

FROM VERY TO WHITMAN:  
THE SHAPING OF EMERSON'S POET

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ABSTRACT

The poetry of Very and Whitman represents the early and late phases of Transcendentalism respectively, and corresponds to different stages in Emerson's evolving conception of the American bard. While Very corroborated the radical individualism of belief that Emerson advocated in the Divinity School "Address", Whitman, besides fulfilling Emerson's prophetic vision of "The Poet", substantiated Emerson's theory, in *Representative men*, of the self which embraces its social and material circumstances as raw material for a synthesizing vision and the context for action. Despite their different modes, one cosmic, expansive, and amorous, the other scriptural, introspective, and exhortatory, in the tradition of American romanticism Very emerges as Whitman's precursor in several important respects: his scripturism anticipates Whitman's project of constructing the new Bible; his claims to divine inspiration anticipate Whitman's channeling of the divine energy of nature; his emphasis on sympathy with and insight into nature as a measure of spiritual regeneration anticipates Whitman's identification with natural objects; his Christ persona anticipates Whitman's role as a modern Christ, friend and redeemer of the oppressed and underprivileged; and finally, his twofold poetic voice, expressive of the earthly and transcendent selves, anticipates the twofold persona of *Leaves of grass*, which fluctuates between buoyancy and divine all-inclusiveness on the one hand and insecurity and human limitation on the other.

1. Introduction

In July 1855, when Emerson was writing his ebullient letter to Whitman in which he deemed *Leaves of grass* "the most extraordinary piece of wit & wisdom that America has yet contributed", marveled at the "incomparable things said incomparably well", and famously greeted the author "at the beginning of a great career" (Emerson 1997: 383-384), Very had for almost fifteen years been leading a secluded life of quiet resignation in his native Salem as a humble Uni-

tarian minister and undistinguished “preacher of the Gospel” (Lyons 1966: 14).<sup>1</sup> Little remained of the self-reliant seer to whose inspired teaching Emerson responded in 1838 with as much enthusiasm and hope as he now had for Whitman, and whose *Essays and poems* he edited for publication in 1839.

Buell’s (1973: 312-330) discussion of personae in Very and Whitman has established a paradigm for thinking of Very’s poetry as a variant of “Transcendental egoism”, another manifestation of the romantic imperial self speaking in a number of authoritative voices. However, the sheer history of Emerson’s responses to the two poets suggests a twofold alternative to Buell’s synchronic approach. Firstly, to state the obvious, Very and Whitman represent different phases of Transcendentalism, early and late, and correspond to different stages in Emerson’s conception of the American bard, which evolved from *Nature* (1836) through “The American scholar” (1837) and the Divinity School “Address” (1838) to “The Poet” (1844) and *Representative men* (1850).<sup>2</sup> Emerson met Very, then a recent Harvard graduate, a tutor in Greek at the College, and an unclassified Divinity School student, in April 1838, not long before completing the “Address”, and this timely encounter possibly influenced, and certainly substantiated, the radical view of the preacher that Emerson endeavored to impress on graduating divinity students who were about to enter Unitarian ministry (Gittleman 1967: 165-166). It could have been with Very’s example in mind that Emerson exhorted his listeners to renounce the doctrines of historical Christianity and seek redemption in the soul, drawing on their immediate experience of the God within: “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost, - cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity” (Emerson 1983: 89). Emerson’s early disappointment with Very, which followed within a year of the “Address”, and his impatience with Very’s limitations may be seen as instrumental in the further evolution of Emerson’s idea of the poet, which received its fullest and most famous formulation in the 1844 essay under the same title, and then, as is less often remembered, was modified in *Representative men*. Emerson did not hear of Whitman until over a decade after the publication of the rhapsodic “Poet” with its celebrated prophetic statement about the future of American literature: “I look in vain for the poet whom I describe... Yet America is a poem in our eyes; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for metres” (Emerson 1983: 465). However, if the author of

*Leaves of grass* appeared as a self-styled incarnation of the Emersonian bard,<sup>3</sup> Emerson’s reaction to his work should also be seen in the context of the later and more subdued *Representative men*, which is closer in time to his readerly encounter with Whitman. In any case, despite the reverse order of an idea and its fulfillment, Whitman became for Emerson’s later works what Very had been for the “Address”: the American representative man, the Self which in *Nature* transcended its social and material circumstances, but in *Representative men* embraced them as raw material for a synthesizing vision and the context for action.

Secondly, in the tradition of American romanticism Very emerges as Whitman’s precursor rather than his austere and pietistic counterpart, an isolated author of fine but narrowly doctrinal religious sonnets. True enough, Whitman’s and Very’s modes could hardly be more different: one cosmic, expansive, and amorous, the other scriptural, introspective, and exhortatory. It is instructive to read, for example, Very’s “The Eagles” (1993: 153-154), a violent, apocalyptic, allegorical vision of vengeful birds tearing the carcasses of sinners, alongside Whitman’s late “Dalliance of the eagles”, which celebrates the beauty, majesty, and vigor of two eagles mating.<sup>4</sup> The first *Leaves of grass* also provides ample material for comparison: it suffices to contrast Very’s “The Graveyard” (1993: 103) with the fragment beginning “And as to you death, and you bitter hug of mortality . . . it is idle to try to alarm me”, which later became section 49 of “Song of Myself”; or Very’s “Thy brother’s blood” (1993: 102-103) with the fragment “I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise”, which be-

<sup>3</sup> It is useful to remind ourselves that in the light of Whitman’s own statements the question of his direct indebtedness to Emerson becomes less obvious. The famous declaration, “I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil” comes from John T. Trowbridge’s reminiscence of a conversation he had with Whitman in 1860, recorded forty years after the event and hence not quite reliable (Asselineau 1960: 53-54). Asselineau (1960: 55) quotes a series of Whitman’s conflicting comments about Emerson’s influence on his work, concluding on their basis that “Whitman knew the writings of Emerson at least second-hand from 1847 at the latest and . . . read them with enthusiasm as he admits in . . . *Specimen Days*. . . . But we see no trace of the lightning-stroke mentioned by Trowbridge which would explain everything. On the contrary, if Emerson’s ideas and philosophy were familiar to him for so long, it is very unlikely that they suddenly overwhelmed him in 1854 and were then imposed on him with the force of an unexpected revelation”. Nonetheless, given the striking parallels between Whitman’s preface to the 1855 *Leaves of grass* and Emerson’s “The Poet”, as well as the close correspondence between “The Poet” and some passages from the poem which was later titled “Song of Myself”, the view that Emerson was not a decisive influence on Whitman is profoundly counterintuitive.

<sup>4</sup> For a reading of this poem as an example of Whitman’s use of the present participle to represent process, see Greenspan (1995: 104-106).

<sup>1</sup> From Very’s 1861 letter to Frederick Goddard Tuckerman.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed treatment of this evolution, see Sealts (1992).



came section 16 of the "Song".<sup>5</sup> In the latter passage Whitman envisages his gigantic self absorbing the entire American nation in its geographical diversity and the diverse pursuits and trades of its people: "[I am] a wandering savage,/ A farmer, mechanic, or artist . . . a gentleman, sailor, lover or quaker,/ A prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician or priest" (Whitman 1982: 43), although, in a characteristic movement from panoramic vision to a genre scene, he singles out robust frontiersmen and blue-collar workers for the brotherly relation of comradeship: "Comrade of Californians . . . comrade of free northwesterners, loving their big proportions,/ Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen – comrade of all who shake hands and welcome to drink and meat" (Whitman 1982: 42-43). By contrast, in Very's "Thy brother's blood" the speaker renounces any connection with humanity seen collectively as a sinful crowd and, in a gesture reversing that of Whitman, refuses to accept a hand stained with the blood of Cain's fratricide:

I have no Brother – they who meet me now  
 Offer a hand with their own wills defiled,  
 And while they wear a smooth unwrinkled brow  
 Know not that Truth can never be beguiled;  
 Go wash the hand that still betrays thy guilt;  
 Before the spirit's gaze what stain can hide?  
 Abel's red blood upon the earth is spilt,  
 And by thy tongue it cannot be denied;  
 I hear not with the ear – the heart doth tell  
 Its secret deeds to me untold before;  
 Go, all its hidden plunder quickly sell,  
 Then shalt thou cleanse thee from thy brother's gore;  
 Then will I take the gift – that bloody stain  
 Shall not be seen upon thy hand again  
 (Very 1993: 102-103).

