Literary Transcendentalism

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Jones Very and Walt Whitman would certainly have disliked sharing a chapter with each other, even though one of the Very family's cats, "an enormous grey woolly" animal, was named after Walt. Very's austere pietism and Whitman's metropolitan expansiveness do not mix. But they resemble each other in the lengths to which they go in experimenting poetically with the idea of the self. Emerson invented the equation which all such experiments assume, \( i = I \) (or self = Self, soul = Soul), but modestly refrained from exploiting it in his own person, except in a limited way. Thoreau presented a version of himself as a representative man, but did not press his claims to prophetic status beyond a point. Whitman and Very, however, both regarded themselves as charismatic figures called to be spokesmen, through their poetry, of the divine word. Not that this was the only view they had of themselves: in Very's case, it lasted with full intensity only for a brief period; in Whitman's, it alternated with more modest images of himself as lyrist and language experimenter. Partly because of these complicating factors, one of the salient features of the poetry of both is a fascinating interplay of voices. Now the poet speaks from one side of his mind, now from another; now he speaks in his own person, now he is prophet or God.

In their development of the possibilities of the poetic speaker's role, Very and Whitman suggest Tennyson and Browning's contemporaneous achievements in the dramatic monologue. The four poets share in common the impulse to project themselves imaginatively into as many forms of experience as possible. The main difference is that the Victorians maintain a certain ironic distance from their poetic masks, while Very and Whitman express lyric empathy with theirs. This latter characteristic can be traced back to the idea of cosmic unity-in-diversity discussed in Part III, above. According to this principle, the individual may stand before all the monuments of the past, as Emerson puts it, and tell himself, "'Under this mask did my Proteus nature hide itself'" (W, II, 5). There is no identity in nature or history which the inspired soul may not assume. Hence one finds Emerson in his poetry speaking in the person of Alphonso of Castile, Mithridates, Montaigne, Merlin, Saadi, Brahma, Nature, a nun, and other identities.

But as Jonathan Bishop points out, often Emerson's "projected identities are playful, even capricious." 2 Emerson writes in an increasing awareness of the insufficiency of the individual perception and therefore the inevitability of role-playing when one assumes a given stance or identity. In his later writing, accordingly, the figure of Proteus stands no longer for unity-in-variety but for the elusiveness of truth and the illusoriness of appearances. But while Emerson himself thus becomes something of a Victorian, detaching himself from the identities he momentarily assumes, his successors take their "I" more seriously and attempt to orient their creative worlds around it. Thus the poetic stance of Very and Whitman is truer to the original Transcendentalist idea of self, and it is in their writings rather than in Emerson's or Thoreau's that one sees the literary possibilities of this idea exploited to the fullest.

Jones Very was temperamentally much less urbane and more intense than Emerson, and far less inclined to view man's relation to God and nature in impersonal terms. For Emerson, God was a "sublime It"; Very, as a self-professed Channing Unitarian, experienced God as a father and was therefore much more likely to write about spiritual experience in familiar terms. As for Very's attitude toward nature, he seems to have held that nature is a stumbling block for man in his fallen or unenlightened condition (a notion which Emerson would have rejected as a calvinistic anachronism), but that regenerated man is restored to Adam's position of mastery over the things of nature:

For he who with his maker walks aright
Shall be their Lord as Adam was before.

This sentiment seems identical with Emerson's position in *Nature*, but in fact there is an implicit difference. For Very is deeply committed to the idea of man's relationship to nature as a kind of personal mastery (though he would reject this way of putting it), while Emerson sticks rather closely to an impersonal view of this relationship as spirit answering to spirit.


Superficially, this claim will seem paradoxical, since Emerson frequently expresses an admiration of the great man who dominates his environment, whereas Very's extreme pietism keeps him from such hero worship. But that same pietism made Very more aware of spiritual grandeur as a personal feeling.

