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In the 1855 edition of "Song of Myself" Walt Whitman achieved a distinctively American expression and created at the same time a highly individualistic poem through his combination of three elements --an American vocabulary which included slang, a colloquial style which reflected the idioms and rhythms of common speech, and the oratorical impulse prevalent in nineteenth century America.

His prose statements reveal that Whitman was a leading voice in a national literary movement for an independent American literature not based upon English models. In the 1855 "Song of Myself" his vocabulary reflects the basic ways that American speech diverged from the English, in addition to reflecting his unique poetic style. The colloquial style, also linked to his desire for an independent American literature, comprises not only the colloquial word or phrase but definable stylistic features. Whitman's oratorical style was prompted by his early exposure to oratory and by his desire to speak directly to an audience. His own notes plus the oratorical features of "Song of Myself" are signs that even if he did not intend to deliver the poem he wrote much of it from an orator's stance.

Whitman's American vocabulary and both the colloquial and oratorical styles are unified by a common impulse--that of speaking to Americans with an American voice.

THE AMERICAN VOCABULARY, THE COLLOQUIAL STYLE, AND THE ORATORICAL MODE: INFLUENCES ON WHITMAN'S 1855 "SONG OF MYSELF"

by

Lucie G. Taylor

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Robert D. Stephens
Thesis Adviser

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This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser Robert D. Stephens

Committee Members Donald G. Darnell

Charles E. Davis

July 16, 1975

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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CHAPTER I

WHITMAN AND THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE

In 1867, William Michael Rossetti wrote of Walt Whitman, "He brings a glowing mind into contact with his own time and people; and the flame from which it catches fire is Americanism."[1] Whitman, like the later poet Stephen Vincent Benet, was "in love with American names,"[2] and when he exclaimed that Monongahela "rolls with venison richness upon the palate,"[3] he voiced also his strong interest in the power of the spoken word. Whitman wanted to speak with a uniquely American voice--to utter the names that evoked the vastness and beauty of America, to talk with the language of the American workingman, and at the same time, to use his poetic vision to guide Americans toward fresh recognition of their innate human and spiritual dignity. These forces determined the style of the 1855 "Song of Myself." Here Whitman achieved a distinctively American expression and created at the same time a highly individualistic poem through his combination of three

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[1]William Michael Rossetti, "Walt Whitman's Poems," The Chronicle, (London: July 6, 1867), in The Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), p. 982.

[2]Stephen Vincent Benet, "American Names," 1931; rpt. The American Tradition in Literature, II, rev. ed., ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), p. 1026.

[3]Walt Whitman, "An American Primer," 1904, in Untermeyer, p. 582. All references to Whitman's poetry and prose after 1855 are from this edition.

elements--an American vocabulary which included slang, a colloquial style which reflected the idioms and rhythms of common speech, and the oratorical impulse so prevalent in nineteenth century America.

While the final edition of "Song of Myself" retains these qualities to some extent (the oratorical quality does not suffer) Whitman's deletion of many slang words and phrases and his tightening of the loose colloquial structure of many passages represent a change in tone from the sense of vigorous and impromptu conversation which characterizes the first version. If his revisions represent a movement toward greater control and poetic compression, they also alter the quality of spontaneity which makes the 1855 edition more faithful to his theories that American poetry should embrace the spoken language of the common man. Even if some of his lines from the earlier edition are somewhat brash, perhaps almost frivolously self-assertive ("Washes and razors for foofoos. . . . for me freckles and a bristling beard"), they often transmit an unapologetic confidence and humor that Whitman admired in American common speech. It is fitting to his democratic stance that he gave equal importance to different types of expression, whether elevated, coarse, tender, or boisterous.

Whitman's impulse toward a spoken poem and his desire to achieve a distinct American language, not necessarily dual forces, but fused in his conception of "Song of Myself," were compatible for several reasons. The "American rude tongue"[4] that Whitman wanted to incorporate into

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[4]Walt Whitman, Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, August, 1856, in Untermeyer, p. 521.

poetry was based upon speech rather than upon writing. Whitman believed that the speech of workingmen often possessed a rough casual grace and a metaphorical accurateness of description which made it a more appropriate vehicle for American poetry than conventional poetic diction. When he spoke with this voice, Whitman addressed an intended common, rather than genteel, audience and was simultaneously breaking new ground in poetry. Furthermore, one of the features of the colloquial style is its tendency to focus attention on the individual word as an isolated unit; in "Song of Myself" this unit is often charged with symbolic meaning. The oratorical mode, more formal than the colloquial, yet sharing with it the qualities of speech, was suited to his mission as American seer, the common man elevated by a greater vision, who would summon Americans to fulfill their highest potential. And finally, the parallelisms and repetitions so familiar to the orator give the poem its cumulative structure, appropriate to the democratic inclusiveness of Whitman's vision, allowing him to reiterate and balance themes and to spin out his American catalogues and scenes.

Although Whitman evolved a new poetic form in combining the elements of "Song of Myself," his theories on the American language were part of a general interest in American English which flowered in the nineteenth century. A brief overview of the issue, including an examination of some of Whitman's prose statements, is pertinent to a consideration of his position as an American poet.

Obviously the emergence of an English language with distinctly American features was an inevitable result of the migration of Englishmen

to America. The differences in the British and American habits of speech were prompted by the distance between the two countries and were natural reflections of different experiences. American divergence from British English began before the Revolution, yet it was not until the last part of the eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth that the dispute between Englishmen and Americans over their tongue began. The dispute was marked by nationalism on both sides and by the inherent differences between aristocratic and democratic societies. English critics often seemed to view the American speech as a barbarous soiling of the purity of the language. American writers usually reacted in one of two ways. They either submitted to the English view, imitating its literary style, or they reacted with a nationalistic stubbornness which demanded their linguistic as well as political independence from England.

In The American Language, H. L. Mencken cites publications which reflect the consciousness of a national language. There were numerous attempts to classify American modifications of English, such as John Pickering's pioneer work, A Vocabulary or Collection of Words and Phrases Which Have Been Supposed to be Peculiar to the United States (1816), or Schele de Vere's later work, Americanisms: The English of the New World (1871). Theories on the nature of American English were advanced, for example, those of Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America (1835), where the Frenchman noted that Americans tended to modify without hesitation the meanings of English words and that the masses

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determined the laws of the language. Noah Webster's Spelling Book (1782), his Dissertations on the English Language (1789), and his American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) had as their common goal the establishment of a national language. And finally there began the emergence of a literature whose diction reflected the speech of the American common man. This diction first surfaced in the works of the American humorists, such as Seba Smith's The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing (1830) and James Russell Lowell's "The Bigelow Papers" (1848), both using New England dialects. A. B. Longstreet's Georgia Scenes (1835) and Joseph G. Baldwin's Flush Times in Alabama and Mississippi (1853) introduced frontier dialects. Whitman, however, was the first American writer to fuse a distinctly American voice with serious poetry.

Even in his prose alone, Whitman does his share to promote the American language as a distinct form, building on, yet divergent from, the English. His statements concerning the American language have in common his strong desire for an independent American literature, a desire motivated not only by his patriotism, but by his belief in the power of words to evoke the things or experiences they represent in the mind of the reader or hearer. It was his belief in the close link of word with thing that made Whitman reject as false any American writing based on English models. If distinct American words existed to describe the

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[5]Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 1835, trans. George Lawrence, ed. J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner; (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 446.

American experience, Whitman thought they should be used, and because most of the American experience revolved around the common man, Whitman believed that American poetry should reflect the freshness of the common man's colloquialisms and slang.

Whitman asserts the American poet's independence in the 1855 Preface by stating that the poet must incorporate the geography of his country and by going on to prove it with a characteristic outpouring of American names:

> Mississippi with annual freshets and changing chutes, Missouri and Columbia and Ohio and Saint Lawrence with the falls and beautiful masculine Hudson, do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than embouchure into him [the poet]. The blue breadth over the inland sea of Virginia and Maryland and the sea off Massachusetts and Maine and over Manhattan bay and over Champlain and Erie and over Ontario and Huron and Michigan and Superior, and over the Texan and the Mexican and Floridian and Cuban seas and over the seas off California and Oregon, is not tallied by the blue breadth of the waters below more than the breadth of above and below is tallied by him.

The American poet spans the land between the seas: "On him rise solid growths that offset the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and liveoak and locust and chestnut and cypress and hickory and limetree and cottonwood and tuliptree and cactus and wildvine and tamarind and persimon . . . and tangles as tangled as any canebrake or swamp. . . ."

His "flights and songs and screams" will "answer those of the wild-pigeon and highhold and orchard-oriole and coot and surf-duck and red-shouldered-hawk and fish-hawk and white-ibis and indian-hen and cat-owl and water-pheasant and qua-bird and pied-sheldrake and blackbird and mocking bird and buzzard and condor and night-heron and eagle."

The "essences of the real things" enter him: "the perpetual coming of immigrants--the wharfhem'd cities and superior marine--the

unsurveyed interior--the loghouses and clearings and wild animals and hunters and trappers . . . the free commerce--the fisheries and whaling and gold-digging. . . ."

The chant winds on to include "the noble character of the young mechanics and of all free American workmen and workwomen."[6] Since he believed that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (p. 5), simply listing these American words was for Whitman a poetic gesture. He goes on to argue for a simplicity of style that makes the poet the channel of the world around him. He will not be "meddlesome" or let "elegance or effect or originality" hang in the way of his message (p. 13). The poet shall flood himself with the immediate age (p. 21), which for Whitman means including its spoken vocabulary. He describes the English language as befriending the American expression; its valuable attributes are that it is "brawny enough and limber and full enough" to do so: "it is the dialect of common sense." He says that the poems "distilled from other poems will probably pass away" (pp. 22-23). All of these statements are attuned to the concept of an American expression which refuses to imitate previous literary convention.

