols of value from the substances of value. The farmer doesn't move his produce until he's paid, and if he's paid in dollar bills (or checks or credit at the store), then he has exchanged embodied worth—wheat and oats—for symbolically valuable but substantially worthless paper. When the system is working, of course, the symbols are negotiable and he can convert them back into substances at any time. Both market exchange and abstract thought require this alienation of the symbol from the object. Mathematics, that highly abstract form of cognition, could not proceed if we did not replace the "real" objects of analysis with ciphers, just as the cash market could not operate if we could not convert apples and oranges into symbolic wealth and the symbols back into apples and oranges.

This affinity between abstract thought and market exchange seems to me the reason why Chauncy's "reasonable" deism (or its immediate heirs, Unitarianism and transcendentalism) has historically been associated with the upper-middle class and with intellectuals. Cash exchange is to gift exchange what reason is to enthusiasm. In the old joke, a Unitarian comes to a fork in the road; one sign points to Heaven and the other to a Discussion About Heaven. The Unitarian goes to the discussion. The enthusiast, of course, knows his spiritual knowledge cannot be discussed because it cannot be received intellectually. Like Whitman, he testifies, he does not argue. And the ceremonies of enthusiastic religions tend to include the body, rather than talk. The celebrants dance and sing, they quake and tremble. But no one dances ecstatic dances in the churches of the rich. Nor do they speak in tongues or raise their hands in the gesture of epiphany the way the Christian enthusiasts do. The rich would seem to sense that the more you feel the spirit move in the physical body on Sunday, the harder it will be to trade in cash on Monday. Better to sit in one's pew and listen to a talk. The unitarianism that men like Chauncy developed called for no enthusiastic flights of fancy; it was, as others have pointed out, a religion with which the merchants of Boston could be at ease.

I have offered these remarks about enthusiasm partly to introduce the element of "bodily knowing" into my description of Whitman's gifted state, but also to help us place Whitman in the spirit of his times. We might say that Whitman was Emerson's enthusiastic, Emerson with a body. The sage of Concord stands midway between the crew-cut deist and the hairy-necked Whitman. Emerson left the Unitarian Church, to be sure, but he remained a curious mix of Chauncy's caution and the passion he prefigured for Whitman. In his own well-known epiphany, Emerson felt himself to be a "transparent eyeball.... I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God." And not Charles Chauncy, then. But still, the lens of the eye is our only bloodless organ of sense. "I was born cold," Emerson confided in his journal, "My bodily habit is cold. I shiver in and out; don't heat to the good purposes called enthusiasm a quarter so quick and kindly as my neighbors."

It was for Whitman to read Emerson's "Nature" and take it to heart, to feel the soul's tongue move in his breast, an epiphany of animal heat. Emerson was moved by his first reading of Leaves of Grass, but in 1860 he walked Whitman around Boston trying to persuade him not to speak so frankly about the body in his poems.
—reading him, that is, a caveat against enthusiasm.* Apparently, Whitman found Emerson's reasoning sound and compelling. "Each point... was unanswerable," he wrote in his memoir of their talk, "no judge's charge ever more complete and convincing." Emerson was the greater intellectual and the greater critic. But Whitman was the greater poet, and faithful to his genius. He did not debate the master's caution, but when Emerson asked in conclusion, "What have you to say to such things?" Whitman replied, "Only that while I can't answer them at all I feel more settled than ever to adhere to my own theory and exemplify it." Or, as he used to tell the story in old age, "I only answer'd Emerson's vehement arguments with silence, under the old elms of Boston Common."

Whitman begins "Song of Myself" with a description of the delight of the passage of "stuff" through his body: "my respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs." (Or later, sounding like a true enthusiast: "Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and the index.") The "self" that Whitman's song presents to us is a sort of lung, inhaling and exhaling the world. Almost everything in the poem happens as a breathing, an incarnate give-and-take, which filters the world through the body. Whitman says of a long list of people and occupations, "these tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them.../ And of these... I weave the song of myself." Upon hearing a noise, he says, "I think I will do nothing for a long time but listen, / And accrue what I hear into myself...", and he then presents us with a long catalog of sounds. When he describes this material respiration in the language of gifts, Whitman speaks of his inhalation as "accepting" the bounty of the world, his exhalation as "bequeathing" or "bestowing" (himself, his work).

The initial event of the poem, and of Whitman's aesthetic, is the gratuitous, commanding, strange and satisfying entry into the self of something that was previously separate and distinct. The corresponding gesture on Whitman's part is to give himself away.

* When Whitman later tried to raise money for his work in the Civil War hospitals, a friend wrote to him from Boston: "There is a prejudice against you here among the 'fine' ladies and gentlemen of the transcendental School. It is believed that you are not ashamed of your reproductive organs and, somehow, it would seem to be the result of their logic—that eunuchs only are fit for nurses."
Between the poles of sympathy and pride lie the “secrets of art,” the poet tells us, and if we are to gaze upon those secrets, we must follow the passage of these “objects” through the body, follow the poet’s breath from the sympathetic inhalation through to the outbreath, the pride “out of which,” says Whitman, “I utter poems.”

A poem called “There Was a Child Went Forth” offers a typical description of Whitman’s receptive sympathy. A young boy walks out of doors:

And the first object he look’d upon, that object he became...

The early lilacs became part of this child,
And grass and white and red morning-glories, and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird, ...
And the water-plants with their graceful flat heads, all became part of him.

In his sympathetic phase, Whitman preserves the participatory sensuality of childhood. The boy who became the lilac when he saw the lilac survives in the older man. In the poems at least, Whitman seems to feel no distance between his senses and their objects, as if perception in the gifted state were mediated not by air or skin but by some wholly conductive element that permits instantaneous contact with the palpable substance of things. We believe the poems because he has drawn the scenes with such sharp detail. He spots the runaway slave “through the swung half-door of the kitchen”; he sees how “the young sister holds out the skin while the elder sister winds it off in a half, and stops now and then for the knots.” Imagine him floating over the nation, he sees below “the sharp-peak’d farm house, with its scallop’d scum and slender shoots from the gutters.” We have all had moments of such contact: lost in the grays of snow blown sideways across the clapboards, or daydreaming in the rain pockmarking the tops of cars, the ants gathered where wisteria leans against the stucco. And we accept that Whitman knew, and wrote out of, such contact because he noticed that half-door, the knots in the yarn, the shoots of green in the gutter dirt.

In this initial phase of his art, Whitman is essentially passive and things beyond the skin are active, “libidinous” and “electric.” Natural objects find him attractive. They approach him of their own accord and push at the edges of the self, like lovers:

Crowding my lips, thick in the pores of my skin,
Joisting me through streets and public halls, coming naked to me at night,...
Calling my name from flower-beds, vines, tangled underbrush,...
Noiselessly passing handfuls out of their hearts and giving them to be mine.

When the poet is in the gifted state, the world seems generous, exhaling odors and auras toward him. “I believe,” he says, “the soggy clods shall become lovers and lamps. . . .” Animals, stones, the people in their daily lives enter into his body. “I find I incorporate gniss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, sculent roots. . . .” The fishermen packing layers of halibut in the hold, two men arguing over a penny, “the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick . . . All this I swallow, it tastes good. . . .”

By taking his nourishment through his senses, Whitman comes to have a carnal knowledge of the world. His participatory sensuality “informs” him in both senses—it fills him up and it instructs.

Oxen . . ., what is that you express in your eyes?
It seems to me more than all the print I have read in my life.

The poet studies inside of objects the way the rest of us might study in the library.

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

But the objects cannot be read as a book is read. They are hieroglyphs, sacred signs that reveal their meanings only to that host who is gracious enough to receive them into the body. The leaf of grass is “a uniform hieroglyphic,” as are the oxen or those soggy clods, and perception, in the gifted state, is a constant hierophany. The ducks scared up in the woods reveal their “wing’d purposes.” Objects are “dumb, beautiful ministers” which articulate their ministration when they are accepted by the self.

Whitman calls on us to leave the “distillation” or “perfume” gathered in books and to come out of doors to breathe the thinner “atmosphere,” the original hieroglyphs, not the commentary of the scribes. As we inhale this atmosphere of primary objects, they exhale gnosis, a prolific, carnal science, not an intellectual know-
ing, "I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God
not in the least." As his body and its senses are the font of Whit-
man's religion, so the perception of natural objects is his sacra-
ment. "The bull and the bug never worship'd half enough, / Dung
and dirt more admirable than was dream'd." Whitman lists the
gods of old and then says he learns more from watching "the
framer framing a house"; "a curl of smoke or a hair on the back of
my hand [is] just as curious as any revelation."
What is the knowledge that the hieroglyphs reveal? It is in part a
thing we cannot "talk" about (the poem, like the eyes of the
oxen, is to be received into the self, read with the breath). One or
two things are clear, however. As with the first epiphany, Whit-
man's constant communion with objects reveals the wholeness of
creation. He comes to feel "in place" through this commerce, and
knows his own integration with the world. He says the animals

... bring me tokens of myself. . . .
I do not know where they got those tokens,
I must have passed that way untold times ago and negligently
dropt them,
Myself moving forward then and now and forever. . . .

Natural objects—living things in particular—are like a language
we only faintly remember. It is as if creation had been dismem-
bered sometime in the past and all things are limbs we have lost
that will make us whole if only we can recall them. Whitman's
sympathetic perception of objects is a remembrance of the whole-
ness of things.

Secondly, and here we come around to the beginning again, the
reception of objects reveals that the gifted self is a thing that
breathes. Their entrance is itself the lesson. We are not scaled
in calcium like the clam. Identity is neither "yours" nor "mine," but
comes of a communion with the world. "Every atom belonging to
me as good belongs to you."

Whitman makes a distinction between the self and the narrower
identity. Toward the beginning of "Song of Myself" he offers a
compendium of personal history:

... The effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city
I live in, or the nation, . . .
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, compliments, dues,

The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,
The sickness of one of my folks or of myself, or ill-doings
or loss or lack of money, or depressions or exalt-
tations. . . .

But these, he says, "are not the Me myself."

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am.
Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary. . . .