A comparison of the essays each man wrote about Shakespeare will give a better sense of this difference between them. To a large extent they are interested in Shakespeare for the same reasons: his creative range or negative capability, the way in which he seems to illustrate the idea of the creative process as inspired and spontaneous, and the alarming discrepancy between his genius and his “immorality.” The difference is that Emerson is content to know nothing of the “real” Shakespeare. He sees it rather as a virtue that “Shakespeare is the only biographer of Shakespeare” (W, IV, 208). Very, on the other hand, is intensely concerned with reconstructing and typing Shakespeare's mind. Even his negative capability Very insists on seeing as a mark of personality: “In this activity of mind, then, in this childlike superiority to the objects by which it was attracted, we find Shakespeare,” although Very goes on to concede that “this condition of mind might perhaps be designated as an impersonal one, so strongly is it always possessed by that which is before it, as to seem for the time to have no other individuality” (C, 38-39).

The standard by which Very finally judges Shakespeare is also instructive. He sees Shakespeare as a spiritual child, as representing “that primaeval state of innocence from which we have fallen” (39), but by the same token having the moral limitations of a child. In the sense that a child’s mind spontaneously and amorally reflects everything in its environment, Shakespeare represented both the pure and the impure. “In Wordsworth and Milton, on the contrary, we see the struggle of the child to become the perfect man in Christ Jesus” (46), which is a higher aspiration. This intermediate stage of development is something of a declension also, in that the poet
loses his power of total empathy and becomes trapped in self-consciousness, "but when the war of self which these and other bards have so nobly maintained shall have ceased, and the will of the Father shall be done on earth as it is in heaven . . . then shall the poet again find himself speaking with many tongues. . . . Each soul shall show in its varied action the beauty and grandeur of Nature; and shall live forever a teacher of the words it hears from the Father" (47). This formulation contains an interesting and characteristic mixture of the ideas of self-abasement and self-glorification. Very had more of both than Emerson, insisting on the necessity both of absolute submission to the will of God and the infallible authority of him who had done so, as Very believed himself to have done.

Very's peculiar brand of intoxication with the self comes out most strikingly in the last of three unpublished letters "To the Unborn," evidently designed as a preface to the 1839 Essays and Poems but rejected by Emerson. These letters (on "Birth," "Prayer," and "Miracles"), called "Epistles" after St. Paul but written in the style of St. John, are in effect three mini-sermons on redemption. Each of his three subjects Very interprets metaphorically in the transcendental or post-Unitarian manner discussed in Chapter 4, above. Real birth is the new birth; true prayer is the total action of the reborn man; the true miracle is the unity of the self with God which awaits the reborn. To dramatize this last idea, Very abruptly drops his role as preacher and speaks with the tone of God himself. Just as Jesus told his hearers "I am the Resurrection and the Life," Very says:

So say I to you to whom as the unborn I stand in a similar position. I am your Resurrection and life, believe in Me that speaks and you though unborn, shall be born. . . . "He that receives

you,” said he to his disciples, receives Me and he that receives Me receives Him that sent Me. These Me’s and I’s are the I’s and Me’s of the persons in the different worlds or states of which I have spoken and which because they are used are confounded by you and you are led to think that the person who speaks is like yourself.

For the moment his unborn audience will fail to recognize the speaker’s divine authority, but they surely will perceive it when they themselves are reborn to his estate: “Now you make me what I am to you; then you shall see me as I am; for you yourself will be made like unto me.” 8 What Very has done is to push the Unitarian view of Jesus as representative man, as extended by the Transcendentalist idea of God’s potential immanence, to its uttermost limits, and dare to assert that he too has His authority. This Very had been doing in the flesh for some time, to the confusion of his friends and neighbors; “The Epistle on Miracles” simply represents his nearest attempt to explain himself deliberately in writing.

Like Emerson, Very was a poet before he was a mystic, and his vision necessarily expressed itself more compellingly (at least to an unbeliever) in poetry than in prose, because it was profoundly metaphorical. When he looked at nature he saw emblems; when he looked at the self he saw God; when he looked at society he saw parables of spiritual death, or the potential for regeneration. It is no wonder that when his talent dwindled he became an occasional poet, because it seems always to have been instinctive with him to convert the external stimuli of the moment into tropes: biblical phrases, natural images, popular sayings, and the like. 9 But his most distinctive hallmark as a poet is the reinterpretation of scripture and the creation from the perspective of one who has merged with God.