Two other important prose statements, "An American Primer" and "Slang in America," praise the American vernacular and hail it as a fit medium for American literary expression. Although the "Primer" was never refined to its final form as a lecture, clear statements of Whitman's views on the American language emerge. First, Whitman

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[6]Walt Whitman, Preface to Leaves of Grass, 1855, (rpt., ed. Malcolm Cowley, New York: The Viking Press, 1959), pp. 7-8. All citations from the 1855 Preface and "Song of Myself" are from this book.

perceives a dichotomy between the literary language of America and the spoken language of the majority of the people--not an especially original observation of a rather universal dichotomy but marked by his impatience with America's lengthy subservience to the rules of English literature. He says, "I see that the time is nigh when the etiquette of saloons is to be discharged from that great thing, the renovated English speech."[7] He contrasts the "Real Dictionary" and "Real Grammar" with the language in books. The Real Dictionary and Grammar contain all forms of words and expressions which exist in use, and if necessary they break any pre-established laws of language (pp. 571-72). Even a partial list of the elements of American speech Whitman praises includes numerous varieties of slang words and expressions, trade terms, political jargon, tavern words, industrial terminology, words of the farmer and sailor. And he mentions many varieties of proper names, including Indian names, such as Monongahela, Mississippi, and Ohio. These words and names, he says, express America. Whitman is hostile to imported names that he believes have nothing to do with America. He would replace the Spanish names in California, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona--names which have the air of the monk, cloister, and miracles--with Indian names or names to reflect the "roughness, money-making, and hunt for gold" which actually characterize the land (p. 585). Whitman's nationalism becomes a bit extreme here, blinding him to the quality of those very names to represent one part of America's experience.

7"An American Primer," in Untermeyer, p. 570.

But his misdirection is forgivable since it is obvious that his intention was to emphasize the uniquely American aspects of the language. He believes that America will be commemorated in names "and shall stand rooted in the ground in names" (p. 584). His praise of the words that embody America ends with his assertion that American writers are to embody the spirit of America by using its spoken language: "American writers are to show far more freedom in the use of words. Ten thousand native idiomatic words are growing, or are today already grown, out of which vast numbers could be used by American writers with meaning and effect--words that would be welcomed by the nation, being of the national blood--words that would give that taste of identity and locality which is so dear in literature (p. 585)."[8]

Whitman had written most of the "Primer" in the mid-fifties. "Slang in America," printed in November of 1885, shows that he continued to be interested in the subject of the American language. This later essay presents a more detailed description of his views of slang as one of the most dynamic and molding forces of language. He equates slang with "indirection, an attempt of common humanity to escape bald literalism."[9] Slang "is the lawless germinal element below all words and sentences, and behind all poetry," and since language arises out of human experience, it "has its bases broad and low, close to the

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[8]Horace Traubel, Preface to "An American Primer," p. 568.

[9]Walt Whitman, "Slang in America," 1885, rpt. in Untermeyer, p. 563.

ground." The masses determine the final trends and directions of language because they are the most closely involved with the concrete (pp. 562-63). Whitman's view of the originators of slang takes a characteristically democratic turn when he says: "The propensity to approach a meaning not directly and squarely, but by circuitous styles of expression seems indeed a born quality of common people everywhere, evidenced by nick-names and the inveterate determination of the masses to bestow subtitles" (p. 564). He cites as proof of the popular penchant for slang the nicknames of states (citizens from Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Wisconsin were called Gunflints, Corn Crackers, and Badgers, respectively), the outlandish but appropriate names of towns (Shirttail Bend, Loafer's Ravine, and Toenail), and newspapers (The Tombstone Epitaph, The Jimplecute of Texas) (p. 564-65). His fascination for names is one of the most marked features of his language curiosity.

In his study of Whitman's unpublished manuscript material, provided by Charles Feinburg of Detroit, C. Carroll Hollis finds more material intended by Whitman for a lecture. Hollis organizes these notes into a coherent arrangement and proposes that the lecture be called "The American Idiom." In these notes written shortly before or after the 1855 edition of Leaves of Grass, Whitman praises the English language as America's most precious legacy from the past, but adds: "Then what improvement have we to make upon it? Very Great ones. It has to be acclimated here, and adapted to us and our future--many new words are to be formed--many of the old ones conformed to our uses."[10]

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[10] C. Carroll Hollis, "Whitman and the American Idiom," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 43 (1957) 419.

Since the real grammar is determined by the speech of the masses, he says that it "has plenty of room for eccentricities and what are supposed to be gaucheries and violations" and that "the life-spirit of the American States must be engrafted upon their inherited language" (p. 420). Whitman's comments that America will modify English words to fit its purposes and his belief that language is determined by the speech of the majority of the people sound distinctly like those of Tocqueville. Yet their point of view is different. While the Frenchman fears that language will be made impure and ambiguous by giving "unwonted meaning to an expression already in use,"[11] Whitman believes that the adaptability of English is one of its great merits.

Whitman goes on to criticize the literary expression of England as no "fresh and hardy growth" reflecting the "sanity and beauty of nature" but an expression which "has been scented from outside and duly becomes stale." Although literary critics may be sometimes justified in complaining that Whitman's verse is often not distinctly American, hardly any reader would deny that Whitman's descriptions of nature are sane and beautiful ("Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue (21, 1.42), "You my rich blood, your milky stream pale strippings of my life" (24,1533), to give them only small praise. Whitman ends by saying that American writers are to improve the expression of the English language: "I would like to know who can

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[11] Tocqueville, p. 448.

examine these type-productions of foreign literati imported here, not from Great Britain only, but from anywhere, without feeling that the best, the whole, that has in them been done, ought to be far better done--ought to be superseded here in America by newer greater men" (p. 420).

Whitman was not alone in calling for a poetry to embody the American present. Emerson had made such a call earlier in "The Poet," written in 1843-1844: "I look in vain for the poet whom I describe. We do not with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness address ourselves to life, nor dare we chaunt our own times and social circumstances." He continues: "We have had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials. . . ." And he goes on to say: "Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres."[12] It is not surprising that in this essay Emerson also says that "bare lists of words are found suggestible to an imaginative and excited mind" (p. 17). Emerson's American list seems to be a prelude to Whitman's longer and more ambitious lists, such as the ones in the Preface and the many which Whitman includes in "Song of Myself." Yet neither Whitman's

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[12]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson. III, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. (1843-44; rpt. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917) p. 37-38.

philosophy nor his style is merely an echoe of Emerson's; Whitman felt his convictions as deeply and transformed them into poetry more powerfully and more consistently than Emerson did. Both poets realized that the poetry of America had to break away from the conventional literary forms in order to realize its new expression. In doing so, they were part of a national literary movement which valued a return to the language of the common man rather than a continued emulation of the polite usage of literary language. Yet F. O. Mattheissen concludes that "this doctrine was destined in many quarters to provide only another set of literary artifices." Longfellow's "Hiawatha" and "The Wreck of the Hesperus" and Whittier's "Skipper Ireson's Ride," he says, attempted to capture primitive energy, but failed, Longfellow's language tending "to remain gracefully decorous."[13] The attempts of other writers to express common speech were more successful, for instance, the yankee dialect of Lowell's Hosea Bigelow. And Sylvester Judd's Margaret (1845) achieved in Mattiessen's words "authentic twists of folk speech by recounting the customs of 'A Husking Bee' or of "A Night at the Still'" (p. 37). Lowell had said that "poets and peasants please us in the same way by translating words back again to their primal freshness."[14] Matthiessen continues by saying

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[13]F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 34.

[14]James Russell Lowell, quoted in Matthiessen, p. 37.

that these various attempts in America to capture the freshness of the word were all being made in response to Emerson's proposal in "Nature" that "words are signs of natural facts."[15] What Whitman and Emerson were calling for, however, was not simply an imitation of Yankee dialect such as Lowell achieved in the "Bigelow Papers." They were concerned with serious poetry and with the possibilities of the right word as a more direct union between object and thing--the ability of some words almost to evoke the object itself.

This is the source of Whitman's insistence on the right name and of his love of Indian names. In "Starting from Paumanok" which appeared in 1860 as an announcement of his poetic program in Leaves of Grass, Whitman uses Paumanok rather than Long Island for the place where he was born. He converts Manhattan to Mannahatta, also the Indian form. As he symbolically sweeps through America, the names he chants are the native American names: Dakota, Missouri, Niagara--the list winds on and on. The section of the poem most dense with names celebrates the past of the Indians and the heritage they have left America in names:

> And for the past I pronounce what the air holds of the
> red aborigines.
>
> The red aborigines,
> Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds,
> calls as of birds and animals in the woods,
> syllabled to us for names,
> Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natches,
> Chattahoochee, Kaqueta, Oronoco,
> Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla,
> Leaving such to the States they melt, they depart,
> charging the water and the land with names. (Sec. 16)

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[15] Emerson, "Nature," The Complete Works, I. (1836; rpt. 1917) p. 25.

In "Poetry and the Imagination," Emerson had said

> The metallic force of primitive words makes the superiority of the remains of the rude ages. It costs the early bard little talent to chant more impressively than the later, more cultivated poets. His advantage is that his words are things, each the lucky sound which describes the fact, and we listen to him as we do to the Indian, or the hunter, or miner, each of whom represents his facts as accurately as the cry of the wolf or the eagle tells of the forest or the air they inhabit.[16]

In the "Primer," Whitman had emphasized that the sound and meaning of Indian names fit each other: "They give the true length, breadth, depth. They all fit. Mississippi!--the word winds with chutes--it rolls a stream three thousand miles long" (p. 582). Obviously, Mattheissen's summation of Emerson's theory of language applies equally to Whitman: "to name a thing exactly was somehow magically to evoke it, as it had been for the primitive conjurer" (p. 32).

The next best thing to the "aboriginal names" was for Whitman the language of the masses, especially slang with its "bases broad and low, close to the ground." What Whitman called the "indirection" of slang was actually his idea of a more direct link of word with thing, but what seems to be a paradox in terminology is actually a statement of the poetic value of metaphor. In believing that slang is a truer approximation of reality than "bald literalism" and in saying that it is "the lawless germinal element below all words and sentences and behind all poetry," Whitman was once more getting at Emerson's

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[16]Emerson, "Poetry and the Imagination," The Complete Works. VIII. (1875; rpt. 1917) p. 57.

theory that words are signs of natural facts. Whitman's explanation in "Slang in America" uses some of the same examples that Emerson uses in "Nature." Whitman explains: "Thus right means literally only straight. Wrong primarily meant twisted, distorted. Integrity meant oneness. Spirit meant breath, or flame. . . ." (p. 563). The same principle underlies the capacity of nicknames to get closer to the truth of the thing by their metaphorical quality. It also explains Whitman's delight in "Slang in America" in the name the streetcar conductors call themselves, "snatchers," or in the answer of one carpenter to another when asked "What did you do before you was a snatcher?" Answer: "Nail'd" (p. 563). Or, addressing the earth in "Song of Myself," Whitman says, "Earth! You seem to look for something at my hands,/Say, old topknot! what do you want?" (40,1.987).

The last line is one of many which show Whitman's realization of his prose statements calling for the incorporation into poetry of the common speech and slang of America. Such a line shows no subservience to the "type productions of foreign literati"; instead, it seems to mock centuries of conventional poetic apostrophe. And the metaphorical fitness of the nickname "old topknot" describes the natural fact much more closely than "earth" does. Embedded in this line are many of Whitman's views calling for a new American poetry.