Identity forms and disperses inside the container of the self. Re-
currently in the work we find a curious image, that of a sea alive
with countless particles which occasionally cohere into more com-
plicated bodies, and then dissolve again. To be born, to take on life in
a particular form, is to be drawn into "a knit of identity" out of the
"palid float" of this sea. Whitman says that he, like the rest of us,
was "struck from the float forever held in solution" and "receiv'd
identity by [his] body . . ." Identity is specific, sexed, time-bound,
mortal. It is transitory, drawn together and then dispersed. The
self is more enduring, standing apart from "the pulling and haul-
ing." In terms of our argument so far, the self takes on identity
through its reception of objects—be they perceived lilac leaves or
the atoms of the physical body—and the self gives up identity as it
abandons these objects. The self is not the reception, not the
dispersal, not the objects. It is the process (the breathing) or the
container (the lung) in which the process occurs.

Whitman is not logically rigorous in his use of "self" and "iden-
tity," but these generalizations offer an approximate beginning. I
introduce them because there is a middle phase in the process of
the gifted self: between sympathy and pride, between the reception
and the bestowal, lies a moment in which new identity comes to
life as old identity perishes. A sequence of three of these moments
marks the center of "Song of Myself." In each, Whitman calls on
some outer object or person to enter or merge with him, beginning
with the sea:

I behold from the beach your crooked inviting fingers, . . .
We must have a turn together, I undress, hurry me out of sight
of the land,
Cushion me soft, rock me in billowy drowse,
Dash me with amorous wet, I can repay you. . . .
Sea beating broad and convulsive breaths,
Sea of the brine of life and of unshovell’d yet always-ready graves,...
I am integral with you....

Here is the first hint of the death that lies in Whitman’s sympathy. The water of contact is a soporific, the amorous wet is full of graves. A line in the first edition speaks of a pain accompanying the fusion: “We hurt each other as the bride groom and the bride hurt each other.” Old identity breaks to receive the new. The new may simply replace the old or, as in this figure, old identity may fuse with the outer object, a marriage, new flesh.

The fear, pain, and confusion of this integration is more marked in the next of these three moments. This time Whitman invokes sound; the catalog of what he hears ends with a woman singing in the opera:

I hear the trained soprano:... she convulses me like the climax of my love-grip;
The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
It wrenches unnamable ardors from my breast,
It throbs me to gulps of the farthest down horror,
It sails me.... I dab with bare feet.... they are licked by the indolent waves,
I am exposed.... cut by bitter and poisoned hail,
Steeped amid honeyed morphine.... my windpipe squeezed in the fakes of death,
Let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
And what we call Being.

The outer object is definitely sexual now, and if only because sexual identity is so deeply felt (especially for one who claims to have “receiving identity by [his] body”), both the attraction and the fear are heightened—the singing voice is both honey and poison. He must choose: will he risk admitting what is clearly foreign into the self or will he erect a protective armor and close himself off? Is this woman’s song a gift to be refused? It is at this point in the poem that Whitman pauses to define “being”; the entrance of the soprano’s voice is followed immediately by the lines, already quoted, which equate being alive with allowing the objects of the world to pass through the self. The living self accepts the frailty of sympathy. “To be in any form, what is that?... Mine is no callous shell....” Whitman does not deny his hesitancy and fear, but in the end he opens the skin, accepting what is a poison to particular identity so as to receive a higher sweetness for the durable self.

The scene with the opera singer is quickly followed by the strongest of the three moments of tension between the old and the new identity. Whitman has been drawn to the sea and to a woman heard from a distance. Now he says, “To touch my person to someone else’s is about as much as I can stand.” Again, something fearful but inviting overtook him. He describes the entry in terms of a betrayal by his senses; normally, it seems, his senses act as guards protecting the borders of the self—they let some things enter, they stop others. But when he touches this person, “touch” takes over and he is possessed, both by his own desire and by the lover.

Is this then a touch? quivering me to a new identity,
Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,
My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself,

On all sides prurient provokers stiffening my limbs,
Straining the udder of my heart for its withheld drip,
Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,

Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,

Unbuttoning my clothes, holding me by the bare waist,

Deluding my confusion with the calm of the sunlight and pasture-fields,

Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away,
They bribed to swap off with touch and go and graze at the edges of me,

No consideration, no regard for my draining strength or my anger,...

I am given up by traitors,
I talk wildly, I have lost my wits....

As before, there is something threatening to the particular identity in this fusion with what is foreign to the self. But a new and necessary detail is now added: this time the sensual reception of the other leads toward new life. He is “quiver[ed]... to a new identity”; the panicky union leads to these calmer declarations:

Parting track’d by arriving, perpetual payment of perpetual loan,
Rich showering rain, and recompense richer afterward.

Sprouts take and accumulate, stand by the curb prolific and vital.
Landscapes projected masculine, full-sized and golden.

There is a cycle: new identity follows the old. With these “sprouts” we have arrived at Whitman’s central image, the leaves of grass, a form of life that perishes but rises again and again out of its own decay.

Whitman’s grass almost always appears over a grave. His invocation is not “O grass” but “O grass of graves.” The two are constantly connected, from the beginning of the poem where a child asks, “What is grass?” and Whitman’s associations soon lead him to death (“And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves”), to the end of the poem where he describes his own eventual grave with its “leafy lips.”

This distinctive vein of Whitman’s poetry comes, I imagine, out of a meditation on the following brief sentence recorded in his earliest journal: “I know that my body will decay.” No fixed identity can relax in the face of this knowledge. Once it has entered our consciousness, that part of us which takes identity seriously will begin to search for a way of being which could include the fact of death and decay. In the same notebook, Whitman wrote a fragmentary phrase: “Different objects which decay, and by the chemistry of nature, their bodies are [changed?] into spears of grass.” “Song of Myself” is an attempt to replicate this chemistry. In the poem the grass usually appears after something has entered, and altered, the self. The scenes we have just reviewed, the “sprouts” that follow touch, are a good example (or, earlier, Whitman sees the grass for the first time, its “leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,” immediately following his epiphany). Whitman wishes to demonstrate that the self replicates or participates in that chemistry of nature which changes decayed bodies into spears of grass.

At one point in Leaves of Grass Whitman speaks of the compost of decay: “It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.” In “Song of Myself” the grass itself speaks: “Growing among black folks as among white, / . . . I give them the same, I receive them the same.” As the grass is food for animal life, so we animals, with the death of the body, become food for the grass. It accepts what we bestow upon it, then gives itself away. But this, of course, is also how Whitman pictures the gifted self. When it identifies with “the grass over graves,” therefore, the self assumes an identity harmonious with its own process in the gifted state. The self that identifies with a cycle of gifts takes its own activity as its identity—not the reception of objects, not the bestowal of particular contents, but the entire process, the respiration, the give-and-take of sympathy and pride. And “the grass over graves” therefore comes to stand for more than enduring life in Whitman’s cosmology. It stands for the creative self, the singing self. Not only does the grass sprout from the grave, but it speaks; it is “so many uttering tongues” emerging from “the faint red roofs” of the mouths of the dead.

In accepting the decay of the body, the impermanence of identity, and the permeability of the self, Whitman finds his voice. His tongue comes to life in the grave and begins its song. Or perhaps we should not say “grave,” but “threshold,” for at the moment of change we cannot well distinguish between birth and death:

And as to you Death . . . it is idle to try to alarm me.

To his work without flinching the accoucheur comes,
I see the elder-hand pressing receiving supporting,
I recline by the sills of the exquisite flexible doors,
And mark the outlet, and mark the relief and escape.

The “accoucheur” is a midwife or obstetrician, so these “doors” are both an entrance to the grave and an exit from the womb. “The new-born emerging from gates and the dying emerging from gates,” says another poem. Whitman addresses us from this gate or doorway: “From the cinder-strew’d threshold I follow their movements . . .”; “I wait on the door-slab.” The poems appear in the frame of the flexible doors, and they themselves are the leaves of grass, threshold gifts uttered from the still-point where life both rises and falls, where identity forms and perishes.

The grass over graves is a very old image, of course; Whitman did not invent it. Vegetation has always been taken as a sign of indestructible life, and the vegetable gods of antiquity were its personification. I discussed Dionysos in an earlier chapter; Osiris is the other good example, the one with which Whitman seems to have been acquainted. A friend of his once recounted that Whitman as a young man living in New York “paraded on Broadway with a red shirt on, open in front . . ., and compared himself with Christ and Osiris.” Later, in the 1850s, visitors to Whitman’s room in his mother’s house would find a group of unframed pic-
tatures pasted on the wall—Hercules, Dionysos or Bacchus, and a satyr. Whitman apparently used to meditate on images of the gods, trying to imagine them present in himself, or trying to speak with their voices. In “Song of Myself” we read:

Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grand-
son,
Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha.

And so on; the list includes thirteen gods. Whitman was not a scholar of these things—he took most of his information from newspapers and popular novels—but his intuitive grasp was strong. He was able to flesh out an image by sensing what was still alive in it for his own purposes and experience.

In the Astor Library in New York, sometime during 1855, Whitman came across a huge compendium of etchings of Egyptian hieroglyphs and tomb carvings that had been published fifteen years previously by an Italian archeologist. One of these etchings, reproduced here, shows a version of the resurrection of the dead Osiris. A libation is being poured over Osiris’ coffin, out of which grow twenty-eight stalks of wheat. We do not know if Whitman studied this particular drawing, but it seems likely. In 1856 he published “Poem of Wonder at The Resurrection of The Wheat” (later, “This Compost”), one of whose lines could serve as a caption for the drawing: “The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves . . . ."

There are many conflicting accounts of the story of Osiris, but all agree on certain elements. Osiris was a god-king who ruled Egypt in ancient times. His brother, Set, jealous of his power, killed him by trapping him in a box and floating it down the Nile. Isis, who was both Osiris’ sister and wife, retrieved the body and brought it back to Egypt. Set found it again, however, and, tearing it apart, scattered the limbs. In some versions of the story, Isis gathered the limbs, put the body back together and then lay with her husband to bring him back to life. In other versions, Isis took the form of a bird and flew over the earth seeking Osiris’ body. When she found it, she beat her wings so that they glowed with light and stirred up a wind; Osiris revived sufficiently to copulate with her, begetting their son, Horus.

The etchings that Whitman saw refer to a more vegetable version of the resurrection. Osiris was also a god of the crops, iden-

“The … wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves.”

The Osiris etching that Whitman probably saw in the Astor Library in 1855. The next year he wrote “Poem of Wonder at The Resurrection of The Wheat.” The etching shows a libation being poured over the dead Osiris; twenty-eight stalks of grain sprout from the body.

tified with the annual Nile flood and subsequent reappearance of the wheat. A number of reliefs have been preserved in which plants or trees grow from his dead body. In paintings and statues, Osiris is typically painted green. It was also the custom to make a figure of Osiris in grain on a mat placed inside a tomb. In the museum at Cairo there is an Osiris mummy which in ancient times was covered with linen and then kept damp so that corn actually grew on it.

