

Walt Whitman, European National Poetry, and the Revolutions of 1848-49

The failure of the 1848-49 European revolutions was crucial in the evolution of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman shared the revolutionary spirit of 1848-49, portraying an ideal America of unique and growing diversity. How does Whitman as an American national poet with revolutionary sympathies compare with his European contemporaries, such as Mickiewicz of Poland, Petőfi of Hungary, or Shevchenko of Ukraine? Whitman sympathized with liberal European revolution, but not with European xenophobia, which after 1848 was increasingly associated with nationalism and the poetry of nationalism. Whitman is spiritually closest not to European national poets but to poets of the East such as Tagore and Iqbal. His identification with America as heir to xenophobic, dying Europe took added force from his father's death. Whitman, despairing at the reality of American politics in the 1840s and 1850s, sought an idealized freedom of the Self in a universalist mystical vision. The tolerant inclusiveness of Whitman's poetry found a practical outlet in the Civil War, in his saintly, self-sacrificing behaviour as a hospital nurse and the expression in his poetry of the horror, not glory, of war. Through his inner conflicts, in which his sexual identity was central, Whitman spoke for the uncertainties of American national identity after 1848. Whitman's poetry revealed his power, and that of the Nation, to contain and resolve painful contradictions and grow through them; and in this way, too, a multicultural America could emerge.

*Európa csendes, ujra csendes,
Elzúgtak forradalmi... Szégyen reá!*

*(Europe is quiet, quiet again,
Its revolts have died down... Shame on it!)*

Petőfi 1849

Liberty, let others despair of you – I never despair of you.

Whitman 1850

Like many Americans, Walt Whitman was deeply affected by the 1848 European revolutions: they aimed, as did the American War of Independence, for freedom from monarchy and for human rights. Whitman supported these revolutions enthusiastically, but they all failed and he was disappointed by their failure. Whitman shared with Byron the idea of Liberty as a holy cause; and like Shelley he believed that poets are lawgivers - in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* he calls the poet 'the president of regulation' (Whitman 1964: ii 438) - with the power to change society, at times violently.¹ How does Whitman as an American national poet with revolutionary sympathies compare with his European contemporaries, such as Mickiewicz of Poland, Petőfi of Hungary, Lönnrot of Finland, Shevchenko of Ukraine, or Botev of Bulgaria, and others ?

Whitman, like many European poets at the time, had hoped for a general European revolt and the 'downfall of despotism' (Whitman 2003: 194). Whitman began the first poems in *Leaves of Grass* in 1847, as revolutionary agitation grew, and later, after 1848, and partly in response to the revolutions. Most notably, there is the poem, 'Europe' (or 'Resurgemus'), where Whitman is eager for the fall of kings:

¹ On Whitman and the revolutions of 1848, see Stein (1998). For a broad picture of Whitman in relation to other 19th century national poets, see Aberbach (2015).

Suddenly, out of its stale and drowsy lair, the lair of slaves,
Like lightning Europe le'pt forth
Sombre, superb and terrible
As Ahimoth, brother of Death.
God, 'twas delicious!
That brief, tight glorious grip
Upon the throat of kings.

This is the language of violent revolution, familiar in 19th century national poetry but, like 'A Boston Ballad' – these being the only poems in *Leaves of Grass* published prior to 1855 - in a tone unusual for Whitman.

Whitman at first shared the militarism of his age, but broke with it. Consider his poem, 'Europe', alongside the Hungarian national poet, Sandor Petőfi, who wrote in his poem, '1848': 'We are ashamed for the long night of servitude./ Our anger rises against tyrants./ Our morning prayer is a sacrifice of blood' (Petőfi 1973: 337); or the Italian poet Mameli, like Petőfi a martyr to the national cause in 1848-49. Mameli had a career that Whitman would have envied: he died in Rome fighting under Garibaldi - a hero to Whitman - for Italian independence from Austria. His poem *Fratelli d'Italia* (1847) - from 1946 Italy's national anthem - invokes the Byronic spirit of sacrifice for the Nation: 'Let us gather in legions/ Ready to die:/ Italy calls!' Whitman, however, had no desire to be a poet of the lost cause, like Heine who, as the first poems of *Leaves of Grass* were written, confessed himself a failure in the fight for freedom: *Verlorner Posten in dem Freiheitskriege* (a lost sentry in the war of liberation) ('Enfant Perdu').²

² In 'To a Foil'd European Revolutionaire', Whitman identifies the desire for liberty as the most deeply ingrained instinct, the last to go.

Whitman's enthusiasm for violent revolution is clear in his journalism of the 1840s, which tracked the upheavals as they spread from France to Prussia and the German states, then to Italy, Austria, Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland, setting off several dozen other conflagrations throughout Europe. These events were widely covered in the American press, including the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *New Orleans Crescent*, which Whitman edited in early 1848. Whitman was in New Orleans when the French king, Louis Philippe, was deposed on 22-24 February 1848; the poet Alphonse de Lamartine, whom Whitman admired, became French head of state for several months. Whitman had predicted that Louis Philippe, 'the false one, the deceiver', would be consumed by the flame of liberty (Whitman 2003: 194). As in 'Europe', Whitman's anti-monarchism is close in tone to that of revolutionary European poets in the 1840s. Petöfi, for example, in a proclamation of September 20, 1848, wrote of the deposed Louis Philippe: 'On the French throne there sat a reprobate, rascally king, France gave a great cry and at this cry the throne trembled and collapsed, and the perfidious king fled in terror, and in place of a crown a curse rests on his head' (Petöfi 1974: 268).