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this essay I refer to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of grass* as the one that inspired Emerson's enthusiasm. The twelve poems in the original *Leaves* did not have titles and were not divided into numbered sections; nonetheless, I mention poem titles and section numbers for the sake of convenience in locating the fragments cited. Another difference between the first *Leaves* and its later versions is punctuation: In the 1855 poems Whitman often uses a sequence of four suspension points, which reflects the contemplative quality of his verse and the leisurely movement of the speaker's mind, in keeping with the image of an idle visionary in the opening lines: "I lean and loafe at my ease . . . observing a spear of summer grass" (Whitman 1982: 27). In later editions of the *Leaves* Whitman replaced the suspension points with conventional commas. Throughout the essay I represent Whitman's suspension points as widely spaced dots: . . . to distinguish them typographically from the ordinary ellipsis: . . . or . . .

Very's speaker positions himself above the human condition, assuming the role of a seer who fathoms souls and disdains human beings' innate depravity hidden behind their complacent faces. In the Calvinistic framework of the poem his voice, unlike that of Whitman, is castigatory and devoid of compassion. The persona becomes a wrathful Christ speaking in the Edwardsean rhetoric of chastisement and using Shakespearean imagery, the bloody hand reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's token of guilt. In contrast to Whitman's geographic and historical realism, Very stages the spiritual drama of his poem in the timeless reality of salvation, where the perpetuation of sin annuls all distance between the biblical crime of Cain and the present moment. Whereas Whitman's vision is horizontal as his persona travels across the continent, incorporating the identity and experience of every individual he encounters, Very's vision is structured vertically: not only does the speaker stand above humanity but his gaze penetrates beneath the surface of the visible world, moving from his listeners' "smooth unwrinkled brow" to their corrupted hearts, and even though spiritual rebirth brings forgiveness, it does not seal the disjunct between the righteous, sinless speaker and his fallible addressees. Finally and most conspicuously, Very's highly literary language, fraught with biblical archaisms and framed by the fixed pattern of the Shakespearean sonnet, stands in sharp contrast with the deliberately colloquial discourse of Whitman's free verse and its saturation with realistic detail. If Very, according to the nineteenth-century critic Charles Eliot Norton's apt observation, reads like "a George Herbert who had studied Shakespeare, read Wordsworth, and lived in America" (Levernier 1978: 30), Whitman's first *Leaves of grass* appears to have been written by a Psalmist who had read Emerson, listened to Italian opera, studied the New Testament, and lived among the mid-century American working class.

If Whitman had come across Very's sonnets in Clarke's (1839) *Western messenger* or in Emerson's edition, which is unlikely but not wholly impossible, he certainly would not have found them appealing, let alone stimulating. Nonetheless, Very's poetry anticipates Whitman's verse in several important respects. Before Whitman embarked on his vast poetic project which he described as the "great construction of the new Bible" (Reynolds 2000: 9), Very had ventured to write the Scripture anew in his sonnets. Before Whitman pantheistically resolved to express the divine energy of nature, Very had envisioned himself as the vehicle of the Holy Spirit. Before Whitman identified with a blade of grass, recognized himself in the Louisiana live-oak, or perceived the spider as an emblem of his soul creating its cosmic vision, Very had posited sympathy with and insight into nature as a measure of spiritual regeneration. Before Whitman assumed the role of a modern Christ, friend and redeemer of the oppressed and underprivileged, Very had spoken as the Son of God urging the slumbering humanity to spiritual rebirth. Finally, before Whitman envisaged the twofold persona



of *Leaves of grass*, fluctuating between buoyancy and divine all-inclusiveness on the one hand and insecurity and human limitation on the other, Very projected a voice divided between what Robinson (1978: 206) termed the “exemplary” and “transcendent” selves.

## 2. Mapping a genealogy: Very as precursor

Very wrote his most compelling poems during a period of intense religious exaltation which lasted about two years, leading to his dismissal from Harvard and culminating in a month's confinement at the McLean Asylum in Charlestown in the fall of 1838. On the day of his confinement Very paid several visits to his Salem neighbors, among them Emerson's friend Elizabeth Peabody, preached the imminence of the Second Coming, and then attempted to baptize several Unitarian ministers in town (Gittleman 1967: 212-219). Very's sonnets, like his efforts to regenerate the unconverted, “serve his overall plan of proselytization” (Robinson 1978: 207) and are expressions of supernaturally imparted truths. Claiming divine authority for his voice, in “The new birth” Very describes the emergence of his poetic consciousness as simultaneous with his spiritual awakening:

‘Tis a new life; - thoughts move not as they did  
 With slow uncertain steps across my mind,  
 In thronging haste fast pressing on they bid  
 The portals open to the viewless wind;  
 That comes not, save when in the dust is laid  
 The crown of pride that gilds each mortal brow,  
 And from before man's vision melting fade  
 The heavens and earth – Their walls are falling now -  
 Fast crowding on each thought claims utterance strong;  
 Storm-lifted waves swift rushing to the shore  
 On from the sea they send their shouts along,  
 Back through the cave-worn rocks their thunders roar;  
 And I a child of God by Christ made free  
 Start from death's slumbers to Eternity

(Very 1993: 64).

The speaker's state of mind exemplifies the organic connection between vision and expression which Emerson accentuated in the Divinity School “Address”: “Always the seer is a sayer. ... The man on whom the soul descends, through whom the soul speaks, alone can teach” (Emerson 1983: 81). Very envisages poetic inspiration as pure receptivity, an influx of Spirit made possible by utter self-effacement. Not only the movement of thoughts but also their articulation are uncontrolled, independent of the poet's will as the waves “send their shouts

along”. The activity of the Spirit, described as a storm within and rendered onomatopoeically via the accumulation of *s-*, *sh-*, voiced *th-* and voiceless *th-* sounds, is conveyed through a series of nature images centered around “the viewless wind”, the Christian emblem of the Holy Ghost, which causes turmoil in the heretofore stagnant mind: “storm”, “waves”, “shore”, “sea”, “rocks”, “thunders”. (An ardent student of Shakespeare, Very could be echoing the storm scenes in Act III of *King Lear*.) Most interestingly, the sonnet is informed by a double consciousness: one mystical, permeated by the Holy Spirit, the other poetic, or a self-consciousness witnessing the speaker's transformation.

In a letter to his college friend the Rev. Henry W. Bellows, Very provided a retrospective account of his revelation:

After having begun my duties at Cambridge this year [1838 – MZ] about the third week I felt within me a new will something which came some time in the week but I could not tell what day exactly. It seemed like my old will only it was to the good – it was not a feeling of my own but a sensible will that was not my own. Accompanying this was another feeling as it were a consciousness which seemed to say – “That which creates you creates also that which you see or him to whom you speak”, as it might be. These two consciousnesses as I may call them continued with me two or three weeks and went as they came imperceptably [*sic*]. While they continued I was moved entirely by the Spirit within me to declare to all that the coming of Christ was at hand...  
 (Very 1993: lvi-lvii).