Osiris is the “evergreen” principle in nature. Like the other well-known vegetation gods, he stands for what is broken, dismembered and decayed yet returns to life with procreative power. His body is not just reassembled, it comes back green. With him we return to the mystery of things that increase as they perish—to the Tsimshian coppers cut apart at a chief’s funeral, the Kwakiutl coppers dismembered and riveted back together with increased value, Dionysos and the spirits that grow because the body is
broken. And the gift as we first described it: a property that both perishes and increases. Osiris is the mystery of compost: “It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions.”

I have filled out the image of this god not because Whitman necessarily knew all of these details, but because I want to give some sense of the range of inherited meaning behind “the grass over graves.” Whitman begins with “I know that my body will decay,” and through a mysterious green chemistry he ends with the new shoots of grass. And he identifies that grass with his poetry:

Scented herbage of my breast,
Leaves from you I glean, I write...
Tomb-leaves, body-leaves growing up above me above death,
...O the winter shall not freeze you delicate leaves,
Every year shall you bloom again, out from where you retired
you shall emerge again. . . .

The self becomes gifted when it identifies with a commerce of gifts and the gifted self is prolific. In nature the Osiris-force is the resurrection of the wheat; in a commerce of gifts it is the increase; in the gifted self it is creativity, and for a poet, in particular, it is original speech.

Whitman says that “the inmost secrets of art” sleep between sympathy and pride. We have so far addressed him primarily by the first of these terms, sympathy, the receptive phase of his imagination. Objects approach and enter the permeable self, giving it identity—or, rather, a sequence of identities, for the old perishes as the new enters. Particular identity is dismembered, the particular body decays. But the self is not lost, new “sprouts take and accumulate.” With them we come to the second pole of Whitman’s art, the assertion of an active, autonomous, and idiosyncratic being. By “pride” Whitman means not haughtiness but something closer to self-confidence. Animals are proud in this sense, “so

—The poem from which these lines are taken is the one about which D. H. Lawrence made his perceptive comment, “Whitman is a very great poet, of the end of life.” The remark is often quoted without its context, and Whitman was only a poet of death. But the context is so as to imply that Whitman is the one I am setting up here. “...Of the end of life,” says Lawrence, and he adds, “But we have all got to die, and disintegrate. We have got to die in life, too, and disintegrate while we live. . . . Something else will come. Out of the cradle endlessly rocking.”

.../ They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins...” The proud are those who accept their being as sufficient and justified. The proud man, in Whitman’s constantly repeated image, is he who will not remove his hat for any person, institution or custom. Whitman himself used to wear his hat in the house.

Pride is not antithetical to sympathy, but it is selective. “Dismiss whatever insults your own soul,” counsels Whitman in the voice of pride. When pride is active, Whitman’s sympathy has only what the mystics call a “selective surrender.” Some things must be denied admission to the core of his being. Earlier we saw how his senses surrender him to a lover; they reappear later as the agents of pride, and the result is different:

You laggards there on guard! look to your arms!
In at the conquer’d doors they crowd! I am possess’d!
Embody all presences outlaw’d or suffering. . . .

“...To arms!”—this is an unusual note of quahog-consciousness in “Song of Myself.” Whitman wants to harden himself. Why? Because at this moment in the poem sympathy has drawn him toward the dying and the empty. They enter his body: he is a convict handcuffed in prison, he is a child arrested for stealing:

Not a cholera patient lies at the last gasp but I also lie at the last gasp,
My face is ash-color’d, my sinews gnarl, away from me people retreat.

Askers embody themselves in me and I am embodied in them,
I project my hat, sit shame-faced, and beg.

This is dangerous. It is one thing to sympathize with the sick, but quite another to be infected with cholera. It is one thing to accept the perishing that leads to rebirth, and quite another to suffer the dead-end death in which the soul is lost. As D. H. Lawrence pointed out in his essay on Whitman, the leper hates his leprosy: to sympathize with him means to join in his hatred, not to identify with the disease. Here pride demands the assertion of the self against the outer object. Or better, it calls for a bestowal, an out-breathing, of the contents of the self, not a new infusion. The beggar holding out his hat has nothing to offer the self. It is he who needs to be filled—with food, matter, flux, a shot of the spirit. In
short, the terms of the poem must change. Sympathy is insufficient. The next lines are unique in Whitman:

   Enough! enough! enough!
   Somehow I have been stunn'd. Stand back! ...
   I discover myself on the verge of a usual mistake.

That I could forget the mockers and insults!
That I could forget the trickling tears and the blows of the
bludgeons and hammers!
That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion
and bloody crowning.

I remember now,
I resume the overstaid fraction,
The grave of rock multiplies what has been confided to it,
or to any graves,
Corpses rise, gashes heal, fastenings roll from me.

I troop forth replenish’d with supreme power, one of an
average unending procession. . . .

"Song of Myself" is not a highly organized poem, but to my
mind it draws a certain coherence from a series of three "pass-
ions." In the first of these (Section 5) the invited soul makes love
to the poet. He comes to life. A long "in the world" section follows
in which an essentially passive self suffers an escalating series of
identities which culminate in the second passion (Sections 28 and
29—the touch that ends in the new sprouts). Another "in the
world" section follows, this one closing with the beggar holding
out his hat, and then the final passion (Section 38, just quoted).
Whitman drops the sympathetic voice and takes up the voice of a
rising spirit (Christ come from the grave or—in the first edition—
as ascending dervish: "I rise exstatic through all . . . / The whirling
and whirling is elemental within me.")

He asserts an identity: "I resume the overstaid fraction"
("staid" in the sense of "fixed"—he speaks from the part of the self
that says "I am eternal" rather than the part that accepts decay).
He dissociates himself from "the mockers and insults." He be-
comes a character, a personality, an individual capable of giving
off energy and vitalizing others. The idleness and passivity that
marks the first half of the poem falls away after this scene; he is
active now, a teacher and a lover. He fathers children, he heals the
sick and strengthens the weak ("Open your scar'd chops till I
blow grit within you"). He doesn't actually raise the dead, but he
calls the moribund back from the lip of the grave:

   To anyone dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the
door, . . .

   I seize the descending man and raise him with resistless will,
   O despairer, here is my neck,
   By God, you shall not go down! hang your whole weight
   upon me.

   I dilate you with tremendous breath. . . .

Our enthusiasm has exhaled at last. He who absorbed the proffered
world for a thousand lines now gives it all away. "Anything I have
I bestow."

Whitman describes the being that gives itself away in a variety
of images. It exhales a divine nimbus, it gives off auras and aromas
(including "the scent of these armpits"), it is "electric" or "magneti-
cic," its eyes flash with a light more penetrating than the sun, it
"jets" the "stuff" of love—and finally, it speaks or sings or "ut-
ters poems." This last, the poetry, is, of course, the emanation
of the gifted self to which we shall attend here. But before doing so, I
want to offer a brief biographical note on Whitman bestowing
himself in love. The story will lead us back to our topic, the poetry
as a gift, because in order to bestow his work, Whitman will set
out to establish a gift-relationship with his reader, a love-relation-
ship, really: "This [the poem] is the touch of my lips to yours . . .
this is the murmur of yearning." Some specifics from Whitman's
life will help us clarify the terms under which he courts his reader,
and will anchor our analysis against some of our singer's loftier
claims.

The basic fact is that Whitman was a man disappointed in love.
A close reading of the poems collected as Children of Adam and
Calamus tells us quite a bit. The former group, intended to express
"the amative love of women," are not convincing. As in those
churches in which sex is tolerated only as an instrument of pro-
creation, it is a persistent quirk of Whitman's imagination that

* To speak of procreation as a bestowal, Whitman is forced to abandon
his habitual evenhandedness toward the sexes. The male self ejaculates
sperm, the female gives birth to babies.
heterosexual lovemaking always leads to babies. His women are always mothers. No matter how graphically Whitman describes “the clinch,” “the merge,” within a few lines out pops a child. This has the odd effect of making Whitman’s sexually explicit poems seem abstract: they have no emotional nuance, just biology. The women are not people you would know, nor anyone you feel Whitman knew.

But the *Calamus* poems are true love poems. They include all the feelings of love, not just attraction, excitement, and satisfaction, but disappointment, and even anger. They were written between 1856 and 1860 by a man who had extended his heart to someone and was waiting, in doubt, to see what might happen. His love was not returned, it seems—Whitman states it directly twice and nothing contravenes the impression:

Discouraged, distracted—for the one I cannot content myself without, soon I saw him content himself without me.

I loved a certain person ardently and my love was not return’d
Yet out of that I have written these songs.

We don’t know what went wrong, but Whitman clearly didn’t get what he wanted. One of the finest of the *Calamus* poems presents Whitman’s “leaves” in a new context, that of loneliness and love:

I saw in Louisiana a live-oak growing,
All alone stood it and the moss hung down from the branches,
Without any companion it grew there uttering joyous leaves of dark green,
And its look, rude, unbending, lusty, made me think of myself,
But I wonder’d how it could utter joyous leaves standing alone there without its friend near, for I knew I could not...

The pride out of which Whitman utters poems is not a solitary self-containment. It is active and self-assured, but it is also continuous with the other phases of the self. Just as he enters the gifted state when the lover takes his hand, so the poems come to him when his friend is near. And their utterance is directed outward, a gift meant to “inform” another self. That, at least, is the ideal—described in the poetry and desired in the life.

But we must set the live-oak of this poem beside another tree found in a journal entry from the summer of 1870. At the time Whitman was in love with a young man named Peter Doyle. The relationship proved to be one of the most satisfying of his life, but that summer Whitman was troubled. Disguising the entry by referring to Doyle as “her” and replacing his initials with an alphanumeric code, Whitman records, first, a resolution to cool his ardor.

TO GIVE UP ABSOLUTELY & for good, from this present hour, this FEVERISH, FLUCTUATING, useless undignified pursuit of 164—too long, (much too long) persevered in,—so humiliating. . . . Avoid seeing her, or meeting her, or any talk or explanations—or ANY MEETING WHATSOEVER, FROM THIS HOUR FORTH, FOR LIFE.