CHAPTER II

WHITMAN'S VOCABULARY: REFLECTION OF AMERICAN USAGE

One would expect Whitman's poetry to reflect basic trends in American English since his language theories are concerned with the role of the American poet in using American words. Although "Song of Myself" is not merely a duplication of the language Whitman heard on the streets of Manhattan, much of its vocabulary is distinctly American and can be classified according to general patterns of American modifications of English. In The American Language, Mencken discusses various attempts to classify these patterns. The most general division shows four broad groups: first, obsolete English words still used in America; second, words introduced from other languages; third, English words given new meanings in America; and fourth, words coined in America representing new ideas, experiences, products, or natural features.[1] The last two categories often seem to blend, especially when they take the form of compound words. Words of Indian origin, however, seem to deserve a distinct category, apart from other foreign words, since these words were for the most part peculiar to the American continent. Much of Whitman's vocabulary falls into these five categories.

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[1]Sylva Clapin, A New Dictionary of Americanisms, 1902, in H. L. Mencken, The American Language, 4th rev. ed., (1936; rpt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965) p. 100.

The poet who wrote the 1855 Leaves of Grass was extremely receptive to the creative growth of the language of the new continent. Yet Whitman did not choose words simply because they were peculiarly American. He was a discriminating selecter of words. Especially in his early work, he combines a delicate taste for the right word with a willingness to innovate, using language boldly and possessing a disdain for most previous literary conventions--qualities that gave his work the sense of being both representative of the American use of language and unique in poetry. Whitman's choice of words from the five categories of American modification of English is an important step in the direction toward the colloquial poetic style, revealing a uniquely American readiness to break from the musicality and decorum of conventional literary language and to choose words which catch the effect of sound and meaning he wants.

In relation to the first category of American modification, some of Whitman's archaisms have been noted by Rebecca Coy in "A Study of Whitman's Diction."[2] Whitman's choice of archaisms in "Song of Myself" seems to have been determined by the quality of their sounds to fit the sense of his description. For instance, the appropriate union of sound and sense engenders the archaism "swags" in this line: "The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses, the block swags underneath on its tied-over chain . . ." (13,l.219). The word conveys the action of the heavy swaying of the huge block.

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[2]Rebecca Coy, "A Study of Whitman's Diction," Texas University Studies in English, 16 (1936) 122. Rebecca Coy's study is for the most part a cumulative categorization of Whitman's vocabulary by type. The analyses are mine.

Whitman could have said "sways" but the harsh "g" and "z" sounds of "swags" are rougher and heavier, making the archaism a better choice. The word also suggests "swagger" which can transfer to the confidence of the Negro driver who "tosses the slouch of his hat away from his forehead." Whitman's words often have this capacity of suggesting multiple meanings.

In a later stanza, the poet's lovers call his name "from flower-beds or vines or tangled underbrush." The alliterated "b's" and "s's" in "bussing my body with soft and balsamic busses" gives an almost whispering effect, the "noiselessness" which he states in the next line: "Noiselessly passing handfuls out of their hearts and giving them to be mine." He seems to choose the archaism of this line and the alliterative words as well, not only because of their soft sound, but also because the movement of the lips in pronouncing them is suggestive of the act of kissing itself. Earlier in the stanza he had said that his lovers (not just human lovers, but the sights and sounds of natural objects) were "crowding" his lips. In pronouncing "bussing my lips with soft and balsamic busses" the lips are sensually called into play, crowded but gently with the sound of the words.

These archaisms were not simply poetic stock, but were chosen because their sound and meanings fit, much in the same way he felt Indian names fit. Rebecca Coy notes, however, that after 1865 Whitman's archaisms became more conventional and more numerous, indicating that he had made his "peace with the past." She agrees, however, that prior to 1865, the archaic terms used by Whitman were for the most part "short, forceful words expressing a shade of meaning without modern equivalent" (p. 123).

Similarly, Whitman's use of foreign or foreign-sounding words is limited in the 1855 Leaves of Grass and increases afterward, as early as "Starting from Paumanok" in 1860 where his use of foreign words is excessive. It is admittedly unfair to lift these passages out of context, but they represent the general tone. "Melange mine own" (Sec. 10) or "Democracy . . . Ma Femme" (Sec. 12) or "See, in arriere, the wigwam, the trail" (Sec. 18). The French term is in rather forced company with the two nouns and has no valid reason for being there. [All emphases here and in the remainder of this paper are mine.]

Although Whitman uses a number of foreign words in "Song of Myself," he neither overemphasizes them nor uses them extensively. "Savans" appears unobtrusively in a list of those who share equally in the soul's benefits (17,l.364), "embouchures" fits his triumphal music in asserting the worth of losers (18,l.368), and in "Eleves I salute you" "eleves" (38,l.969) is an appropriate name for the newly-sighted "students" of the universe who with the poet have been resurrected and "troop forth replenished with supreme power."

The use of foreign words by a poet who so strongly espoused the American language is not contradictory in view of the national propensity to absorb the words of its immigrants into the mainstream of the language. Whitman was characteristically American in following this trend, perhaps more so when his choice of such words seemed indiscriminate or ostentatious rather than fitting. Yet his use of foreign words is also congruent with his desire to fit word with thing: he was searching for meanings that he could not find in words of English origin.

For instance, the substitution of "pupils" or "students" for "eleves" destroys some quality of mystery and ambiguity that Whitman attempts to achieve through his use of the less familiar French term. The poet has just experienced a resurrection from a kind of spiritual death caused by his assumption of mankind's suffering. His Christ-like ascension to renewed spiritual affirmation implies an association of "eleves" with "elevated"; the voice rises with the last syllable and the sound of the word within the context of the passage is joyous. Although the foreign word here is justified, it still is not one of those striking instances where Whitman's use of language achieves brilliant effects, however. On the contrary, its success can be more accurately characterized as modest. When in another line he says "my amie" and the reader wonders why "my friend" would not have done as well, the reader is still not really annoyed and if he is amused or impatient, these emotions dissipate in the force of the real power of Whitman's use of language at his best. And even if, as some critics suspect, Whitman's foreign words hint of showing-off, they seem to be the display of a primitive rather than a pedant. That Whitman was sometimes seduced by the mere sound of a foreign word was part of his pervasive faith in words to suggest experience. Randall Jarrell says that "only a man with the most extraordinary feel for language, or none whatsoever, could have cooked up Whitman's worst messes."[3] The paucity

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[3]Randall Jarrell, "Some Lines from Whitman," Poetry and the Age, (New York: Vintage Books, 1953) p. 106.

of foreign words in "Song of Myself, however, either increases their effect when they do occur or makes the reader amenable to them, and there are no glaring failures as in some of Whitman's later poems. Of course, Whitman's intended audience of common men and women would not have known what the words from other languages (or from Whitman's personal vocabulary of foreign sounding terms) meant at all; this perhaps is their most serious criticism.

In using both archaisms and foreign words in "Song of Myself," Whitman follows an American trend. Yet his vocabulary reveals a highly individualistic choice of words, rather than simply an echo of American usage. In fitting into the third category of American modifications of English, that of giving new meanings to English words, he is often again making personal poetic choices. He often conveys a shade of meaning which differs not only from the English conception of the word, but from the standard American conception as well. But such usage is still in keeping with the role of originality that he mapped out for the American poet in the 1855 Preface: "The cleanest expression is that which finds no sphere worthy of itself and makes one" (p. 13).

So he asks his audience, "Have you reckoned a thousand acres much? Have you reckoned the earth much?" (2,1.22), perhaps trying to catch their ear with a word in wide colloquial use. But here he is not actually using the word colloquially, nor even intending the standard definition of counting or calculating. He goes beyond to suggest a more spiritual reckoning of nature, the felt realization of the "good of the earth and sun."

Or, in a characteristic conversion, he changes a word most often used as a verb to a noun and in doing so, suggests the sensual, lulling movement of ocean swells: "Cushion me soft . . . rock me in billowy drowse" (22, 1.455). The same free use of language occurs in "Who need be afraid of the merge?" (6,1.136) or in "this is the float and odor of hair" (19,1.377). He dares to flirt with the grotesque in describing an orchestra's effect upon him: "It wrenches unnamable ardors from my breast, It throbs me to gulps of the farthest down horror" (26,1.605). Yet the word is appropriate to the frenzied passage describing the danger of total sensory bombardment.

Whitman's willingness to infuse words with new shades of meaning is coupled with the incorporation into "Song of Myself" of words taken directly from American speech. These words often take the form of compounds. Mencken, discussing new American substantives "manufactured from the common material of the mother tongue" says, "In them America exhibits one of its marked tendencies, a habit of achieving short cuts by bold combinations." He cites "cloud-burst" as an especially vivid example. Other words he lists are "claim-jumper," "homestretch," "prairie-schooner," "worm-fence," and "flat-boat" (p. 144-45). The last two words appear in "Song of Myself" along with the following: "poke-weed" (5,1.38), "chowder-kettle" (10,1.77), "break-down," (a noisy American dance) (12,1.212), "woolypates" (term for Negroes) (15,1.279), "camp-meeting" (33,1.777), "coon-seekers" (15,1.317), and "fancy-man" (16,1.346) to name only some of them.[4] Whitman's long lines studded

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[4]These words are defined as Americanisms by Rebecca Coy, p. 119.

with such words were intended to hold the ear of his audience by using their spoken vocabulary and were also designed to conjure by images of America. Some of the compound words in the poem are Whitman's own inventions, showing again his absorption of a tendency of the national language. A few are "loveroot" (2,l.14), "elderhand" (5,l.83), "fellow-senses" (28,l.628), "sharptoothed touch" (29,l.641), and "longlived swan" (33,l.761). Many of the adjective combinations appear in Whitman's catalogues, where they present striking images before the poet moves on to the next line. In one of the vignettes, epithets formed by these combinations render unforgettable the exhausted and stunned passengers who have narrowly escaped death: "lank loose-gowned women . . . silent old-faced infants . . . sharp-lipped, unshaven men . . ." (33,l.824-25).

Whitman exploits adjective combinations for their slang quality. He speaks of those who "piddle and patter here in collars and tailed coats," yet "acknowledges the duplicates" of himself under their "scrape-lipped and pipe-legged concealments"(42,l.1074-75). Here his slang is worthy of an American humorist. But it is also characteristic of his style that these terms appear with language that is more standard. "I am aware who they are" and "I acknowledge the duplicates of myself" are obviously not slang nor even informal. The epithets, however, could be lifted to fit the mouth of any frontier rowdy engaged in a contest of insults.

