

# Walt Whitman's Split Poetic Personalities

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## ABSTRACT

Walt Whitman fills his poetry with contradictions and inconsistencies as he explores different solutions to complex spiritual, social, and psychological problems. Such contradictions often take the form of competing first-person characters, each with a different set of beliefs, powers, and experiences. In the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* especially, there is a chaotic tension between other and self, unity and difference, transcendence and isolation, knowledge and confusion, reality and façade, and power and weakness. These tensions play out in the realm of the “I” as the narrator regularly shifts his form and his relationship to the world around him.

Twentieth-century critics have read Whitman from a variety of angles. Most readings identify a division of competing projects or voices, but the nature of the division depends on the particular critical lens at work. In particular, this essay examines D. H. Lawrence, Malcolm Cowley, Harold Bloom, and Vivian Pollak as readers of Whitman. Each of them finds it necessary to reduce the complexity of the poetry, but each also contributes an important critical analysis that expands the discussion of Whitman’s critical tensions and their purposes. Ultimately, I argue that Whitman’s division of contradictory first person voices offers his poetry a unique rhetorical force.

## Walt Whitman's Split Poetic Personalities

Whitman seems to prepare us for any inconsistency in a passage from section 51 of "Song of Myself": "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then. . . I contradict myself; / I am large. . . I contain multitudes." The narrator of this poem thereby claims a chaotic unity that makes both him and his spiritual mission "large," but the uncomfortable tensions produced by his contradictions cannot be explained so easily. The narrator sometimes claims a transcendent power that allows him to instantly cross continents, to speak for everyone, or to absorb the suffering of others, while at other times he is simply one of a procession, who can only celebrate himself or muse on natural mysteries. At still other times, an entity outside the narrator resists him, calling his transcendent power into question. In fact, the narrator cannot contain all of the multitudes, and the natural world in particular finds several opportunities to push against his universalizing drive. There is a self-awareness in Whitman's poetry that holds its "large," transcendent hero at a distance and creates a richer, larger poetic world that contains other entities and personas who demand a more complex consideration of a number of ontological, aesthetic, and psychological problems. In the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* especially, there is a chaotic tension between other and self, unity and difference, transcendence and isolation, knowledge and confusion, reality and façade, and power and weakness.

Many critical readings of Whitman have identified a division of voices, each with a different set of powers and ontological boundaries. Vivian Pollak, for example, identifies a cast of characters that often undercut Whitman's most transcendent poetry:

Divergent and differently marked voices haunt the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, as in some measure they continue to haunt the subsequent books. Even as he strove for unity, consecutiveness, ensemble, Whitman mainly produced a poetry of disunion, gaps, and indirection. (58)

Harold Bloom likewise structures his analysis around the "dance of roles constantly substituting for one another" (Bloom 1976:12). Whitman never defines his cast of characters and entities in a consistent or precise way, so the door is open for a variety of readings.

Critics have considered the question from many different angles, and of course there is no widespread agreement, but what nearly everyone agrees upon is the distinction between Whitman the poet and the narrator of his poetry. The 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (from which all excerpts will be taken unless otherwise noted) creates distance from its author by excluding the Whitman's name from the title page, containing instead his image (probably in character) on the frontispiece facing the title page. Another page notes that the book has been entered into copyright by "Walter Whitman," and the name "Walt" is not encountered until section 24 of what would later be known as the "Song of Myself," where we meet "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos." Malcolm Cowley, in his 1959 introduction to the first edition, considers this character to be distinct from the poet:

This dramatization of the hero makes it possible for the living Whitman to exalt him – as he would not have ventured, at the time, to exalt himself – but also to poke mild fun at the hero for his gab and his loitering, for his tall talk or “omnivorous words,” and for sounding his barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. The religious feeling in *Song of Myself* is counterpoised by a humor that takes the form of slangy and mischievous impudence or drawling Yankee self-ridicule. (xv)

It is conventional, of course, to distinguish any author from the narrator, but this is a particular kind of resistance that undermines what we might call the universalizing project of the hero. What the hero inflates, the poet or narrator often deflates, often in the voice of another persona or character.

In this essay, I will outline the models of Whitman’s fragmented poetic personalities proposed by several critics, and then offer my own reading in order to consider the way each model is demonstrated in the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Each model approaches Whitman’s poetic fragments from a different critical angle, but I would like to show some of the ways they map onto each other and form a set of useful interpretive tools. Ultimately, the chaos of Whitman’s poetic vision accomplishes what a less contradictory poetry simply could not have accomplished, and a true understanding of Whitman requires a large critical toolbox to allow for all of the multitudes it contains.

The terminology will inevitably become a little chaotic as more characters enter the analysis, so I’ll start with a few important definitions. I will use the term “narrator” to simply describe Whitman’s first person voice at all times. The narrator will

sometimes coincide with other entities, one of which I will term the “Hero.” This is the character that predominates much of Whitman’s poetry (and especially “Song of Myself”), who is named “Walt Whitman,” usually speaks in the first person, and often claims a supernatural awareness and power. Finally, I will use the terms “Whitman” or “poet” to refer to the historical Whitman, who is always extratextual or hovering outside the poetry. Many critics and readers simply consider the Hero to be Whitman’s always-active narrator, or even Whitman himself, but to accept all of the Hero’s bold declarations at face value would be to reduce Whitman’s rich, complex poetry to a simple philosophical treatise. In fact, very little of the poetry is as straightforward as it seems.

The equation of Whitman’s Hero with Whitman himself was conventional for a long time, and most of the early reactions to *Leaves of Grass* concern the poet more than the book. Thoreau, for example, considered the book a “brag” which demands a comparison to or judgment of its poet: “Since I have seen [Whitman] I find that I am not disturbed by any brag or egotism in his book. He may turn out to be the least braggart of all, having a better right to be confident. He is a great fellow.” The Hero of the first edition, however, is far more than a “great fellow,” and Thoreau’s comparison suggests that Whitman himself possessed some measure of the supernatural and spiritual power he depicted in his poetry. The negative reactions, of course, were just as personal. One review, which Whitman called a “lump of—you know what,” declared that he was a sexual predator, he had the moral sensibilities of “a stock-breeder,” and he ought to kill himself (Kaplan 222, 242). It was the sexuality of *Leaves of Grass* which

drew the broadest and most personal criticism, even as it became more and more ridiculous over time to connect the aggressively omnisexual Hero to the aging, disorganized, oddly asexual hermit of Camden, New Jersey. After Whitman's death, critics understandably treated him with a little more distance, but the detachment of the poetry from the man was still impossible, and emotional reactions still predominated. Ezra Pound called Whitman his "spiritual father," but also considered him "disgusting" and "exceedingly nauseating" (8-9). D.H. Lawrence, in his 1923 essay "Whitman," admitted a conflicted relationship with Whitman, strongly attacking and simultaneously admiring him. Lawrence's essay is a turning point in Whitman criticism, however, because it examines the conflicting motives in his poetry.