The mystical mode of both the letter and the sonnet is strikingly different from the tradition of a Jonathan Edwards. Rather than resort to paradox and contradiction, Very relates the irrational experience of conversion in the rationalist discourse of Lockean psychology appropriated by Unitarianism. While such phrases as “something which came”, “it seemed”, “as it were”, or “as I may call them” do suggest that words cannot fully convey the experience, Very nonetheless aims at maximum precision in the realm of *psychological* rather than spiritual phenomena, speaking of the presence of a strange “new will” and the coexistence of “two consciousnesses”. Unlike Edwards's visions of divine glory or Emerson's spiritual communion with the Oversoul, Very's revelation is not an insight into the nature of the Deity or the design of the universe but an invasion of the Holy Spirit into the space of the mind and the emergence of a second, divine consciousness which governs his words and actions. Romanticism was sensitive to divisions within the conscious mind: Fichte, for example, distinguished the “me” and the “me of me”, that is, consciousness and self-consciousness constitutive of the subject's sense of identity; Emerson emphasized the presence of the divine element within the human soul (Van Leer 1986: 69-70). Very's distinction between the two consciousnesses represents a similar duality construed

in terms of Calvinist introspection and Lockean psychology rather than the romantic philosophy of nature and spirit.

With his background in Quakerism, the anti-hierarchical, anti-ecclesiastic religion of the Inner Light, Whitman did not have to struggle with the rationalist heritage of orthodox or liberal Congregationalism or reconcile its authoritarian theology with Emerson's pantheistic religion of the imperial self.<sup>6</sup> In accordance with Emerson's statement in "The Poet" that "[t]he Universe is the externisation of the soul" (Emerson 1983: 453), the opening lines of the 1855 "Song of Myself" replace Very's humility with self-aggrandizement, and Very's introspection with an outward movement of consciousness absorbing the external world:

I celebrate myself,  
 .....  
 I loafe and invite my soul,  
 I lean and loafe at my ease . . . . observing a spear of summer grass  
 (Whitman 1982: 27, sct. 1).

Whereas Whitman also conceives of inspiration as receptivity, the speaker's passive stance is counterbalanced by his emphasis on his own agency: "I loafe", "I lean", and his persistent repetition of the first person pronoun. His inspiration is characteristically self-reflexive: rather than with a sudden influx of Spirit, poetic vision originates first and foremost with self-assertion, and second, with sensory perceptions of the self-conscious subject. In the act of "observing a spear of summer grass" perception is synonymous with mystic contemplation and spiritual communion with nature, while the speaker's nonchalant pose masks intense concentration on a natural detail which becomes the central symbol of the poem. In Schelling's formula, the romantic symbol "does not simply signify, but also *is*" (Todorov 1982: 209); it has an autonomous existence as a concrete object *and* expresses universal meanings. While Very in "The new birth" uses the stormy sea as a natural metaphor for spiritual phenomena, Whitman's spear of grass functions simultaneously at the level of the particular and the general, in the natural space of America and the mental space of consciousness.

<sup>6</sup> Whitman himself made much of his Quaker connections. His maternal grandmother had been Quaker and his mother maintained Quaker sympathies. As a boy Whitman was strongly impressed by the Quaker leader Elias Hicks, whose last sermon he heard in Brooklyn. Later in his life Whitman planned to write a book on Hicks (Templin 1970). As Templin argues, although Whitman displays none of Quaker quietism or self-negation, the doctrine of Inner Light with its emphasis on the spirit of God in every human being and the reality of religious intuition created favorable ground for the Transcendentalist influence of Emerson on Whitman (Templin 1970: 134-135).

Most importantly, Whitmanian inspiration is channeled through the senses. While Very focuses on the psychology of inspiration in "The new birth", Whitman's catalogue of visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory and tactile sensations at the beginning of "Song of Myself" projects an erotics of inspiration which privileges touch as the most erotic sense of all. When Whitman says of the atmosphere, "I am in love with it, / I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked, / I am mad for it to be in contact with me" (Whitman 1982: 27, sct. 2), he is translating the transparency of the Emersonian eyeball, which, characteristically, also occurs in the atmospheric medium, into the finite opacity of the body whose erotic encounter with the elements engenders poetic vision. Nudity is Whitman's mode of stripping the self of artificial social roles and other contingent qualities which hinder his communion with nature. Where Emerson envisions the self as divested of personal identity and reduced to pure consciousness, Whitman projects a self divested of clothing and transformed into pure desire. As Irigaray (1991: 167) observes, "Desire requires a sense of attraction: a change in the interval or the relations of nearness and distance between subject and object". Whitman's transition from the present tense of "I loafe . . . observing" to the future tense of "I will go" underscores the breach of simultaneity: the unity of subject and object in the act of perception gives way to the unbearable distance of longing as desire anticipates union: "I am mad".

Just as Very envisages himself as a vehicle and instrument of the Holy Ghost who has obliterated his personal will and penetrated his consciousness, in his passive surrender to inspiration the Whitmanian speaker becomes a channel of the divine energy of life in its multiple forms: "Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world" (Whitman 1982: 28, §3); "Through me the afflatus surging and surging . . . through me the current and index" (Whitman 1982: 50, §24). In the preface to *Leaves of grass* Whitman declares that "The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase of diminution, and is the free channel of himself" (Whitman 1982: 14). This ideal of stylistic transparency, which is a corollary of an Emersonian escape from self-consciousness as the poet "resign[s] himself to the divine *aura* which breathes through forms" (Emerson 1983: 459), finds an equivalent in an image of unconditional openness, or, one might say, vulnerability to stimuli:

Mine is no callous shell,  
 I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
 They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me  
 (Whitman 1982: 55, sct. 27).

To render the instantaneous conveyance of multiple life forms streaming forth through the speaker, Whitman draws on the contemporary notion of electricity,



which, as Baym (2002: 45) reminds us, was scientifically conceived as ethereal fluid until the time of Einstein's discoveries. Webster's 1828 Dictionary, revised and reprinted through the nineteenth century, defined electricity as "The operations of a very subtil fluid, which appears to be diffused through most bodies, remarkable for the rapidity of its motion, and one of the most powerful agents in nature". The resulting image, no less bizarre than Emerson's eyeball, is that of a poet as an electric telegraph, whose body, previously divested of clothes, has now cast off the skin separating the inner from the outer and is walking around with exposed nerve fibers which transmit material objects to pour them forth in poetry, a grotesque literalization of Emerson's postulate that the poet should fasten words to visible things and use nature's creatures "as a picture-language" (Emerson 1983: 452). There is no expansion of consciousness in the Whitman passage, no filtering of external reality through the mind, and no retention; the speaker is merely a medium allowing things to unobstructedly flow through. Railton (1995: 23) stresses Whitman's "ability to dispense almost entirely with metaphor" as one of his "most impressive achievements as the poet of common reality". It seems, however, that even as Whitman does privilege metonymy over metaphor, he does not abandon metaphor but disguises it through concretization: his metaphors are palpable, intensely visual, surreal in their aggressive concreteness. Let us consider this image of the poet's all-inclusiveness, occurring halfway through "Song of Myself":

I find I incorporate gneiss and coal and long-threaded moss and fruits and grains and esculent roots,

And am stucco'd with quadrupeds and birds all over

(Whitman 1982: 57, sct. 31).

Literally wound in the great chain of being, from chunks of minerals through growing plants and harvested crops to different classes of animals, the speaker is a giant carrying the entire creation within and upon his body. He resembles Arcimboldo's uncanny allegorical portraits of the seasons, except that Whitman's image is not allegorical but grotesquely literal. The "conductors" of the previous image now seem to have clogged, ceasing to transmit things all the way through; the speaker, no longer transparent, absorbs and becomes covered by natural objects which he must consciously forge into poetic language, following, as it were, Emerson's claim that the poet "puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object" (Emerson 1983: 456).