Whitman's slang and colloquialisms are not restricted to compound words, but occur in "Song of Myself" in various forms. Dandies are "foofoos" (22,l.468) or "latherers" (47,l.1239). In a passage rejecting

any doctrine of life's depravity, slang and colloquialisms produce a tone of strong, scornful negation:

> I do not snivel that snivel the world over,
> That months are vacuums and the ground but
> wallow and filth,
> That life is a suck and a sell, and
> nothing remains at the end but
> threadbare crape and tears.
>
> Whimpering and truckling fold with powders
> for invalids. . . . conformity goes to the
> fourth removed,
> I cock my hat as I please indoors or out.
>
> Shall I pray? Shall I venerate and be ceremonious?
> I have pried through the strata and analyzed to
> a hair,
> And counselled with doctors and calculated close
> and found no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.
>
> In all people I see myself, none more and not
> one a barleycorn less, . . .

The key words in this passage are intensified by their sound reiterations. The mocking tone of "snivel" is enforced by its repetition; there is an audible sneer in the word. The "s" sound is picked up again in a strong, coarse phrase: the poet refuses to believe that life is "a suck and a sell." The "s" is heard again in an affirmation: "I have . . . found no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones." The hard "c" in important words is repeated to create a tone of cocky self-assertation or again scorn: "suck and a sell," "threadbare crape and tears," "whimpering and truckling," "conformity," "I cock my hat," "counseled with doctors," "calculated close," "sticks to my own bones," and "not one a barleycorn less." The emphasis on this sound continues even as the tone softens: "I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept with a carpenter's compass,/ I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick

at night" (20,l.392-408). This reinforcing of meaning with sound could be achieved only by a poet who knew the value of the spoken word.

The same sensitivity to the spoken word enabled Whitman to exploit or coin many words valuable for their onomatopoetic quality. He hears "the blab of the pave. . . . sluff of bootsoles" (8,l.146), the whizz of limbs heads stones wood and iron high in the air, (33,l.860), the bustle of growing wheat. . . . gossip of flames. . . . clack of sticks cooking my meals" (26,l.586-87), the wild gander's "Yahonk" (14,l.238) and as the spotted hawk complains of his "gab," he shouts his own "barbaric yawp" (52,l.1322-23). Not strictly onomatopoetic, but striking because it is almost so is his use of "limpsey" instead of "limp" in the description of a runaway slave: "Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsey and weak" (10,l.185). The aural quality achieved by the added syllable extends the meaning beyond that of the limpness of fatigue. The rhythm of the altered word evokes not just a condition, but an action: it imitates the limping movement of fearful exhaustion. A highly visual and highly kinetic image of the pursued slave is conjured with one word. Obviously, onomatopoeia is not a uniquely American poetic device, yet Whitman's use of it often includes words that one would expect to find more readily in common, even rough, speech than in poetry. It is hard to imagine Shelley or Keats or Longfellow or Holmes using such words as "blab," "gab," or "yawp"; it is less difficult to imagine a group of streetcar drivers or laborers using them. Other words such as "gossip of flames" or "limpsey," however, reveal a highly poetic sensitivity to the assocation of sound and meaning on a more complex level.

Words of Indian origin, native to the American continent, would obviously appear in "Song of Myself," among them "moccasin," "powowing," "wigwam," and "quaghaug." Whitman often uses uniquely American words symbolically. Asserting the significance of even the lowest forms, he says that "if nothing lay more developed the quahaug in its callous shell were enough" (27,l.611-12). Since its rather unpleasant gutteral sound is fitting to its lowly status, the Indian word was a better choice than "clam." Whitman continues by saying that his is "no callous shell" and that his "instant conductors . . . seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me." He is super-sensitive to his environment and he conveys this sensitivity more strongly by juxtaposing it to the callousness of the quahaug's shell.

Whitman uses a few Indian proper names in "Song of Myself" but not as many as one might expect. There are no successions of lines packed with Indian names such as those that appear in "Starting from Paumanok." Rather than such chants, catalogues often carry the names in descriptions such as this one: "The torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahooche or Altamahaw. . . ." (15,l.318).

He follows the outline of his prose statements more closely, however, by using nicknames a great deal in order to identify with his American audience and to exhibit the vigor of the vernacular tongue. One of his answers to the question, "What is the grass" is that as a "uniform hieroglyphic" the grass grows among "black folks as among white,/Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff,/I give them the same, I receive them the same" (6,l.97-100). These American nicknames are the concretes which ground the symbolism of the grass. In the stanza,

the grass represents the unity of existence and the equality of men. The repetition of like sounds in the four names further enforces this quality and is especially appropriate to the meaning of the last line.

Whitman's vocabulary in "Song of Myself," then, can be shown to reflect the major ways that American speech diverged from British English. The combinations of archaisms, foreign words, and various types of Americanisms and colloquialisms, in addition to Whitman's coined and onomatopoetic words, is a principal way the poem achieves its American flavor. Yet at the same time, Whitman's frequent use of these words in a highly individualistic manner enables him to achieve new effects of meaning, making the poem not only a reflection of American usage, but a new American creation in itself.

CHAPTER III

THE COLLOQUIAL STYLE

In addition to his using an American vocabulary, Whitman broke new ground in poetry through his fusion of a symbolic and colloquial style. Since "colloquial" is subject to several interpretations, it is important to discern just what is meant by the term. "Colloquial" of course, defines language that is informal and characteristic of the spoken, rather than written, situation. Generally, colloquial language in literature appears to be more spontaneous and more loosely structured than non-colloquial prose and poetry. The term is somewhat elusive or at any rate elastic--it can include various types of expression. It refers not only to individual words but to the way that words, phrases, and clauses are joined together. Some lines in "Song of Myself," however, achieve a colloquial quality simply by their vocabulary; sometimes a single word can tip a sentence on the side of the colloquial mode. For instance, when Whitman says, "I loafe and invite my soul" (1,l.4), the word "loafe" lends the clause a more casual, tentative quality, at least on an apparent level, than the sentence would possess without that word. Yet sometimes a clause can be colloquial without containing a word that immediately draws attention, as in the case of this line from "Song of Myself": "You should have been with us that day round the chowder kettle" (9,l.177). As this line suggests, the colloquial clause usually is directed to a listener; however, the converse does not as often hold true--a statement directed to a listener is often not colloquial, as in the case

of a formal oration or a scholarly address. And generally, although this is not always the rule, the speaker in colloquial literature emerges sooner or later as a definable personality, whereas in non-colloquial literature the narrator may be only an omniscient voice. This aspect of the colloquial situation is well-suited to Whitman's purposes in "Song of Myself"; although Walt Whitman as a persona assumes universal qualities, there is always the immediate and very real sense of an individual person who speaks.

Some further examples reveal the various types of language that mark "Song of Myself" as a poem in the colloquial mode. In addition to using the colloquial word, such as "loafe" and the clause that is simply conversational ("You should have been with us that day round the chowder kettle."), Whitman uses slang: "and not one a barley-corn less." He uses colloquial phrases or clauses that are in wide popular use, almost to the point of being cliches, shown in both the question and the direct statement here: "Where are you off to, lady? for I see you,/You splash in the water there, yet stay stock still in your room" (11,l.200-201). He swears: "By God! You shall not go down! Hang your whole weight upon me" (40,l.1007-08). He thinks out loud, groping for meaning: "What is a man anyhow? What am I? and what are you?" (20,l.380). He creates epithets and imperatives which have the vigorous, spontaneous quality of this line: "You there, impotent, loose in the knees, open your scarfed chops till I blow grit within you" (46,l.933).

All of these lines function on a symbolic level in the larger fabric of the poem. The most central symbols conveyed by the colloquial

style, however, are contained in the words "loafing" and "guessing." Loafing is the state of passivity by which the poet becomes receptive to the natural world, to its fusion with his own nature, and finally to a realization of the pervasive influence of the soul in all things. Just as his loafing--or the ease which allows him to observe a spear of summer grass--is only apparently casual, so the single spear of grass is only apparently a small thing; the grass will become the symbol of the unity of life: "the common air that bathes the globe" (17,1.359). Later Whitman begins the passage in which the union of body and soul is erotically described by asking his soul to "loafe" with him "on the grass" (5,1.75), the same passivity and receptivity represented by this word allowing the union to occur, enabling the poet to achieve transcendent knowledge.

The tentative reaching and feeling for the meaning of the grass and therefore existence continue to be expressed in colloquial language in the next section. The first two lines are colloquial by virtue of the dialogue situation, the word "fetching," and their very simplicity: "A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands:/ How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it is anymore than he." But the most important colloquialism is the clause "I guess." Whitman's loafing allows him to guess and this guessing means a receptive mental state in which the poet throws out hypotheses freely and without strain. It is only casual in that it represents a free play of the imagination's symbol-making capacity. Because of this rich freedom, his guesses can land on and elaborate on many symbols for the grass. Whitman guesses that the grass might be "the flag of my

disposition," "the handerkerchief of the Lord," "the produced babe of the vegetation," or a "uniform hieroglyphic" with meaning directed equally toward all people (6,11.90-100). Later, after affirming his acceptance of evil as well as good, incarnating the natural world, and being ravaged but brought to a new identity by touch, the poet realizes that his guesses were true:

> Swift wind! Space! My Soul! Now I know it
> is true what I guessed at;
> What I guessed when I loafed on the grass,
> What I guessed while I lay alone in my bed. . . .
> and again as I walked the beach under the
> paling stars of the morning (33,11.709-11)."

The unifying symbol of the grass is again expressed at the poem's end as the poet bids farewell: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,/If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles." The formality of "I bequeath" is overbalanced by the remainder of the two lines. The last line is tenderly colloquial in tone, suggesting that the way for his audience to find the soul is also by loafing and guessing on the grass.

The colloquial aspects of "Song of Myself" are revealed further by a closer stylistic examination of the poem. In his study of The Colloquial Style in America, Richard Bridgman isolates certain features of colloquial literature and applies them to the fiction of Twain, Hemingway, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein. Yet even though Bridgman's study is limited to fiction, his theories are still concerned with speaking situations and are therefore useful in a discussion of Whitman's colloquial passages.