He was suffering, ten years later, the same kind of frustrated passion that lies behind *Calamus*. Immediately below this entry we find an “outline sketch of a superb character”:

his emotions & are complete in himself irrespective (indifferent) of whether his love, friendship, &c are returned, or not
He grows, blooms, like some perfect tree or flower, in Nature, whether viewed by admiring eyes, or in some wild or wood entirely unknown . . .

Depress the adhesive nature
It is in excess—making life a torment
All this diseased, feverish disproportionate adhesiveness.

Whitman could settle at neither pole. Years before this journal entry he had seen that indifferent, perfect tree “uttering joyous leaves,” and he knew it as an image of the being he longed for, “complete in himself.” But he also knew it was impossible, that he came best to song through contact. There is a spiritual path in which the soul ascends in isolation, abandoning all creatures. But this was not the path for Whitman, so hungry for affection and so present in his body. As he grew older Whitman did in fact find a form for his “adhesive nature”; he managed a series of long-lasting, basically paternal relationships with younger men, Doyle being one of them. But to judge from his letters, he wanted more. He wanted to “work and live together” with a man; he wanted to “get a good room or two in some quiet place . . . and . . . live
The Gift

The picture I have drawn of the process of the gifted self began with its inhalation of objects; to turn now to the bestowing phase of this self, and in particular to the poetry as a gift, we must add a new and essential detail: the objects that inform the self are unable to speak. "You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful ministers." And not just objects—Whitman's world is also filled with people who cannot speak. He offers them his tongue:

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,
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.

Dumb people, dumb objects. Not everything comes into the world with a tongue, it seems. The poet Miriam Levine, who grew up in a working-class neighborhood in New Jersey, tells me that her family used to speak of articulate men and women as having been "born with a mouthpiece." Those who can express themselves in speech have been given that mysterious something, like the mouthpiece of a trumpet or the reed of a wind instrument, through which experience is transmuted into sound. Whitman receives the mute into the self in order to articulate what he calls their "buried speech." He becomes the mouthpiece of the dumb, and not, I suspect, of these objects and slaves alone but of his family and his lovers. This last in particular: in art as in life Whitman was always attracted to the figure of an inarticulate young man:

...I pick out some low person for my dearest friend,
He shall be lawless, rude, illiterate...
O you shunn'd persons, I at least do not shun you,
I come forthwith in your midst, I will be your poet...
(sometimes)—and this also is the urgency behind Whitman’s attention to the mute: he would assure their lives by giving them speech. He would be the tongue for the “living and buried speech . . . always vibrating here, [the] howls restrain’d by decorum . . .”; he would allow his thoughts to be “the hymns of the praise of things,” so that the spirits which have been bestowed upon him—by the unlettered boy, the wood duck, the eddies of fog—will not perish.*

Before we describe Whitman’s work more fully in these terms, I should pause to clarify where, exactly, the gift lies in the creation of a work of art. In common usage the term covers three different things, unfortunately. And while I have tried to be more precise in my own usage, some confusion still creeps in. The initial gift is what is bestowed upon the self—by perception, experience, intuition, imagination, a dream, a vision, or by another work of art. Occasionally the unrefined materials of experience or imagination are finished works, in which case the artist is merely a transmitter or medium (the surrealist poets tried to work in this manner; the art of the religious society of Shakers also fits this model, their artists being known as “instruments” and their art as “gifts”). But it is rare for the initial material to be the finished work of art; we must usually labor with it.

The ability to do the labor is the second gift. The artist works, to echo Joseph Conrad once again, from that part of our being which is a gift and not an acquisition. To speak of our talents as gifts distinguishes them from those abilities that we acquire through the will. Two men may learn to speak a foreign language with equal accuracy, but the one who has a gift for languages does not have to struggle with his learning as does the man who has no

* In an account of a center serving the Jewish elderly in California, the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff offers the following observation about storytelling: “Stories are a renewal of the word, made alive by being spoken, passed from one to another, released from considerations of correctness and law. . . . Rabbi Nechman of Brotzov ordered that all written records of his teachings be destroyed. His words must be passed from mouth to mouth, learned by and in heart. ‘My words have no clothes,’ he said. ‘When one speaks to one’s fellows, there arises a simple light and a returning light.’”

The oral tradition—stories, songs, poems passed from mouth to mouth—keeps the gift of speech alive. The poet Gary Snyder, asked in an interview why the oral tradition is so weak in the United States, answered: “Because of the stress on individual names and the emphasis on keeping a text pure.”

Each of these preoccupations—the one a concern of the market, the other a concern of the academy—treats our art as proprietary works, not gifts.

gift. Men or women of talent must work to perfect their gifts, of course; no one is exempt from the long hours of practice. But to set out to acquire the gift itself through work is like trying to grow an extra hand, or wings. It can’t be done.

The artist’s gift refines the materials of perception or intuition that have been bestowed upon him; to put it another way, if the artist is gifted, the gift increases in its passage through the self. The artist makes something higher than what he has been given, and this, the finished work, is the third gift, the one offered to the world in general or directed back specifically to the “clan and homeland” of an earlier gift.

Whitman himself imagines the commerce of these gifts as both an inner and an outer activity. He has a strong sense of a reader to whom the poem is directed. That recipient is not always the conventional reader of the book, however; it is just as often an interior figure, Whitman’s own soul—or muse or genius or spirit-lover (the one he imagined would meet him in death, “the great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine”). In one of his prefaces Whitman speaks of his poems as having been spoken to him by his soul—but he is dissembling if he would have us believe that these poems are the same as those we find printed on the page. The soul that translates dumb objects into speech does not speak the finished poem, as Whitman’s fat revision books attest. Out of what the soul has offered him, the poet makes the work. And in this interior commerce the finished work is a return gift, carried back into the soul. In a famous letter Keats wrote that the world is not so much a “vale of tears” as a “vale of soul-making.” The artist makes a soul, makes it real, in the commerce of gifts. As when the Roman sacrifices to his genius on his birthday so that it may grow and become free spirit, or as with any number of the exchanges we have described, the point of the commerce is a spiritual increase and the eventual actualization of the soul.

Every artist secretly hopes his art will make him attractive. Sometimes he or she imagines it is a lover, a child, a mentor, who will be drawn to the work. But alone in the workshop it is the soul itself the artist labors to delight. The labor of gratitude is the initial food we offer the soul in return for its gifts, and if it accepts our sacrifice we may be, as Whitman was, drawn into a gifted state—out of time, coherent, “in place.” And in those moments when we are gifted, the work falls together graciously. (Not always, of course. For some the work may fall into place regularly, but most of us cut out a thousand pairs of shoes before the elves begin to sew.)
When Whitman speaks of his work in terms of an outer audience, he tells us, to take a key example, that he intended *Leaves of Grass* "to arouse" in the hearts of his readers "streams of living, pulsating love and friendship, directly from them to myself, now and ever." It seems an odd direction at first: "from them to myself." As we saw in Whitman's life, we have before us an artist who is hungry for love. He knew it. He speaks of his desire as "this terrible, irrepressible yearning," and he speaks of his poetry as the expression of a "never-satisfied appetite for sympathy, and [a] boundless offering of sympathy . . . , this old eternal, yet ever new interchange of adhesiveness . . . ." If we read the next sentence literally, we shall find the source of his need: "The . . . surest tie between me and Him or Her, who, in the pages of *Calamus* and other pieces realizes me . . . , must . . . be personal affection." Whitman is saying, as he said in the poem about the "terrible doubt of appearances," that the state in which he comes to life requires that he find a reader to whom he may communicate the gifts of his soul. He exists, he is realized, literally, through this completed contact:

The soul, reaching, throwing out for love,
As the spider, from some little promontory, throwing out
filament after filament, tirelessly out of itself, that one
at least may catch and form a link, a bridge, a
connection . . . .

Whitman's confessions of artistic intent reveal the same frustrated yearning that lies behind the *Calamus* poems, and I should not proceed without noting that his neediness sometimes undercut the work itself. There are some clammy poems in *Leaves of Grass*. We feel a hand on our shoulder, a pushy lover (I am thinking, for example, of a moment in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" when Whitman claims to have imagined all of his readers before they were born; it seems presumptuous). But in the best poems, Whitman manages that poise, requisite to both art and love, which offers the gift without insisting. He may not have found the love he wanted in life, but it would be wrong to consign his appetites entirely to personal circumstance. Who among us has been sufficiently loved, whose heart has been fully realized in the returning gaze of the beloved?

Let us turn now to the function of the work once it has been given to the outer audience. When Whitman offers his poem to the literal reader, he sometimes addresses him as "O reader of the future." In part this is a poet's way of imagining a better audience than the one that was offered him in time, but I think we may also take the phrase as an atemporal invocation to the reader that lies potentially in each of us. Whitman directs his gift toward our souls now. He speaks in the prophetic perfect to wake the gifted self in any who would receive his poem. The poet, he says, "spreads out his dishes . . . he offers the sweet firm-fibered meat that grows men and women." "This is the tasteless water of souls . . . this is the true sustenance." A work of art that enters us to feed the soul offers to initiate in us the process of the gifted self which some antecedent gift initiated in the poet. Reading the work, we feel gifted for a while, and to the degree that we are able, we respond by creating new work (not art, perhaps, but with the artist's work at hand we suddenly find we can make sense of our own experience). The greatest art offers us images by which to imagine our lives. And once the imagination has been awakened, it is productive: through it we can give more than we were given, say more than we had to say.* "If you become the aliments and the wet," says Whitman of his poems, "they will become flowers, fruits, tall branches and trees." A work of art breeds in the ground of the imagination.

In this way the imagination creates the future. The poet "places himself where the future becomes present," says Whitman. He sets his writing desk in the "womb of the shadows." Gifts—given or received—stand witness to meaning beyond the known, and gift exchange is therefore a transcendent commerce, the economy of recreation, conversion, or renaissance. It brings us worlds we have not seen before. Allen Ginsberg tells a story about a time when he was a young man, out of luck and out of lovers, lying on his bed in Spanish Harlem, reading Blake. He had put the book aside. He had masturbated. He had fallen into a depression. And then, as he lay gazing at the page he heard a voice say Blake's poem, "Ah sunflower, weary of time / That countest the steps of the sun . . . ." "Almost everything I've done since has these moments as its motif," Ginsberg has said. "The voice I heard, the voice of Blake, and to be able to create it in the moment."
The ancient saturnal voice, is the voice I have now. I was imagining
my own body consciousness. It is Ginsberg's use of "imagining"
that I wish to mark. With a poem as his seed image, the
young man imagined the sonority and quiddity with which the
older man has come to sing the songs of Blake.