Whitman's sympathy was with the French Revolution, even for the Reign of Terror, for 'the overthrow of the despotism' he wrote 'whole hecatombs of royal carcasses were a cheap price indeed' (Whitman 2003: 306). The pen, Whitman wrote, could 'make gaping wounds in mighty empires – to put the power of kings in jeopardy, or even chop off their heads – to sway the energy and will of congregated masses of men, as the huge winds roll the sea, lashing them to fury, and hurling destruction on every side!' (*ibid.*, 62). Here, in full revolutionary flow, is a fit companion to Robespierre, Byron, Marx and Engels, Bakunin, and Garibaldi! But it is not the characteristic voice of *Leaves of Grass*.

Whitman's poetry of tolerance

Whitman's youthful zeal for blood and gore in casting kings to the dung heap of history was the norm among revolutionary 18th - and 19th -century poets. Yet, in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman marked his differences from his European contemporaries. Whitman is the only 19th century national poet who, instead of wanting to shoot foreigners, made

poetry out of welcoming them to New York. European poets sing of the nation, not immigrants. Most of them belong to defeated or subjugated nations, yearning for freedom. They tend to see immigrants as strangers from often-hostile countries; foreigners are suspect, aliens dangerous.

America - unlike Europe - could see its future in immigration. Whitman loved to loiter by the New York docks, where he saw the country transformed by immigrants - many from the defeated and subjugated European countries. As these immigrants were transformed into Americans, Whitman became their national poet. In the decade prior to the publication of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, Whitman witnessed the arrival of about three million immigrants, the largest proportionate increase at any time in American history. A large number were Irish Catholics fleeing the potato famine. In fact, there was much resistance to immigration, especially Catholics. In the years up to and including the Civil War it was questionable if Americans could live with their fellow Americans, let alone millions of new immigrants. While the argument over slavery raged, a virtual civil war in New York was caused by the Protestant American party (the 'Know-Nothings'), who aimed to exclude Catholics and foreigners from public office, and limit Irish and German Catholic immigration. The 'Know-Nothings' reached the height of their influence as *Leaves of Grass* came off the press in 1855. Whitman adopted some Know-Nothing attitudes, 'to the extent that he would once say that America's digestion was strained by the "millions of ignorant foreigners" coming to its shores' (Reynolds 1996: 86).

Similarly, Whitman could not escape popular prejudice against American Blacks, nor was he immune to White supremacist views. Whitman's journalism on Blacks lacks the idealism of his poetry. In the *Brooklyn Daily Times*, 6 May 1858, he writes: 'Who believes that Whites and Blacks can ever amalgamate in America? Or who wishes it to happen? Nature has set an impassable seal against it. Besides, is not America for the Whites? And is it not better so?' (Whitman 1932: 90). Whitman believed (as

Lincoln did) in White superiority and in segregation,³ even that slavery had its ‘redeeming points’ (*ibid.*, 88). Yet Whitman, in his poetry, does not write about American opposition to new immigrants, nor does he give way to his own prejudices: his America, unlike Europe, is tolerant and accepting of newcomers, ‘curious toward foreign characters’ (*By Blue Ontario’s Shore* 5), too large to be swamped by them.⁴ In America beats ‘all the pulses of the world’ (‘Pioneers, O Pioneers!’). Whitman’s response to the new arrivals as Americans in the making, and the making of America, was a total rejection of immigration restrictions and nationalistic and ethnic hatred, which he associated with Europe, especially after the failure of the 1848-49 revolutions: ‘lend us the children of the poor, the ignorant, and the depraved’, America ‘rejects none’. Jesus-like, Whitman comforts the ‘shunned men and women’ of the world, as he puts it in ‘Children of Adam’: ‘I will be your poet’.⁵ These include Blacks. Whitman’s earliest surviving attempt at free verse, in a notebook of 1847-48, begins: ‘I am the poet of slaves’ (Whitman 1984: i 67).⁶ Free verse is clearly associated in his mind with liberation. In the twelve-poem 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman’s portrayal of Blacks is unusual in contemporary American literature. He mentions Blacks in nine of these poems. Whitman’s embrace of all peoples includes slaves, for ‘Whoever degrades another degrades me’ (*Song of Myself* 24):

³ Whitman regarded Blacks as ‘sources of dread and emblems of retribution’ (Erkkila 1989: 240). On Whitman’s racial views, see Klammer (1995) and Folsom (2000). Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), evidently supported the return of Blacks to Africa. The novel ends with a former slave writing to American friends from France of his impending departure for Liberia: ‘I have no wish to pass for an American... As a Christian patriot, as a teacher of Christianity, I go to *my country*’.