One way that Whitman can be viewed as a pioneer in his use of slang and colloquialisms in his poetry (in addition to his using them at all) is that he did not "quarantine" those words or phrases by any visible means such as italics or quotation marks, but simply let them occur naturally within lines or passages of more standard language. Bridgman discusses the opposite tendency among prose writers of about the same period who were "attracted to the vernacular yet unwilling to commit themselves wholly to it."[1] For instance, the American writer John Neal, who was proud of his use of colloquial language, as late as 1869 felt he had to italicize this sentence from his autobiography Wandering Recollections: "When a boy, I was always a bungler, not being sure of hitting a barn-door--I might say of *fetching* a two-story house."[2] One will recall Whitman's use of the same word in several passages: "A child said, What is the grass? *fetching* it to me with full hands." or "I . . . would *fetch* you whoever you are flush with myself" (42,l.1081). Obviously Whitman's tone is more serious, yet it is still valid to make the comparison. Since Whitman believed the word would be a natural choice for the common democratic persona who frequently speaks in "Song of Myself," he did not find it necessary to apologize for it. Whitman's intended audience of common men and women instead of the literati is responsible for the natural flow of the

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[1]Richard Bridgman, The Colloquial Style in America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 23.

[2]John Neal, Wandering Recollections of a Somewhat Busy Life: An Autobiography (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1869), quoted in Bridgman, p. 23.

colloquial word or phrase in his poetry. His being on common ground with his audience made it no more necessary for him to explain slang and colloquialisms than it would have been for any American workingman who used them in everyday conversation.

Although Whitman allows idiomatic words and phrases to occur without setting them off with italics or other barriers, he shares what Bridgman calls "the colloquial propensity for outlining and elevating single words" (p. 22). One way he does this is in the list or catalogue, a common feature of American vernacular writing (p. 29). These lists allow each word to achieve prominence while the coordinating conjunction "and" provides the beat to keep the momentum of the speaker going. The conjunction also acts as a kind of buffer which establishes an isolated territory for each word (p. 30). Discussing one of Huck Finn's lists, Bridgman says that Huck's eye moves from object to object and is not impeded by reflection or explanation. Huck observes that the gardens of Arkansas contain "jimpsom weeds, and sunflowers, and ash-piles, and old curled-up boots and shoes, and pieces of bottles, and rags, and played-out tin-ware."[3] The words are presented, undisturbed by commentary, in a linear sequence representing the way the objects are seen or the fashion in which they occur to the speaker in a given moment. Whitman does something similar in many of his lists; although he does not comment on the items within the list, the passages surrounding it usually do reveal why the list is important. For instance, in his passage noting that "a kelson of the creation is love," Whitman sees further:

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[3]Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter 21, quoted in Bridgman, p. 119.

> And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping
> in the fields,
> And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
> And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped
> stones and elder and mullen and pokeweed (5,11.85-89).

The reader knows from the larger context that these objects are presented to reveal the equal importance of small things in the chain of existence. And realizing Whitman's feeling for the right word, the reader also knows that these words are not random. Yet the list seems to come from a speaker who looks about him and recounts what he sees at that particular moment, without organizing his words in advance. One has only to recall casual conversations to realize that this tendency to string objects or actions together is a prominent characteristic of the colloquial situation.

A similar list, this time of adjectives, occurs in this line from Whitman: "What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me. . . ." (14,l.252). Two effects, both important to Whitman's purpose are produced: the style of casual, almost impromptu speech, and the prominence of each important word. This passage illustrates the "defining impulse" which concentrates upon the word and "is integral with the stylistic shift toward the colloquial" (p. 28). "Lists," Bridgman says, "define by proximity, by implicitly comparing similarities and contrasting differences" (p. 29). When Whitman says, "What is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is Me," he is defining himself for his audience with these adjectives. Obviously, the words in this list involve similar qualities, reinforced by the similar sounds of the words--the repeated long "e" sounds and the "est" endings. The purpose of the list, in addition to defining himself, is to state the poet's identity with the heretofore uncelebrated common man and his ordinary experiences.

Carl Strauch discusses the list as a means of focusing attention on the specific word in Emerson's poetry. After quoting Emerson's statement in "The Poet" that "bare lists of words are found suggestible to an imaginative and excited mind," Strauch goes on to say of Emerson: "In his poems this feeling for the quality of words displays itself in frequent lists, that like the far more ambitious catalogues of Whitman, become Adamic acts of naming and identity."[4] Strauch's words obviously recall Whitman's line which names his qualities as means of identifying himself and of identifying with his audience.

Sometimes the punctuation between the items of Whitman's lists takes the form of ellipsis marks, indicating a longer pause than commas or conjunctions. After he has rejected the distillation of books, Whitman says, "I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,/I am mad for it to be in contact with me." The lines which follow list some of the sensations he perceives there:

> The smoke of my own breath,
> Echoes, ripples, and buzzed whispers. . . . loveroot
> silkthread, crotch, and vine,
> My respiration and inspiration. . . .the beating
> of my heart. . . . the passing of blood and air
> through my lungs,
> The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and
> of the shore and darkcolored sea-rocks,
> and of hay in the barn,
> The sound of the belched words of my voice. . . . words
> loosed to the eddies of the wind,
> A few light kisses.....a few embraces. . . . a reaching
> around of arms,
> The play of shine and shade on the trees as the
> supple boughs wag. . . . (12,11.13-19)

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[4]Carl F. Strauch, "The Mind's Voice: Emerson's Poetic Styles," Style in the American Renaissance, ed. Carl F. Strauch (Hartford: Transcendental Books, 1970), p. 43.

Although this list is of phrases as well as single words, it still seems to relate the things that the poet perceives as those perceptions occur. The ellipsis marks seem to indicate a longer pause in which the poet passively waits for the next sensation allowing speech to expand simultaneously. The use of commas rather than conjunctions between other items allows a quicker articulation of them, a rapidity which is appropriate to the rapid succession of those sensations as he receives and then communicates them. The particular variation of commas, conjunctions, and ellipsis marks reflects both the way the poet perceived objects and sensations and also his pace in relating them. Furthermore, it does not seem farfetched to hypothesize that the effect of the ellipsis marks on the page visually suggests the state of suspension of the poet which allows him to be so receptive to physical sensation.

Another tendency of speech is that when the mind of the speaker is preoccupied with an important or crucial action, repetition of sounds and words often occurs (p. 33). The intensity of the erotic experience in the passage in which Whitman is "quivered to a new identity" by touch might be responsible for the sound echoes there. It should be emphasized here that this passage, rather than having the casual tone of the colloquial, has instead the quality of impassioned and frenzied speech. Yet Whitman typically leads into it using extremely colloquial language: "To touch my person to someone else's is about as much as I can stand" (27,1.617). These lines show the repetition and sound echoes that the intensity of the situation produces:

> 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, . . .
> On all sides prurient provokers stiffening
> my limbs, . . .

Echoes occur in "touch" and "hush," and "flames" and "veins," in the many alliterations of the "s" sound, in the alliteration of "treacherous tip" and of "prurient provokers," and in the repeated "-ing" of "reaching," "crowding," and "stiffening." The frenzied action is caught up in more participles throughout the passage. Words are repeated, especially "touch" in the latter lines, as he breaks into more desperate tones. There are assonance, internal rhyme, and alliteration, all of which I indicate by underlining:

> I am given up by traitors:
> I talk wildly. . . . I have lost my wits. . . .I and
> nobody else am the greatest traitor, . . .
>
> You villain touch! what are you doing? . . . . my breath
> is tight in my throat,
> Unclench your floodgates! you are too much for me.
>
> Blind, loving wrestling touch! Sheathed hooded sharptoothed
> touch! (28).

Through the relentlessness of the sense bombardment and through the highly excited speech that conveys it, the passage builds up to a crescendo of repeated sounds. This passage illustrates Bridgman's theory that "fits of alliteration and other sound repetitions and associations may be brought on when the writer is more preoccupied with the imagined experience than with the surface of his prose. This is no more than to say that instances of repetition arise more often in speech than in writing" . . . (p. 34-35).

He goes on to say that these repetitions make up the unity of form in the colloquial situation and that "they join company with the frequent occurrence of co-ordinating conjunctions, which Walt Whitman sometimes brought to the fore in his verse." In his only reference to Whitman, he quotes this passage from section thirteen of the 1892 "Song of Myself" as an example:

> I believe in those wing'd purposes,
> And acknowledge red, yellow, white
> playing within me,
> And consider green and violet and the
> tufted crown intentional
> And do not call the tortoise unworthy
> because he 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. (p. 38)

He then compares this sentence from Huckleberry Finn (Chapter 11) which he arranges in a similar manner:

> Then she got to talking about her husband
> And about her relations up the river,
> And her relations down the river,
> And about how much better off they used to was,
> And how they didn't know but they'd made
> a mistake coming to our town,
> instead of letting well alone--
> And so on and so on,
> Till I was afraid I had made a mistake
> coming to her to find out what was
> going on in the town;
> But by-and-by she dropped onto pap
> and the murder,
> And then I was pretty willing
> to let her chatter right along. (p. 38-39)

Bridgman continues to explain: "These co-ordinating conjunctions furnish the beat for long colloquial sentences. The sense may wander, the meaning may cloud over, and clarification may never come (since cloudiness

is the truest vision of the moment), but underneath it all pulsates that monotonous, barely noticeable rhythm of the conjunctions, sufficiently dependable to sustain equilibrium and to provide the confidence and comfort that go with it." He ends by asserting the resemblance Whitman and the colloquial prose writer (p. 39).

Whitman's poetry also exhibits an aural organization in the use of present participles. In addition to the aural unity provided by the "-ing," the participles suggest continuing action. This quality can be clearly seen in the passage on touch where it is especially appropriate to the frenzied experience:

> On all sides prurient provokers stiffening
> my limbs,
> Behaving licentious toward me, taking no denial,
> Depriving me of my best as for a purpose,
> Unbuttoning my clothes and holding me by
> the bare waist,
> Deluding my confusion with the calm of the
> sunlight and pasture fields,
> Immodestly sliding the fellow-senses away, . . .

Whitman could have used the present tense to communicate the same experience, but not nearly so effectively:

> On all sides prurient provokers stiffen
> my limbs,
> Unbutton my clothes and hold me by the
> bare waist,
> Delude my confusion . . . etc.

This does not come close to capturing the sense of continuum achieved by the present participles which suggest a continued present that works in the poet's memory as he relives and relates the experience verbally.

Perhaps this sense of the present--of continued and various states of being and perceiving--is one of the major effects of Whitman's colloquial style. Through it "Song of Myself" achieves its sense of

freshness and immediacy, allowing Whitman's vision to focus on image after image as he fulfills the role of namer. It is not only the individual word or idiom, then, that creates Whitman's colloquial style, but the capacity of the syntax to bind objects and actions together as if the poet were perceiving them for the first time.