Lawrence does not credit Whitman with any ironic self-awareness, but he does identify a tension between the Hero's bold prophecy and the ability of the poet or narrator to fulfill that prophecy. He condemns Whitman for the universalizing, absorptive Hero, who sometimes appears to obliterate the masses, and whose uplifting project therefore cannot be trusted. On the other hand, Lawrence admires Whitman for his sense of radical equality when he meets subjects on their own terms, because a universal respect that maintains personal difference is what he considers a worthy poetic project.

First of all, Lawrence objects to the construction of a narrator that embodies the "uncomfortable universalization" that transcends any individual experience. For example, reacting to the line, "I am he that aches with amorous love," Lawrence chides Whitman:

Walter, leave off. You are not HE. You are just a limited Walter. And your ache doesn't include all Amorous Love, by any means. If you ache you only ache with a small bit of amorous love, and there's so much more stays outside the cover of your ache, that you might be a bit milder about it. (12)

Lawrence points out the impossibility of the claims of the Hero persona, and the inability of anyone to contain a broad category of human experience. The three line poem Lawrence cites, first published in 1860 in the Children of Adam series, is characteristic of Whitman's Hero:

I Am He That Aches With Love

I am he that aches with amorous love,

Does the earth gravitate? does not all matter, aching, attract all matter?

So the body of me to all I meet or know.

The capitalization of "Amorous Love" is Lawrence's, but its presumptiveness, at least, would not be terribly out of place in Whitman's poem. The narrator as Hero boldly proclaims here that he sexually attracts everyone and is likewise attracted to them. He takes the conceit a step further in section 40 of the "Song of Myself," explicitly claiming to nullify any subjectivity within his absorptive power:

I am not to be denied. . . .I compel. . . .I have stores plenty and to spare.

And any thing I have I bestow.

I do not ask who you are. . . .that is not important to me,

You can do nothing and be nothing but what I will infold you.

It is this presumption that offends Lawrence. The people and places the Hero absorbs are simply less important than the Hero's ability to absorb them.



What Lawrence misses, however, is that despite the Hero's absorptive, corporeal demands, he is better understood as an incorporeal ideal of democracy that uses the terms of corporeality only as metaphors. The concept of a universally desired, universally desiring amorous lover, for example, is ridiculous when applied to any real, discerning human, but it would be more accurate to consider the Hero's universal sexual claim to be a radically different and inhuman brand of sexuality, disembodied from the bodies it supposedly derives from. The Hero is aggressively promoting a sort of Platonic form of amorous love, one that can only be gestured toward in literature. Whitman's poetry always begins with metaphysical claims and spiritual models and then progresses to the imagery of democracy, sex, brotherhood, and the body. One of Whitman's innovations is to give his holy ghost of democracy a body, to obsess over the body's senses, and to constantly gesture outside the text toward the reader. He demands that the Hero, like Jesus, be miraculously transubstantiated into flesh, as if nothing could be more realistic.

Messianic imagery, in fact, pervades "Song of Myself." In section 33, the Hero, in the course of a catalogue of his travels, claims a personal relationship with "god": "Walking the old hills of Judea with the beautiful gentle god by my side." When the catalogue shifts to examples of human suffering, the Hero is eager to adopt that suffering himself: "Agonies are one of my changes of garments," "I myself become the wounded person," "I am the man ... I suffered ... I was there." In section 38, we even encounter the narrator's crucifixion:

That I could forget the mockers and insults!

That I could forget the trickling tears and the blows of the bludgeons and  
hammers!

That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody  
crowning!

Harold Bloom considers Whitman's "true scandal" to be the equation of the Hero to Christ, not the pervasive sexuality in *Leaves of Grass* for which he was so broadly attacked (9). It is hard to disagree, and this oversight in most of the early negative reviews suggests that those reviewers were simply not reading very closely. The later revisions of *Leaves of Grass* would reduce some of the sexual imagery, possibly reflecting Whitman's reaction to the scandal of the book's sexuality, but the messianic portions of the book were virtually unchanged. With the exception of the later capitalization of "God" in section 33, none of these passages was revised at all beyond punctuation (Triggs 549-573).

Implicit in the messianic Hero persona is a claim to racial universality. There is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, for they are one within the Hero's kosmos. Lawrence takes particular issue with the narrator's frequent claim to speak for other races. In a somewhat dated diatribe, he declares, "Esquimos are not minor little Walts. They are something that I am not, I know that. Outside the egg of my allness chuckles the greasy little Esquimo. Outside the egg of Whitman's allness, too" (14). He goes on to compare Whitman to a driver at night who can only see the beams of his headlights: "Allness! shrieks Whitman at a cross-road, going whizz over an unwary Red Indian" (15). Whitman's relationship with race has filled volumes of criticism, but it is fair to

say that he describes other races more or less positively in his poetry. The narrator of "Song of Myself" harbors a fugitive slave (which the poet never did), follows a black wagon-driver in order to admire him, and praises the "friendly and flowing savage." What, then, is Lawrence objecting to? The description of the wagon-driver in section 13 will help to answer this question:

The negro holds firmly the reins of his four horses. . . .the block swags underneath  
on its tied-over chain,

The negro that drives the huge dray of the stoneyard. . . .steady and tall he stands  
poised on one leg on the stringpiece,

His blue shirt exposes his ample neck and breast and loosens over his hipband,

His glance is calm and commanding. . . .he tosses the slouch of his hat away from  
his forehead,

The sun falls away on his crispy hair and moustache. . . .falls on the black of his  
perfect and polished limbs.

Some of this passage could just as easily describe the frontispiece of the first edition, in which the poet has not, as of this point, been named. At the very least, the loose shirt, calm glance, and slouching hat suggest that this character is a partial mirror for the "I" who observes him. The narrator as Hero is projecting himself onto a new character. This is a clear example of what the narrator calls in section 42 "omnivorous words." The Hero is only able to characterize racial difference by projecting sameness onto it. Another example is in section 39, where the narrator introduces the "friendly and flowing savage":

Is he some southwesterner raised outdoors? Is he Canadian?

Is he from the Mississippi country? or from Iowa, Oregon or California? or from  
the mountain? or prairie life or bush-life? or from the sea?

Wherever he goes men and women accept and desire him,

They desire he should like them and touch them and speak to them and stay  
with them.