The imagination can create the future only if its products are
brought over into the real. The bestowal of the work completes
the act of imagination. Ginsberg could have said, "O dear, now I'm
hearing voices," and taken a sedative. But when we refuse what
has been offered to the empty heart, when possible futures are
given and not acted upon, then the imagination recedes. And with-
out the imagination we can do no more than spin the future out
of the logic of the present; we will never be led into new life
because we can work only from the known. But Ginsberg
responded as an artist responds. The artist completes the act of
imagination by accepting the gift and laboring to give it to the real
(at which point the distinction between "imaginary" and "real"
dissolves).

The college of imagination which conducts the discourse of art
is not confined by time. Just as material gifts establish and main-
tain the collective in social life, so the gifts of imagination, as long
as they are treated as such, will contribute toward those collectives
we call culture and tradition. This commerce is one of the few
ways by which the dead may inform the living and the living
preserve the spiritual treasures of the past. To have the works of
the past come to life in the active imagination is what it means "to
have gathered from the air a live tradition," to use Ezra Pound's
wonderful phrase. Moreover, as a commerce of gifts allows us
to give more than we have been given, so those who participate in a
live tradition are drawn into a life higher than that to which they
have been born. Bestowed from the dead to the living and from the
living to the unborn, our gifts grow invisibly among us to sustain
each man and woman above the imperfections of state and age.

A live tradition is neither the rhetoric nor the store of facts that
we can learn in school. In a live tradition the images speak for
themselves. They "itch at your ears," as Whitman says. We hear
voices. We feel a spirit move in the poems that is neither "me" nor
"the poet" but a third thing between. In a live tradition we fall in
love with the spirits of the dead. We stay up all night with them.
We keep their gifts alive by taking them into the quick of our being
and feeding them to our hearts.

Ezra Pound once wrote in a pamphlet: "Of religion, it will be
enough for me to say, in the style of a literary friend . . . , 'every
self-respecting Ravenneese is procreated, or at least receives spirit
or breath of life, in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia." For
Pound, a culture husbands its liveliness in its works of art; they are
like storage barrels for that "tasteless water" which the citizen
drinks to revive, or procreate, his soul.

A live tradition extends in both directions in time, but most
artists seem to face themselves in a primary direction, toward
either the past or the future. The fils à papa (the father's son), say
the French, has the spiritual attitude that serves the past, while the
fils à maman is in love with emerging life. The terms well differen-
tiate Whitman and Pound, to whom we shall be turning soon.
Pound—one of the few American poets who remained close to his
father throughout his life—was in love with the past. It fed his
soul, and he dedicated his work to its preservation.

But Whitman, the mother's son, courted the future. "I meant
Leaves of Grass . . . to be the Poem of Identity (of yours, whoever
you are, now reading these lines) . . . ," he says. He means "iden-
tity" in the sense we have developed—the poetry is a gift that
offers to pass through and transform the self. When we speak of the
"Whitman tradition" in art, we mean that line of artists—Hart
Crane, Isadora Duncan, William Carlos Williams, Pablo Neruda,
Henry Miller, to name only a few—who have possessed the spirit
that came to life with their reception of the poetry. Just as Whit-
man was the enthusiast of Emerson and Carlyle and George Sand,
allowing their spirits space in his body, so these artists are the
enthusiasts of Whitman. They are not merely students, of course,
but laborers who permitted his gift to live in the imagination and
be the seed for new work, work connected to the spirits of the dead
but distinct, current, alive. "Sprouts take and accumulate. . . ."

II. ADHESIVE RICHES

Democratic Vistas. Whitman's long, rambling, postbellum medita-
tion on art and politics, sets democracy on two opposed founda-
tions, the individual and the masses (the "average," "the all-level-
ing aggregate"). Whitman gives preference to neither of these
poles in the practice of his democracy, but in describing its
formation he begins, as the poetry began, with the individual com-
ing to his powers, or hers, in isolation. "The noiseless operation of
one's isolated Self" precedes community. Our actions and charac-
ter must spring from what is received in the ground of our being,
else they will be merely derived behaviors, appliqué personalities.
Any political thinker will notice right away, of course, that we are dealing here with a politics of inner light, one in which “man, properly train’d in sanest, highest freedom, may and must become a law, and series of laws, unto himself.” The initial event in Whitman’s democracy is not a political event at all. “Alone . . . —and the interior consciousness, like a hitherto unseen inscription, in magic ink, beams out its wondrous lines to the senses.”

Even Whitman’s emphasis on the masses arises from his desire to nurture the idiosyncratic. Individual identity cannot thrive where some people count and others do not. Just as all are invited to the poetry (“I will not have a single person slighted or left away”), so democracy enfranchises every self—politically and spiritually. Whitman pauses in his Vistas to address the Europeans: “The great word Solidarity has arisen. Of all dangers to a nation as things exist in our day, there can be no greater one than having certain portions of the people set off from the rest by a line drawn—they not privileged as others, but degraded, humiliated, made of no account.” Hierarchy, any line drawn to separate the “best from the worst” in social life, is the hallmark of what Whitman calls “European chivalry, the feudal, ecclesiastical, dynastic world,” a world whose manners, he felt, still held sway in the New World. He would have them replaced by his universal suffrage of the self—a suffrage not as much of the vote but one in which no man is obliged to take his hat off to any other. He places each citizen on this equal footing not only to protect the idiosyncratic self but to produce it as well. Democracy has a future tense. Enfranchisement “commence[s] the grand experiment of development, whose end (perhaps requiring several generations) may be the forming of a full-grown man or woman.” Whitman begins his democracy with individual identity, but in its action neither the One nor the Many is primary, each exists to produce the other so that the nation might be their union, “a common aggregate of living identities.”

To arrive at this union, Whitman’s democracy needs one last ingredient. A series of realized selves does not automatically become a community. There must be some sort of glue, a cohesive to bind the aggregate together. “The two are contradictory,” says Whitman of the poles of his democracy, “. . . our task is to reconcile them,” and he does so, first of all, with a political version of the manly love of comrades: “Adhesiveness or love . . . fuses, ties and aggregates . . . , fraternizing all.” Whitman borrowed the term “adhesiveness” from phrenology. This nineteenth-century form of pop psychology distinguished between “amative” sexual love and “adhæsive” friendship (which, in the phrenologist’s iconography, was symbolized by two women embracing each other). Adhesive love is the second element in Whitman’s politics which is not strictly political, at least insofar as politics has to do with power. Perhaps we would do well to differentiate the term: adhesiveness is an éros power while most of what passes as politics is logos power. Law, authority, competition, hierarchy, and the exercise of royal or despotic will through the courts, the police and the military—these are logos powers, and they are the skeletal structure of most political systems. The image of two women embracing is not found on any nation’s flag. Whitman envisioned drawing isolated individuals into a coherent and enduring body politic without resorting to the patriarchal articles of the social contract. In short, he would replace capitalist home economics with “the dear love of comrades.” His politics reveal an unspoken faith; that the realized and idiosyncratic self is erotic and that erotic life is essentially cohesive. He assumes that the citizen, like the poet, will emerge from the centrifugal isolation, in which character forms, with an appetite for sympathetic contact and an urge both to create and to bestow.

In this last we come to the fusion of Whitman’s aesthetics and politics, the social life of the gifted self. Even more than the love of comrades, I think, the true cohesive force in Whitman’s democracy is art. In his political aesthetic, as we saw at the end of the last chapter, the artist absorbs not “objects” but “the central spirit and idiosyncrasies” of the people. And his responsive act is to create “a single image-making work for them.” It is this work, or better, the nation’s artistic wealth as a whole, which draws a people together. We could even say that the artist creates (or at least preserves) the “central spirit” of the people, for, as in the poetry, a spirit that has never been articulated cannot endure. As the poet Robert Bly says in a different context, “Praise to the first man who wrote down this joy clearly, for we cannot remain in love with what we cannot name . . . .” Nor can we nurture or take sustenance from a spirit that remains unspoken. In Whitman’s democracy the native author creates an “embryo or skeleton” of the native spirit. The artist absorbs a thing that is alive, of course, but its life is not assured until its name has been given. Literature does not simply absorb a spirit, says Whitman, it “breed[s] a spirit.”

Whitman insisted that a spirit dwelt in the American people which was different from the one articulated by romantic novels from the Continent or by native authors, such as Longfellow. And he believed the spirit would soon be lost if it could not be realized
He was in love with it, or with a part of it at least. Whitman is a sort of Richard Henry Dana, Jr., for poets, whose Vistas "cheerfully include . . . a practical, stirring, worldly, money-making, even materialistic character . . . ." whose "theory includes riches, and the getting of riches . . . ." What Whitman loved was the shimmer, the bustle, the electric excitement of the marketplace, not the practical aspects of making a living. He participated sensorily in trade. In a letter to Peter Doyle he offers an emblematic description of his delight, sitting atop an omnibus in New York City:

If it is very pleasant . . . [I] ride a trip with some driver-friend on Broadway from 23rd street to Bowling Green, three miles each way. You know it is a never-ending amusement & study & recreation for me to ride a couple of hours, of a pleasant afternoon, on a Broadway stage in this way. You see everything as you pass, a sort of living, endless panorama—shops, & splendid buildings, & great windows, & on the broad sidewalks crowds of women, richly-dressed, continually passing, altogether different, superior in style & looks from any to be seen any where else—in fact a perfect stream of people, men too dressed in high style, & plenty of foreigners—and then in the streets the thick crowd of carriages, stages, carts, hotel & private coaches, & in fact all sorts of vehicles & many first-class teams, mile after mile, & the splendor of such a great street & so many tall, ornamental, noble buildings, many of them of white marble, & the gayety & motion on every side—You will not wonder how much attraction all this is, on a fine day, to a great loafer like me, who enjoys so much seeing the busy world move by him, & exhibiting itself for his amusement, while he takes it easy & just looks on & observes.

In Democratic Vistas, Whitman ends a similar catalog of city delights saying that they "completely satisfy my senses of power, fulness, motion, &c., give me, through such senses and appetites, and through my esthetic conscience, a continued exaltation and absolute fulfilment." This sensuous participation in the liveliness of the market, along with Whitman's credo—"all are invited"—means we find in him no reflexive antagonism toward the buyers and sellers. In life as in the poetry, he identifies as readily with the "nonchalant" farmer as with the Yankee "ready for trade."

