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Randall Jarrell

WALT WHITMAN: HE HAD HIS NERVE

WHITMAN, Dickinson, and Melville seem to me the best poets of the 19th Century here in America. Melville's poetry has been grotesquely underestimated, but of course it is only in the last four or five years that it has been much read; in the long run, in spite of the awkwardness and amateurishness of so much of it, it will surely be thought well of. (In the short run it will probably be thought entirely too well of. Melville is a great poet only in the prose of *Moby Dick*.) Dickinson's poetry has been thoroughly read, and well though undifferentiatingly loved—after a few decades or centuries almost everybody will be able to see through Dickinson to her poems. But something odd has happened to the living changing part of Whitman's reputation: nowadays it is people who are not particularly interested in poetry, people who say that they read a poem for what it says, not for how it says it, who admire Whitman most. Whitman is often written about, either approvingly or disapprovingly, as if he were the Thomas Wolfe of 19th Century democracy, the hero of a de Mille movie about Walt Whitman. (People even talk about a war in which Walt Whitman and Henry James chose up sides, to begin with, and in which you and I will go on fighting till the day we die.) All this sort of thing, and all the bad poetry that there of course is in Whitman—for any poet has written enough bad poetry to scare away anybody—has helped to scare away from Whitman most “serious readers of modern poetry.” They do not talk of his poems, as a rule, with any real liking or knowledge. Serious readers, people who are ashamed of not knowing all Hopkins by heart, are not at all ashamed to say, “I don't really

know Whitman very well.” This may harm Whitman in your eyes, they know, but that is a chance that poets have to take. Yet “their” Hopkins, that good critic and great poet, wrote about Whitman, after seeing five or six of his poems in a newspaper review: “I may as well say what I should not otherwise have said, that I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman’s mind to be more like my own than any other man’s living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a very pleasant confession.” And Henry James, the leader of “their” side in that awful imaginary war of which I spoke, once read Whitman to Edith Wharton (much as Mozart used to imitate, on the piano, the organ) with such power and solemnity that both sat shaken and silent; it was after this reading that James expressed his regret at Whitman’s “too extensive acquaintance with the foreign languages.” Almost all the most “original and advanced” poets and critics and readers of the last part of the 19th Century thought Whitman as original and advanced as themselves, in manner as well as in matter. Can Whitman really be a sort of Thomas Wolfe or Carl Sandburg or Robinson Jeffers or Henry Miller—or a sort of Balzac of poetry, whose every part is crude but whose whole is somehow good? He is not, nor could he be; a poem, like Pope’s spider, “lives along the line,” and all the dead lines in the world will not make one live poem. As Blake says, “all sublimity is founded on minute discrimination,” and it is in these “minute particulars” of Blake’s that any poem has its primary existence.

To show Whitman for what he is one does not need to praise or explain or argue, one needs simply to quote. He himself said, “I and mine do not convince by arguments, similes, rhymes, / We convince by our presence.” Even a few of his phrases are enough to show us that Whitman was no sweeping rhetorician, but a poet of the greatest and oddest delicacy and originality and sensitivity, so far as words are concerned. This is, after all, the poet who said, “Blind loving wrestling touch, sheath’d hooded sharp-tooth’d touch”; who said, “Smartly attired, countenance smiling, form

upright, death under the breast-bones, hell under the skull-bones"; who said, "Agonies are one of my changes of garments"; who saw grass as the "flag of my disposition," saw "the sharp-peak'd farmhouse, with its scallop'd scum and slender shoots from the gutters," heard a plane's "wild ascending lisp," and saw and heard how at the amputation "what is removed drops horribly in a pail." This is the poet for whom the sea was "howler and scooper of storms," reaching out to us with "crooked inviting fingers"; who went "leaping chasms with a pike-pointed staff, clinging to topples of brittle and blue"; who, a runaway slave, saw how "my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin"; who went "lithographing Kronos . . . buying drafts of Osiris"; who stared out at the "little plentiful mannikins skipping around in collars and tail'd coats, / I am aware who they are, (they are positively not worms or fleas)." For he is, at his best, beautifully witty: he says gravely, "I find I incorporate gneiss, coals, long-threaded moss, fruits, grain, esculent roots, / And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over"; and of these quadrupeds and birds "not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth." He calls advice: "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors from their jambs!" He publishes the results of research: "Having pried through the strata, analyz'd to a hair, counsel'd with doctors and calculated close, / I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones." Everybody remembers how he told the Muse to "cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts, / That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas', Odysseus' wanderings," but his account of the arrival of the "illustrious emigré" here in the New World is even better: "Bluff'd not a bit by drainpipe, gasometer, artificial fertilizers, / Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay, / She's here, install'd amid the kitchenware." Or he sees, like another Breughel, "the mechanic's wife with the babe at her nipple interceding for every person born, / Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three lusty angels with shirts bagg'd out at their waists, / The snag-toothed hostler with