Behaviour lawless as snowflakes. . . words simple as grass. . . uncombed head and  
laughter and naivete;

Slowstepping feet and the common features, and the common modes and  
emanations,

They descend in new forms from the tips of his fingers,

They are wafted with the odor of his body or breath. . . they fly out of the glance  
of his eyes.

Once again, this description might as well be of the Hero himself. The savage's identity is indeterminate and therefore universal, extending into the "bush" of Africa and the "sea" of Polynesia. His words are like leaves of grass, his fingers create new forms, and like the Hero in "I am He that Aches with Love," he is universally desired. The Hero cannot admit anyone to escape the all-expansive canopy of his own identity.

When the narrator harbors a fugitive slave in section 10, however, we get a glimpse of what Lawrence admires in Whitman's poetry, what he terms as "sympathy." The narrator does not absorb or project the fugitive's identity at all, but rather meets him on his own terms, eats with him at the same table, and lets him go. The difference in description is clear:

The runaway slave came to my house and stopped outside,  
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,  
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsey and weak,  
And went where he sat on a log, and led him in and assured him,  
And brought water and filled a tub for his sweated body and bruised feet,  
And gave him a room that entered from my own, and gave him some coarse  
    clean clothes,  
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,  
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;  
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and passed north,  
I had him sit next me at the table. . . .my firelock leaned in the corner.

At every stage of this episode, the narrator asserts not only the fugitive's equality with himself, but also his difference. In fact, it is the recognition of the fugitive's difference and vulnerability that enables the narrator to help him. He does not hide the fugitive's damaged body from view, nor does he claim any kind of personal acceptance from him beyond an acceptance of charity. This is not the Hero speaking. The narrator of this section takes on a new persona, whom I will call the "Sympathizer."

This is the entity (or at least the poetic motivation) that Lawrence credits with "the American heroic message," "a new great doctrine," "feeling with [other wayfarers along the road] as they feel with themselves" (19). The admirable Whitman, he writes, is not the Hero who suffers for us like Jesus or absorbs us into his kosmos, but the Sympathizer who meets us on the open road, accepts us exactly as we are, and lets us go.

The narrator sometimes takes on this persona when he allows others to speak. For example, he encounters a prostitute in section 15, who taunts a crowd with “blackguard oaths”:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and pimpled  
neck,

The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each other,  
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you,)

The prostitute’s voice remains separate from the narrator’s, and like the fugitive, her body is grotesque. The narrator does not intervene in the crowd, and his sympathy is expressed by his isolation from it. The most the narrator as Sympathizer can do is observe her misery, silently express his disapproval of the crowd, and move on.

Later on in section 24 of “Song of Myself,” the narrator as Hero absorbs the voices of both slaves and prostitutes:

Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,  
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,  
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarves...

In this case, the Hero emphasizes that both figures are outcasts and therefore in want of a public voice. He also seems to be speaking for the dead, especially for those who were prevented from speaking when they were alive. The earlier prostitute’s “blackguard oaths” have been silenced as the Hero becomes a sort of medium for her

identity. Later, in section 33, the Hero absorbs the suffering of a catalogue of subjects, including a scene with a fugitive slave:

I am the hounded slave. . . I wince at the bite of the dogs,  
Hell and despair are upon me. . . crack and again crack the marksmen,  
I clutch the rails of the fence. . . my gore dribs thinned with the ooze of my skin,  
I fall on the weeds and stones,  
I riders spur their unwilling horses and haul close,  
They taunt my dizzy ears. . . they beat me violently over the head with their whip-  
stocks.

In the earlier scene, the focus was on the fugitive's damaged body, but the majority of this new scene is devoted to the agents of violence who damage him. The Hero absorbs the fugitive's identity in order to absorb his suffering, but the fugitive must become highly passive, as if he is a third person in the scene while the Hero stands against the marksmen and dogs to absorb their violence. Gone are the more-developed "revolving eyes" and "awkwardness" of the fugitive's subjectivity that the Sympathizer has previously allowed.

Fast forward three decades, and Malcolm Cowley tries to reconcile these cross purposes into the single, coherent narrative of a character who represents the experience of what was literally Whitman's transformative spiritual awakening. As framed by Cowley, "Song of Myself" is similar to Dante's *Divine Comedy* in that a dynamic protagonist who shares a name with the poet is granted a vision, goes on a spiritual quest, and takes into himself some degree of divinity along the way. Cowley

does not go so far as to suggest the particulars of the mystical experience, but he notes the similarity of its effect to "Samadhi," a Hindu and Buddhist term denoting a high level of meditation. He argues that Whitman's access to Eastern literature and philosophy was limited, but that his Samadhi allowed him to re-invent similar ideas for himself. This vision apparently occurred as the first edition was being written: "What it must have been was a mystical experience in the proper sense of the term. Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, the most acute of Whitman's immediate disciples, believed that it took place on a June morning in 1853 or 1854. He also believed that it was repeated on other occasions" (xii-xxii). In this case, what Cowley calls the poet's "transpersonal" vision informs the creation of the Hero, who is a transliteration of Whitman himself in his elevated state.

Cowley's structural model of the "Song of Myself" begins with the introduction of the "poet or hero" (or simply the "narrator" in my terminology) as he leans and loafers at his ease. In Cowley's structure, this is a coherent, always-active entity (like Dante's "Dante") who merely changes his abilities and beliefs as the poem goes on. In fact, the Sympathizer as defined above is more active than the Hero at the beginning of the poem. The narrator declares in section 1, "every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." The Hero who becomes active later in the poem would probably rather say, "every atom belonging to you as good belongs to me." When the narrator as Sympathizer in section 5 turns to his "soul," he asserts its equality with "the other I am," presumably the body, and friendly conversation turns into a casual sexual



encounter which formally begins the vision quest. The initiation of enlightenment occurs at the moment of climax, and is followed by a state of hyper-awareness:

You [my soul] settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon  
me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my  
barestript heart,

And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet.

Swiftly 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 elder brother of my own,

And that all the men ever born are my brothers. . . .and the women my sisters and  
lovers,

And that a kelson of the creation is love;

And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,

And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,

And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullen  
and pokeweed.

The sexual union of body and soul leads to a series of revelations: first, the narrator's intimate connection to God, second, his intimate connection to other humans, and finally his intimate connection to the minutiae of nature. Love is a "kelson," meaning a structural girder of a ship, of "the creation," which is therefore not an event but a moving vessel. If this section recalls Eastern mysticism, it does so in a way that is

thoroughly original. Whitman's poetic "soul" is not a well-defined entity, but this passage demonstrates that although it is part of the narrator's identity, it would normally be outside the narrator's body. The sexual union of the narrator's soul and body must be an extraordinary occurrence, and leads to a heightened sensual awareness that gives the narrator a microscopic knowledge of the world outside his body. According to Cowley, the poet's eyes are "truly open for the first time" (xvii), and he begins the extended vision quest by humbly turning to the grass in section 6.