⁴ One of these ‘foreign characters’, who arrived, a temporary exile, in New York in 1850-1 was Garibaldi whose attempt with Mazzini to establish an Italian republic in 1848-9 had failed. It is possible that Whitman’s pose in the frontispiece of *Leaves of Grass* was meant to recall Garibaldi’s manly revolutionary style. He once described being compared to Garibaldi as ‘the crowning tribute’ (Whitman 1961 i 341).

⁵ See Whitman (1984: i 149) and Bowers (1969: 62).

⁶ Elsewhere, too, in his notebooks Whitman identifies with slaves, in lines anticipating *Leaves of Grass* (10): ‘I am the hunted slave/ Damnation and despair are close upon me’ (Whitman 1984: i 109)

The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside...
He staid with me for a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,
I had him sit next to me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.
(*ibid.*, 10)

Whitman goes beyond sympathy to a remarkable identification with slaves - 'I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs' (*ibid.*, 33) - and even with the vengeful rage felt by the oppressed: 'I hate him that oppresses me' ('The Sleepers'). The poet seeks 'a change of heart by *all* Americans to include Blacks and other marginalized peoples in a diverse and united democracy' (Klammer 1995: 157).

Among major European national poets, Gjergj Fishta of Albania, a Catholic priest in the only European country with a Muslim majority, is unusual in sharing Whitman's inclusiveness. Fishta, in *The Highland Lute* (mostly 1902-1909), his epic of Albanian history from about 1860 until independence from the Ottoman empire in 1912, depicts Christian and Muslim cultures co-existing amid multiple viewpoint. Fishta treats Albanian identity as inclusive, with Muslims and Christians united against common foes after the Congress of Berlin: Muslims swear on the Koran, Christians on the Gospels, to be loyal and defend Albania (Fishta 2005: 130, 131). In this poetry, nationalism supersedes religious conflict and points to an end of ancient divisions and rivalries.

Yet, analogues to Whitman's combination of ardent nationalism coupled with mystic love for humanity and semi-biblical universalism are rarely found in Europe, a continent of centuries-long religious wars. In contrast with Europe, riven by class hatred, Whitman defines America in terms of a common humanity, with grass its symbol. What European poet ever described the smell of his arm-pits, as Whitman does, as finer than prayer (*Song of Myself* 24)? His style itself is often close to newspaper English, common and comprehensible as grass, 'the grass that grows wherever the land is and the water is' (*ibid.*, 17), expressing a universal soul, its thoughts the thoughts of all men in all ages: 'If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing...' (*ibid.*, 17).

What is commonest, cheapest, nearest, easiest, is Me,
Me going in for my chances, spending for vast returns,
Adorning myself to bestow myself on the first that will take me,
Not asking the sky to come down to my good will,
Scattering it freely forever.

(*ibid.*, 14)

Modern poets spiritually closest to Whitman are not in Europe but in the East, including Shawqi of Egypt, and Tagore and Iqbal of India.⁷

Whitman and the East

Shawqi, writing under British rule, describes with pride the tolerance and inclusiveness of the ancient Egyptian civilization, ‘... papyrus and Psalms, Torah, Gospel and Koran, Mena and Cambyses, / Alexander and the two Caesars, and Saladin the Great...’⁸ Tagore, also writing in hope of independence from the British empire, defines national identity as international, in the Whitmanesque ‘Pilgrimage to India’ (1910). This is an Indian *Salut Au Monde!*, recalling all the peoples who, from ancient to modern times created India: Aryan and non-Aryan, Scythian, Hun, Mughal, Pathan and peoples from West, all bringing their bounty, ‘Give and receive, merge and be merged:/ From India’s ocean-shore of great humanity ...’ (Tagore 2004: 200–1). In a 1909 letter, Tagore writes of India in language of manifest destiny, recalling Whitman on America: ‘India in different periods of her history received with open arms the medley of races that poured in on her without any attempt at shutting out undesirable elements. ... It is not manifestly her destiny that East and West should find their meeting place in her ever-hospitable bosom’ (*ibid.*, 407). The Indian Muslim poet, Iqbal, in ‘Vision of a New World’, expresses belief in ‘A world without distinction of blood and colour’ (Iqbal 2000: 126). Even in his overtly nationalistic poetry, such as ‘National Song of India’

⁷ For a comparison between Whitman and Tagore, see Sastry (1992).

⁸ Revised from Arberry (1965: 160-1).

(*Tarana-I-Hindi*, 1904), Iqbal merges national and universal feeling. True religion, he writes, does not teach discord: ‘Strung on a single thread, we are one./ We are Indians’ (Burney 1987: 8). Iqbal’s poem moved Gandhi to tears and inspired his non-violent protests against British rule. He sang it many times in jail: ‘what could be sweeter than that religion never taught mutual hatred?’ (*ibid.*, 9).