says, "O suns— O grass of graves— O perpetual transfers and promotions, / If you do not say anything how can I say anything?" Not many poets have written better, in queerer and more convincing and more individual language, about the world's *gliding wonders*: the phrase seems particularly right for Whitman. He speaks of those "circling rivers the breath," of the "savage old mother incessantly crying, / To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd secret hissing"— ends a poem, once, "We have voided all but freedom and our own joy." How can one quote enough? If the reader thinks that all this is like Thomas Wolfe he *is* Thomas Wolfe; nothing else could explain it. Poetry like this is as far as possible from the work of any ordinary rhetorician, whose phrases cascade over us like suds of the oldest and most-advertised detergent.

The interesting thing about Whitman's worst language (for, just as few poets have ever written better, few poets have ever written worse) is how unusually absurd, how really ingeniously bad, such language is. I will quote none of the most famous examples; but even a line like *O culpable! I acknowledge. I exposé!* is not anything that you and I could do—only a man with the most extraordinary feel for language, or none whatsoever, could have cooked up Whitman's worst messes. For instance: what other man in all the history of this planet would have said, "I am a habitan of Vienna"? (One has an immediate vision of him as a sort of French-Canadian halfbreed to whom the Viennese are offering, with trepidation, through the bars of a zoological garden, little mounds of whipped cream.) And *enclaircise*—why, it's as bad as *explicate!* We are right to resent his having made up his own horrors, instead of sticking to the ones that we ourselves employ. But when Whitman says, "I dote on myself, there is that lot of me and all so luscious," we should realize that we are not the only ones who are amused. And the queerly bad and the merely queer and the queerly good will often change into one another without warning: "Hefts of the moving world, at

innocent gambols silently rising, freshly exuding, / Scooting obliquely high and low"—not good, but *queer!*—suddenly becomes, "Something I cannot see puts up libidinous prongs, / Seas of bright juice suffuse heaven," and it is sunrise.

But it is not in individual lines and phrases, but in passages of some length, that Whitman is at his best. In the following quotation Whitman has something difficult to express, something that there are many formulas, all bad, for expressing; he expresses it with complete success, in language of the most dazzling originality:

The orchestra whirls me wider than Uranus flies,
 It wrenches such ardors from me I did not know I
 possess'd them,
 It sails me, I dab with bare feet, they are lick'd by the
 indolent waves,
 I am cut by bitter and angry hail, I lose my breath,
 Steep'd amid honey'd morphine, my windpipe throttled in
 fakes of death,
 At length let up again to feel the puzzle of puzzles,
 And that we call Being.

One hardly knows what to point at—everything works. But *wrenches* and *did not know I possess'd them*; the incredible *it sails me, I dab with bare feet; lick'd by the indolent; steep'd amid honey'd morphine; my windpipe throttled in fakes of death*—no wonder Crane admired Whitman! This originality, as absolute in its way as that of Berlioz' orchestration, is often at Whitman's command:

I am a dance—play up there! the fit is whirling me fast!

 I am the ever-laughing—it is new moon and twilight,
 I see the hiding of douceurs, I see nimble ghosts whichever way
 I look,
 Cache and cache again deep in the ground and sea, and where
 it is neither ground nor sea.

Well do they do their jobs those journeymen divine,
 Only from me can they hide nothing, and would not if they could,
 I reckon I am their boss and they make me a pet besides,
 And surround me and lead me and run ahead when I walk,
 To lift their sunning covers to signify me with stretch'd arms,
 and resume the way;
 Onward we move, a gay gang of blackguards! with mirth-
 shouting music and wild-flapping pennants of joy!

If you did not believe Hopkins' remark about Whitman, that *gay gang of blackguards* ought to shake you. Whitman shares Hopkins' passion for "dappled" effects, but he slides in and out of them with ambiguous swiftness. And he has at his command a language of the calmest and most prosaic reality, one that seems to do no more than present:

The little one sleeps in its cradle.
 I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away
 flies with my hand.

The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
 I peeringly view them from the top.

The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom.
 I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the
 pistol has fallen.