The Whitmanian autonomy of the image displayed in the many catalogues of "Song of Myself" is a decisive step away from Very's predominantly typological use of natural imagery. The Calvinist semiology of salvation orients such Very poems as, e.g., "The barberry-bush" (1993: 192), where the first frost which sweetens the bitter berries becomes an emblem of death and the happiness of the immortal soul in afterlife; "The Worm" (1993: 235), which depicts the chrysalis,

a favorite Puritan symbol of the resurrection; "The clouded morning" (1993: 184), where the distorted view of familiar objects enveloped in mist provides an analogy to blurred spiritual vision; or "The canary bird" (1993: 53), where the caged singer epitomizes the fate of the divinely inspired preacher misunderstood by his listeners. Nonetheless, even the typological poems are romantically saturated with concrete detail, manifesting a keen sensitivity to the visible world. Albeit based on a preestablished code of correspondence between the seen and the unseen, Very's romantic typology stems from the observation of nature in its sensible, opaque concreteness. Thus, what distinguishes him from an Edward Taylor or, among his contemporaries, from the Amherst natural theologian Edward Hitchcock is his method of interpreting natural phenomena, which disclose their religious meaning rather than providing ready evidence of Calvinist doctrine. With the exception of "The Worm", which silently presumes the standard allegorical meaning of the worm's metamorphosis into a butterfly, Very perceives nature as a source rather than illustration of spiritual truths. A typological sonnet usually consists of a realistic description of a natural scene whose spiritual import is revealed in the closing lines. "The latter rain" (1993: 72), one of the most successful poems in this group, depicts parched soil and thirsty vegetation reviving as they absorb the rain which penetrates all nature. The contrast between the barrenness of "the sun-dried fields and branches bare" and the fecundity of "the fruit all ripened" and the "furrowed fields disclos[ing] the yellow crops" parallels that between an unconverted soul and one which has received grace, but the parallel is only implicit, suggested retrospectively by the phrase "bursting pod of talents", which alludes to the parable of the three servants and thus sets an analogy between nature and the human being, construing the season of harvest and preparation for winter's sleep as an emblem of the evening of life which precedes the final reckoning at death.

At times, however, Very abandons the typological code and approaches Emersonian symbolism, as in "Autumn leaves":

The leaves though thick are falling; one by one  
Decayed they drop from off their parent tree;

.....  
Soiled by the rain each leaf neglected lies,  
Upon the path where now thou hurriest by;  
Yet think thee not their beauteous tints less fair,  
Than when they hung so gaily o'er thy head;  
But rather find thee eyes, and look thee there  
Where now thy feet so heedless o'er them tread;  
And thou shalt see where wasting now they lie,  
The unseen hues of immortality

(Very 1993: 188).



Congregational typologists saw falling and decaying leaves as an emblem of impending old age and death: “*The first moral lesson taught us by the fading leaf, is the certainty of the decay and dissolution of our bodily powers*” (Hitchcock 1850: 85). Even the naturalist Thoreau, who in his “Autumnal tints” set out simply to compile a descriptive catalogue of New England trees as they change color in the fall, and who admired fallen leaves for their sheer appeal to the senses, drew a moral lesson from them: “How beautifully they go to their graves! how gently lay themselves down and turn to mould! ... They teach us how to die” (Thoreau 2001: 381-382). The analogy was clearly too suggestive to be easily resisted. To Very, on the other hand, fallen leaves offer a lesson in epistemology, a course in the perception of spiritual reality. Whereas the sonnet’s view of physical death as a path to immortality is Calvinistic, the leaves are not typologically translated into a spiritual truth but become transparent, affording those awakened a glimpse of eternal life. In an Emersonian fashion, the visible dissolves to reveal the invisible.<sup>7</sup>

In its emphasis on the act of perception and the interrelation between the mode of perception and the individual’s spiritual state Very’s poem again seems to prepare the ground for Whitman. In one of the key passages of “Song of Myself” the speaker’s encounter with a child prompts a lesson in romantic semiosis which demonstrates how symbolic meanings are generated:

A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
 .....  
 I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff woven.  
  
 Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,  
 .....  
 Or I guess the grass is itself a child . . . . the produced babe of the vegetation

<sup>7</sup> Herbold (1967: 245-146) distinguished two kinds of nature in Very’s poetry: one finite, imperfect, and inert, the work of God’s hands not to be confused with God himself; the other infinite, self-generating, and pantheistic, capable of sharing in the poet’s feelings and incorporating rather than representing the glory of God. This sharp distinction between Very’s stances as a Calvinist and as a romantic or Transcendentalist was undermined by Levernier (1978: 30-31), who argued that Very did not “discern an essential opposition” between Calvinism and Transcendentalism, since in his view “as an epistemological mode for learning about truth, Calvinism subsumed Trans-cendentalism”.

Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,  
 And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,  
 .....

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves  
 (Whitman 1982: 31, sct. 6).

Without losing its material opacity, the grass allows passage to the unseen, yielding a plethora of spiritual or, as Emerson would say, moral meaning. The symbol is created by the observing consciousness which sees the grass in turn as a reflection of the poet’s own strength and fertility; a trace of God; an epitome of childhood; an emblem of democracy; or a metonymy of death. Unlike Very, Whitman does not expect his readers to achieve a particular insight; it is precisely the subjectivity and fluidity of meaning that guarantees its universality. The shift from the rigid symbolism of Very to the flowing symbolism of Whitman parallels the evolution of Emerson’s idea of the symbol from *Nature’s* theory of one-to-one correspondence between matter and spirit, where “Particular natural facts are symbols of particular spiritual facts” (Emerson 1983: 20), to the insistence on process, flux, and metamorphosis in “The Poet”, where the bard’s “speech flows with the flowing of nature”; “thought is multiform”; “all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive” (Emerson 1983: 456, 463). In Emerson that perception of universal flux eventually works to deprive experience of any stable frame of reference: being, intellection, and cognition become relative, the subject trapped in the glass prison of illusion from which there is no escape as “Dream delivers us to dream” (Emerson 1983: 473).<sup>8</sup> What saves Whitman from collapsing into the eerie dizziness of Emerson’s “Experience” is his firm grounding in palpable reality, his reliance on the body, and his unwavering trust in the senses.

While Emerson sees the imagination as the poet’s mode for escaping “the custody of that body in which he is pent up, and of that jailyard of individual relations in which he is enclosed” (Emerson 1983: 460), the Whitmanian persona in “Song of Myself” famously introduces himself as “Disorderly fleshy and sensual . . . . eating drinking and breeding” (Whitman 1982: 50, sct. 24) and constructs his protean identity through a series of encounters and identifications as he journeys across the continent, absorbing both the natural and human worlds. In the sweeping movement of consciousness the speaker becomes what or who he sees and interprets natural forms as reflections of himself: landscapes are

<sup>8</sup> Van Leer points out that this famous statement from “Experience” already appears in “The Poet” (Emerson 1983: 463), where it is part of an ambiguous apology for the liberating power of imagination (Van Leer 1986: 151).



“projected masculine full-sized and golden”; animals “bring me tokens of myself”; “Swift wind” becomes “My Soul” (Whitman 1982: 56, 58, 59); but also, in more specific claims to sameness, “I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself”; “My voice is the wife’s voice... They fetch my man’s body up dripping and drowned”; “I am the hounded slave”; “I am the mashed fireman with breastbone broken” (Whitman 1982: 64, 65). Marginally, it may be observed that while the speaker’s compassionate identification with those who suffer is construed as a Christlike gesture, it involves a complex ambiguity, an implied division of the self into sufferer and consoler. In solipsistic pity, the Whitmanian persona is both the bereaved wife and the one who commiserates with her, a doubleness which hints at an aggravating solitude of the bard whose poetic project necessarily alienates him from the crowd and who resorts to impersonation to gain his own sympathy.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the poems by Very which posit imaginative identification with nature present it as a mode for abandoning contingent relations, limitations of personal selfhood, and anxieties of earthly life. “The Song” (1993: 70) is a Wordsworthian lyric praising the beauty of “crooked streams and fields” and the regenerative power of communion with nature, which counteracts the passage of time and restores the poet to childlike carelessness. “The Columbine” projects a liberating movement of consciousness which attempts to transcend subjectivity and unite with the natural world, becoming a twin of the homely flower growing on a rocky hill:

Still, still my eye will gaze long fixed on thee,  
Till I forget that I am called a man,  
And at thy side fast-rooted seem to be,  
And the breeze comes my cheek with thine to fan;  
Upon this craggy hill our life shall pass,  
A life of summer days and summer joys,  
Nodding our honey-bells mid pliant grass  
In which the bee half hid his time employs...