Whitman’s America: a contrast with Europe

Whitman is rare among 19th century American poets in being un-European, even anti-European. Repeatedly, he calls on America’s ‘un-corrupted core of primal fresher soul’ to overthrow Europe’s ‘moral rottenness’ (Zweig 1984: 32). He condemns Europe in ‘Song of the Redwood-Tree’ for its ‘old dynastic slaughter-house’ and anachronistic monarchies, gripped by reaction after 1848. The axe, symbol of cruel arrogant European power, is in the hands of American frontiersmen a tool of progress, taming the wilderness. Europe is corrupt, maimed, a dying culture. The United States, he implies, is the only country left to guard democracy and liberty. America alone is the chance of a new start for humanity. This belief that democracy depends on America has powerful parallels in American political documents: for example, in Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776), which defines America as uniquely tolerant of the many cultures of its citizens; in Jefferson’s Inaugural Address (4 March 1801) in which America is ‘the world’s best hope’; and in the closing words of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address (19 November 1863): ‘that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.’ Whitman in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* provocatively declares that the poetry of ‘other nations’ – i.e. in Europe – marked the end of the line. American poetry – namely Whitman’s – is a new birth of creativity, opening new possibilities for humanity:

‘Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted and their eras and characters be illustrated and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative and has vista’ (Whitman 1964: ii 437).⁹

Europeans disenchanted with the events of 1848-49 found refuge in America. Adolf Brandeis, father of the eminent American jurist Louis Brandeis, arrived from Prague in 1849, in advance of his future wife. He wrote to her: ‘To your own surprise you will see how your hatred of your fellow-man, all your disgust at civilization, all your revulsion from the intellectual life, will drop away from you at once. You will appreciate that these feelings are solely the products of the rotten European conditions’ (Sachar 1981: 167). Whitman came to share this aversion to Europe, as a ‘lair of slaves’, mostly overlooking the fact that Europe had emancipated its slaves, while America had not.¹⁰

The perception of national territory separates Whitman from European national poets. The United States was larger than all the revolutionary European states of 1848-49 put together: in Europe, a ‘land rush’ was unthinkable. Land ownership in mostly monarchic European states was linked to class stratification and subject to government control - that is, in the absence of enfranchisement, to the control of the upper classes. As the European population grew in the 19th century, land became scarcer. In England, John Clare, Whitman’s English contemporary, responded in his poetry to the Enclosures

⁹ In his notebooks, Whitman defines American poetry as poetry of the future: ‘The poetry of other lands lies in the past [...] the Poetry of America lies in the future’ (Whitman 1984; iv 1435). Whitman consciously eliminated evidence of literary influence in his poetry, including European poets: ‘make no quotation and no reference to any other writers’ (Whitman 1984: i 159). On Whitman’s aversion to influence, also see ‘Rules of Composition’ (*ibid.*, 101). Toward the end of his life, however, in the poem, ‘Old Chants’ and ‘A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads’ (1888), Whitman openly acknowledges the extent of his reading, much of which in the open air (Whitman 1964: ii 722).

¹⁰ In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Harriet Beecher Stowe points out the irony that Hungarians who escaped Austria after their failed revolt in 1848-9 - a revolt enthusiastically supported in America - were welcomed as heroes by Americans, who were evidently too patriotic to see heroism among escaped Black slaves: ‘if any of our readers do, they must do it on their own private responsibility’ (ch. 17).

Act which closed public land previously used by the common people to keep livestock or to collect firewood. The geography of Clare's English claustrophobia contrasts with Whitman's American expansiveness, in poems such as 'Song of the Open Road' or 'Our Old Feuillage'. To Clare, the English enclosures go against nature and natural law, affecting the poor most. Here is Clare on the hated new 'No entry' signs:

As though the very birds should learn to know
When they go there they must no further go,
Thus, with the poor, scared freedom bade good-bye
... And birds and trees and flowers without a name
All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came...

'The Moors'

Whitman's vision of an expanding America conveys one of the great attractions of America to immigrants - to escape a world in which, as Clare put it, 'the prosperity of one class was founded on the adversity and distress of the other' (Clare 1984: 490n). What does Whitman see in American democracy that European monarchies fail to achieve? To Whitman, the greatest gift of democracy is the free Self, a sensibility created by democratic government, untrammelled by kings and queens, in which individuals are as unconscious of government as a healthy body is unselfconscious. The free Self feels confident at its leisure to contemplate itself and the universe.

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease, observing a spear of summer grass.

(Song of Myself 1)

European national poets rarely ‘loafe’. Their longing for liberty, which Whitman applauded, was often accompanied by hatred of the foreigner, of the ‘Other’, which Whitman deplored. Mickiewicz, for example, obsessed as he is with Polish defeats and humiliation by Russia, does not just want liberty but also violent revenge,

... when Polish eagles take their ancient land by storm
gorged with corpses, drunk with blood,
fold their wings as the enemy dies ...¹¹

Another contemporary of Whitman, the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko, prays in his ‘Testament’ of 1845, that Ukraine will someday free itself and destroy its enemies:

Bury me, then rise and break
your heavy chains, water with the blood
of tyrants your freedom ...¹²

For these views, Shevchenko was sent to Siberia - by personal order of the Tsar. This could not have happened to Whitman, living in a country with a free press; a freedom which Whitman as a newspaper editor could especially appreciate, and one of the main reasons for the European revolutions in 1848. Whitman was highly critical of American government in the 1840s and 1850s, but at least he could not be clapped in jail for doing so.