On one level, the speaker travels at will through a circuit of identities. He assumes the role of any or all the prophets: John the Baptist, Isaiah, Noah, Moses. Adamlike he dreams:

8 Jones, pp. 158, 160.

9 See for example, C, pp. 248, 259, 265, 269, 272.
The speaker here is not the old Adam but the new man in Christ, himself a kind of deity. Elsewhere he becomes God the Father:

I am the First and Last declare my Word
There is no voice but it is born of Me
I am there is no other God beside
Before Me all that live shall bow the knee  [B, 173]

Wouldst thou behold my features cleanse thy heart  [B, 172]
or Christ the son:

This is the rock where I my church will build  [B, 154]
Come then partake the feast for you prepared
I have come down to bid you welcome there  [B, 156]

Why come you out to me with clubs and staves,
That you on every side have fenced me so  [B, 197]
or the Holy Ghost:

I come the rushing wind that shook the place
Where those once sat who spake with tongues of fire
Oer thee to shed the freely given grace  [B, 163]

It is surely no accident that all but one of the seven sonnets just excerpted remained unpublished during the nineteenth century, as they are among the most daring Very ever wrote.10 Most of the fifty or so in which the speaker impersonates the

10 A less extravagant reading is possible, however, if one thinks of these poems as addresses from above to the humble poet. Gittleman, pp. 312 ff, takes this approach, and it is supported by the line following the excerpt last quoted: “And bid them speak while I thy verse inspire.” The fact remains that the poems are written as if spoken by the deity.
deity do not live up to their extraordinary beginnings and become vitiated by filler lines and overuse of biblical phraseology, but in conception they are a remarkable group of poems. (Incidentally, Emerson was wrong in insisting that the Spirit be grammatical. These poems read best without punctuation, just as Bartlett printed them from the manuscript.)

Very's prophetic speaker does not always ventriloquize through the mask of deity or biblical figure, by any means. He has an identity of his own, albeit of a somewhat generalized sort. One often finds him having millennial visions of "The White Horse" (C, 108), "The New Jerusalem" (B, 199), the resurrection of the dead (C, 107), and the like; decrying "The Unfaithful Servants" (C, 120), "The Glutton" (C, 129), and other avatars of sin, even to the point of presenting himself as the scourge of God (B, 168); comforting the people with words of encouragement (C, 101); petitioning God to use him as an instrument (C, 103) or aid mankind Himself (C, 120). The most interesting poems of this group, because they come closest to breaking the Old Testament stereotype Very usually sets for himself, are those in which the prophet attempts to establish some sort of human relationship with his audience in addition to his official capacity.

My brother, I am hungry,—give me food
Such as my Father gives me at his board;
He has for many years been to thee good,
Thou canst a morsel then to me afford;

I ask the love the Father has for thee,
That thou should'st give it back to me again;
This shall my soul from pangs of hunger free,
And on my parched spirit fall like rain;
Then thou wilt prove a brother to my need,
For in the cross of Christ thou too canst bleed. [C, 94]

A poem like this makes it clear that the speaker has a personal investment in his mission. He is not merely re-enacting the role of Jesus for the benefit of the unborn (although the poem is
based on the gospel maxim that what is done for the least of mankind is done for the Lord); he himself, the poem suggests, has a genuine need for reciprocal communication with the neighbor he has come to admonish, as indeed Very seems to have had in life.

Frequently, indeed, the speaker does not appear at all in the role of deity or prophet, but as a single person, in a variety of mental states. The most common of these is a prayerful attitude, either of praise or petition to God. In "The Prisoner," he is "a slave to mine own choice" (C, 141), who looks forward only distantly to his transfiguration; in "The Presence" (C, 83) he is the solitary worshiper suffused with a sense of the protecting spirit. In another group of poems he presents himself as a soul seeking to emulate Christ, anticipating a similar crucifixion, either for his own salvation ("That I through Christ the victory may win" [B, 199]) or, less often, to serve as a model for the rest of mankind. Another series of poems portrays the speaker in contemplation of or active relationship with nature; in still another, smaller group, but more interesting as far as self-dramatization is concerned, the speaker pictures himself in an unstable relationship with others. Significantly, the speaker does not attain intimacy with those to whom he speaks to the extent that he does with God and nature. Usually he sees himself as rejected or rejecting; at most, he issues us invitations to come with him on a "ramble" through the fields (C, 119) or to join him in his spiritual quest (C, 137).