This sense of the present helps to create the intense immediacy of some of the vignettes in which Whitman is the Christ-like figure who not only sympathizes with those who suffer, but becomes them and assumes their suffering: "I am the man. . . . I suffered. . . . I was there" (33, 1.827).

One with the hounded slave, Whitman speaks in the present tense in short, descriptive clauses, their rhythm and phrasing appropriate to the sense of flight, pain, and violation. There are no words of transition between these clauses; the actions described occur too rapidly, making transition unnecessary. Word combinations in the passage reveal Whitman's ability to create sounds that closely suggest both physical and psychological pain. For instance, the archaism "dribs" in the clause "my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin," (33,1.836) possesses a harshness that "drips" does not, and when echoed with "ooze," creates an effect of nagging torment. The whole clause when spoken aloud seems to capture the dizzying pulsebeat that throbs in the ears and brain of one who is exhausted and terrorized. Yet in spite of the almost stylized effect of the succession of staccato clauses, the voice retains the authenticity of the colloquial, not in any casual sense, but because it is a voice articulating felt pain. The poet's refusal to interfere by moralizing and the restraint yet intensity of the passage give it tragic elevation.

When Whitman steps back and explains, "Agonies are one of my changes of garments" he creates metaphor that is at once colloquial and metaphysical in its yoking of the abstract and domestic, reminding one of the later poet Emily Dickinson. But immediately after this compressed figurative statement, he goes on to explain that he does not ask the wounded person how he feels, but becomes the wounded person, an explanation that is prosaic and unnecessarily explicit. The following line, "My hurt turns livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe" is much more forceful without sacrificing the quality of speech (33, ll. 840-842).

The description of the "mashed fireman" retains the same elevated simplicity that the colloquial voice achieved in the first vignette. Whitman's willingness to use such words as "mashed," "yelling shouts," "distant clicks"; the repetition of words and phrases ("I heard"; "They have cleared the beams away. . . . they tenderly lift me forth"; "I lie"); the similarity of grammatical structure in the short clauses; plus the spoken quality of such lines as "Painless after all I lie, exhausted but not so unhappy" are marks of the colloquial style. The fireman's painlessness and tranquility remove him from the tragedy of his death and engender the detached and impressionistic quality of some of his perceptions ("I lie in the night air in my red shirt" and "The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches"), perceptions that can be conveyed through Whitman's technique of letting the fireman speak. The suffering described in the first stanza is transfigured by the peace of the second, the simplicity of language and the "pervading hush" infusing the passage with the quality of benediction (33, ll. 843-50).

But Whitman's colloquial voice does not always succeed in conveying the tragedy he intends. The language of the old artillerist, while realistic in its attention to detail and action, becomes cliche when Whitman attempts to describe the dying general: "Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general . . . /He gasps through the clot. . . . Mind not me. . . . mind. . . . the entrenchments" (33, ll. 862-63).

The recounting of the Goliad massacre is more effective. The frame for the narration is flawed, however, by the tone of "Hear now the tale of a jetblack sunrise" and "Hear of the murder . . . etc" at the beginning and the "And that is the tale . . ." after the narration. (Although it is better than "'Tis the tale" in the death-bed edition). "Jetblack sunrise" is also a weakness, too facile an image for a poet with Whitman's range of language. The narration itself again is a presentation of actions, although here the identity of the speaker who describes the proud generous natures of the four hundred and twelve young men is unclear. The speaker is assumed to be a witness but his distance from the event allows him to make more subjective evaluations ("They were the glory of the race of rangers"). For the most part, however, the narration is objective, the poet's outrage implied but not inserted. The sense of pathos and tragedy is heightened by the almost conversational understatement of lines such as "The second Sunday morning they were brought out in squads and massacred. . . . it was beautiful early summer,/The work commenced about five o'clock and was over by eight" (34, ll. 865-89).

The transition to the frigate fight is too abrupt, too cheerful to follow the image of the bloody struggle between the dying boy, his

assassin, and the two who had to tear the youth away. The reader cannot accept so suddenly the tone of jovial old seadog which is interjected in "Did you read in the seabooks of the oldfashioned frigate-fight?/Did you learn who won by the light of the moon and stars?" and in "Our foe was skulk in his ship, I tell you . . ." (35,11890-92). The easy familiarity of this particular colloquial voice breaks the tone of suffering essential to Whitman's participation in the agony of mankind. The account of the battle itself is only mediocre, not through any flaw in the colloquial style, but simply because Whitman's use of his poetic powers seemed to have temporarily flagged.

Yet the same poet describes the aftermath of the battle with great verbal sensitivity. The speaker looks about him in the stillness following the victory and lists what he perceives. As Randall Jarrell said about one of Whitman's other lists, the man who would call this a "mere list . . . would boil his babies up for soap."[5] Whitman's juxtaposition of images in this passage often captures the essence of tragedy. The "dead face of an old salt" is juxtaposed with his "carefully curled whiskers." The "dabs of flesh upon the masts and spars" are suggested even more horribly when they are followed by "the cut of cordage and dangle of rigging." The "black and impassive guns, and litter of powder-parcels, and the strong scent" are contrasted to the "delicate sniffs of seabreeze. . . . smells of sedgy grass and fields by the shore," smells whose freshness ironically underscores the battle's destruction and loss. The possibilities of the list as a colloquial

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[5]Jarrell, p. 110.

feature and as a poetic tool are fully exploited here. In the same passage there is the suggestiveness of the phrase "the slight shock of the soothe of waves," the spoken "s's" evoking the whispered silence, the rhythm of the line imitating that of small waves hitting the ship's sides, and the meaning of "shock" becoming more than that impact--denoting the numbed, not soothed, sensibilities of the survivors. There is more emphasis on sounds as Whitman describes an amputation: "The hiss of the surgeon's knife and the gnawing teeth of his saw,/The wheeze, the cluck, the swash of falling blood"(36,ll.918-32). Here the poet does not consider the possibility that his graphic imitation of these sounds might offend someone's conceptions of literary propriety; he is totally within the thrust of the experience, and at the same time, pushing language to the limits of its potential to evoke agony. Whitman takes a risk, yet he wins in his gamble with the grotesque, stealing power from it. The tendencies of the colloquial speaker to grope aloud for the right word, to test sound against meaning, and to use language with the freedom engendered by the colloquial situation allow Whitman to be daring. In using this mode, his successes overbalance his failures.

CHAPTER IV

THE ORATORICAL MODE AS POETRY

The features which mark the colloquial style, combined with Whitman's frequent use of uniquely American names, words, and slang, plus his prose statements which place high value on the idiomatic speech of the American masses, all suggest that "Song of Myself" would achieve its fullest potential in being heard, especially by an American audience. Another influence on Whitman's style--that of oratory--supports this view. To view "Song of Myself" as a poem incorporating the features of both the colloquial style and the oratorical mode involves no contradictions. Bridgman sums up the similarities of the two styles when he says that "the oratorical mode shares the characteristics of the colloquial. Its exclamations, repetitions, uncertain backings and fillings, accumulations of synonyms, and rhetorical emphases all originate in the extemporaneousness of speech, the spontaneous jetting of language that maintains its equilibrium by constant movement forward rather than by a poised interrelationship among stable elements" (p. 7).

Whether Whitman intended to deliver "Song of Myself" from the platform is not the issue here, although if he had been the charismatic public speaker he wanted to be he might have done just that. The point is that the style of the poem is influenced by his desire to speak directly to an audience with a new and powerful American voice. The influence of oratory on Whitman's poetry has been noted by many critics.

Bliss Perry, F. O. Matthiessen, Frederick Seyberg, C. J. Furness, Gay Wilson Allen, and C. Carroll Hollis all emphasize this view.[1] Perry, for example, believes that "not to apprehend Leaves of Grass as a man speaking is to miss its purport" (Walt Whitman, p. 97) and C. J. Furness in Walt Whitman's Workshop says of Whitman: "In order to understand the fluent, orotund tone of his verse, it is essential to realize that the fountainhead of his poetry was in oral declamation." Furness goes on to explain Whitman's early fondness for reading aloud or for quoting passagesfrom Shakespeare while riding ferryboats or walking on the seashore and his habit of reading his verse aloud to groups of friends (pp. 27-31). His interest in oratory was not simply amateurish, however. He made countless notes for projected lectures, and Furness reports that frequently he transferred ideas originally intended for poems to his lecture notes and vice-versa. An instance of the latter process was his incorporation into "Starting from Paumanok" of these lines, originally intended for a lecture on religion: "Not character, nor life worthy the name without religion,/ Nor state nor man nor woman without religion" (p. 29). Whitman had dreams of becoming a great national spokesman--a "wander-speaker" who "with all the aid of art and the natural flowing luxiuriance of oratory" . . . would always "hold the ear of the people." As Washington had

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[1]Bliss Perry, Walt Whitman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906) pp. 83-87; 96-97; F. O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance, pp. 549-58; Frederick Schyberg, Walt Whitman, trans. Evie Allison Allen, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951) pp. 107-11; C. J. Furness, ed. Walt Whitman's Workshop. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928) passim, Gay Wilson Allen, American Prosody (New York: American Book Company, 1935), p. 231-32. C. Carroll Hollis, "The Oratorical Stance and Whitman's Early Poetry," Papers on Walt Whitman, ed. Lester Zimmerman and Winston Weathers, University of Tulsa Department of English Monograph Series, 2 (1970) 56-79.

made free the American soil, this orator, he said, would "make free the American soul" (p. 36).

Whitman's oratorical aspirations were not surprising in light of the influence of oratory on nineteenth century America. According to F. O. Matthiessen, the oratorical mood of America had been engendered by the Revolution itself and had carried over to the pulpit and then to the area of local and national politics (p. 18). The issues and debates brewing in America from the 1830's through the end of the century produced the great speeches of such public figures as Webster, Clay, and Calhoun, and the lyceum movement fostered the lectures of Emerson, Thoreau, and Frances Wright, among others. The lyceum movement, according to Mary W. Graham, was "the most important educational influence affecting adult Americans in the nineteenth century."[2] Lectures often became literature. They were tried out on the public and were then refined as essays. The fact that three-fourths of Emerson's published writings began as lectures is indicative of the importance of the speaker's platform.[3]

Whitman had accompanied his parents to lyceum and religious lectures as a child, had taken an active part in the Smithtown debating society when he was a school teacher on Long Island, and had written what his brother George referred to as "barrels of lectures."[4]

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[2]Mary W. Graham, quoted by Robert T. Oliver, History of Public Speaking in America, (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1965) p. 459, note.