As for poets in the Ottoman empire, these are even more violent than tsarist poets in their hatred for foreign rule, for the stranger in their midst. Greek poets such as Soutsos and Valaoritis express the intense chauvinism and anti-Islamicism of the time.¹³ The Romanian poet Eminescu declares revenge against the Ottoman Turks as his dearest wish: ‘Dreamea pentru revanşa, întunecată ca o mormână,/ Sângerea duşmanului sâcâind pe

¹¹ Adapted by David Aberbach from Mickiewicz (1962: 2).

¹² Adapted by David Aberbach from Shevchenko (1977: 198).

¹³ On 19th century Greek national poetry, see Aberbach (2015: ch. 6).

your sword,/ above their lopped-off hydra heads dreamed-of triumph streaming in the wind ...' (Carduner 1986: 50). The Bulgarian poet Botev compares the Turkish feudal state to a 'body eaten alive by worms, in terrible agony yet wishing, through the wriggling of the worms, to flutter a little longer' (Topencharov 1982: 68).

Xenophobic European nationalism worsened after 1848; and if America followed, Whitman felt, this and the evil of slavery could destroy the United States. Perhaps the most intolerant of European poets, and the most extreme contrast to Whitman, is Petar II Petrovic-Njegoš, head of both the Serbian/Montenegrin state and of its Orthodox Church. Njegoš published his epic *The Mountain Wreath* in 1847, just at the time when Whitman began work on the poems that were to become *Leaves of Grass*. Njegos' poem climaxes in a Serbian massacre of hated Serbian Christian converts to Islam: 'Our struggle won't come to an end until/ we or the Turks are exterminated' (Njegoš 1989: 8).¹⁴ The history of European religious intolerance such as that expressed by Njegoš resolved the American Founding Fathers to separate Church and State. Njegoš' encouragement of genocide contrasts with Whitman's love of humanity as a whole, 'each of us with his or her right upon the earth' (*Salut Au Monde!*).

Whitman sympathized with liberal European revolution, not with European xenophobia, which after 1848 was increasingly associated with nationalism and the poetry of nationalism. Whitman's conception of America is in pointed contrast to Europe: he celebrates America, its liberty, democracy, tolerance and variety – and abhors slavery and political corruption. Whitman's ideal America is free and tolerant, open to new ideas and infinite possibilities, improvising, exuberant, optimistic, a force of unity and regeneration - for itself and for the entire world:

¹⁴ Though evidently based on a fictive genocide, *The Mountain Wreath* – a fixture of the Serbian school curriculum and 'the archetypal example of what to ban from the classroom' (Kaufman 2001: 216) – contributed to the violent hatred leading to the genocide of the Bosnian Muslims in 1992–95.

Not unlike Jefferson after the erosion of French revolutionary ideals under the Napoleonic dictatorship, Whitman felt America after 1848 to be the only country left to guard democracy and liberty, the last chance of a new start for humanity. Though this was an idealized view, there is no doubt that as the European monarchies hardened against democratic liberalism, American democracy, though imperfect, seemed all the more precious and vulnerable. The European retreat from liberalism after 1848 put the burden on America to unify its divided house as civil war threatened, then came, in the most destructive conflict between the Napoleonic wars and World War I.

Whitman's conception of America as a 'Nation of nations' - a conglomerate of peoples from all over the earth - recalls the prophetic self-image of biblical Israel: once the spiritual ideal is realized, all national and racial divisions will fall away as spiritual internationalism makes political nationalism obsolete. But, like biblical Israel, Whitman's America was an ideal, not the reality.

Whitman and the American ideal

After 1848, as the crisis over slavery deepened, Whitman retreated increasingly to a vision of an ideal, transcendent, timeless, even mystical America, far removed from the conception of the Nation among European national poets. To be American, writes Whitman, is to be oneself, to be an individual, to know oneself, to be free. Whitman adapts Jefferson's belief in individuals, not institutions, as the basis of democracy. Men are 'a law unto themselves'. Democracy could not be achieved through social organizations - political parties, trade unions, churches, etc. - only by individuals. The Self is above all things: '...nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is' (*Song of Myself* 48). Whitman repeats the word 'individuals' over and over, in an emphasis without parallel among European poets - even the Romantics, who stressed the primacy of the Self:

It is not the earth, it is not America who is so great,
It is I who am great or to be great, it is You up there, or any one,
It is to walk rapidly through civilizations, governments, theories,
Through poems, pageants, shows, to form individuals.

Underneath all, individuals,
I swear nothing is good to me now that ignores individuals,
The American compact is altogether with individuals,
The only government is that which makes minute of individuals,
The whole theory of the universe is directed unerringly to one single
individual – namely to You.