In Cowley's structural model, the narrator has not yet gained the power of absorption, but he applies his new awareness to the people and places around him before turning that awareness upon himself in section 20, and then upon his individual senses in section 26. The vision quest reaches its peak in section 28, when the personified sense of touch stages an attack on the body. This attack is the other moment of "Song of Myself" that Cowley describes as an "ecstasy," this time "through the senses" (xviii). This time, however, the effect is explicitly reductive rather than expansive. The narrator is attacked "on all sides by prurient provokers" that diminish his mind and his other senses. He envisions his body as a political state that is betrayed by the agents of touch, and then the attack shifts from political to sexual as the narrator's sense of touch becomes a sort of rapist:

The sentries desert every other part of me,  
They have left me helpless to a red marauder,  
They all come to the headland to witness and assist against me.

I am given up by traitors;

I talk wildly. . . .I have lost my wits. . . .I and nobody else am the greatest traitor,  
I went myself first to the headland. . . .my own hands carried me there.

You villain touch! what are you doing?. . . .my breath is tight in its throat;  
Unclench your floodgates! you are too much for me.

This would seem to be a collapse of the meditative Samadhi that awakens the narrator to transpersonal unity. Betsy Erkkila points out that the narrator in this section is experiencing a masturbatory fantasy:

Stimulated and stiffened by the 'treacherous' fingertips of himself, the poet loses his bodily balance. Carried away by the solitary act of onanism, he also loses the balance between self and other, body and soul that is part of his democratic posture (104).

The autoerotic "ecstasy" at this point seems to have precisely the opposite effect of the Samadhi of section 5. What was once balanced by a unity between soul and body has now become unbalanced by autoeroticism, and the "democratic posture" exhibited by the Hero is thereby disrupted.

Just as the first ecstasy, progressing from a casual sexual encounter, created a state of microscopic awareness, the second ecstasy, a kind of self-rape, creates a state of macroscopic awareness as he gains the power of universal identification over the next ten or so sections. In section 39, Cowley designates the active persona as the "superman," a being who emerges from the vision with a feeling of omnipotence. Section 39, in fact, is entirely focused on the "friendly and flowing savage," but Cowley agrees with my earlier reading of this character as simply another face of the Hero. The following sections depict the superman, or a version of the Hero in his most powerful

and most Christ-like incarnation. In section 42, this character speaks out with “a call in the midst of the crowd, / my own voice, orotund sweeping and final,” and delivers a kind of sermon on the mount to the democratic masses, and finally, he begins to deflate as he prepares to depart in the final sections, narrowing his scope until he is speaking to the individual reader (xix-xx).

If Cowley’s reading seems a little reductive, it is because his critical project is primarily biographical. He wants to read “Song of Myself” as the documentation of Whitman’s mystical life, and he structures his analysis around those moments that supposedly represent some kind of real spiritual awakening. To accomplish this reading, he requires a coherent but highly dynamic character at the center of the poem that acts as an allegorical figure for the historical Whitman.

More modern analyses of “Song of Myself” tend to resist the kind of structural reading Cowley presents. David Reynolds goes so far as to emphasize the freedom from structure as one of the poem’s central elements:

The poem as a whole follows no discernable pattern. There have been nearly twenty different descriptions of a ‘structure’ of ‘Song of Myself,’ most of them centered on the development of the private self, but these varying, sometimes contradictory explanations are Procrustean efforts to impose order on a poem whose free form is one of its main rhetorical points. (325)

Reynolds’ categorical resistance to a unifying structure ignores many of Whitman’s important movements. There are some well-defined causal structures, for instance when the Hero’s prolonged vision of war in sections 34-36 leaves him “stunned” and

isolated. Also, the Hero's powers expand, more or less, from the beginning to the end. In particular, the union of body and soul that Cowley makes so much of is indeed a transformative moment, allowing the expansion of the narrator's consciousness until he becomes a "Kosmos," a being with transcendent power that holds a central place in Whitman's ideology.

Whitman took the term "Kosmos" directly from the Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's 1845 book of the same name. Humboldt, like many scientific writers of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, was concerned with the union of scientific fact and comforting spirituality. He argued that the whole of nature, from the enormous to the miniscule, was connected in an orderly and harmonious manner, and that human consciousness was nature's ultimate creation. Humboldt's *Kosmos* was a place where nature, intuition, and art were merely different faces of the same continuum, and where the scientist, philosopher, and artist alike should employ themselves with discovering the hidden links between these forms. It is no surprise that the term became so instrumental to Whitman, who read the work in translation (*Cosmos*) but preferred the exotic-sounding "K" of the German. In an early notebook, he offered his own definition: "noun masculine or feminine, a person who[se] scope of mind, or whose range in a particular science, includes all, the whole known universe" (Reynolds 245). Whitman's application of the term to an exceptional, all-inclusive individual is a departure from Humboldt, but we can see a stronger resemblance at the conclusion of section 5 of "Song of Myself," when the narrator's sudden enlightenment, what Cowley calls Samadhi, leads him to microscopic vision:

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.

The harmonious unity of large and small is the hallmark of Humboldt's *Kosmos*. We do not encounter the term "Song of Myself" until section 24 with the identification of "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a Kosmos," but the narrator's microscopic awareness in section 5 truly signals his transformation, a definitive expansion of his "scope of mind," to use Whitman's phrase. One of Whitman's innovations was to adapt the term to the individual while maintaining Humboldt's original definition, so that an awareness of the unity of the large and small scales of nature is exactly what allows the Hero to become so powerful and inclusive.

Structure and continuity certainly exists in all of Whitman's poetry, even if Cowley gets a little carried away in his identification of it. He takes the broad coherence of "Song of Myself" for granted, and anticipates counter-readings by mocking them: "I do not see how any careful reader, unless blinded with preconceptions, could overlook the unity of the poem in tone and image and direction" (xx).

Fast forward two more decades, and Harold Bloom provides one such counter-reading (of all Whitman's poetry, not just "Song of Myself") that undermines the unity that Cowley argues for. His primary concern is with an aesthetic continuity that links

Whitman to Wallace Stevens, or, in a later study, to a broad field of “genius” writers.