(Very 1993: 61-62).

Although Levernier (1978: 36) deems it “Very’s most explicitly Transcendental poem”, the sonnet could more accurately be described as a bolder version of the Wordsworthian “Song”, another reverie about returning to childhood happiness and its innocent harmony with nature, here translated into the Transcendental id-

<sup>9</sup> The remarks about the speaker’s loneliness are implicitly corroborated by Railton (1995: 8, 9), who argues that the all-inclusive I of “Song of Myself” “is everything, the whole cosmos, except *you*” and that “the quest is to cross the gap between *I* and *you*”, the reader/listener/lover whose presence is necessary for the speaker to be complete.

iom of escape from personal identity. Transcendental discourse notwithstanding, communion with nature does not bring about an Emersonian insight into universal laws or a Whitmanian expansion of the self. Without positing any spiritual essence beneath the visible, Very’s speaker turns to nature to seek tranquility and, arguably, relief from his demanding roles as proselytizer and prophet, which, like Whitman’s cosmic consciousness, set him apart from his fellow human beings: “My weary eyes shall close like folding flowers in sleep” (Very 1993: 62). Yet Very is too much of a Calvinist to make this Whitmanian step away from self-consciousness. The sonnet’s optative mode implies that even this modest, unrevelatory kind of transparency is unattainable.

Poems that do not voice religious concerns, however, are exceptional in Very’s oeuvre. While in the Divinity School “Address” Emerson complained that “Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead” (Emerson 1983: 81), Very certainly redeems this fault as his poetry re-enacts the revelation, repeating the Word of God anew. Unlike most romantic poets and most mystics, Very does not struggle with the failure of language to eff the ineffable. On the contrary, his revelation is verbal and, for the most part, scriptural in character, his thoughts clothed in phrases lifted from the Bible: “This is the bread that cometh down from heaven,/ Of which who eats no other food he needs”; “My mansion is prepared; come, enter in”; “For he who long has tarried is at hand,/ And comes Himself his vineyard to demand”; “Oh hasten find the rest He gives in me/ And you shall fear no fear in me restored”; “My kingdom is within you... Open thine inward eye for thou art blind”.<sup>10</sup> This discursive strategy, which Buell (1986: 183) aptly terms “biblical ventriloquism”, provides a mode for avoiding the fallen and inadequate human discourse which could distort the divine truth. As vehicle of the Logos, scriptural language is itself an instrument of salvation and thus a corollary of Very’s messianism and his roles as a biblical prophet or Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Very’s use of the Christ persona, the most daring of his biblical roles, has been discussed at length in the context of the Unitarian and Transcendental concepts of the human and the divine (Buell 1973: 316-318; Robinson 1978). Unitarianism, which prevailed at Harvard Divinity School through the first half of the nineteenth century and informed Very’s religious training there, denied the

<sup>10</sup> “My meat and drink” (Very 1993: 96); “The Promise” (Very 1993: 141); “Then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn” (Very 1993: 154); “Flee to the mountains” (Very 1993: 133); “The Snare” (Very 1993: 144).

<sup>11</sup> Robinson (1978: 212) argues along the same lines: “his task as poet and medium of the Spirit still binds him to a somewhat conventional language, as does his deeper commitment to proselytization. The voice of God must be heard to have an effect on the reader, but that voice, Very felt, must also be easily understood”.



divine nature of Jesus and emphasized his humanity, a conception which made less unthinkable the poet's identification with Christ. Emerson took a further step, arguing in the "Address" that "If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God" (Emerson 1983: 76) and that Jesus was a representative man, an inspired bard who talked about his divinity as a synonym of self-reliance (Emerson 1983: 80). Thus, Emerson's Jesus was himself a poet whose greatest strength lay in the prophetic power of his imagination, another idea which may have encouraged the fusion of the poetic and the proselytic or redemptive in Very's work.<sup>12</sup> Yet whereas Very's role as Christ may have been prepared by the developments in Unitarian and Transcendental philosophy, its radical aspect is that Very does not present himself as the human Jesus of the Unitarians but as the divine Christ of Calvinism. Before his confinement in the asylum Very announced to Elizabeth Peabody, "I am the Second Coming" (Gittleman 1967: 217). The voice speaking in such sonnets as "The Son", "My Church", or "Yourself" is that of Jesus addressing the Father in humble prayer or exhorting unregenerated mortals to spiritual rebirth. Rather than construing himself as a contemporary version of the biblical representative man, as Whitman will do, or dissolving his finite self in the transcendent Self, as Emerson posited, Very merges with the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God who had walked the earth eighteen hundred years before and has now returned to save humanity.

Very's confidence in language as a vehicle of truth, his dependence on Scripture, and his use of the Christ persona prepare the ground for Whitman, whose project to create the "new Bible" involves both teaching the new gospel of universal love and democracy and reaching to the Old Testament for poetic models (Asselineau 1962: 243). When Whitman, in the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves*, terms the song of the American poet "the great psalm of the republic" (Whitman 1982: 8), he not only invokes Hebrew poetry as his direct antecedent but also returns poetry to its religious and prophetic functions, especially relevant to the forward-looking, expanding nation. The poet, says Whitman, "sees the solid and beautiful forms of the future where there are now no solid forms" (Whitman 1982: 8). Whereas the view of poetry as psalm transfers to it the authority of the original biblical text, the implicit analogy with the psalmist King David further legitimizes the poet's Emersonian role as leader, stressing his hierarchic authority and unique closeness to the divine source of inspiration. Rhetorically, Whitman's deployment of biblical parallelisms and repetitions emphasizes the revelatory and rhapsodic quality of his verse, the biblical rhythms mediating the crudity of his imagery and the shocking novelty of his themes. While Very avoids fallen language by ventriloquizing Scripture, Whitman sets out to redeem

<sup>12</sup> On Emerson's concept of Jesus as poet, see Schleiner (1979: 192-93).

language by recourse to nature, or the multifarious American reality, and to redeem American reality by incorporating it in poetry. This purpose is served by the catalogue, the most characteristic trope of Transcendentalist rhetoric, which, as Buell (1973: 168) reminds us, can also be traced to the Old Testament, and specifically to the Book of Psalms, which "used it for praise".

Naming, of course, is an Adamic gesture through which Whitman fulfills the role of Emerson's poet as "the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's" (Emerson 1983: 456-457). Saying is also the office of Jesus, who in the Platonic triad of truth, goodness, and beauty represents beauty, or poetry (Emerson 1983: 449). Common to American and European romantic millennialist thought, the Emersonian identification of poet with messiah, which transforms poetry into gospel and invests it with redemptive power, underlies Whitman's messianic stance. Departing from the literalism of Very's Christ persona, Whitman presents himself as a secularized Christ of the modern era, divine by virtue of his inspiration, his all-encompassing sympathy, and his Emersonian role as redeemer. As though summoning disciples, he promises insight through communion: "Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems" (Whitman 1982: 28, sct. 2). Asserting the dignity of the underprivileged, he iterates Christ's admonitions in chapter 18 of Matthew: "Whoever degrades another degrades me", and posits himself as the vehicle of "many long dumb voices" (1982: 50, sct. 24). He absorbs the pain and experiences the humiliation of others, suffering for humanity in his own Passion: "That I could forget the mockers and insults! ... That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning!" (1982: 70-71, sct. 38). In a Christlike gesture, he invites the oppressed to a feast: "This is the meal pleasantly set. ... The kept-woman and sponger and thief are hereby invited . . . . the heavy-lipp'd slave is invited . . . . the venerealee is invited", and proclaims the democratic ideal of universal equality: "There shall be no difference between them and the rest" (1982: 44, sct. 19).