(By *Blue Ontario's Shore* 15)

In his post-1848 poetry, Whitman became a kind of secessionist revolting against the confines of grief-stricken family and traumatized Nation for the freedom of the Self. He launches his persona across continents to distant lands. He reaches into outer space and the Universe, back in time or into the future. He enters the mystical realm. He burrows frantically into himself, his past, and into Sex or Death. He voyages away from trouble and limitation, not just of the oppressive Self but also of the Nation - the 'lair of slaves', the 'democratic slaughter-house' - shrinking the wounds of Self and Nation *sub specie aeternitatis*, retreating from the suffering world to return to it with new insight and new health, speaking the voice of 'Nature without check with original energy' (*Song of Myself* 1), aiming to 'add, fuse, complete, extend – and celebrate the immortal and the good' ('L. of G.'s Purport'). The reader opens *Leaves of Grass* to find 'this is no book,/ Who touches this touches a man' ('So Long!').

As for the question whether Whitman was more deeply affected by politics or by personal relationships, poems such as 'Once I Passed through a Populous City' suggest that politics are secondary. In the published poem, the object of the poet's affection is a woman, in the notebooks a man. Here is the text from the notebooks:

Once I passed through a populous city imprinting on my brain for future use,
its shows, architecture, customs, and traditions,
But now of all that city I remember only the man who wandered with me there,
for love of me,
Day by day, and night by night, we were together.

All else has long been forgotten by me - I remember, I say, only one
rude and ignorant man who, when I departed, long and long held me
by the hand, with silent lip, sad and tremulous.
(Whitman 1922, ii 102)

The city is thought to be New Orleans in 1848 but, if so, the poem is dominated not by revolutionary American and European politics which then filled Whitman's daily life as a newspaperman but by the poet's far-reaching emotional revolution: 'All else has long been forgotten by me.'

As Whitman grew as a poet in the 1850s, the differences widened between him and European poets. Whitman moves from being a type of violent national poet in the poem 'Europe' to being a poet of mystical calm and acceptance of all as equals. In *Song of Myself* (24), for example:

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.
Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have
their counterpart of on the same terms.

And in the poem, *Salut Au Monde!*

Each of us inevitable,
Each of us limitless – each of us with his or her right upon the earth,
Each of us allow'd the eternal purports of the earth,
Each of us here as divinely as any is here.

America, dynamic, growing, prospering, increasingly diverse, impressed the idealistic Whitman as a source of good. No longer the angry newspaperman raging at Europe and American politics, Whitman the poet speaks with the voices of a nation built out of virtually all other nations, in harmony and versatility. In his expansive free verse, the Nation is a revolutionary creative act, beautiful in its simplicity, original in its diversity and capacity for growth, mature in its achievement. We are reminded here of Renan's belief that national identity is formed by forgetting and historical error.

Whitman and the revolt against Europe

What caused Whitman to abandon the xenophobia of his age and, instead, define American national identity as inclusive of many foreign immigrants, with their diverse cultures? Whitman's Quaker background inculcated tolerance and belief in the 'inner light' which joins human beings, including slaves, to God. Living in New York, Whitman saw the violent results of national differences and religious hatred. Yet, the entire history of America can be seen as a process of separation from European maladies: religious intolerance, rigid social stratification, class conflict, inequality, oppression, religious conflict, nationalism. Certainly, Whitman did not want America to go the way of Europe after the failure of the revolutions of 1848.

But might there also have been psychological factors involving Whitman's family, his sexuality, and experiences of trauma and loss? Here too, there was a break with Europe. Part of the allure of inclusiveness such as Whitman's is its sexual tolerance and acceptance of death. No 19th century European poet, not even Baudelaire in *Fleurs du Mal*, is as frank about sex as Whitman in *Children of Adam*. Whitman is un-Victorian in removing the taint of sin from sex, declaring a democracy of sexual variety:

Have you ever loved the body of a woman?
Have you ever loved the body of a man?

Do you not see that these are exactly the same to all in all nations
and times all over the earth?
(‘I Sing the Body Electric’ 8)

Much 19th century European poetry on death stresses the blackness of grief; in Whitman, death is part of life. Whitman wrote the early poems of *Leaves of Grass* while nursing his dying father in Brooklyn. In a suggestively Oedipal analogy, which Whitman first states in the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, the son (America) inherits all from his dead father (Europe, the ‘Old World’):

[America] perceives the corpse slowly borne from the house,
Perceives that it waits a little while in the door, that it was fittest for its days,
That its life has descended to the stalwart and well-shaped heir who approaches...

Whitman’s image of America is the image of Whitman as he wanted himself to be: an heir come into his inheritance, open, loud and confident, resourceful and generous, comfortable with himself, speaking with quietly revolutionary egotism and egalitarianism the language of liberty and democracy:

Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son,
Turbulent, fleshy, sensual, eating, drinking and breeding,
No sentimentalist, no stander above men and women
or apart from them,
No more modest than immodest.

Unscrew the locks from the doors!
Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs!

Whoever degrades another degrades me,
And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.
Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have
their counterpart of on the same terms.