It is like magic: that is, something has been done to us without our knowing how it was done; but if we look at the lines again we see the *gauze, silently, youngster, red-faced, bushy, peeringly, dabbled*—not that this is all we see. "Present! present!" said James; these are presented, put down side by side to form a little "view of life," from the cradle to the last bloody floor of the bedroom. Very often the things presented form nothing but a list:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
 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 duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
 The deacons are ordained with cross'd hands at the altar,
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the
 big wheel,
 The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe
 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;)
 The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
 He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blur with the
 manuscript,
 The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
 What is removed drops horribly in a pail. . . .

It is only a list—but what a list! And how delicately, in what
 different ways—likeness and opposition and continuation and
 climax and anticlimax—the transitions are managed, whenever
 Whitman wants to manage them. Notice them in the next quota-
 tion, another “mere list”:

The bride unrumple her white dress, the minute-hand of the
 clock moves slowly,
 The opium-eater reclines with rigid head and just-open'd lips,
 The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her
 tipsy and pimpled neck. . . .

The first line is joined to the third by *unrumple* and *draggles*,
white dress and *shawl*; the second to the third by *rigid head*,
bobs, *tipsy*, *neck*; the first to the second by *slowly*, *just-open'd*,
 and the slowing-down of time in both states. And occasionally

one of these lists is metamorphosed into something we have no name for; the man who would call the next quotation a mere list—anybody will feel this—would boil his babies up for soap:

Ever the hard unsunk ground,
 Ever the eaters and drinkers, ever the upward and downward sun,
 Ever myself and my neighbors, refreshing, wicked, real,
 Ever the old inexplicable query, ever that thorned thumb,
 that breath of itches and thirsts,
 Ever the vexer's hoot! hoot! till we find where the sly one hides
 and bring him forth,
 Ever the sobbing liquid of life,
 Ever the bandage under the chin, ever the trestles of death.

Sometimes Whitman will take what would generally be considered an unpromising subject (in this case, a woman peeping at men in bathing naked) and treat it with such tenderness and subtlety and understanding that we are ashamed of ourselves for having thought it unpromising, and murmur that Chekhov himself couldn't have treated it better:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
 Twenty-eight young men and all so friendly,
 Twenty-eight years of womanly life and all so lonesome.

She owns the fine house by the rise of the bank,
 She hides handsome and richly drest aft the blinds of the window.

Which of the young men does she like the best?
 Ah the homeliest of them is beautiful to her.

Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,
 You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room.

Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth
 bather,
 The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them.

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran
 from their long hair,
 Little streams pass'd all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also pass'd over their bodies,
 It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs.

The young men float on their backs, their white bellies bulge
 to the sun, they do not ask who seizes fast to them,
 They do not know who puffs and declines with pendant and
 bending arch,
 They do not know whom they souse with spray.

And in the same poem (that "Song of Myself" in which one
 finds half his best work) the writer can say of a sea-fight:

Stretched and still lies the midnight,
 Two great hulls motionless on the breast of the darkness,
 Our vessel riddled and slowly sinking, preparations to pass
 to the one we have conquer'd,
 The captain on the quarter-deck coldly giving his orders
 through a countenance white as a sheet,
 Near by the corpse of the child that serv'd in the cabin,
 The dead face of an old salt with long white hair and
 carefully curl'd whiskers,
 The flames spite of all that can be done flickering aloft and below,
 The husky voices of the two or three officers yet fit for duty,
 Formless stacks of bodies and bodies by themselves, dabs
 of flesh upon the masts and spars,
 Cut of cordage, dangle of rigging, slight shock of the
 soothe of waves,
 Black and impassive guns, litter of powder-parcels, strong scent,
 A few large stars overhead, silent and mournful shining,
 Delicate snuffs of sea-breeze, smells of sedgy grass and fields by
 the shore, death-messages given in charge to survivors,
 The hiss of the surgeon's knife, the gnawing teeth of his saw,
 Wheeze, cluck, swash of falling blood, short wild scream,
 and long, dull, tapering groan,
 These so, these irretrievable.

There are faults in this passage, and they *do not matter*: the serious truth, the complete realization of these last lines make us remember that few poets have shown more of the tears of things, and the joy of things, and of the reality beneath either tears or joy. Even Whitman's most general or political statements often are good: everybody knows his "When liberty goes out of a place it is not the first to go, nor the second or third to go, / It waits for all the rest to go, it is the last"; these sentences about the United States just before the Civil War may be less familiar:

Are those really Congressmen? are those the great Judges?
 is that the President?
 Then I will sleep awhile yet, for I see that these States sleep,
 for reasons;
 (With gathering murk, with muttering thunder and lambent
 shoots we all duly awake,
 South, North, East, West, inland and seaboard, we will
 surely awake.)