The alternation between divine, prophetic, and human voices from poem to poem to have a provocatively disorienting effect on the reader, who sometimes becomes unsure just who is speaking. For example, the poems in which God apparently speaks have been interpreted as dialogues between God and the poet, rather than as monologues in which the poet assumes the role of God. On the other hand, a poem which seems to begin on the human level may turn out to be a divine communication.
I knock, but knock in vain; there is no call
Comes from within to bid Me enter there. [C, 146]
Not until one comes to “Me” is it clear that this is the complaint of Christ, not of the frustrated soul. Again, the opening of “To-Day”—“I live but in the present; where art thou?”—might seem to express the confusion of a superficial mind, but it turns out to be the call of the omnipresent God to the distant sinner, who is “far away and canst not hear” (C, 173). In a few poems, it is finally impossible to resolve the speaker into a single voice. “Terror,” for example, seems to begin with a prophet or onlooker witnessing the apocalypse:

There is no safety! fear has seized the proud;
The swift run to and fro but cannot fly;
Within the streets I hear no voices loud,
They pass along with low, continuous cry.

Yet at the end of the poem God himself emerges as the speaker:

Repent! why do ye still uncertain stand,
The kingdom of My Son is nigh at hand. [C, 110]

But to take God as the speaker throughout would be to deny the note of awe in the tone at the outset.

Very’s use of the speaker is altogether sufficiently versatile and subtle as to suggest conscious manipulation of the persona for literary effect, despite his professed disinterest in revision and his friends’ claims that he “composed without a thought of literary form.” 11 For example, his two haunting sonnets on the I-Thou relationship, “Yourself” and “Thy Neighbor,” read like exercises in wit. Here is the latter:

I am thy other self; what thou wilt be
When thou art I, the one thou seest now;
In finding thy true self thou wilt find me,
The springing blade where now thou dost but plow;

I am thy neighbor, a new house I've built
Which thou as yet hast never entered in;
I come to call thee; come in when thou wilt,
The feast is always waiting to begin;
Thou shouldst love me, as thou dost thyself;
For I am but another self beside;
To show thee him thou lov'st in better health,
What thou wouldst be when thou to him hast died;
Then visit me, I make thee many a call;
Nor live I near to thee alone but all. [C, 117]

Who speaks here? Is it the local prophet, or Christ speaking through him, or does one first of all imagine one's own neighbor speaking, and then see Christ standing behind him? The three types of persona intermingle here; the invitation is essentially to the heavenly banquet, but it has overtones of a New England dinner. In a faint way, Very anticipates Whitman in saying that you will find "myself" everywhere: in the speaker-countryman who has come to call on the farmer-reader; in yourself; even under your bootsoles, in "the springing blade." These multiple suggestions show Very's considerable gift for swerving away from outright didacticism in the direction of wit and emotional complexity. Not that the content of the poem is hard to grasp; it all opens up quite easily as soon as one perceives the biblical associations of self-neighbor-Jesus. The complexity consists in the dislocating effect of having a poet, or rather a poem, express this idea in its own person; and in the laconic way in which it is expressed, so that the poem seems halfway in between an exhortation and a riddle.

In view of what we know about Very's moral seriousness, it is quite unlikely that he intended to exploit the element of ambiguity in his personae for its own sake, or that he published his poetry under the pseudonym of "I" for literary effect. When Sophia Peabody and her brother expressed "our enjoyment of his sonnets," for example, Very replied that "unless we thought them beautiful because we also heard the Voice in reading
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them, they would be of no avail." 12 The strong probability is that Very was simply intoxicated by the mystical relationships between self and Self, oneself and oneSelf, so that in certain situations it was instinctive for him to elaborate these relationships poetically in what seems to us a very modern way. In any case, Very almost never fails to create an arresting effect when he writes of the disparity between the temporal and spiritual aspects of the I and the I-Thou relation, particularly in those poems which begin with an ostensibly mundane speaker making what would be an outrageous statement if interpreted in less prophetic terms:

'Tis to yourself I speak; you cannot know
Him whom I call in speaking such an one,
For thou beneath the earth liest buried low,
Which he alone as living walks upon [C, 116]

I have no Brother,—they who meet me now
Offer a hand with their own wills defiled [C, 87]

I weigh out my love with nicest care [B, 198]

I do not need thy food, but thou dost mine [B, 201]

As these lines suggest, Very's specialty as a poet, just as in life, was self-righteousness, justified (in his mind, anyhow) by the spiritual authority with which he felt himself to be invested. The incongruity of a Harvard tutor speaking as the Messiah was a practical stumbling block to his mission among the Revs. Charles Wentworth Upham, John Brazer and other Salem worthies, but a poetic asset in the long run.

In his excellent study of Very, Edwin Gittleman suggests that Very intended in the late 1830s to publish his poems in an arrangement whereby the spiritual cycle outlined in the "Letters to the Unborn" "would be unfolded in systematic fashion," but

that Emerson refused. However well thought out Very's scheme actually was, Gittleman is quite right in pointing out that his holy sonnets, "if arranged without regard for the exact order of composition . . . comprise the only form of epic Very thought still possible in the modern world," a drama of unfolding spiritual consciousness. Very's friend W. P. Andrews, in his edition of Very's poetry, tried to give a sense of what this order might be by organizing the selections into a sequence of categories: "The Call," "The New Birth," "The Message," "Nature," "Song and Praise," and "The Beginning and the End." In Gittleman's somewhat more apocalyptic interpretation, the hypothetical sequence would have been "organized in terms of the promise of the Second Coming," depicting "the prelude and consequences of this manifestation of deity on earth." These conjectures attest to the impression of organic relationship among the poems of this period which anyone who reads them all through is bound to feel. They do invite rearrangement into a sequence, and the sequential approach seems also to be validated by Very's prophecies of imminent millennium during his period of illumination. Actually to reorder Very's work in this manner, however, is to impute to him a degree of calculation which clashes somewhat with one's impression of him as a visionary, and to make his work seem more contrived and less spontaneous. Very may well have had such a poetic plan in mind, judging from his attempts to evangelize his friends. But had he carried it out, his poetry would seem a great deal less transcendental than it now is. The rich interplay of voices and moods which the very confusion of Clarke's edition (bad as it is) preserves would have been regularized and toned down, and the prophetic voice would begin to sound like that of the pitchman.

Carried to its logical conclusion, the idea of the self as God means that the "I" is capable of the same infinite variety as

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13 Gittleman, pp. 336, 312. 14 Andrews; Gittleman, p. 323.
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nature and that every thought and act is (at least potentially) significant and holy. The transcendentalists realized this, but the thought disturbed them. The transcendentalist ministers from the conservative clarke to the radical parker shrank back from cosmic egoism; emerson and thoreau and even very entertained it only under strict conditions. They made a sharp distinction between higher and lower natures and reserved their praise for the first; even emerson’s tributes to instinct and thoreau’s to wildness are based on the assumption that the primitive impulse is essentially chaste. Secondly, though the transcendentalists delighted in the multiplicity of nature, in seeing spirit manifest itself in a variety of forms, they preferred to think of the self as essentially unitary, not liable to change, except in the direction of greater purification. thus emerson comes very close in “experience” to the modern idea of a disintegrated self when he describes personality as a succession of moods, but he regards this successiveness as a tragic thing and falls back with relief upon the vision of a spirit which underlies all such change. the personae of thoreau and very have even less tolerance for the chaos of experience. one sees them constantly trying to order their perceptions and maintain their integrity against a hostile and philistine audience. “they were all in some particulars much alike,” whitman said of emerson, alcott, and thoreau. “they all had the same manner—a sort of aloofness: as though they meant me to see they were willing to come only so far: that coming an inch beyond that would mean disaster to us all.”

whitman ventured further. his earlier poetry in particular exploits the literary potential of the transcendental “i” to its fullest. he was prepared to celebrate a much greater range of human experience, the body as well as the soul; his gift for empathy was unsurpassable; and he was enough of an exhibitionist to make “myself” a much more dominant figure than

15 quoted in horace traubel, with walt whitman in camden (new york: mitchell kennerley, 1914), iii, 403.
the New Englanders would have thought to do. One may draw
dim analogues between Whitman, Thoreau, Very and the idea
of a romantic epic of the self; but only in *Leaves of Grass* (and
particularly "Song of Myself") is anything like the feeling of
epic scope really attained.\(^\text{16}\) In this respect, Whitman's book
stands as both the culmination and the epitaph of literary
Transcendentalism. A short review of both these aspects here
may also serve as a postscript to this survey of the Transcenden-
talist persona.