Nevertheless, if democracy is believed to fulfill the promise of the Second Coming and bring redemption, Whitman's rhetoric betrays the failure of his messianic project. Railton (1995: 8) demonstrates how in the very first stanza of "Song of Myself" the shift from "[t]he eternal present of 'I celebrate myself'" to "the future tense of 'shall assume'" reveals incompleteness and conditionality. Similarly, the phrase "There shall be no difference between them and the rest" postpones the healing of divisions within the nation to an indefinite future or, to say the least, leaves it in the sphere of prophecy. Just as Emerson's bard, the Whitmanian speaker finds himself in a postlapsarian world of limitation, in the aftermath of what Emerson described in "Experience" as the "unhappy ... discovery we have made that we exist" (Emerson 1983: 487). Emerson preaches



that to transcend the fallen human condition is to transcend self-consciousness; to transcend one's *sense* of limitation as a prerequisite for transcending the limitations themselves, as "Circles" postulates. The only absolute escape from self-consciousness, however, is *Nature's* momentary vanishing of the self in the Oversoul, a Transcendentalist version of the Christian *kenosis* which, however, can only be recounted retrospectively, by self-conscious recourse to memory. Therefore, although on the one hand the poet experiences un-self-conscious communion with nature as he "stands on the centre" and sees things as they are (Emerson 1983: 449), on the other hand self-consciousness, or "the slight dislocation" of "the Centre of Life" that Emerson lamented in his journal (Packer 1982: 182) is an ineluctable part of the poet's condition. Although in "The Poet" Emerson posits saying as a dialectic reconciliation of *Nature's* opposition of being and seeing, the division of the mind into the experiencing "me" and the observing "me of me" cannot be transcended once and for all. Very's surrender of self-consciousness to Spirit, as Emerson had seen, resulted at its extreme in a loss of original poetic voice.

Whitman attempts to circumvent this aporia by replacing Emersonian communion *with* the Oversoul with the conception of the poet's self *as* Oversoul. Accordingly, in lieu of Emerson's emphasis on pure consciousness as the sole instrument of true cognition, Whitman foregrounds self-consciousness as an essential aspect of the poet's genius and the primary source of inspiration. However, Whitman's infinite expansion of the self to encompass all nature and humanity results in moments of anxiety unknown to Very. If the I has absorbed everything, it has no foundation or reference point outside of itself. Thus, when Whitman construes his persona as "large" and "contain[ing] multitudes" (1982: 87, sct. 51), he deprives himself of Very's unwavering confidence in the truth of his vision:

These are the thoughts of all men in all ages and lands, they are not original  
with me,

If they are not yours as much as mine they are nothing, or next to nothing  
(Whitman 1982: 43, sct. 17).

This passage is precariously poised between a grand claim to universality as the speaker's consciousness has mystically absorbed the thoughts of all people – and, paradoxically, the uncertainty and vulnerability of vision which craves comfort and reassurance from the you as an autonomous individual and which, in a desperate gesture of self-protection, tries to salvage some of its validity: "or next to nothing". As he oscillates between omnipotence and limitation, the Whitman persona, in marked contrast to Very's speaker, cannot always maintain his mastery over language, unexpectedly failing to articulate essential meanings. "I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women", he

says of the grass that overgrows graves (Whitman 1982: 32, sct. 6). Toward the end of "Song of Myself", when the poem's predominantly ecstatic tone becomes more subdued, poetic language, hitherto boundlessly expansive, suddenly loses its power to name, the speaker on the verge of sliding into silence:

There is that in me . . . . I do not know what it is . . . . but I know it is in me.

.....  
I do not know it . . . . it is without name . . . . it is a word unsaid,

It is not in any dictionary or utterance or symbol

(Whitman 1982: 86, sct. 50).

The speaker's fluctuations between powerful all-inclusiveness and vulnerable individuality in the first *Leaves of grass* have been accounted for in various ways: as resulting from the unstable identity of the lower middle class in the shift from agrarian economy to the urban marketplace (Lawson 2003: 338-339) or reflecting the tension between self-assertion and erotic anxiety (Railton 1995: 24). Tapscott (1984: 43), discussing the modernist reception of Whitman, speaks of Whitman's twofold persona as an all-absorbing giant who incarnates America and "a local settler in a particular place". Anticipating Whitman, Very translated Emerson's lesson of the loss of self in the currents of the Universal Being into the Calvinist dogma of conversion, or the influx of divine grace into the human soul, which in moments of supreme intensity completely blurs the boundaries between man and God. Very's manipulation of the human and divine voices has been examined by Robinson (1978), who demonstrates how "Very creates a persona . . . who as an equal can lead his fellows further toward his concept of religious salvation" and how, in another group of poems, he "obscures this exemplary self by speaking in a voice that has transcended the bounds of selfhood completely and assumed the authority of one of the members of the trinity" (1978: 207). Whitman, for his part, transfers the pulsations of Emerson's expanding and contracting self into the secular frameworks of sexuality and desire; capitalist economy with its many trades; urbanism and technological development; territorial growth with the variety of newly-emerged regional identities; racial diversity and national debates over slavery.

Images of the giant in "Song of Myself" are among the poem's most compelling: "My ties and ballasts leave me . . . . I travel . . . . I sail . . . . my elbows rest in the sea gaps,/ I skirt the sierras . . . . my palms cover continents,/ I am afoot with my vision" (Whitman 1982: 59, sct. 33). This image of sublime grandeur is followed by the poem's longest catalogue of landscapes, settings, wildlife, crops, urban and rural occupations, aspects of frontier life, entertainments, and finally, heavenly bodies, which reinforce the self's cosmic dimensions. Yet albeit centered around his poetic self-consciousness and rooted in American geography, the national identity forged by the giant remains summatory, reaching



only a precarious coherence, an uneasy balance between unity and diversity. If this transcendent identity is created by the speaker's all-encompassing cosmic love, desire for the you returns the superhuman persona to his limited human self. Whereas the giant can experience what might be termed elemental desire, as when he craves for a touch of the air on his naked body, desire for the you immediately explodes his all-absorbing magnitude, revealing his dependence and vulnerability and giving his voice a new immediacy of recollection, plea, or complaint: "You villain touch! what are you doing? ... Did it make you ache so leaving me?" (Whitman 1982: 56, sct. 28-29). The speaker's final disintegration, a puzzling conclusion to a poem that celebrates selfhood, appears as a relief from this exhausting oscillation, abandonment of his overwhelming burden of diversity, and escape from self-consciousness concomitant with relinquishing his role as poet. The gesture of yielding all agency to the you hints at fatigue rather than fulfillment: "If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles" (Whitman 1982: 88, sct. 52), and implies poetry's eventual failure to reconcile the conflicts and divisions of the antebellum decade.