[3]Carl Bode, The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 226.

[4]Roger Asselineau, The Evolution of Walt Whitman, I, (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 95.

But perhaps one of the greatest single influences on Whitman's faith in the power of the spoken word was a religious lecture given by the Quaker preacher Elias Hicks. Whitman had accompanied his parents to the lecture in 1829 and never forgot its impact. He described the event sixty years later in an essay called "Elias Hicks" in which he praised Hicks's quality as a speaker: He writes, "A pleading tender, nearly agonizing conviction and magnetic stream of natural eloquence, before which all minds and natures . . . yielded entirely without exception, was its cause, method, and effect." Whitman further characterizes Hicks's manner of speaking as "passionate unstudied oratory, not argumentative or intellectual, but penetrating. . . ."[5] Of equal importance, behind Hicks's words was an "inner light" which Hicks "emanated from his very heart to the hearts of his audience" (p. 907). Whitman's comments about this moving experience help define his standards for an orator which he also developed in his poetry. The magnetic stream of natural eloquence, the passionate but seemingly unstudied oratory, and a sense of inner conviction are certainly characteristic of many passages of "Song of Myself."

Several of Whitman's poems themselves help define his conception of the ideal orator. This conception was not of a political spokesman or debater, but of one who would mold the character of Americans. In "A Song of Joys" Whitman exclaims:

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[5]Walt Whitman, "Elias Hicks" Camden, N. J., 1888, in Untermeyer, p. 906.

O the Orator's Joys!
To inflate the chest, to roll the thunder of
the voice out from the ribs and throat,
To make the people rage, weep, hate, desire
with yourself,
To lead America,--to quell America with a great
tongue.

In "On Journeys Through the States" Whitman imagines himself a dweller for awhile in every city and town who will "fear not, be candid, promulge the body and the soul" and "be copious, temperate, chaste, magnetic,/And what you effuse may then return. . . ." The orator is a teacher whose lessons will be absorbed and will later flower. In the 1855 Preface Whitman says that "A great poem is no finish to a man or woman but rather a beginning." The great poet will take his audience into "regions previously unattained" (p. 22). And in lines which seem to be addressed to the individual listener, Whitman urges him in "Song of Myself" to wade timidly by the shore no longer but "to be a bold swimmer" (46,11.1228-29). The convictions of the orator-poet are also the people's, and through his role of seer they will come to recognize what was latent in themselves: "It is you talking just as much as myself. . . . I act as the tongue of you,/It was tied in your Mouth. . . . in mine it begins to be loosened" (47,11.1244-45). Whitman did not expect his messages to be completely perceived at once, but to work gradually into the consciousness of the reader or hearer.

His greatest praise of the magic and importance of oratory is in a poem called "Vocalism." Here Whitman speaks of "the divine power to speak words," and says, "O what is it is me that makes me tremble so at voices?/Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her I shall follow. . . ." The speaker who has this power has gained it after

absorbing the variety of human experience, "after treading ground and breasting river and lake, . . . after absorbing eras, temperaments, races, after knowledge, freedom, crimes. . . ." He can then awaken his audience to new perceptions and possibilities with his voice which is "practiced and perfect" and with his "developed soul." He can "bring forth what lies slumbering forever ready in all words" (p. 360-61). The connection of this idea to Whitman's use of American words and names is vital. If he could evoke with the right voice American things in his catalogues, he could bring his audience to an awareness of their identity as Americans and eventually as human beings.

More of Whitman's ideals for a new and freshly American type of oratory are set down in the notes compiled by Furness. In 1858 Whitman wrote that a revolution in American oratory was called for to change it "from the excessively diffuse and impromptu character it has (an ephemeral readiness, surface animation, the stamp of the daily newspaper, to be dismissed as soon as the next day's paper appears) and to make the means of a grand modernized delivery of live modern orations, appropriate to American, appropriate to the world" (p. 34-35). By this Whitman did not mean that he intended to reject the idioms of the American common man; as we have seen, he used them freely. He simply meant that the character of the national oratory should transcend the topics of current political or social interest and assume a role more commensurate with the universal experience of men and women. Again "Song of Myself" absorbs this feeling: it summons his American audience to the higher ideals of love, sympathy, and democracy.

The method to achieve these high ends or to teach lessons was important. Whitman says: "A Lesson must be supplied, braced, fortified at all points. It must have its facts, statistics, materialism, its relations to the physical state of man, nations, the body, and so forth, and to money-making and well-being. It must have its intellectual completeness, its beauty, its reasoning to convince, its proofs, and so forth, and finally, it must have its reference to the spiritual, the mystic in man, that which knows without proof and is beyond materialism" (p. 35). This methodology suggests the combining of spiritual and material which characterizes many of Whitman's passages. It also recalls his explanation in the 1855 Preface that "folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which they always attach to dumb real objects. . . . they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls" (p. 10).

The language of oratory also must be "developed anew"; it must not be literal, but "elliptical and idiomatic."[6] This combination suggests Whitman's expression of abstract themes (the soul) through the use of symbols (the grass) and the style of that expression as often colloquial or "idiomatic" (loafing and guessing).

His oratory would combine different styles, indicated by these notes collected by Thomas B. Harned: "a stern and harsh passage, crackling and smashing like a falling tree, many other passages of many different tones, but all converging sooner or later into the clear, monotonous

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[6]Furness, p. 35.

voice, equable as water--sometimes direct addresses made to you, the hearer with a pause afterwards, as if an answer were expected, then perhaps for many minutes total abstraction and traveling into other fields. . . ."[7] These pauses and the combination of different tones are characteristics of "Song of Myself."

Furthermore Whitman says that the new American speaker must not "spare himself." There must be the sense that he shares in the sins as well as the joys of mankind. Another change he intends is the use of his own name in the speeches to make his sense of identification more complete. "Why not mention myself by name, Walt Wh[itman] in my speeches?"[8] he asks. He does this in section twenty-six of "Song of Myself": "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos. . . ." He also wanted to address his audience frequently in an intimate and personal vein. He wanted his speeches to be "ego-style" and in the first person--"something involving self-esteem, decision, authority--as opposed to the current third-person style" which he thought was "didactic, well-smoothed . . . essayism."[9] Although Whitman agreed with many of Emerson's ideas, he did not always admire his style. He wanted his own poetry and oratory to be more "earthy" and once said of

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[7]T. B. Harned, "Whitman and Oratory," The Complete Writings of Walt Whitman, VIII, pp. 253-54, quoted by Schyberg, p. 107. In a note Schyberg says that the phrase about the direct address reads ". . . without a pause afterwards, . . ." but says that this does not seem logical and believes that Whitman intended "with" instead of "without."

[8]Furness, p. 36.

[9]Furness, p. 210, note.

Emerson: "Suppose his books become absorbed . . . what a well-washed and grammatical, but bloodless and helpless race we should turn out."[10]

Finally, Whitman would subordinate all gestures except those of great significance. More important than an abundance of physical gestures was what he called "interior gesture," an emanation of the spirit like that which characterized the oratory of Elias Hicks.[11]

Whitman's aspiration to be an American orator who would elevate the soul and mold national character with the divine power of words did not materialize. Yet such a mission dominates his poetry. And the methodology designed for the orator in his notes--integrating the concrete with the abstract and the material with the spiritual, sharing in the suffering and joys of his audience, using the first person approach which emphasized the man Walt Whitman, and displaying his inner conviction--is evident in "Song of Myself."

Whitman's innovations for a new American oratory are combined with his frequent reliance on the traditional methods of oratory also. The question to the audience, the direct address, the identification with the audience, proving his statements, the recapitulation, and repetition and parallelism construct "Song of Myself" although, as his notes and statements suggest, they are often transfigured into uniquely Whitmanesque form.

For instance, in the first line of "Song of Myself," Whitman announces, "I celebrate myself," using the first person approach he promised. In the second line he immediately establishes identity between himself and the audience by stating that they shall assume what he assumes

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[10] Matthiessen, p. 532

[11] Furness, p. 37.

and that every atom belonging to him "as good" belongs to them. Here he is obviously making a more inclusive and more mystical identification than that found in conventional oratory. He asserts a common human bond and also sets the tone for a symbolic identity in which he and his audience fuse to share the same selfhood.

In section two, after asserting the superiority of first-hand outdoor experience over the second-hand distillation of experience in books and asking the people of the audience if they have "reckoned" the value of the earth or felt proud to get at the meaning of poems, he directs a series of imperatives to them, the purpose of which is to tell them to be self-reliant:

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

The repetition of words and the parallel grammatical structure of these lines emphasize the importance of the concept of self-reliance that Whitman wants to infuse into his audience. Gay Wilson Allen in American Prosody says that Whitman often uses reiterations "to achieve purely oratorical effects" and that "there is no denying the fact that parallelism and reiteration are characteristic oratorical rhythms" (p. 232). One need look no further than Emerson's "The American Scholar," 1839, for examples of these techniques. I arrange these passages as lines to reveal more clearly their oratorical features:

It came into him, life;
It went out from him, truth;
It came to him, short-lived actions;
It went out from, immortal thoughts;
It came to him, business;
It went out from him, poetry.
It was dead fact; now it is quick thought.
It can stand and it can go.
It now endures, it now flies, it now inspires![12]

or

We will walk on our own feet;
We will work with our own hands;
We will speak our own minds (p. 115).

One could cite many other examples from speeches and orations to demonstrate that parallelism and repetition are stock oratorical devices. Yet it is too well-known to belabor. Whitman, like orators in general, uses the techniques to emphasize and unify ideas and to maintain the momentum of speech.

In section three of "Song of Myself" Whitman rejects all "talk of the beginning and the end" and goes on to assert the value of the present.

There was never any more inception than
  there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And will never be any more perfection
  than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now (11. 32-35).

The epanelepsis in these lines enforces the importance of "now," not past or future. The staccato, spondaic stress of the phrase "than there is now" when repeated four times is certainly designed to drive home the point to his audience.

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[12]Emerson, "The American Scholar," The Complete Works, I, (1839: rpt. 1917) p. 87-88.

But Whitman soon switches from the general language and driving rhythm of this oratorical assertion to concrete and colloquial language as he describes himself in the jargon of carpentry--"plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams,"--and says he is "stout as a horse (ll. 41-42). Through the context of physical reality, he indicates the path to the soul--a progression he promised in both the Preface and in his oratory notes--by saying, "I and this mystery here we stand" (l. 43). He then moves on to assert the equality of physical and spiritual, again using parallelism and repetition: "Clear and sweet is my soul. . . . and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul" (l. 44).