(Song of Myself 24)

It may be that as a grieving son, Whitman was drawn to a quest for inner harmony and union - 'cosmic consciousness', his friend Richard Bucke called it;¹⁵ and his vision of union was compatible with political Union, the healing of divisions, with the idea of the United States.

Whitman: biographical self and national poet

In *Song of Myself*, Whitman seems to know exactly who he is. Yet, at moments the agonizing question emerges, for him as for America, with its rapidly changing identity: who is this Self of whom I sing? There is literal truth in Whitman's declaration that even by the end of *Song of Myself*, the reader 'will hardly know who I am or what I mean': 'these leaves and me you will not understand', he admits in 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand'. Who is the Me of *Leaves of Grass*, and how did this Me become a revolutionary national poet after 1848-49? At moments, Whitman seems less a confident poet of national unity than a bundle of contradictions. Not unlike America itself, Whitman is 'torn between democracy and history, between what he appears to be and what he is' - he struggles with deep-rooted American problems,

¹⁵ On possible links between mysticism and grief, see Aberbach (1989).

‘how to reconcile the desire for personal liberty with the demands of social union [...] the republican ideals of the past and the dislocations of a modern market economy’ (Erkkilä 1989: 165, 254, 256).¹⁶ Whitman’s Me is admittedly not always under control: ‘You villain touch! what are you doing? my breath is tight in its throat,/ Unclench your floodgates, you are too much for me’ (*Song of Myself* 28). The poet, striving for American purity, seems plagued by European impurity: he is the ‘poet of wickedness’ (*ibid.*, 22). It is strange that so tormented and self-absorbed a poet as that of ‘As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life’ could become a public spokesman for a new optimistic, forward-looking America, enemy of the Europe that had betrayed liberal hopes:

¹⁶ Whitman’s older contemporary, the poet and scholar Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, shared a concern with the Union, drawing on Lönnrot’s *Kalevala* in creating a unifying American mythology, but failed to communicate Whitman’s complexity and contradictions:

Sail on, O Ship of State!
Sail on, O Union, strong and great!
Humanity with all its fears,
With all the hopes of future years,
Is hanging breathless on thy fate!
“The Building of the Ship” (1849)

All your strength is in your union.
All your danger is in discord;
Therefore be at peace henceforward,
And as brothers live together.
The Song of Hiawatha (1855), pt. 1

Longfellow’s shallowness when compared with Whitman perhaps accounts partly for the fact that although in the 19th century Longfellow was regarded far more than Whitman as an American national poet, his reputation has not stood well the test of time. Still, Whitman’s nationalism degenerates shrilly at times into ‘a program of democratic cant’ (Erkkilä 1989: 160).

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me
I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet
untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd,
Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows.

The 'real Me' at the time of the completion of the first *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 was evidently not the confident heir, or that alone, but the son broken by grief, hearing in the murmuring of the sea at Paumanok whispers of his own mortality, the washed-up wrecks, the envy of death, the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, out of which his poems were to come:¹⁷

I throw myself upon your breast my father,
I cling to you so that you cannot unloose me,
I hold you so firm till you answer me something.

Kiss me my father,
Touch me with your lips as I touch those I love,
Breathe to me while I hold you close the secret of the murmuring
I envy.

Anti-politics in Leaves of Grass

Such confessions of lack of confidence in the Self are rare in Whitman's poetry, and similarly rare are expressions of lack of confidence in the United States. Yet, in comparison with Europe after 1848, doubt in America's future was in many ways justified. Was America really better than Europe? The relaxed tone of *Leaves of Grass* belies the fact that the 'United States' were headed for civil war. American

¹⁷ On loss as a motivating force in creativity, see Aberbach (1989). An untold influence on Whitman's poems of death was Tennyson.

democracy seemed an experiment in danger of failing as the States were torn apart by the controversy over slavery.¹⁸ American leadership, including the three presidents prior to Lincoln, was dwarfed by the crisis it faced. Whitman wrote the early poems of *Leaves of Grass* in despair at American political corruption. In a vicious attack on American political ineptitude and self-seeking, 'The Eighteenth Presidency!', written in 1856 but not published in his lifetime, Whitman compared politicians to lice, maggots, venereal sores.

Whitman's attack on the European 'lair of slaves' seemed to apply more to America than to Europe. Was America really better than Europe? England had ended the slave-trade in 1807 and banned slavery in its empire in 1833. Whitman's attack on 'the lair of slaves' in 'Europe' seemed to apply more to America than to Europe. Was America threatened by civil war better than Europe - a 'democratic slaughter-house'? Could Whitman state that slavery had no place in America, as Cowper could of England in the late 18th century: 'Slaves cannot breathe in England' ('The Task')? America, whose southern states were largely dependent on agriculture and slavery, lagged behind, a hypocrite since 1776 to its democratic principles.¹⁹ Jefferson tried to end slavery in the Declaration of Independence, but Congress would not agree, and Jefferson himself owned many slaves. American legislation to deal with slavery as the Union grew - notably the Missouri Compromise (1820-21), the Wilmot Proviso (1846) and the Kansas-Nebraska Bill (1854) followed by the Dred Scott case (1857) -

¹⁸ After the Civil War, too, Whitman was highly critical of America (Morris 2000: 238ff.) and, in *Democratic Vistas*, expressed awareness of the fragility of democracy and its potential failure.