### 3. Rethinking the poet: Emerson's disappointments

The Transcendentalists could approach the question of Very's sanity in terms of the Kantian distinction between the two cognitive faculties.<sup>13</sup> As Emerson himself had said in the Divinity School "Address", "There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding" (Emerson 1983: 80). Every higher truth, when filtered through the lower mental faculty, is falsified and turns into empty doctrine. Thus, Very's alleged madness effectually attested to the authenticity of his revelation. Following Very's visit at his home in late October 1838, shortly after Very's release from the McLean Asylum, Emerson wrote to Margaret Fuller:

Very... staid a few days confounding us all with the question -- whether he was insane? At first sight & speech, you would certainly pronounce him so. Talk with him a few hours and you will think all insane but he. Monomania or mono *Sania* he is a very remarkable person & though his mind is not in a

<sup>13</sup> The distinction between the two cognitive faculties was an essential concern of Transcendentalism, whose very emergence was stimulated by James Marsh's edition of Coleridge's (1829) *Aids to reflection*. Coleridge's reinterpretation of the Kantian concepts of reason and understanding and his identification of reason with intuition, foregrounded by Marsh in his long "Preliminary essay," offered a possibility for breaking away from Unitarian rationalist theology (Gura 1981: 40-45).

natural & probably not in a permanent state, he is a treasure of a companion, & I had with him most memorable conversations

(Emerson 1997: 191).<sup>14</sup>

Emerson first met Very during America's first major economic crisis: booming land speculation, Johnson's banking policies, and the transatlantic reverberations of a financial crisis in London led to a New York bank panic in May 1837, which marked the onset of a prolonged depression (Jones 1995: 147-148). Emerson had by then reached a modest financial stability thanks to his income from lecturing and preaching and an inheritance from his first wife Ellen's estate (Buell 1978: 50), and while the business letters to his brother William reveal some anxiety about financial matters (Emerson 1997: 169, 172-173), on the whole he viewed the crisis with his characteristic detachment, as an instructive spectacle of social apocalypse. A journal entry of May 22, 1837 reads: "The black times have a great scientific value. It is an epoch so critical a philosopher would not miss... this era [is] more rich in the central tones than many languid centuries. What was, ever since my memory, solid continent, now yawns apart and discloses its composition and genesis" (Emerson 1982: 163-164). But even as Emerson sees the fluctuations of capitalist economy as transient and insubstantial, counterbalanced by the fertility of the cultivated land (1982: 164), he perceives the mechanization and commodification of human work as a threat to the individual's spiritual integrity. If the infinitely expanding self in *Nature* parallels the territorial expansion of the United States, the parable of Man subdivided into many separate functions in "The American scholar" reflects the capitalist division of labor which must be overcome at the spiritual level. Thus, apart from becoming the Transcendentalist saint, brave enough to disregard social conventions, Jones Very provided Emerson with a living example of the triumph of the human spirit over historical, economic, and financial circumstances, dissolved by an awakened consciousness.

However, Emerson's enthusiasm faded along with Very's vision. After the *Essays and poems* was released by Little and Brown in September 1839, Emerson no longer had the zeal to champion the book he had so painstakingly edited (Gittleman 1967: 352-354). He did, however, review the volume for the *Dial*,

<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to his selection of Very's poems, Clarke defended Very's sanity in a similar way: "the intense contemplation of any vast theme is apt to disturb the balance of the lower intellectual faculties. While the Reason, which contemplates absolute truth, is active and strong; the understanding which arranges and gives coherence to our thoughts, may be weakened or reduced to a state of torpor. ... When for instance, we have seen a man in whose intellect all other thoughts have become merged in the great thought of his connexion with God, we have had the feeling very strongly, which we once heard thus expressed, 'Is this MONOMANIA, or is it MONO-SANIA?'" (Clarke 1978: 342-343).



stressing the coarseness of Very's poetry as its intrinsic value and a measure of its spontaneity. He also pointed to Old Testament poetry as Very's model, observing that his verses are "indebted to the Hebrew muse for their tone and genius. This makes the singularity of the book... that so pure an utterance of the most domestic and primitive of all sentiments should in this age of revolt and experiment use once more the popular religious language, and so show itself secondary and morbid" (Emerson 1841). The ostensibly laudatory tone of these remarks hardly conceals Emerson's impatience: what ultimately discouraged him was the narrow range of Very's concerns, his excessive dependence on the Bible and on Congregational doctrine, and, worst of all, his reluctance or inability to abandon scriptural language and imagery. The example of Very, which initially attested to the unlimited potential of the human soul, now seemed to confirm what Packer (1982: 181) describes as Emerson's "tremendous fear that the soul's natural tendency to ossification will transform the purest truth into the deadliest falsehood".<sup>15</sup> To Emerson, Very's poetry demonstrated that petrified language can kill even the most inspired vision, and that even the most inspired language, like that of the Bible, becomes petrified when mechanically repeated.<sup>16</sup>

Over the next decade Emerson kept returning to what he saw as a glaring disparity between Very's inspiration and his conventional means of expression. In the Journal for 1845 he compared Swedenborg to "our Jones Very, who had an illumination that enabled him to excel every body in wit & to see farthest in every company... & yet he could never get out of his Hebraistic phraseology & mythology, &, when all was over, still remained in the thin porridge or cold tea of Unitarianism" (Emerson 1982: 350, 5 Nov.). Even his insistence on the novelty of poetic language in "The Poet" seems at least partially to echo Emerson's frustrated expectations for Very, as does his critique of Jacob Behmen: "the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. ... Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false" (Emerson 1983: 463-464). As late as 1849 Very appears on Emerson's list of "Littleendians" alongside Alcott, Newcomb, Channing, Thoreau, and Emerson himself. That the catalogue of men who had potential but wasted it consists of Transcendentalists is symptomatic of the crisis of Emerson's idealism and his disillusionment with

<sup>15</sup> While Packer does not make the claim that Very directly influenced "The Poet," she points to correspondences between Very's poetry and teaching and the ideas included in Emerson's essay (Packer 1982: 186-189).

<sup>16</sup> Buell (1986: 183) identifies the double bind of what he terms "literary scripturism" as follows: "to set out to write Scripture was to put oneself in the bind of aiming at a truly 'original relation to the universe' ... and at the same time to acknowledge that one was following a model".

Transcendental philosophy which, as "Experience" demonstrated, collapses in confrontation with reality. No Americans appear on the list of "Bigendians", who are the protagonists of the soon to be published *Representative men*: Plato, Swedenborg, Shakspeare [sic], Montaigne, Goethe, and Napoleon (Emerson 1982: 407, Oct.-Nov.).

That volume, which Emily Dickinson called "a little Granite Book you can lean upon" (Dickinson 1958: 569), originated as a lecture series delivered in the winter of 1845-1846, on the eve of the Mexican War, at a time when the price of U.S. pursuit of its "manifest destiny" was acutely visible as territorial expansion involved conflict and bloodshed, which added to Emerson's personal grief after the death of his son Waldo. In a way, the book develops and revises Emerson's positions in "The Poet", where the messianic bard is the paradigmatic human being, embodying true perception and spiritual communion with nature which find expression in his language: "the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth" (Emerson 1983: 448). By 1850, in the wake of "Experience", Emerson had revised not only his view of the self as potentially capable of boundless expansion but also his concept of the poet as a mythic, disembodied figure transcending the limitations of the common lot, a projected ideal with no equivalent in reality. In *Representative men*, whose title recalls the above description of the poet, the six outstanding representatives of humanity at different points in history are seen pragmatically from the vantage point of society which can benefit from their achievements, in accordance with the book's opening essay "The uses of great men".