How well, with what firmness and dignity and command, Whitman does such passages! And Whitman's doubts that he has done them or anything else well—ah, there is nothing he does better:

The best I had done seemed to me blank and suspicious,
 My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in
 reality meagre?
 I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
 I too knitted the old knot of contrariety . . .
 Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public assembly,
 yet never told them a word,
 Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing,
 gnawing, sleeping,
 Played the part that still looks back on the actor and actress,
 The same old role, the role that is what we make it . . .

Whitman says once that the "look of the bay mare shames silliness out of me." This is true—sometimes it is true; but more

often the silliness and affectation and cant and exaggeration are there shamelessly, the Old Adam that was in Whitman from the beginning and the awful new one that he created to keep it company. But as he says, "I know perfectly well my own egotism, / Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less." He says over and over that there are in him good and bad, wise and foolish, anything at all and its antonym, and he is telling the truth; there is in him almost everything in the world, so that one responds to him, willingly or unwillingly, almost as one does to the world, that world which makes the hairs of one's flesh stand up, which seems both evil beyond any rejection and wonderful beyond any acceptance. We cannot help seeing that there is something absurd about any judgment we make of its whole—for there is no "point of view" at which we can stand to make the judgment, and the moral categories that mean most to us seem no more to apply to its whole than our spatial or temporal or causal categories seem to apply to its beginning or its end. (But we need no arguments to make our judgments seem absurd—we feel their absurdity without argument.) In some like sense Whitman is a world, a waste with, here and there, systems blazing at random out of the darkness. Only an innocent and rigidly methodical mind will reject it for this disorganization, particularly since there are in it, here and there, little systems as beautifully and astonishingly organized as the rings and satellites of Saturn:

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
 The courage of present times and all times,
 How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the
 steam-ship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,
 How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was
 faithful of days and faithful of nights,
 And chalked in large letters on a board, Be of good cheer,
 we will not desert you;
 How he follow'd with them and tack'd with them three days
 and would not give it up,

How he saved the drifting company at last,
 How the lank loose-gown'd women looked when boated
 from the side of their prepared graves,
 How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the
 sharp-lipp'd unshaved men;
 All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
 I am the man, I suffered, I was there.

In the last lines of this quotation Whitman has reached—as great writers always reach—a point at which criticism seems not only unnecessary but absurd: these lines are so good that even admiration feels like insolence, and one is ashamed of anything that one can find to say about them. How anyone can dismiss or accept patronizingly the man who wrote them, I do not understand.

The enormous and apparent advantage of form, of omission and selection, of the highest degree of organization, are accompanied by important disadvantages—and there are far greater works than *Leaves of Grass* to make us realize this. But if we compare Whitman with that very beautiful poet Alfred Tennyson, the most skillful of all Whitman's contemporaries, we are at once aware of how limiting Tennyson's forms have been, of how much Tennyson has had to leave out, even in those discursive poems where he is trying to put everything in. Whitman's poems *represent* his world and himself much more satisfactorily than Tennyson's do his. In the past a few poets have both formed and represented, each in the highest degree; but in modern times what controlling, organizing, selecting poet has created a world with as much in it as Whitman's, a world that so plainly *is* the world? Of all modern poets he has, quantitatively speaking, "the most comprehensive soul"—and, qualitatively, a most comprehensive and comprehending one, with charities and concessions and qualifications that are rare in any time.

"Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself," wrote Whitman, as everybody remembers, and this is not naïve, or something he got from Emerson, or a complacent pose.

When you organize one of the contradictory elements out of your work of art, you are getting rid not just of it, but of the contradiction of which it was a part; and it is the contradictions in works of art which make them able to represent to us—as logical and methodical generalizations cannot—our world and our selves, which are also full of contradictions. In Whitman we do not get the controlled, compressed, seemingly concordant contradictions of the great lyric poets, of a poem like, say, Hardy's *During Wind and Rain*; Whitman's contradictions are sometimes announced openly, but are more often scattered at random throughout the poems. For instance: Whitman specializes in ways of saying that there is in some sense (a very Hegelian one, generally) no evil—he says a hundred times that evil is not Real; but he also specializes in making lists of the evil of the world, lists of an unarguable reality. After his minister has recounted “the rounded catalogue divine complete,” Whitman comes home and puts down what has been left out: “the countless (nineteen-twentieths) low and evil, crude and savage . . . the barren soil, the evil men, the slag and hideous rot.” He ends another such catalogue with the plain unexcusing “All these—all meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon, / See, hear, and am silent.” Whitman offered himself to everybody, and said brilliantly and at length what a good thing he was offering:

Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights,
 well entretied, braced in the beams,
 Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
 I and this mystery here we stand.