¹⁹ Many of the English leaders of the anti-slavery movement were Quakers; and Whitman's Quaker roots are evident in his opposition to slavery.

exacerbated conflict.²⁰ The European failure in 1848-49 roused painful questions about the American ideals of liberty and justice for all, including Black slaves: could these be realized without civil war? As a newspaper editor, Whitman was thoroughly familiar and disgusted with American politics.²¹ In response to the Dred Scott decision, Whitman played the devil's advocate, contrasting Europe favorably with America, for Europe, unlike America, had killed slavery: 'Does the whelp [slavery] fall howling and dead under the blows of an English judge and have his full swing, with meat and drink to boot, from the caressing hand of an American judge?' (quoted by Erkkila 1989: 148).

Whitman and the Civil War

Had Whitman's idealistic picture of a tolerant, dynamic America in *Leaves of Grass* been a reality, the Civil War would have been unlikely. In the war, Whitman committed himself to the Union not just as a poet but also as a participant, in hospitals. The war gave him a role and an identity, and a direction for his poetry. Whitman regarded himself as 'saved' by the war. In the early months of the war, while still in New York, he expressed conventional war fever, reminiscent of 'Europe', in poems such as 'Beat! Beat! Drums!' and 'Song of the Banner at Daybreak':

I hear the tramp of armies, I hear the challenging sentry,
I hear the jubilant shouts of millions of men, I hear Liberty!

²⁰ Other threats to America's future are, similarly, not apparent in *Leaves of Grass*. America in the 1850s was in an economic crisis and gripped by one of its periodic bursts of religious mania and xenophobia, especially towards Catholics. The anti-Catholic and anti-German 'Know-Nothings' reached the height of their influence as *Leaves of Grass* came off the press in 1855, and even Whitman shared some of their prejudices, though he did not put them in his poetry (Reynolds 1996: 87).

²¹ Whitman's support for 'Free Soil' – the belief that territories acquired by the United States in its war with Mexico (1846-47) should be free of slavery – cost him his job as editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, the leading newspaper in Brooklyn at the time, whose owner, Isaac Van Anden, sympathized with the slaveowners of the South (Zweig 1984: 27-8).

After Whitman volunteered as a nurse in war hospitals, such exhilaration vanished. Again, in his role as nurse, Whitman was like practically no other national poet, several of whom - including Byron, Petőfi, Mameli, Marti, and Pearse - became fighters and died as martyrs. Whitman is unique in aiming to heal, not kill or be killed, for the national cause. When Whitman nursed sick and dying soldiers, he made no distinction between men of the South and of the North, or Black and White. He made the tolerant inclusiveness of his poetry a living reality.

Unlike most 19th century poetry, Whitman's war poems express the horror, not the glory of war. These poems are, at times, brutally realistic, with nauseating imagery of bloody rags, piles of amputated limbs, stumps, terrified faces, foreshadowing World War I poets such as Owen and Sassoon: 'is there no hell more damned than this hell of war'? No longer does Whitman try to differentiate between America and the European 'slaughter-house'. Bloody though the revolutions of 1848-49 were, the Civil War was a far worse butchery. Whitman's Civil War poems are nationalistic - but not in war-fever, as in his earlier poetry, but in grief and compassion:

Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war,
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop't and I resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead...
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied and fill'd again.
(*'The Wound-Dresser'* 1, 2)

Whitman: national poet and poet of the Self

Whitman bridges the liberal optimism of the pre-1848 era and the ensuing disillusionment: at first a chauvinist like other 19th century national poets, Whitman in his Civil War poetry foreshadows the anti-war national poetry of World War I. In the years 1848 to 1865, when Whitman emerged as a national poet, his contradictions could mirror those of the Nation, his despair and hope merge with those of the Nation.

In his poetry, as in life, Whitman saw himself as a father-healer. In much the same way that he took over his father's role, he saw America taking over from Europe the chief responsibility for the survival of liberal democracy. Rather than be the secretive, gloomy son of a decaying, self-destructive family, Whitman chose to identify himself with a healthy, forward-looking, dynamic America. Whitman's new identity was that of America, the young 'truculent giant', powerful, confident, creative, welcoming the new, heir to the European liberal tradition, a 'corpse' after the failed revolutions of 1848. Whitman, through his inner conflicts, his raving questions and uncertainties about his true Self, spoke for the uncertainties of American national identity after 1848. The poet's cosmic-confessional individuality and embrace of diversity came to embody the democratic Nation's strength in diversity - and the power of the free individual. The Civil War gave Whitman a role as healer, but the war also helped Whitman to heal himself. As the Nation could not be destroyed by Civil War, so also the poet could not be obliterated by inner conflict; and as the Nation transformed the poet, the poet transformed the Nation.

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