But, of course, Whitman stays seated on top of the omnibus, he doesn't get down and take a job with the fruit vendor. The wealth

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* As it is, for example, in Mao Tse-tung's political aesthetic where "work in literature and art . . . is subordinated to the revolutionary tasks set by the Party . . . ."
The Gift

accumulated by the men along Broadway is different from that of the man who writes, "I will carefully earn riches to be carried with me after the death of my body . . . ," or who says that "Charity and personal force are the only investments worth anything." Whitman admits the traders as a part of his identity, but he is not a trader. They "are not the Me myself."

So if by the mercantile spirit we mean the spirit of men who feel their lives are inside the merchandise itself, who must leap from high windows when the stock market falls, then Whitman lacks this spirit. He would still be riding the omnibus, observing their desperation. As for that mercantilism which becomes snared in its own commodities, Whitman has this to say:

Here and there with dimes on the eyes walking,
To feed the greed of the belly the brains liberally spooning,
Tickets buying, taking, selling, but in to the feast never once going,
Many sweating, ploughing, thrashing, and then the chaff for payment receiving,
A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming.

These lines have occasionally been misread as an expression of solidarity with the exploited, sweating workers. They aren't that at all. It's the man who owns the grain bins by the freight depot who gets the chaff; it's the mice who get the wheat. The key phrase is "idly owning." Animals are idle owners, the forest god Wotan is an idle owner, and Whitman is the idle owner of all the lights on Broadway.

Whitman imagined for us an American type I would call the village indolent. The village indolent appears whenever the will to work devours necessary leisure, whenever farmers in the Midwest start plowing at night or cutting down the groves around their homes so as to plant soybeans right up to the windows. Whitman's idle man stands for the hidden spirit without which no one gets anything from trade. He refuses to do anything but enjoy the fruits of commerce. He eats up all the profits. The harder they work, the lazier he gets. The more money they reinvest in the company, the more he squanders his inheritance. The village indolent, like the religious mendicant, has riches that cannot be distinguished from his poverty. The "poverty" of the mystic is not an absence of material objects; it consists, rather, in breaking down the habit of resting in, or taking seriously, things that are less than God. "Blessed are the poor" is a psychological law," says the poet.

Theodore Roethke, "it's the business of Lady Poverty to confer on her lovers the freedom of the universe." She gives them the run of the woods. The secret text of the Protestant ethic is this: "You can't take it with you, but you can't go unless you've got it." In his detachment from the body of property the village indolent comes into a wealth he will carry after the death of his body. Thoreau still has the run of Emerson's woods.

Whether by virtue of such an ideological indolence or not, Whitman himself always distinguished between earning a living and the labor of art. "The work of my life is making poems," he would declare when Leaves of Grass first appeared and, in old age, would claim that he had "from early manhood abandoned the business pursuits and applications usual in my time and country," obediently giving himself over to the urge to write poems, "never," adds a later preface, "composed with an eye on the book-market, nor for fame, nor for any pecuniary profit." Such remarks may seem a touch ingenuous at first glance; Whitman applied himself to business sometimes, and not just in early manhood, and one can watch his eye alight on the book-market from time to time. But his declarations are not meant to be facts of that sort; they are meant to express the spirit in which he worked, and in that sense they are not ingenuous at all.

We need only hold in the background our description of the gifted self—and of the social presence of that self and its works—to see why Whitman would separate the spirit of his art from the marketplace. If the merchant hopes to earn a profit in the sale of his commodities, the transaction cannot be a convivial communion, joining "self" and "other." Commodities must move between reciprocally independent spheres, and the mercantile spirit therefore necessarily suppresses the sympathetic faculty and welcomes the brain that divides. Reckoning time and value, marking and maintaining the distinction between self and other—these are the virtues of the mercantile spirit and of the honest merchant who earns his living by their practice. Understood for their power and for their limitations, they are not necessarily toxic to the virtues of the gifted state, but they are distinct from them. I realize that I overstate my case a little—there are times in the creation of the work when the artist reckons and discriminates, just as there are times in the life of the successful merchant when he engages with his customers and imagines their desires. But I am speaking of ruling virtues. The salesman may imagine his buyer's wants, but in the end, to earn his daily bread he needs some "other" who is not made a part of the self by the transaction. This may be an obvious
point, but you cannot make money without calculating value and without the distinction between buyer and seller. Commodities are not adhesive riches as Whitman would have art be. And while the artist must evaluate, reckon, and judge at different phases in the creation of his work, such skills are not the ruling motives of art, at least not by Whitman's model. For Whitman the self becomes the gifted self—prolific, green—when it recognizes the stuff of its experience, its talents, and the products of its labor to be gifts, endowments. And the work of the artist can only come to its powers in the world when it moves beyond the self as a gift—from the artist to his audience or, in its wider functions, as that “image-making work” whose circulation preserves the spirit of the collective and slowly accrues a culture, a tradition.

In Whitman's prose writings we find his remarks on the functions of the poetry alongside his claims to having “abandoned the business pursuits.” How deeply he felt a conflict between the two may not be clear, but it is clear that he is a man who never exhibited much material ambition. There's an amusing and typical story from the years he spent in Washington, D.C., during the Civil War. When Whitman first arrived in the capital, he intended to find work as a clerk in one of the departments. To this end he wrote to Emerson asking for letters of introduction to the secretaries of State and Treasury. Emerson kindly complied, but by the time the letters arrived, Whitman had discovered he could earn his keep by working a few hours a day as a copyist and freelance journalist; his material wants were few and his energies had been quickly absorbed in ministering to wounded soldiers in the hospitals.

Emerson's letters lay undisturbed in the poet's trunk until eleven months later, when a friend from Boston, John Townsend Trowbridge, offered to deliver the one addressed to the Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon Chase. Trowbridge happened to be a guest in Chase's home, “a fine, large mansion,” he tells us, “sumptuously furnished, cared for by sleek and silent colored servants, and thronged by distinguished guests...” The Chase mansion sat diagonally across the street from the house in which Whitman rented his quarters. On visiting this “bare and desolate back room” one winter evening, Trowbridge found it to hold a bed, a cupboard made from a pine box, a few chairs, and a sheet-iron stove; for housekeeping utensils Whitman had a jackknife, a teakettle, a covered tin cup, and a bowl and spoon. Whitman was in the habit of eating from a sheet of brown paper and throwing it in the fire at the end of the meal. The night of Trowbridge's visit the fire had gone out in the stove. The window was open to the December air, and the men sat in their overcoats, arguing about literature.

The next day, upon learning of Emerson's letter, Trowbridge persuaded Whitman to let him carry it across the street. He presented it to the Secretary that evening after dinner. Chase was impressed to see Emerson's name, but averred that he couldn't imagine hiring Whitman. "I am placed in a very embarrassing position," he said. "It would give me great pleasure to grant his request, out of my regard for Mr. Emerson, but..." But Leaves of Grass, it seemed, had made Whitman notorious; he was said to be a rowdy. "His writings have given him a bad repute," Chase concluded, "and I should not know what sort of place to give to such a man."

Trowbridge offered to relieve the Secretary of his embarrassment by withdrawing the letter. Chase hesitated, glancing at the signature. "No," he said, "I have nothing of Emerson's in his handwriting, and I shall be glad to keep this."

Whitman's friend was forced to report that not only had he failed to find the poet a job but he'd lost the letter to boot. Whitman was bemused. "He is right," he said, "in preserving his saints from contamination by a man like me!"

Whitman himself had scant desire to become any but an idle owner. He didn't own a home until he moved to Camden, N.J., when he was sixty-five. Until then he had always lived with family, with friends, or in rented rooms. It wasn't that he was niggardly about money. He knew how to get a construction contract, build a house and sell it. He was always able to find work as a journal editor when he wanted it. In the 1840s and again in the late 1860s he held down steady jobs. He was direct and frank when selling a poem ("the price is 4 pounds—$20—in gold and four copies of the number in which it is printed" reads a typical cover letter). He was both frugal and generous. His solicitation of letters from Emerson reveals some craft in the job market. But as the fate of those letters shows, he wasn't really interested. His aspirations were plain. His fantasy of a house was "a regular Irish shanty.... two rooms, and an end shed." His letters show he didn't think of his accommodations in Washington as bare and desolate: "I have a little room, & live a sort of German or Parisian student life—always get my breakfast in my room, (have a little spirit lamp).... walk quite a good deal... go down the river, or off into Virginia..." Whitman spent his days in Washington browsing through the newly built capital buildings, listening to speeches in the Congress, walking the banks of the Potomac, writing poems and—the
main thing—nursing the wounded in the hospitals. "With my office- 
hunting, no special results yet," he wrote to a friend. "I cannot 
give up my Hospitals. . . . I never before had my feelings so 
thoroughly and . . . permanently absorbed." When the war was 
over and the hospitals empty, Whitman finally settled into a steady 
job. It bored him. "A clerk's life . . . is not very interesting."

III. SAPLINGS

Whitman had traveled to Washington in December of 1862 to look 
for his brother George, who the family feared had been wounded 
during the second battle of Bull Run. While he was in the city he 
got to Campbell Hospital to visit "a couple of Brooklyn boys" 
from his brother's regiment. About a hundred wounded men lay in 
a long shed with whitewashed walls. Whitman stopped to try to 
comfort a boy who was groaning with pain. "I talked to him some 
time," Whitman wrote to his sister. "He seemed to have entirely 
give up, and lost heart—he had not a cent of money—not a friend 
or acquaintance." Discovering that no one had examined the boy 
since he was brought in, Whitman went and found a doctor. He sat 
on the bedside and wrote out a letter that the young man dictated 
to his family. The boy said he would like to buy some milk from a 
woman who came through the ward each afternoon, and Whitman 
gave him the change in his pocket. "Trifling as this was, he was 
overcome and began to cry.

This serendipitous encounter drew on so many elements of 
Whitman's personality that he soon abandoned his plans to return 
to New York. It not only touched his sympathy and generosity 
but gave him a chance to "emanate"—to heal through attention 
and affection—and to fulfill one of his roles as a poet, committing 
to paper the speech of the illiterate boy. He began to visit the 
hospitals daily. He wrote to friends in Boston and New York 
soliciting contributions so he could buy things for the soldiers, and 
soon he had settled into the routine that was to last all through 
the war—living in a rented room, working three or four hours a 
day at odd jobs, and visiting the hospitals.