Whether or not Emerson was really Whitman's "master," as
he averred in 1856, is an unanswerable question.\(^\text{17}\) In any event,
Whitman can be seen as extending all the creative possibilities
of the self which have been discussed so far: its socially repre-
sentative or democratic aspects; its double or multiple nature;
and the mysteriousness of that multiplicity. "Myself" in Whit-
man's poetry becomes, by turns, a demiurge or Oversoul; an
epitome of America; a proteus of vicarious shapes and moods;
the book or poem itself; and lastly, you, the reader.\(^\text{18}\) As a re-

\(^{16}\) For application of the idea of the epic to *Leaves of Grass*, see Roy
University Press, 1961), pp. 69–83; Charles R. Metzger, "Walt Whitman's
Philosophical Epic," *Walt Whitman Review*, 15 (1969), 91–96; and James
E. Miller Jr., *A Critical Guide to Leaves of Grass* (Chicago: Chicago Uni-

\(^{17}\) The definitive discussion of this point I take to be Roger Asselineau,
52–55.

\(^{18}\) Helpful previous discussions of Whitman's use of personae are
Philip Y. Coleman, "Walt Whitman's Ambiguities of 'I,'" in *Studies in
American Literature in Honor of Robert Dunn Faner*, ed. Robert Partlow
Donna L. Henseler, "The Voice of the Grass Poem 'I': Whitman's 'Song of
Myself,'" *Walt Whitman Review*, 15 (1969), 26–32; and Bruce R. Mc-
Elderry, Jr., "Personae in Whitman (1855–1860)," *American Transcen-
dental Quarterly*, No. 12 (1971), 25–32. My thinking on this subject has
also been clarified by Edwin Haviland Miller, *Walt Whitman's Poetry*:
sult, Whitman’s speaker comes much closer than the Transcendentalists’ to encompassing the whole range of human consciousness. He is not ashamed of his body; he is not so insistent on identifying himself with his best moments; he is willing, indeed eager, to show himself loafing, dreaming, doubting, hungering, masturbating, dying. When it comes to presenting the self in its universal aspects, moreover, Whitman does not merely assert this claim in theory, but has the persona act it out, by imaginatively projecting into a series of identities or situations. In this way, the principle of spiritual metamorphosis which the Transcendentalists celebrated in the activity of nature is at last fully dramatized on the human level. Thus Whitman’s speaker seems more pretentious than the Transcendentalists’, but the element of moral elitism is largely absent. Unlike the speakers of Very and Thoreau, who think of themselves in the company of heroes and prophets, Whitman’s persona embraces even the “cotton-field drudge” and the “cleaner of privies” (l. 1003). One feels too that the speaker genuinely wants this experience of human contact, despite his weakness for factitious rhetoric.

Whitman’s powers of empathy also give him a greater awareness of the ineffability and unpredictability of the self: “I hear and behold God in every object, yet understand God not in the least” (l. 1281). And why should he bother to figure it all out? “To elaborate is no avail. learn’d and unlearn’d feel that it is so” (l. 47). The grass may be any number of things, and all is well; the speaker may be in New York one moment and Montana the next, without knowing how he got there, and it is well; he is “amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary” (l. 76) or “hankering, gross, mystical nude” (l. 389) and it is no real contradiction, but rather a sign of healthful fecundity.