Bloom divides the active voices of Whitman’s poetry into a trinity of characters:

My soul, in Whitman, is the dark side or alienated, estranged element in nature. My self is Walt Whitman, one of the roughs, an American, malest of males. The real me or me myself is night, death, the mother, and the sea. The crossings in Whitman’s poetry therefore take place in the realm of my self, the world of anxiety, negativity, meaning. But the crossings move from the realm of the soul, unknown nature, to the known world of the real me or me myself, where what night, death, the mother, and the sea have in common is restitution, the function of compensating Whitman for what an estranged nature keeps taking from him. The persona of my self, as in the title *Song of Myself*, is only a perpetual breaking of forms or shattering of vessels, a dance of roles constantly substituting for one another, and interplay of re-cognitions that leads Whitman from the haunts of his soul to the recognitions of the real me. (Bloom 1976:12)

The first figure of Bloom’s complex analysis is the soul, an entity which the narrator can never fully access, and which is therefore constantly prohibitive of the transcendent sense of unity that he so craves. The “Walt Whitman” persona or Hero is imagined here to be a protean stage-actor consumed by anxiety over this lack of unity. He is able to constantly shift his form to better negotiate a connection to nature and humanity. The final persona, the “Me Myself,” is perhaps the most difficult to identify and understand. In Bloom’s analysis, the narrator never fully achieves the transcendent power he attempts to gain, but when he comes to terms with loss and isolation through the imagery of “night, death, the mother, and the sea,” he reaches a sort of inner peace or resignation to nature rather than power over it.

The “Me myself” appears in section 4 of “Song of Myself” as an inner personal entity that is unaffected by experience or knowledge:

Trippers and askers surround me,  
People I meet. . . the effect upon me of my early life. . . of the ward and city I  
live in. . . of the nation,  
The latest news. . . discoveries, inventions, societies. . . authors old and new,  
My dinner, dress, associates, looks, business, compliments, dues,  
The real or fancied indifference of some man or woman I love,  
The sickness of one of my folks – or of myself. . . or ill-doing. . . or loss or  
lack of money. . . or depressions or exaltations,  
They come to me days and nights and go from me again,  
But they are not the Me myself.

The narrator of this early section of the poem has not yet demonstrated the power of collective absorption, and the experiences described here are clearly those of an individual. The “Me myself,” a mysterious inner being, remains constant as the narrator’s personal experience accumulates. This being is not the “soul,” but it represents a spiritual fragment of self disconnected even from the thoughts and emotions of its owner.

Bloom would later associate the “Me myself” with the “genius or daemon” of Whitman, or something like his muse. He sees Whitman as turning in upon himself for inspiration, displacing from himself a spiritual doppelganger which increasingly appears in later poems: “I suspect that the mockingbird, ‘my dusky demon and brother,’ of ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,’ and the hermit thrush of ‘When



Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd' are alternate versions of Whitman's genius or daemon" (Bloom 2002: 586). While it is possible that these characters are versions of the removed, unchanging "Me myself" of the "Song of Myself," Bloom is on tenuous ground (along with many other critics) when he draws a straight line from the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* to the subsequent editions. Throughout his career, Whitman was constantly reinventing himself as a poet, and the later editions sometimes offer a strong counterpoint to the first edition, reflecting Whitman's shifting aesthetic vision. Such is the subject for another study, but in any case, the "Me myself" is an important figure in Bloom's trinity as a sort of destination for the Hero, who seeks the spiritual unity it represents as a recovery from the damaging encounters with "my soul."

The soul, the "dark side or alienated, estranged element in nature" makes several appearances in the "Song of Myself," often in a distinct, individualized figure I will term as the "Foil." As Bloom suggests above, the careful reader of Whitman is always well-served to pay close attention to his birds, and in the "Song of Myself," there are several birds which act as Foil to the narrator, belittling his transcendent mission, expressing a powerful and dark emotion he cannot assimilate, or confounding him entirely. For example, the "wild gander" of section 14 becomes an icon which fascinates the narrator but remains unreachable:

The wild gander leads his flock through the cool night,  
Ya-honk! he says, and sounds it down to me like an invitation;  
The pert may suppose it meaningless, but I listen closer,  
I find its purpose and place up there toward the November sky.

The narrator takes an especially passive role in this passage, relying on his powers of observation rather than his ability to absorb the gander or to directly reach the sky. The narrator's shift toward the Sympathizer is necessary if he is to negotiate a relationship with the out-of-reach gander. The gander is unaware of the narrator, and its "Ya-honk" only seems like an invitation. The "purpose and place" of the gander's call is in the inaccessible night sky, and draws our attention to the dark zone of nature to which the narrator's awareness does not extend. A more "pert" listener such as the Hero would dismiss or fail to address what he cannot control or absorb, but the Sympathizer can at least appreciate the separateness of the gander as Foil, who forces a crisis by reminding the narrator of his limits.

A darker Foil appears in section 52 as the narrator of "Song of Myself" prepares for death:

The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me. . . .he complains of my gab  
and my loitering.

I too am not a bit tamed. . . .I too am untranslatable,

I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.

When the narrator claims the same "untranslatable" quality as the hawk by sounding his "barbaric yawp," the effect is not at all parallel. We understand the "yawp" to be some gibberish expression that simply announces the narrator's universal presence, but the hawk's "accusation" and "complaint" carry a deeper illocutionary power. The appearance of the hawk, in fact, reminds us that the Hero's universal presence, even his

life itself, can be reduced to “gab” and “loitering.” The Hero at this point is deflated and reminded that his far-reaching rhetoric may actually be an intrusion.

If D.H. Lawrence were to write himself into “Song of Myself” (let’s say as a rooster), this is exactly the role he would play and the “complaint” he would make. By presenting the intrusive Hero as a straightforward figure of Whitman’s poetic philosophy, Lawrence underestimates Whitman’s ability to ironize his own omnivorous words. In the Foil, we have a mysterious and deflationary element that reminds us, just as Lawrence reminds us, of the Hero’s limitations. Cowley considers the hawk’s complaint to be Whitman “poking mild fun” at his narrator as just one example of the “drawling Yankee humor” that stands in the way of spiritual elevation (xv), but he underestimates the darkness of the hawk, who is in fact rushing the Hero toward death, and he does not comment on what the poem’s “humor” may mean about poet’s mystical life, but the term certainly suggests that the poem is not a simple transliteration of Samadhi.

Perhaps the strangest appearance of a natural Foil is in section 24-25, when the narrator comes into conflict with the sun:

The earth by the sky staid with. . . . the daily close of their junction,

The heaved challenge from the east that moment over my head,

The mocking taunt, See then whether you shall be master!

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun would kill me,

If I could not now and always send sunrise out of me.