He would arrive in the late afternoon and stay late into the 
night. Sometimes he would appear just before supper carrying a 
pot of food and go through a ward with a spoon, "distributing a 
little here and there." He discovered a store where he could buy 
homemade biscuits and cookies. He acquired a haversack and 
walked his rounds dispensing crackers, oysters, butter, condensed 
milk, newspapers, dressing gowns, and more. At the Armory 
Square Hospital six or seven hundred men lay wounded:

I try to give a word or a trifle to every one without exception, 
making regular rounds among them all. I give all kinds of 
sustenance, blackberries, peaches, lemons & sugar, wines, 
all kinds of preserves, pickles, brandy, milk, shirts & all 
articles of underclothing, tobacco, tea, handkerchiefs, &c &c 
&c. I always give paper, envelopes, stamps, &c. . . . To many 
I give (when I have it) small sums of money—half of the 
soldiers in hospital have not a cent.

Once in the summer of 1864 he bought ten gallons of ice cream 
and, like someone's grandfather, carried it through all fifteen 
wards of Carver Hospital, giving a little to everyone ("Quite a 
number western country boys had never tasted ice cream before"). 
Always he would sit and take dictation, writing letters home for 
the men who couldn't write, adding at the bottom of the page, 
"The above letter is written by Walt Whitman, a visitor to the 
hospitals." He also wrote to the parents of soldiers who died. 
Sometimes he would read aloud to the men, individually or with 
the whole ward gathered around—the news, reports from the 
front, popular novels, the Odyssey, passages from Shakespeare 
and Scott, and his own poems.

One of Whitman's letters from the second year of the war de-
scribes what by then must have been a typical visit. The day is a 
Sunday and he arrives at the hospital in the midafternoon. He 
sends the evening feeding men too wounded to feed themselves. He 
sits by a man's bed, peeling a peach, cutting the pieces into a glass 
and sprinkling them with sugar. He gives small sums of money to a 
few—"I provide myself with a lot of bright new 10ct & 5ct bills 
. . . to give bright fresh 10ct bills, instead of any other, helps break 
the dullness of hospital life." The men retire early, between eight 
and nine o'clock, and Whitman stays on, sitting in a corner to 
write his letter. "The scene is a curious one—the ward is perhaps 
120 or 30 feet long—the cots each have their white mosquito 
curtains—all is quite still—an occasional sigh or groan—up in 
the middle of the ward the lady nurse sits at a little table with a shaded 
lamp, reading—the walls, roof, &c are all whitewashed—the light 
up & down the ward from a few gas-burners about half turned 
down."

On his very first visit to Washington, strolling near one of the 
hospital buildings, Whitman had suddenly found himself standing
before "a heap of feet, legs, arms, and human fragments, cut, bloody, black and blue, swelling and sickening—in the garden near, a row of graves." What went on in these hospitals was often literally horrible, and the horror was part of what drew Whitman to the work. The hospitals were so informal and understaffed that Whitman was able to participate in almost all the details of life in the wards. He sat through the night with dying men. He cleaned wounds (the men brought in from the field sometimes arrived with maggots in their wounds), and he attended operations. He stood by as the doctors amputated the leg of Lewis Brown, one of the soldiers he had become fond of.

There is a creepy fascination to such horror—the kind that draws a crowd to an automobile accident—and that must have been part of its impact on Whitman. But beneath fascination, and beneath Whitman's own obsession with death, lies yet another reason why people are drawn to hospital work: to be in a place where children are born or where men and women are dying or suffering in extremis is to be close to the quick of life. Those who do not become inured to the work often find it strangely vitalizing. Death in particular focuses life, and deepens it. In the face of death we can discriminate between the important and the trivial. We sometimes drop our habitual or guardian reticence and speak clearly.

This last, at least, was one of the ways Whitman himself chose to explain why he became so deeply involved with working in the wards. He had stumbled upon a public form for his affections, a way for him to become "undisguised and naked" without retreating to the woods. Of his manner in the hospitals he writes, "I have long discarded all stiff conventions (death and anguish dissipate ceremony here between my lads & me)—I pet them, some of them it does so much good, they are so faint—lonesome—at parting at night sometimes I kiss them right & left—The doctors tell me I supply the patients with a medicine which all their drugs & bottles & powders are helpless to yield." The presence of death allowed Whitman a wider emotional life than he had ever had (a conjunction to which we shall have to return in a moment).

Whitman was a maternal man—a person, that is, who cares for and protects life—and the hospitals afforded him a chance to live out his maternalism, his "manly tenderness." Most of the soldiers were under twenty-five, and many were only fifteen or sixteen years old, almost literally "offspring taken soon out of their mothers' laps," and now wounded or sick, weak and helpless. He mothered them. He entered into a life of active charity. If you look back at that wonderful catalog of the treats he dispensed in the wards you will see that its structure is simply "I give . . . I give . . . I give." His nursing offered him a chance to bestow himself in a concrete way, and he describes it in the language of physical-spiritual emanation with which he had earlier described the bestowing phase of the self: the boys need "personal magnetism," they hunger for "the sustenance of love," they "respond . . . electric and without fail to affections," and so on. "It has saved more than one life," It is no secret that people die of loneliness, that those who lose their wives or husbands tend to die sooner than those whose spouses live, or that a wounded soldier far from home may fail to find the will to live. Whitman intends his "presence & magnetism" to supply that subtle medicine which no doctor can prescribe. He enters the work on these terms in the very first encounter, of course—no one is attending the true need of the prostrate boy until Whitman speaks to him, writes his letter for him, and gives him a nickel to buy milk. It's a vivifying gift, literally.

Whitman tells his correspondents that he treats the men "as if they were . . . my own children or younger brothers." He gives them the kind of care that a parent would give to a sick child, and they respond to his attentions in kind. Several letters of gratitude have been preserved. The soldiers address him as "dear Father." They name their children after him. When he himself fell ill in the summer of 1864, a soldier from Illinois wrote: "Oh! I should like to have been with you so I could have nursed you back to health & strength . . . I shall never be able to recompense you for your kind care . . . while I was sick in the hospital . . . No Father could have cared for their own child better than you did me." Whitman himself understood that his contentment and sense of purpose were in good measure a result of being the object of gratitude. As he wrote to a friend in New York, "I need not tell your womanly soul that such work blesses him that works as much as the object of it. I have never been happier than in some of these hospital ministering hours."

Whitman's nursing also gave him a chance to give and to receive physical affection. He complains that the other nurses are too restrained with the men, "so cold & ceremonious, afraid to touch them." How can the healing be transmitted without the body? Whitman pets the boys, he hugs and caresses them. Over and over in the letters he tells of exchanging kisses with the soldiers: "some so wind themselves around one's heart, & will be kissed at parting at night just like children—though veterans of two years of battles
& camp life." Sometimes his kiss is not a parent's kiss but a lover's. Writing to a mutual friend about a visit with Lewis Brown, Whitman says, "[He] is so good, so affectionate—when I came away, he reached up his face, I put my arm around him, and we gave each other a long kiss, half a minute long."

Late in the war, when Whitman was forty-five, he fell ill for the first time in his life, troubled with headaches and fainting spells. It was never clear what ailed him; by his own account, one doctor told him he had been "saturated with the virus of the hospitals," another that he had "too deeply imbibed poison into [his] system," and another that he had "been penetrated by the malaria." Whitman had been bold and incautious in his nursing, going among smallpox victims and deliberately tending the worst fevers and wounds ("I go—nobody else goes.") When he himself began to weaken, he considered leaving the work, but soon realized that it was too important to him. As he wrote to his mother, "It is now beginning to tell a little upon me, so many bad wounds, many putrefied... but as it is I shall certainly remain here... it is impossible for me to abstain from going to see & minister to certain cases, & that draws me into others, & so on..."

There is no reason to doubt that Whitman was physically sick, but I think we may take his illness as a fact of the psyche as well. It seems clear that the emotional weight of Whitman's years of nursing lay in the contact with the soldiers. He changed upon a form for the dedication of his manly tenderness and having found it, allowed it to absorb him completely, giving himself away and receiving affection in return. But then: sickness. To generalize his dilemma and put it boldly we might say: affection decays identity. The ego-of-one is willingly wounded in love, broken so as to receive the beloved. In the soldier's wounds, and in their putrefaction, the ego sees itself, and its fear, reflected. Once the self has abandoned its protective armor, will the lover come to fill the empty place, or will the wound just fester? Whitman's claims to healing the sick with his personal magnetism belong alongside his talismanic sentence "I know my body shall decay"; for, confined inside the knowledge of that decay, the poet of "Song of Myself" had chosen the decay of giving himself away, the Osiris-decay in which with mingled fear and attraction he allowed himself to be drawn into a dismemberment that bears new life as its first fruit.

* Justin Kaplin, Whitman's most recent biographer, says that Whitman's symptoms suggest severe hypertension and, perhaps, mercury poisoning from overdoses of calomel.

A prewar poem, "This Compost" (the poem I earlier associated with the Osiris etching), rehearses the drama of Whitman's hospital work in every detail except, perhaps, the last. The poem opens with a man who hesitates to give himself to love:

I will not go now on the pastures to walk,
I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea,
I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me.

He senses the threat of disease. How, he asks, can he press his flesh to the earth, "Are they not continually putting distemper'd corpses within [it]? / Is not every continent work'd over and over with sour dead?" Whitman resolves the fear in his usual manner, through an invocation of "the resurrection of the wheat." Nature transforms the putrid:

Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

What chemistry!
That the winds are really not infectious,
That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me,
That it is safe to allow it to lick our naked body all over with its tongues,
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it, ...

The list ends with a striking image for the poet of grass:

What chemistry! ...
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once a catching disease.

New love is cautious because it is vulnerable. There is a dark side to nature; the green Osiris has a brother, Set, who rules the desert. If we open ourselves to love, will love come in return, or poison? Will new identity appear, or the dead-end death that leaves a
restless soul? In the poem, at least, Whitman resolves his hesitancy by fixing his eye on the give-and-take of vegetable life in which the earth "grows such sweet things out of such corruptions." In apparent decay the man of faith recognizes the compost of new life.

This, at any rate, is how Whitman resolves the association between love and decay in the poetry. His central metaphor begins with the sympathetic self receiving the outer world (the world of objects or the lover) with both fear and delight, and then suffering a kind of death, the "chemistry of nature" that leads to the spring wheat, the new shoots, the grass over graves. But in life things are a little more complicated. For Whitman "in the game" the sequence begins with a sympathetic man admitting the soldiers to his heart, and feeling again the simultaneous attraction and risk: a "virus" saturates his system as he kisses them good-night. But here the plot may have to change, for is there a "chemistry of man" like the "chemistry of nature" which will assure the life of a lover who has allowed a foreign thing to penetrate his blood?