Section five contains the erotic union of body and soul. Here the "you" he addresses is, of course, not the audience but his own soul as he remembers the erotic-spiritual experience. Perhaps it is difficult to conceive of this passage being spoken before an audience, yet many passages in "Song of Myself" are effective because the poet creates a dramatic situation between himself and some personified concept (or imagined person) within the poem. That the audience seems to overhear these dialogues does not detract from the essential nature of the poem as one to be spoken. It increases its value as a felt dramatic presentation.

The intimacy of this relived union changes in the next passage to more prophetic tones as Whitman reveals the resulting knowledge to the audience:

> Swifly arose and spread around me the peace
> and joy and knowledge that pass all the art
> and argument of the earth;
> And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand
> of my own,

> And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest
> brother of my own,
> And that all the men ever born are also my
> brothers. . . . and the women my sisters and lovers. . . .
> (11. 82-85)

These lines, introduced another of Whitman's speaking styles. Their repetition and parallelism, in addition to the words themselves, suggest the style of a prophet or preacher. Walter Sutton writes in American Free Verse, "This initial parallelism, reminiscent of the verses of the King James Bible, is well-suited to Whitman's conception of the poet as seer and prophet who would proclaim the gospel of the democratic society of the future."[13] Whitman himself says in notes for an address on literature; "We need somebody or something whose utterance were like an old Hebrew prophet's. . . ."[14] In Whitman's four lines we can perceive also a flow of natural eloquence that he so admired in Elias Hicks. D. Elton Trueblood notes that Hicks's oratory "included passages which tended to fall into regular stress," the "heavily accented periods. . . . like the cadence of prose poetry." He arranges this passage from one of Hicks's sermons to resemble Whitman's line:

> And the law of God is written in every heart,
> and it is there that he manifests himself;
> And in infinite love, according to our necessities,
> states, and conditions.
> And as we are all various and different from one
> another, more or less

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[13] Walter Sutton, American Free Verse, (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1973), p. 13.

[14] Furness, p. 67.

> So the law by the immediate operation of devine
> grace in the soul,
> Is suited to every individual according to his
> condition.[15]

Whitman did not derive his style from Hicks, but repetition, parallelism, and a prophetic tone characterize both passages.

After asserting that he is "around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless. . . . and can never be shaken away" (7,1.139), he goes on to prove it with a series of vignettes and catalogues in which he sees, hears or identifies with many varieties of Americans and American experiences. These proofs are obviously not the logical argumentative progressions of traditional oratory, but instead Whitman's more suggestive and "indirect" means of affirmation. In identifying with all people and through establishing such an inclusive identity with his audience, both he and they can assume the experiences he describes to be their own.

The vignettes provide brief narratives which, after the intensity of the first part of the poem, offer a kind of relief for speaker and audience. No oratorical flourish is necessary in these passages. They are usually colloquial in style and vocabulary; for example, "I tucked my trouser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time" (10,1.176).

The catalogues show Whitman's joy in naming for its own sake and demonstrate also his method of evoking the images of America for his audience. The catalogue in section eight names sounds and actions of the city. The longer one in section fifteen is more vast in scope, yet he is still naming in short descriptive phrases the people and scenes of

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[15]D. Elton Trueblood, "The Career of Elias Hicks," in Byways of Quaker History, ed. Howard H. Brenton (Pendle Hill: Wallingford, 1944) pp. 89-90, in Bliss Forbush, Elias Hicks: Quaker Liberal, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936) pp. 164-65.

America. Each phrase or clause can be spoken without a pause. Most begin with the article "the," no other transition being necessary since the speaker's naming is what is important. Like the conjunctions of long colloquial sentences, these articles provide a barely noticable but sustaining beat to keep the list rolling. Whitman brings this catalogue to a close with a parallel structure which both summarizes his incorporation of these things and actions and slows down the pace of the chant: "And these one and all tend inward to me, and I tend outward to them,/And such as it is to be of these more or less I am" (ll. 324-25). It is a kind of recapitulation for the catalogues and vignettes which have been Whitman's proof of the value of the present time, the good of the earth and sun, and the inclusiveness of the self's identity.

The catalogues in later sections show a progression from observation to active participation. Like the earlier catalogues, lines in these passages get their start by means of initial repetition. Yet here initial participles indicate the poet's participation, an activity that articles could not suggest. Other lines begin with directional prepositions such as "where," "upon," and "through" which are signs of the poet's capacity to travel freely in time and space. Recapitulations follow these catalogues, too. Whitman did not intend to explain everything to his audience--as he said, American oratory should be "elliptical." Yet he knew that his "omniverous words" required the structuring voice of the summarizing statement at strategic points. Thus in section forty-eight, almost at the close of the poem, he restates his major themes:

I have said that the soul is not more than
the body,
And I have said that the body is not more
than the soul,
And nothing, not God, is greater to one
than one's-self is,
And whoever walks a furlong without sympathy
walks to his own funeral, dressed in his shroud. . . .

In section fifty-one he makes a plea, colloquial, but which is almost like a revivalist's closing call for commitment:

Who has done his day's work and will soonest be
through with his supper?
Who wishes to walk with me?

Will you speak before I am gone? Will you prove
already too late?

And in the last three lines of the poem he fuses the intimate personal address to the audience with his colloquial voice in words charged with the tender interior gesture he so valued in oratory: "Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,/Missing me one place search another,/I stop somewhere waiting for you"

It almost seems that the ideal "you" would have to be one much like Whitman himself--a man of the people yet possessing unusual vision, sympathy, and appreciation for the subtle nuances of the word. Were his expectations that America would go halfway to meet her poet realistic? Did he really expect the erotic-spiritual symbolism of "Song of Myself" and his role as the representative of every man to be accessible to the understanding of a mass audience? It is probable that in 1855 he did, the faith of the visionary blinding him to the limitations of his intended readers. After reading Whitman's last line--"I stop somewhere waiting for you"--and knowing that in 1855 Whitman earnestly expected America to catch up, does the modern reader

shake his head as at a deluded illusionist, or is he caught up in the transfiguring affirmation that vibrates in that electric silence?

Whitman had told Horace Traubel that he sometimes thought Leaves of Grass to be "only a language experiment."[16] In the 1855 "Song of Myself" this vigorous experimental quality makes the poem a more faithful representation of Whitman's theories of the American language than any of the later revised editions. This is true especially in light of his incorporation into the poem of American idioms and slang. Yet many critics, perhaps basing their judgments on the final edition of "Song of Myself" and on Whitman's later poems, have complained that Whitman's poetry is remarkably devoid of Americanisms when compared to his hopes for a poetry to embody the much praised American speech. Whitman's deletion of many racy slang phrases as he revised "Song of Myself" is partially responsible for a view such as Mencken's that while "An American Primer" and "Slang in America" "make war upon the old American subservience to eighteenth century English pedantry and open the way for the development of a healthy and vigorous autochthonous language in the United States," Whitman never completely realizes his own theories.[17] Mencken goes on to say that it was not such an avowed literary rebel as Whitman who actually "seasoned" literature with the American

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[16]Walt Whitman, quoted by Horace Traubel in the Foreward to "An American Primer," Untermeyer, p. 569.

[17]H. L. Mencken, The American Language Suppl. I, (1945; rpt; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) p. 124.

vernacular, but rather the American humorists who culminated in James Russell Lowell and Mark Twain.[18] It is true that even in much of the 1855 poem the American rude tongue is not present. Yet Mencken's comments and those of other critics such as Rebecca Coy, who is also disappointed that Leaves of Grass "is not the rich depository of colloquial language and Americanisms which might reasonably have been expected,"[19] seem based on the concept that Whitman is to be judged simply as a recorder of the American speech in the last half of the nineteenth century. But Whitman's role as an American poet transcends that of language-recorder. He is more importantly a poet who celebrates American idealism and democracy, realizes the mutual dependence of spirituality and materialism, and recognizes the common bond of humanity. Although the colloquial voice is often the vehicle for the expression of these themes, they are sometimes expressed with equal effectiveness by Whitman's prophetic or oratorical voice. That he did not write his poems entirely with the language of the American vernacular is also to his credit as a poet whose passages are often lyrical. Yet even given that many parts of "Song of Myself" are not uniquely American in language, Whitman's colloquial voice and American vocabulary as means to express successfully his major symbols are present to a degree not attempted before in a serious poem. And although, as Mencken says, Twain is more successful in seasoning American literature with the vernacular, one would only expect him to be so since Huckleberry Finn is fiction narrated in the language of a small-town Mississippi

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[18] Ibid., p. 128.

[19] Coy, p. 124.

boy. Nevertheless there are striking similarities in the colloquial styles of Whitman and Twain. The natural flow of Whitman's colloquial passages, his frequent use of slang, his tendency to display objects in lists, and the rhythms and repetitions which construct the speaking voice of the democratic American persona who narrates "Song of Myself" are forerunners in poetry of what Twain did in prose. If Twain, as Hemingway said, is the beginning of modern American literature,[20] it is not inaccurate to add that Whitman prepared the way.

Although Whitman achieved his goal of creating a uniquely American expression in "Song of Myself," he did not succeed in moving the masses as he had wished to do. The masses never absorbed him as effectionately as he had absorbed them. Whitman seemed to be reconciled to this as he gave a backward glance in 1878 at the less than hearty public reception his poems had received.[21] His recognition came instead from other writers, such as Emerson, and Thoreau, and his poetry, by the same token, influenced later writers rather than the masses themselves. Whitman's rejection of rhyme and conventional metrical structure for the lines of his free verse based on the rhythms of speech were echoed in such poets as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hart Crane, Robinson Jeffers, and Carl Sandburg, the latter's colloquial style and faith in the common man reflecting perhaps the closest link. But one cannot carry comparisons too far, for in the last

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[20]Ernest Hemingway, Green Hills of Africa, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935) p. 22.

[21]Walt Whitman "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads," Preface to November Boughs, 1888, in Untermeyer, pp. 507-08.

analysis Matthiessen's words ring true when he says that Whitman's "kind of rhythm seems to have been suited almost exclusively to his own temperament."[22] And no other poet ever spoke with such a combination of voices in one poem. Chanter, boaster, lyricist, orator, preacher, prophet, casual yet intimate confidante--Whitman is all of these in "Song of Myself." Yet the diversity of these voices is unified by his discovery of the democratic soul in the language of common men for common things and his belief that America offered the most fertile ground for that discovery.

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[22] Matthiessen, p. 592.

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