A late avatar of the Scholar, the great man is seen as a liberator from the tyranny of the capitalist economy of exchange which has invaded even one's private life; the continual counting of gains and losses; the economic attitude toward time which must render a particular profit. "I am plagued, all my living, with a perpetual tariff of prices", Emerson complains. "I go to Boston or New York, and run up and down on my affairs: they are sped, but so is the day. I am vexed by the recollection of this price I have paid for a trifling advantage.... Do what I can, I cannot keep my eyes off the clock" (Emerson 1983: 624-625). The great man reminds us of our inherent worth outside of the system of exchange and frees us from the aggravating self-requirement of continual productivity: he "apprises me of my independence on any conditions of country, or time, or human body... I forget the clock" (Emerson 1983: 625). Further, in a somewhat contradictory argument, Emerson declares that great men help us acknowledge the individuality of others and to resist the leveling influence of society: "They are the exceptions which we want, where all grows alike" (Emerson 1983: 627). Finally, the thinker who counted himself among the American Littleendians encourages his readers to project on great men their own longing for greatness:



“Serve the great. Stick at no humiliation. ... Be the limb of their body, the breath of their mouth. Compromise thy egotism” (Emerson 1983: 629). The call to universal self-reliance and nonconformism articulated a decade earlier has given way to the disillusioned postulate that one be ancillary to the self-reliant, develop by following their example, and avoid stagnancy by frequently changing models, since “We cloy of the honey of each peculiar greatness” (Emerson 1983: 627).

While this attitude may incline him to more balanced and realistic vision, Emerson’s stoical resignation to the rarity of genius and his strained attempt to make the most of mediocrity are driven by deep pessimism, related on the one hand to his own sense of waning inspiration and on the other, to his disheartening perception that the ubiquitous mechanisms of capitalist economy and party politics, which subvert the democratic ideal of equal rights and threaten both individualism and universality, practically invalidate the idea of a scholar as a paradigmatic American. In the aftermath of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, heated debates over slavery, particularly those surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act, were added to growing class differences, corruption, and sectional conflicts, further disuniting the already divided nation. The 1850s, as Reynolds (1995: 66) reminds us, saw an unprecedented crisis of the party system caused mainly by disagreement on the issue of slavery. The Whig party broke up; the Democratic party was plagued by conflict and finally became Southern-oriented; the nativist, anti-Catholic Know-Nothing party emerged (only to decline soon afterwards); and the Northern-oriented, antislavery Republican party developed (Jones 1995: 203-204). It was also a period of blatant presidential incompetence as Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan, successive holders of the chief executive office, were unable to take a decisive stand on the slavery issue (Reynolds 1995: 66-67) and failed to become the nation’s heroic “representative men”, a status often granted to George Washington in contemporary oratorical discourse (Bresky 2002: 228-229). Even for the habitually detached thinker the crisis was too deep and the turmoil too perilous to be approached merely as a lesson for the intellect. In 1856 the embittered Emerson wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes:

A scholar needs not be cynical to feel that the vast multitude are almost on all fours; that the rich always vote after their fears, that cities churches colleges all go for the quadruped interest, and it is against this coalition that the pathetically small minority of disengaged or thinking men stand for the ideal right, for man as he should be, & ... for the right of every other as for his own....

The cant of the Union like the cant of extending the area of liberty by annexing Texas & Mexico is too transparent for its most impudent repeater to hope

to deceive you. And for the Union with Slavery no manly person will suffer a day to go by without discrediting disintegrating & finally exploding it (Emerson 1997: 388-389).

Published a year earlier, *Leaves of grass* ventured to unite the strife-ridden nation, absorbing tensions and conflicts without overlooking bloodshed and abuse, and construing poetry as a mode for forging a national identity above and beyond divisions. Through his use of the twofold persona Whitman mediated between mediocrity and greatness, emphasizing the strength, dignity, and uncorrupted vital energy of the common people and presenting himself as their spokesman and leader at the time when the political authority of the government was severely undermined (Reynolds 1995: 82). In 1855 Whitman may have appeared to Emerson not only as an embodiment of the bard from the 1844 essay but also, perhaps more importantly, as another “representative man”, an American chapter in the series, a poet who, like Shakespeare, has “a heart in unison with his time and country” (Emerson 1983: 710). Emerson stresses the poet’s grounding in the historical moment and his sensitivity to “the national feeling” as the essence of his genius, which must “suffe[r] the spirit of the hour to pass unobstructed through the mind” (Emerson 1983: 711). *Leaves of grass* displays a corresponding attitude to history. Weisbuch’s (1986: 183-184) argument that “Song of Myself” is antihistorical because it does not present time as an agent of change but focuses on “vertical time”, or the *now*, seems inaccurate since, firstly, the poem *is* historical in that the now represents a particular moment in the history of American civilization, economy, and politics in the mid-century; and secondly, we have seen how the poem’s present is occasionally disrupted by the speaker’s leaning toward the future which is expected to bring the fulfillment denied in the now. Unlike the ahistorical Very, whose sonnets happen in the *kairos* of divine revelation, Whitman transcends history by subjecting it to cyclic time, foregrounded in the “Song”, and absorbing it in the persona’s biography:

We have thus far exhausted trillions of winters and summers;  
There are trillions ahead, and trillions ahead of them.

.....

I am an acme of things accomplished, and an encloser of things to be.

My feet strike an apex of the apices of the stairs,  
On every step bunches of ages, and larger bunches between the steps,  
All below duly traveled – and still I mount and mount

(Whitman 1982: 79, sct. 44).



In *Representative men* the romantic notion of history as biography, which Emerson first formulated in his *Essays: First series*, ties in with his precept that genius is the product of his time and that all society contributes to his achievement. More than any other work, "Song of Myself" illustrates this principle as Whitman's speaker assimilates all individuals, literally forging his boundless identity out of theirs.

Pointing out that the words *represent* and *representative* had an unmistakably national resonance for nineteenth-century readers, Bresky (2002: 214-215) argues that Emerson's notion of representative hero engaged American cultural nationalism before "gestur[ing] toward a transcendence of nationality". Including "the Philosopher", "the Mystic", "the Skeptic", "the Poet", "the Man of the World", and "the Writer", Emerson's list encompassed men of thought, speech, and action, or, to recall the tripartite model of "The Poet" (1844), knowers, sayers, and doers. Bresky (2002: 222-229) observes that biographies of great men were an important genre in contemporary American letters since they answered the demand for models of vocation in an increasingly heterogeneous society. Emerson's book, apart from being a response to Carlyle's *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history*, was thus deeply rooted in American literary discourse of the time. While Emerson, for lack of native "Bigendians", pragmatically suggests that cosmopolitan examples of the "social and delegated quality" of men (1983: 631) may help Americans define their own roles in their society, Whitman's version of representative literary heroism which includes and reevaluates all social roles incorporates Emerson's recent model of social fragmentation in the ideal of completeness from "The American scholar" and "The Poet".

Even Whitman's unreserved treatment of sexuality, which scandalized many readers and finally alienated the genteel Emerson too, initially answered Emerson's demand for literature "written by the Instincts" and full of "animal heat" (1982: 403, Aug. 1849), a literature which refuses to veil the sexual aspect of life. "But it does not seem to me much better", says Emerson in the journal, "when the gross instincts are a little disguised, and the oestrus, gadfly, or brize of sex takes sentimental forms. I like the engendering of snails better than the same rut masquerading in Watts's psalms to the Church" (1982: 425, May? 1851).

Emerson's enthusiasm for *Leaves of grass* was short-lived, however, mainly because of Whitman's unselective all-inclusiveness which he soon began to find annoying. When he sent the book to Carlyle in May 1856, in the accompanying letter Emerson alluded to its apparent formlessness and extravagant accumulation of factual detail, which nevertheless were part of its uniqueness as "a nondescript monster which yet has terrible eyes & buffalo strength, & was indisputably American" (Emerson 1997: 389-390). A year later, however, in a letter to Caroline Sturgis Tappan, he complained about the state of American literature

which lacked a lyric poet like Tennyson and mourned the limitations of "[o]ur wild Whitman, with real inspiration but choked by Titanic abdomen" (Emerson 1997: 395). As in the case of Very, Emerson's frustrated expectations were at odds with Whitman's own sense of vocation. Nevertheless, just as Very eighteen years before, in Emerson's eyes Whitman turned out to be just another Littleendian.

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