A curious anecdote will answer the question in the terms Whitman himself might have used. Whitman's comrade after the war, Peter Doyle, suffered at one time from a skin eruption called "barber's itch." Whitman took him to a doctor for treatment. Writing soon thereafter, Whitman tells Doyle: "The extreme cases of that malady...are persons that have very deeply diseased blood, probably with syphilis in it, inherited from parentage, & confirmed by themselves—so they have no foundation to build on." Both Whitman and Doyle had apparently worried that his rash might be a sign of syphilis. (The association between love and disease needed even less imagination in the days before penicillin. Whitman's brother Jesse had contracted syphilis from a prostitute and was later to die in an asylum.) There was no obvious "diseased blood" in Whitman's own parentage, but he felt it close by. And as vegetable life has the chemistry of compost, so, for Whitman, we humans may clean our animal blood through the chemistry of love: "My darling," he wrote to Doyle, "if you are not well when I come back...we will live together, & devote ourselves altogether to the job of curing you..."

Here, however, as in Calamus, we come to a gap between desire and accomplishment. Whitman was not able to cleanse the blood—either his or Peter's—in the fullness of a human love. He could not live out his affections in the form his fancy offered, and his illness dragged on—not, perhaps, the actual ailment that first broke his health but the more figurative "virus of the hospitals..."

which eludes ordinary treatment." It became Whitman's habit for the rest of his life to attribute frailty and disease to the "hospital poison absorbed in the system years ago." His own imagination, that is, sensed he was not cured. During the war he had allowed himself to cease being the "superb calm character" imagined in his journal, "indifferent of whether his love and friendship are returned." Instead, he took the risk and opened himself up. And the soldiers returned his love, but not on the terms he wanted. He was always "Dear Father" to them, never "My darling." His illness, "tenacious, peculiar and somewhat baffling," lingered on. Had he been born in a different land or a different era he might have found the way. But in the capital of the New World in the middle of the nineteenth century,

When I hear of the brotherhood of lovers, how it was with them,
How together through life, through dangers, odium, unchanging, long and long,
Through youth and through middle and old age, how unaltering, how affectionate and faithful they were,
Then I am pensive—I hastily walk away fill'd with the bitterest envy.

In January of 1873 Whitman suffered a paralytic stroke on the left side of his body which left him bedridden for months. As was by then his custom, he associated his failing strength with his wartime illness. "Had been simmering inside for six or seven years... Now a serious attack beyond all cure." Four months later, just as he was beginning to be able to walk again, Whitman's mother died, "the only staggering, staying blow & trouble I have had," he wrote to a friend. "Unspeakable—my physical sickness, bad as it is, is nothing to it." In February of 1875 he had another paralytic stroke, this one on his right side. After his mother's death Whitman had moved from Washington, D.C., to Camden, N.J., at first living with his brother George and then by himself in a house on Mickel Street. It was the first home he had ever owned, but these were bad years, with Whitman isolated, debilitated, and depressed. Early in 1876 Whitman met Harry Stafford, an eighteen-year-old boy working in the Camden printing office where Whitman's book Two Rivulets was being set in type. Stafford's parents owned a farm not far away in the New Jersey countryside, and Whitman soon became their constant visitor. George and Susan Stafford had
seven children, and before long Whitman took his place by the fire as grandfather to the whole brood. He took young Harry under his wing. They wrestled and roughhoused together. "Walt, the semi-invalid, drew enough strength from the younger man to pin him to the floor. . . .," says Justin Kaplan. "They cut up like two boys and annoy me sometimes," a friend, the naturalist John Burroughs, wrote in his diary after a visit. Whitman was both father and mother to the boy, teaching him to read, offering advice on employment and education, buying him clothes and (for Christmas) a gold watch, asking the print shop to be sure that he learned how to set type, and so forth.

Whitman would have liked to be something more than a parent. "My nephew & I when traveling always share the same room together & the same bed. . . .," he tells a prospective host. In September of 1876 he gave Harry what was ostensibly a "friendship ring," but as the difficulties it stirred up make clear, it was something more besides. Whitman's rather spare journal entries are all we have to tell the story. Interlined among street addresses and records of petty cash we find:

talk with H S & gave him r[ing] Sept 26 '76—(took r back)

Nov. 1—Talk with H S in front room S street—gave him r again

Nov 25, 26, 27, 28—Down at White Horse [i.e., the Staffords' farm]—Memorable talk with H S—settles the matter.

Dec 19— . . .
evening, sitting in room, had serious inward rev'n & conv'n—saw clearly. . . .

what is really meant—

—very profound meditation on all—happy & satisfied at last. . . .

(that this may last now without any more perturbation)

scene in the front room Ap. 29 with H

July 20th '77, in the room at White Horse "good bye"

And so forth. The relationship did not break off, the two men continued to see each other regularly that year, but Stafford was moody and quick-tempered while Whitman, we may infer, was perturbed. The ring seems to have remained with the poet. Early that winter, after a visit from Whitman, Harry wrote him an erratically spelled letter: "I wish you would put the ring on my finger again, it seems to me ther is something that is wanting to complete our friendship when I am with you. I have tried to study it out but cannot find out what it is. You know when you put it on there was but one thing to part it from me and that was death." And next we read in Whitman's journal: "Feb 11 [1878]—Monday—Harry here—put r on his hand again."

Whitman wanted to marry before he died. His mother's death seems to have freed him, or spurred him on. Four months after her funeral Whitman sent a friendship ring to Anne Gilchrist, an ardent English admirer who had been pursuing him for years in letters. Three years later, despite Whitman's cautions, she arrived at the dock in Philadelphia. Whitman could have made a marriage of convenience. The woman was more than devoted to him—she set up housekeeping in Philadelphia, kept a special room for him to stay in, fed him Christmas dinner. . . . But she had completely misread the erotic poems. It was, as it had always been, the unlettered boy whom Whitman sought to marry to his soul, "some low person. . . . lawless, rude, illiterate. . . ."

One has to admire his unflagging desire. It was an old, lonely, crippled man who got Harry Stafford to wrestle on the floor with him, sleep in the same bed, and accept his ring. And he got some of what he wanted. In later years he wrote to Harry, "I realize plainly that if I had not known you . . . I should not be a living man today." By that time their relationship had cooled. Harry had grown up. A journal entry of June 1884 reads:

H S and Eva Westcott married.

Whitman accompanied Harry and his bride to the civil ceremony, consenting in the end to be the father again, the father who gives the boy away, not the lover who may keep him.

The Stafford farm offered Whitman something besides Harry and the opportunity to play grandfather to a family. Not far from the house there was a woods, a pond, and a stream called Timber Creek. Spring, summer, and fall, sometimes with the local farm boys but often alone, Whitman would go down to the water. He would drag along a portable chair and sit beneath a large black
frains I heard of the blacks down south, or patriotic songs . . . .
All during the summer of 1876 he wrestled with the trees.

Whitman's nursing during the war had opened him to love. It
changed his life. We find no relationships before the war like those
he later established with Doyle or with Stafford: intense, articu-
lated, and long-lasting. And yet, so opened he was also wounded.
Something needing cure appeared in his blood. “To touch my per-
tson to some one else’s is about as much as I can stand.” It is the
sadness of this life that Whitman could not cure himself with a
human love. A baffled animal, he turned back to his trees in the
end. But as he confides to us before he tells his tale of Timber
Creek, “after you have exhausted what there is in business, poli-
tics, conviviality, love, and so on—have found that none of these
finally satisfy, or permanently wear—what remains? Nature re-
 mains. . . .” Beyond the sadness of this life lies its genius, that
Whitman was able to find the give-and-take to heal him, to find a
green-force to overcome the blood’s decay. He never married his
unlettered boy, but he accepted virtue from an even more unlet-
tered nature and gave it speech.

Whitman hit upon the idea of exercising his limbs by bending
young trees (“my natural gymasia,” he called them). The first
day he spent an hour pushing and pulling an oak sapling, thick as a
man’s wrist and twelve feet high. “After I wrestle with the tree
awhile, I can feel its sap and virtue welling up out of the
ground and tingling through me from crown to toe, like health’s
wine.” He began to sing: “I launch forth in my vocalism; shout
declamatory pieces, sentiments, sorrow, anger, &c., from the stock
poets or plays—inflate my lungs and sing the wild tunes and re-
oak (“exhaling aroma”), or sunbath the naked (except for his hat—
he kept his hat on). He carried pencil and paper and took notes on
the trees, the swarms of bumblebees, the song of the locust (“like
a brass disk whirling”), the hermit thrush, the quail, cedar apples,
a spring that rose from beneath a willow—“gurgling, gurgling
ceaselessly . . . (if one could only translate it)—and the pond
itself with its calamus leaves, water snakes, and birds (“the circle-
gambols of the swallows flying by dozens in concentric rings in
the last rays of sunset, like flashes of some airy wheel”).

Whitman returned to the self of his first song at Timber Creek.
Hobbling down the farm lane early in the morning, he would pause
by the tall, yellow-flowered mullieins to examine their woolly stems
and the light-reflecting facets of the leaf: “Annually for three sum-
mers now, they and I have silently return’d together.” He resumed
that participatory sensuality in which “subject” and “object” dis-
solve to be replaced by a presence, an “invisible physician” he
calls it now, whose medicine “neither chemistry nor reasoning nor
esthetics will give the least explanation.” He wanted to be healed.
“Hast Thou, pellucid, in They azure depths, medicine for case like
mine?” he asks the sky. “And dost Thou subtly mysteriously now
 drip it through the air invisibly upon me?”

As had been the case for the young Whitman, it was the trees
that held this old man’s medicine. A yellow poplar stood near the
creek, four feet thick at the butt and ninety feet high. “How
dumbly eloquent! What suggestions of impermanence and being,
as against the human trait of mere seeming . . . How it rebukes,
by its quiet and equable serenity all weathers, this gusty-temper’d
little whiffet, man . . . .” The trees, like the animals, do not com-
plain of lost love or unsatisfied desire. They celebrate themselves.
Whitman began to fantasize about dryads and dream of trees
speaking to him. “One does not wonder at the old story fables . . .
of people falling into love-sickness with trees, seiz’d exatic with
the mystic realism of the resistless silent strength of them—
strength . . .”