_A Psychological Journey_ (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), though I dissent from some of Miller’s psychological interpretations; and Howard J. Waskow, _Whitman: Explorations in Form_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).
As we saw in Chapter 6, however, the willingness to incorporate the whole of experience into one's self-conception involves certain risks, to which Whitman repeatedly succumbs. Indiscriminateness, for example. When Whitman's empathy becomes fatuous or mechanical, one cries out with D. H. Lawrence, "Oh Walter, Walter, what have you done with it? What have you done with yourself? With your own individual self? For it sounds as if it had all leaked out of you, leaked into the universe." ¹⁹ The problem is not merely one of self-parody. Whitman was also aware of the potentially self-destructive consequences of empathy. It can lead to sickness and shame and even death. In "Song of Myself" the speaker is betrayed by his sense of touch into temporary insanity; in "Calamus" he is the victim of his adhesiveness; in "The Wound-Dresser" he presents himself as haunted, years later, by the young men he attended. Partly, perhaps, because of the spiritual exhaustion of being torn apart so many times, Whitman's gift for empathy dwindled as he aged, as was also true of the Transcendentalists. Beginning even before 1860, a sense of weariness begins to creep in. The poet assumes less often the role of multiform cosmic force, more often the role of observer. If he dons a mask in a given poem, it tends to be a single and limited one: Columbus, a dying redwood tree, a November bough, a sailor embarking on the ultimate voyage. Death is of course the linking motif in these examples, just as the thought of death pervades all of Whitman's good poetry and much of the rest after "Out of the Cradle." In different ways, he turns the fact of death to his advantage: by welcoming it, like a mother or protector, by celebrating the persistence of spirit, by looking forward to the continuance of his fame, by seeing himself as a martyr to the Civil War. All the same, *Leaves of Grass* is ultimately a tragic poem compared to the work of Emerson, Thoreau, and Very, in the sense that

one sees the godlike hero decline and die. Whitman winds up like the "lonely old grubber" of Allen Ginsberg's poem,

Soon to be lost for aye in the darkness—loth, O so loth to depart!
Garrulous to the very last.

["After the Supper and Talk," ll. 11–12]

In such passages as this, *Leaves of Grass* undercuts the Transcendental conception of self and epitomizes in its unfolding the demise of American romanticism. Youthful bravado inevitably sinks into humility as the godlike element in the self shrinks into the more respectable "spark of the divine" and the Oversoul acquires a gray beard and a throne. To the extent that Whitman and the Transcendentalists took seriously the cosmic dimension of their self-dramatizations they ring less true to a modern reader than, say, Ellery Channing's poetic expressions of self-doubt, or the lyrics of Emily Dickinson. Channing was saved from Transcendental naiveté, as we have seen, by the awareness that he was personally unsuited for the self-reliant life. Dickinson, a parallel product of the heritage of self-examination, also shows what seems to us an authenticity—at the cost of her happiness—in being unable either to accept or break away from an inherited religious framework (Orthodox, in her case, not liberal). Like Whitman, she is an experimenter in the first-person, moving through a series of masks: the little girl, the queen, the rebel, the sufferer, the corpse. But one senses in her, as in Channing, a greater awareness of the pose as pose. She admits defeat too often; her moods do not complement each other in the same way as Whitman's—partly because her poems are not run together into sustained visions, as Whitman's often are. She is, in short, more appealingly baffled and lost, in the modern way.

Nevertheless, the Transcendentalist conception of self, however delusory, did lead to some important poetic discoveries,
which through Whitman's example have had a permanent impact on literary history. First, it provided a way of talking about the unity-in-diversity of American society. Second and more far-reaching, it made possible the introduction of stream-of-consciousness techniques into western poetry. The psychological basis of this technique is precisely the Transcendentalist idea of self, stripped of its metaphysical basis: the idea that identity consists of one's perceptions of the universe moment by moment. As Emerson saw, if one denies the assumption of a unifying, essential soul, personality disintegrates into chaos. Because they rested on this assumption, the Transcendentalists put their trust in the "method" of moment-by-moment inspiration as the most "natural" path for the intellect. Whitman's contribution, in turn, was to use this method more uncompromisingly than the Transcendentalists did except in their journals, and to apply it more directly to the self, and thereby to indulge and express the chaos of experience that Emerson came to fear. The somewhat ironic result was that Transcendentalism's last and greatest celebration of the heroic possibilities of the self also foreshadowed those twentieth-century classics in which the self is shown as finally baffled and lost in its labyrinths of perception. Today the self remains in the same divided condition that Emerson describes at the beginning of "The American Scholar."