The sun, rising at dawn, recognizes that the Hero wishes to become its master, but the preemptive “mocking taunt” reverses the direction of aggression, making the Hero afraid for his life and placing him on the defensive. The Hero’s own “sunrise,” like a sort of arms race, restores the balance, but just as with the hawk, his attempt to copy nature’s power does not exactly succeed. The Hero’s “sunrise,” like many of his physical abilities, is a spiritual metaphor, while the sun’s sunrise is more conventional, and we are once again reminded of the Hero’s physical limitation. He can only compete with the sun by changing the grounds of the conflict while using the same terms.

The Hero’s absorption often comes into conflict with nature, but when an individuated champion of nature does not appear, the result is far different. In section 31, the Hero encounters resistance from nature at large, but no particular Foil is present. The rocks emit heat, objects obscure themselves in the distance, and animals retreat, but the Hero overcomes the ability of nature to avoid being part of him:

In vain the speeding or shyness,

In vain the plutonic rocks send their old heat against my approach,

In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powdered bones,

In vain objects stand leagues off and assume manifold shapes,

In vain the ocean settling in the hollows and the great monsters lying low,

In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,

In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs,

In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,

In vain the razorbilled auk sails far north to Labrador,

I follow quickly. . . .I ascend to the nest in the fissure of the cliff.

The Hero simply cannot allow nature to escape his “kosmos,” but natural resistance in this section betrays some kind of internal flaw. The Hero has the ability to master his infinite parts, but the parts will not be mastered without a fight. His presence is an intrusion, and even his awareness is unwanted as “objects” try to obscure themselves. Birds appear, but the Hero’s grasp easily extends into the sky, and the buzzard and the auk cannot be considered embodiments of the Foil, who is known by its ability to escape or confound.

The soul or dark side of nature that escapes the narrator is something like the Freudian subconscious, and the protean Hero who negotiates with it, what Bloom calls “a perpetual breaking of forms or shattering of vessels,” is something like the Freudian ego. Bloom’s analysis, in fact, is highly psychoanalytical, with heavy emphasis on repressed sexuality and Whitman’s relationship with his parents. For example, Bloom associates the Genius or “me Myself,” the doppelganger/muse figure, with Whitman’s mother. In this reading, “Song of Myself” sometimes resembles a therapist’s couch. The meditative experience that Cowley credits as mystical becomes more like a self-hypnotic revelation of repressed memories, or a kind of dream therapy that identifies particular figures as representative of subconscious desires.

“Song of Myself,” shifting between these fragments of identity, transforms the common act of poetic introspection into a sort of transcendent experience. When the narrator invokes the Foil in the form of a hawk, for example, he seems to reach outside himself entirely, and the textual re-combination of elements seems to encompass a universal (perhaps even extratextual) zone of knowledge. The Genius or “Me myself”

is a deeply personal, internal figure, standing apart from the experience of life, but the narrator's access to it seems to cross some external boundary. Bloom considers the experience to be mystical: "The 'real Me' is something like a knowing even as one is known, a kind of American gnosis, of which Whitman is an authentic seer" (Bloom 1999:10). By staging fragments of identity as complete beings, Whitman's poetry transforms psychotherapy and self-discovery into an epic and almost allegorical quest beyond the confines of human experience. When the Foil appears and the narrator becomes aware of his isolation and smallness, we can forget all about Cowley's Eastern-style transpersonal mysticism, and Bloom's "gnosis" of self-discovery occurs on entirely different terms, within the deep solitude of the mortal coil.

More modern analyses of Whitman have generally tended away from Bloom's style of psychoanalysis and the search for broad continuity between authors. Several studies emphasize the usefulness of Whitman's biographical data, but unlike Cowley's narrow spiritual argument, they often take a broader survey of Whitman's historical context. Vivian Pollak's *The Erotic Whitman* is a good example. Her analysis, like many analyses of Whitman, assign his contradictory poetic impulses into different first-person characters. Her characters, however, are not spiritual archetypes but figures drawn directly from the poet's life. The first is the "rough," (hereafter the Rough) who exemplifies the aggressive sexuality and potential violence of the Hero. This character is contrasted to the "gentleman of perfect blood," (hereafter the Gentleman) whose aloof manner contains the Hero's composure and self-confidence. Together, these two aspects of the first-person narrator negotiate a relationship with the masses that is at

once intimate and removed. Pollak argues that both Whitman and his narrator are vulnerable to harm from the disapproval of the masses, and that they require a two-pronged defensive approach:

Both the muscular New York rough and the sweet and tender gentleman are impervious to criticism: the rough because of his hypermasculine coarseness, the gentleman because of his class-based access to tradition. Both are armored as Whitman was not. (57)

Pollak's reading of the poetry as a defense mechanism invokes Whitman's well-documented vulnerability to public opinion. Even within the poetry, the narrator often imbues the masses with the power to accept or reject his self and his philosophy, and the preface of the first edition closes with Whitman's ill-fated poetic aspiration: "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it." The Gentleman and the Rough, however, are both figures of isolation, not absorption. Seen in this light, the narrator's bold democratic claims are a way of controlling the crowd that has the potential to do great harm.

The dangerous crowd, in fact, is exactly where we must look to find the Gentleman and the Rough, who are known by their relationship to it. Pollak first identifies the Gentleman somewhat tenuously in the first edition poem, "Song of the Answerer":

The English believe [the answerer] comes of their English stock,

A Jew to the Jew he seems. . . .a Russ to the Russ...usual and near. . . .removed from  
none.

Whoever he looks at in the traveler's coffeehouse claims him,  
The Italian or Frenchman is sure, and the German is sure, and the Spaniard is  
sure. . . .and the island Cuban is sure.

The gentleman of perfect blood acknowledges his perfect blood,  
The insulter, the prostitute, the angry person, the beggar, see themselves in the  
ways of him. . . .he strangely transmutes them,

They are not vile any more. . . .they hardly know themselves, they are so grown.

Pollak's reading of the "Song of the Answerer" is doubtful, since she takes this final stanza out of context to assert a relationship between the "gentleman of perfect blood" and the masses, and thereby argue that he is a figure for Whitman. The gentleman is not, in fact, a parallel figure to the protean "answerer," who does often resemble the first-person narrator of "Song of Myself." The gentleman is merely one of the catalogue of individuals who identify with the answerer, as the previous stanzas make clear. The answerer's power is to be a sort of funhouse mirror, who reflects subjects as he spiritually improves them. This is another incarnation of the Sympathizer, whose identification with multiple subjects is directed from those subjects themselves. The "gentleman of perfect blood" makes the tradition of hereditary class structure irrelevant, since the powerful answerer may gain the influence of class without the prerequisite heredity.