Just for oddness, characteristicness, differentness, what more could you ask in a letter of recommendation? (Whitman sounds as if he were recommending a house—haunted, but what foundations!) But after a few pages he is oddly different:

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

Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable
 certain rest
 Looking with side curved head curious what will come next,
 Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

Tamburlaine is already beginning to sound like Hamlet: the employer feels uneasily, *Why, I might as well hire myself. . . .* And, a few pages later, Whitman puts down in ordinary-sized type, in the middle of the page, this warning to any *new person drawn toward me*:

Do you think I am trusty and faithful?
 Do you see no further than this façade, this smooth
 and tolerant manner of me?
 Do you suppose yourself advancing on real ground
 toward a real heroic man?
 Have you no thought O dreamer that it may be all maya,
 illusion?

Having wonderful dreams, telling wonderful lies, was a temptation Whitman could never resist; but telling the truth was a temptation he could never resist, either. When you buy him you know what you are buying. And only an innocent and solemn and systematic mind will condemn him for his contradictions: Whitman's catalogues of evils represent realities, and his denials of their reality represent other realities, of feeling and intuition and desire. If he is faithless to logic, to Reality As It Is—whatever that is—he is faithful to the feel of things, to reality as it seems; this is all that a poet has to be faithful to, and philosophers even have been known to leave logic and Reality for it.

Whitman is more coordinate and parallel than anybody, is *the* poet of parallel present participles, of twenty verbs joined by a single subject: all this helps to give his work its feeling of raw hypnotic reality, of being that world which also streams over us joined only by *ands*, until we supply the subordinating conjunc-

tions; and since as children we see the *ands* and not the *because*s, this method helps to give Whitman some of the freshness of childhood. How inexhaustibly *interesting* the world is in Whitman! Arnold all his life kept wishing that we could see the world “with a plainness as near, as flashing” as that with which Moses and Rebekah and the Argonauts saw it. He asked with elegiac nostalgia, “Who can see the green earth any more / As she was by the sources of Time?”—and all the time there was somebody alive who saw it so, as plain and near and flashing, and with a kind of calm, pastoral, biblical dignity and elegance as well, sometimes. The *thereness* and *suchness* of the world are incarnate in Whitman as they are in few other writers.

They might have put on his tombstone WALT WHITMAN: HE HAD HIS NERVE. He is the rashest, the most inexplicable and unlikely—the most impossible, one wants to say—of poets. He somehow *is* in a class by himself, so that one compares him with other poets about as readily as one compares *Alice* with other books. (Even his free verse has a completely different effect from anybody else’s.) Who would think of comparing him with Tennyson or Browning or Arnold or Baudelaire?—it is Homer, or the sagas, or something far away and long ago, that comes to one’s mind only to be dismissed; for sometimes Whitman *is* epic, just as *Moby Dick* is, and it surprises us to be able to use truthfully this word that we have misused so many times. Whitman *is* grand, and elevated, and comprehensive, and real with an astonishing reality, and many other things—the critic points at his qualities in despair and wonder, all method failing, and simply calls them by their names. And the range of these qualities is the most extraordinary thing of all. We can surely say about him, “He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again”—and wish that people had seen this and not tried to be his like: one Whitman is miracle enough, and when he comes again it will be the end of the world.

I have said so little about Whitman’s faults because they are

so plain: baby critics who have barely learned to complain of the lack of ambiguity in *Peter Rabbit* can tell you all that is wrong with *Leaves of Grass*. But a good many of my readers must have felt that it is ridiculous to write an essay about the obvious fact that Whitman is a great poet. It is ridiculous—just as, in 1851, it would have been ridiculous for anyone to write an essay about the obvious fact that Pope was no “classic of our prose” but a great poet. Critics have to spend half their time reiterating whatever ridiculously obvious things their age or the critics of their age have found it necessary to forget: they say despairingly, at parties, that Wordsworth is a great poet, and *won't* bore you, and tell Mr. Leavis that Milton is a great poet whose deposition *hasn't* been accomplished with astonishing ease by a few words from Eliot and Pound. . . . There is something essentially ridiculous about critics, anyway: what is good is good without our saying so, and beneath all our majesty we know this.

Let me finish by mentioning another quality of Whitman's—a quality, delightful to me, that I have said nothing of. If some day a tourist notices, among the ruins of New York City, a copy of *Leaves of Grass*, and stops and picks it up and reads some lines in it, she will be able to say to herself: “How very American! If he and his country had not existed, it would have been impossible to imagine them.”