Pollak's error may be credited to her critical project. She is looking for character archetypes in Whitman's personal life, and there is evidence that as a young man, Whitman preferred to dress as a dandy and seek Manhattan's high society. The



opposite figure of the Gentleman, the Rough, better resembles Whitman in the years just before the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and her argument is that Whitman modeled his poetic personas on the characters he tried (not wholly successfully) to inhabit in his own life. Like many structural interpretations of Whitman, this one requires a reduction of the poetry as well as speculation upon his personal psychology. Whitman's poetry forms a rich world of symbols and unstable oppositions that resist any one-to-one translation into Whitman's life.

Nevertheless, Pollak is correct to identify in the first edition a thread of wildness and physical power which often conflicts with a thread of gentleness and affection. This divergence plays out not in the realm of earthly violence, but in the realm of spiritual struggle as once again, the terms of corporeality are often metaphors for the metaphysical. The Rough and the Gentleman may be seen as fragments of the powerful Hero, whose absorptive mission Pollak breaks down into the Rough's active intervention and the Gentleman's passive observation.

The other, better place Pollak identifies the Gentleman is in section 4 of the "Song of Myself," just before the union of body and soul, and just after the identification of the "Me myself" which is a stable, internal entity, independent of personal experience or behavior:

...but they are not the Me myself.

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,

Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,

Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,

Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next,  
Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it.

Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and  
contenders,

I have no mockings or arguments. . . .I witness and wait.

This figure, "what I am," may simply be a continuation of the "Me myself," in which case "the pulling and hauling" and "the game" are equivalent to all experience and feeling, from which the "Me myself" is independent. The physical passivity of "what I am" in this passage does indicate gentility, especially since the "pulling and hauling" suggests either industrial activity or a lower-class sport. Recall that Bloom identifies the "Me myself" as Whitman's muse, a sort of idealized spiritual self that is the "genius or daemon" of all of his poetry. Bloom's central figure in the trinity, "my Self," "the malest of males," is based on the section 24 identification of "Walt Whitman, American, one of the roughs, a kosmos," from which Pollak identifies the Rough. Bloom sees the shifting "my Self" as a means of reaching the restorative, constant "Me myself," but Pollak uses essentially the same passages to argue for an equal division of the Gentleman and the Rough as two parts of a defensive strategy. These readings may seem immensely different, but Bloom and Pollak each recognize an inherent insecurity in Whitman's poetry, and each understands that what Erkkila calls the narrator's "democratic posture" is some kind of defensive, regenerative mask that allows the individual to transcend a world of isolation and criticism that can be very painful. Furthermore, each critic draws a line between the passive and active self, especially in

relation to other humans, and identifying the split requires an examination of the figures of aggression and violence.

The Rough may threaten violence, but there is very little first-person responsibility for the actually violent episodes of the first edition, such as the massacre at Goliad and the sea battle on the *Bonhomme Richard*. As Harold Bloom observes, “Whitman’s was always a poetry of passion and suffering rather than of act and incident, of personality and *pathos* rather than character and *ethos*” (Bloom 1976:11). The narrator does have some relatively aggressive moments, for example in the first edition poems later titled “A Boston Ballad” and “Europe: The 72d and 73d Years of These States,” in which the narrator attacks European monarchs, associating them with slavery and oppression, but these poems are ironic political commentaries on the 1854 Anthony Burns case and the European revolutions of 1848, respectively, and the violence always remains clearly in the realm of oratory.

Another, stranger form of violence is inherent in sex, as in section 21 of “Song of Myself,” when the narrator’s journey through night and across the earth escalates to an explicitly homosexual union:

Press close barebosomed night! Press close magnetic nourishing night!

Night of the south winds! Night of the few large stars!

Still nodding night! Mad naked summer night!

Smile O voluptuous coolbreathed earth!

Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!

Earth of the departed sunset! Earth of the mountains misty-topt!

Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!

Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!

Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!

Far-swooping elbowed earth! Rich apple-blossomed earth!

Smile, for your lover comes!

Prodigal! You have given me love! . . . therefore I to you give love!

O unspeakable passionate love!

Thruster holding me tight and that I hold tight!

We hurt each other as the bridegroom and the bride hurt each other.

The narrator celebrates the night and earth as if they are sexual partners. The abundant earth has already given the narrator “love” and incurred a debt, which the narrator repays “unspeakably” in terms of a homosexual union. This is a radical kind of transcendence comparable to the earlier union of body and soul that initiates the narrator’s spiritual journey, but the soul, by contrast, is ambiguously gendered. A heterosexual union between the active, male Rough and the passive, female earth could also have expressed spiritual transcendence, but such an episode would be infinitely more conventional. The “unspeakable” union between the male, active earth and the male, less-active Rough is more complete for its abandonment of public respectability, and also highlights the extraordinary nature of the union. The democratic crowds may share some of the narrator’s abilities as he passes through different personas, but we can be certain that he alone has had unspeakable sex with the male earth. This episode also contains a mysterious “hurt” which is inherent in any arrangement of sex. This

“hurt” in the heterosexual instance cannot refer simply to the breaking of the hymen, because the bride and bridegroom inflict it equally on each other. It is a deeper, spiritual damage that results from any form of intimacy. The “hurt” becomes more ambiguous when we remember that the sexual union of this passage is purely figurative, another corporeal metaphor for the narrator’s metaphysical state. By entering into a transcendent unity with nature, the narrator seems to suggest, the individual cannot avoid sacrifice. His achievement of universal, microscopic awareness becomes mysteriously bittersweet when we consider it to be a form of violence.

Notice also the punctuation and syntax of this passage. Every sentence is an exclamation, many sentences are fragments, and many use repetitive rhetoric. The final sentence, “We hurt each other as the bride and bridegroom hurt each other,” is a jarring tonal shift. Not only is it the first of several dozen sentences to simply end with a period, it is also a relatively long and complex sentence. The effect is that this final line flows much more slowly than the preceding passage. The explicit sexual image followed by a sudden drop in rhetoric is comparable to sexual climax. Whitman has used this strategy before, as in the more extended climax of the body and soul passage (“Swiftly arose around me... / and I know...”), where a form of metaphysical enlightenment follows the peak of a sexual episode. This union with the earth follows a similar structure, and after its conclusion, the narrator is aware of the “hurt” inherent in his union, perhaps because that union can only be transient, and each individual must return into his own, isolated self. The lovers can only unite for a moment, but their union depends on the illusion that they can permanently become one. In metaphysical

terms, the narrator is constantly faced with potential disillusionment, and his insistence on a climax-and-recovery model of enlightenment betrays a certain resignation to the isolated self, even at his most transcendent, transpersonal moments.

Unless we believe Cowley, however, the spiritual transcendence of *Leaves of Grass* is itself a metaphor for a social and emotional reality. The corporeal terms of incorporeality are in turn representative of the corporeal. Pollak approaches the problem by gesturing outside the text and into Whitman's personal life: "Making textual sex emerged as Whitman's solution to the psychological, political, and social dilemmas that he could not resolve in life" (60). This is an important awareness that is lacking in much of the earlier criticism. For example, when Lawrence objects to the universal claim, "I am he that aches with amorous love," he fails to understand that the "amorousness" of the Hero is in fact a metaphysical claim and in turn a potential solution to the "psychological, political, and social dilemmas" of Whitman's reality. The path from the Hero's fragmented unity to the fragmented American republic and the Civil War is perhaps not as simple or direct as critics often argue, but to be certain, the ontological and political problems Whitman addresses proved to be very difficult and required a complex solution. The metaphysical power of the Hero, expressed by universal amorousness, casual sex with the soul, or "unspeakable" sex with the earth, was that solution. The complex spiritual promise of *Leaves of Grass* also represents a perfectly non-spiritual promise to harmonize the individual, the crowd, the nation, and the Kosmos. Whitman's gestures toward the metaphysical, however, are often undercut, as we have seen. The division of characters holds this immense promise at a

distance and signals Whitman's awareness of the enormous difficulty of keeping such a promise.

With the help of four dramatically different readings, we now have a full cast of overlapping characters: the author, the narrator, the Hero, the messiah, the Sympathizer, the Dante-esque traveler, the superman, the soul, the Foil, the Me myself, the Gentleman, the Rough, and so on. Many fragments of identity may be active at once, depending on what qualities the critic searches for, and any one particular critical approach is unlikely to be as sensitive as Whitman's complex poetry demands. The examination of these fragments allows us to better understand Whitman's crucial oppositions between self and other, unity and difference, knowledge and confusion, and so on. As we have seen, identification of the active persona often depends crucially on the narrator's relationships with other humans, and particularly on the degree of individuality or power he allows them.

Whether or not the Hero's absorptive power belongs to anyone else is a question to which Whitman offers multiple answers. He defines his "Kosmos" of a Hero as an exceptional individual, but he often blends into a crowd or claims the immortality of everyone. In this passage from section 7 of "Song of Myself," the difference seems to be that the Hero simply knows more about the spiritual continuum, and his identification with others is primarily an act of observation:

I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe  
    . . . and am not contained between my hat and boots,  
And peruse manifold objects, no two alike, and every one good,

The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.

I am not an earth or the adjunct of an earth,

I am the mate and companion of the people, all just as immortal and fathomless  
as myself;

They do not know how immortal, but I know.

The Hero's difference from the crowd in this section seems to be contained in his affinity toward it. Only he understands the experiences of everyone, which leads him to believe that everyone is similarly immortal, fathomless, and good. Knowledge and experience are variable, and the Hero is exceptional in these regards, but immortality is universal.

"Song of Myself" maintains a first-person perspective, and all other subjects are filtered through a self-conscious "I," so even when other characters such as the "friendly and flowing savage" gain the power of absorption, we cannot help but consider that character's distance (or lack thereof) from the narrator. There are other poems, however, in which Whitman writes in the third-person. In "There Was a Child Went Forth," the power of absorption becomes a central concern in the absence of "myself." This poem is included in the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, in which twelve untitled poems are separated either by white space or a double line, and usually by a reiteration of the book's title, which might be considered the title of every poem as well. There are tonal and thematic differences between the poems, but the book is clearly meant to be considered as a whole, and therefore some continuity exists between



the absorptive child of "There Was a Child Went Forth" and the Hero of "Song of Myself."

The child, however, absorbs by virtue of simple observation as opposed to any kind of privileged spiritual knowledge:

There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he looked upon and received with wonder or pity or love or  
dread, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day. . . .or  
for many years or stretching cycles of years.

This power of observation and subsequent absorption is not exceptional in any way. It is not the result of a union of body and soul, and certainly not of any kind of sexual union. It is simply the innate power of all humanity. The child's journey of awareness, like the Hero's, begins with the minutiae of his natural surroundings:

. . . .and the fish suspending themselves so curiously below there . . and the  
beautiful curious liquid . . and the water-plants with their graceful flat heads . .  
all became part of him.  
And the field-sprouts of April and May became part of him. . . .wintergrain  
sprouts, and those of the light-yellow corn, and of the esculent roots of the  
garden...

This passage bears a strong similarity to the passage in "Song of Myself" following the narrator's union of body and soul, but the child who goes forth (and who is therefore always fixed in one place) simply employs his powers of observation and natural curiosity. In fact, this child bears a stronger resemblance to the child who asks "What is

the grass?" in section 6 of "Song of Myself," immediately following the narrator's transformation. By the logic of "There Was a Child Went Forth," the child of section 6 absorbs the grass, the narrator's explanations, and even the narrator himself into his own identity. Whitman thus provides us with two models of absorption: one in which spiritual transcendence allows infinite experience, which in turn allows indirect observation, and the other in which identity is contingent upon a catalogue of direct observations. The Hero transcends time and space, while the child who goes forth is perfectly ordinary, and each of them contains multitudes.

It is this final opposition that perhaps best allows us to understand Whitman's poetic project. Like any politician, priest, teacher, or public speaker, he faces a conflict between identification with the crowd and superiority to it. He must identify with the commoner well enough to forge a spiritual and intellectual connection to him, but he must also possess the superior knowledge that will qualify the crowd's interest. The narrator of the first edition and especially "Song of Myself" solves this problem by having it both ways: one fragment of "Myself" is like you and identifies with you, while another fragment is superior and harmonizes with nature using abilities you may wish to gain. Sometimes an external fragment (the Foil, for example) is required to differentiate these pathways. In this sense, the contradictory "multitudes" of the narrator offer Whitman a rhetorical power available only through poetry.

Whitman makes a business of contradiction, and answers impossible questions by combining many solutions. The orator simultaneously infolds life into the crowd, observes it, absorbs life from it, doubts himself, and stands apart entirely. The Kosmos

is and always has been one, but it disperses as soon as it is known. The narrator declares his eternal, spiritual power, but also admits that such power can only be transient, just like the union of body and soul, self and other, and ultimately poet and reader. The slim first edition of *Leaves of Grass* has made readers for over a century and a half feel as though it contains a secret, a password to some realm of unity. For a brief moment, we have felt Whitman's hand reach through the page, turn a key, and return. We have felt that the most important, most dynamic character is not the Hero, the Sympathizer, or the Me myself, but simply myself. We have felt compelled to somehow answer Whitman's call, orotund, sweeping, and final:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,

Missing me one place search another,

I stop somewhere waiting for you

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