

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Walt Whitman
LEAVES OF GRASS
AND OTHER WRITINGS



AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS
OTHER POETRY AND PROSE
CRITICISM

Edited by

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THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

*An expanded and revised edition based on the
Norton Critical Edition of Leaves of Grass, edited by*

SCULLEY BRADLEY

and

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LATE OF THE UNIVERSITY
OF PENNSYLVANIA

LATE OF UNION COLLEGE



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Thy very songs not in thy songs,
 No special strains to sing, none for itself,
 But from the whole resulting, rising at last and floating,
 A round full-orb'd eidolon.

1876

1876

For Him I Sing⁵

For him I sing,
 I raise the present on the past,
 (As some perennial tree out of its roots, the present on the past,)
 With time and space I him dilate and fuse the immortal laws,
 To make himself by them the law unto himself.

1871

1871

5

When I Read the Book⁶

When I read the book, the biography famous,
 And is this then (said I) what the author calls a man's life?
 And so will some one when I am dead and gone write my life?
 (As if any man really knew aught of my life,
 Why even I myself I often think know little or nothing of my
 real life,
 Only a few hints, a few diffused faint clews and indirections
 I seek for my own use to trace out here.)

1867

1871

5

Beginning My Studies⁷

Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
 The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
 The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
 The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
 I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
 But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

1865

1871

5

5. First appeared in the "Inscriptions" of LG 1871.

6. The first (and more powerful) version of this poem in LG 1867 was limited to five lines, the first four as they are now, the fifth completing the parenthesis: "As if you, O cunning Soul, did not keep your secret well!" The MS (Lion) shows many variants.

7. First appeared in the 1865 *Drum-Taps*, and was transferred to "Inscriptions" in 1871.

The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his way in the
 morning, or at noon intermission or at sundown,
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at
 work, or of the girl sewing or washing,
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,
 The day what belongs to the day—at night the party of young
 fellows, robust, friendly,
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

1860

1867

What Place Is Besieged?⁹

What place is besieged, and vainly tries to raise the siege?
 Lo, I send to that place a commander, swift, brave, immortal,
 And with him horse and foot, and parks of artillery,
 And artillery-men, the deadliest that ever fired gun.

1860

1867

Still Though the One I Sing¹

Still though the one I sing,
 (One, yet of contradictions made,) I dedicate to Nationality,
 I leave in him revolt, (O latent right of insurrection! O
 quenchless, indispensable fire!)

1871

1871

Shut Not Your Doors²

Shut not your doors to me proud libraries,
 For that which was lacking on all your well-fill'd shelves, yet
 needed most, I bring,
 Forth from the war emerging, a book I have made,
 The words of my book nothing, the drift of it every thing,
 A book separate, not link'd with the rest nor felt by the
 intellect,
 But you ye untold latencies will thrill to every page.

1865

1881

9. Originally this poem constituted the last four lines of an eight-line poem printed as "Calamus" No. 31 in *LG* 1860. In the next edition, 1867, it appeared under its present title, and the first four lines of the original piece also became a separate piece under the title "Here, Sailor!" now "What Ship Puzzled at Sea." "What Place is Besieged?" was transferred to "Inscriptions" in 1881.
1. This was the introductory poem (and the only new one) of a group of six labelled "Songs of Insurrection" that WW arranged for the 1871 and 1876 editions; it then became one of the "Inscriptions" in 1881.
2. First a *Drum-Taps* poem, this piece was much improved in revision, achieving its final—and best—form in the 1881 "Inscriptions." Among the changes was the dropping of four lines in the 1871 version to become in 1881 part of another poem, "As They Draw to a Close."

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry 1856-1881
Let the paper remain on the desk unwritten, and the book on
the shelf unopen'd!
Let the tools remain in the workshop! let the money remain
unearn'd!
Let the school stand! mind not the cry of the teacher!
Let the preacher preach in his pulpit! let the lawyer plead in
the court, and the judge expound the law.

Camerado, I give you my hand!
I give you my love more precious than money,
I give you myself before preaching or law;
Will you give me yourself? will you come travel with me?
Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?

1856

220
1881

Crossing Brooklyn Ferry¹

1

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west—sun there half an hour high—I see you
also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes, how
curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats the hundreds and hundreds that cross,
returning home, are more curious to me than you
suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are
more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might
suppose.

5

2

The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours
of the day,

1. This was the "Sun-Down Poem" of the second edition, the most distinguished of the new poems of 1856, taking its present title in 1860. It is possible that WW began its composition even before the first edition went to press, for many of its lines are entered into one of his notebooks of the period. See *An 1855-56 Notebook Toward the Second Edition of Leaves of Grass*, ed. by Harold W. Blodgett (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959). The revisions through the various editions—some fourteen lines were dropped and quite a number of phrases amended—reveal the constant improvement in a composition whose first version evidenced mastery of artistic power. With exalted and sustained inspiration the poet presents a transcendent reality unlimited by the tyranny of time or person or space, a poetic demonstration of the power of appearances—"dumb, beautiful ministers"—to affirm the soul. Philosophical in theme, the poem is yet profoundly personal—his own daily experience made illustrious—and its strength lies in its aesthetic vision. For a detailed analysis, see Stanley K. Coffman's " 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry': A Note on the Catalogue Technique in Whitman's Poetry," *MP* 51: 225-32. Also helpful are M. Wynn Thomas, *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 92-123; and James Dougherty, *Walt Whitman and the Citizen's Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 143-54.

The simple, compact, well-join'd scheme, myself disintegrated,
 every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme,
 The similitudes of the past and those of the future,
 The glories strung like beads on my smallest sights and
 hearings, on the walk in the street and the passage over
 the river,
 The current rushing so swiftly and swimming with me far
 away,
 The others that are to follow me, the ties between me and them,
 The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others.

Others will enter the gates of the ferry and cross from shore to
 shore,
 Others will watch the run of the flood-tide,
 Others will see the shipping of Manhattan north and west, and
 the heights of Brooklyn to the south and east,
 Others will see the islands large and small;
 Fifty years hence, others will see them as they cross, the sun
 half an hour high,
 A hundred years hence, or ever so many hundred years hence,
 others will see them,
 Will enjoy the sunset, the pouring-in of the flood-tide, the
 falling-back to the sea of the ebb-tide.

3

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
 I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so
 many generations hence,
 Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
 Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,
 Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the
 bright flow, I was refresh'd,
 Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift
 current, I stood yet was hurried,
 Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
 thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.

I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old,
 Watched the Twelfth-month sea-gulls,² saw them high in the
 air floating with motionless wings, oscillating their bodies,
 Saw how the glistening yellow lit up parts of their bodies and
 left the rest in strong shadow,
 Saw the slow-wheeling circles and the gradual edging toward
 the south,
 Saw the reflection of the summer sky in the water,
 Had my eyes dazzled by the shimmering track of beams,

2. WW's use of the Quaker designation for the days and months often produced a more musical phrase.

Look'd at the fine centrifugal spokes of light round the shape
 of my head in the sunlit water,³
 Look'd on the haze on the hills southward and south-westward,
 Look'd on the vapor as it flew in fleeces tinged with violet,
 Look'd toward the lower bay to notice the vessels arriving,
 Saw their approach, saw aboard those that were near me,
 Saw the white sails of schooners and sloops, saw the ships at
 anchor,
 The sailors at work in the rigging or out astride the spars,
 The round masts, the swinging motion of the hulls, the slender
 serpentine pennants,
 The large and small steamers in motion, the pilots in their
 pilot-houses,
 The white wake left by the passage, the quick tremulous whirl
 of the wheels,
 The flags of all nations, the falling of them at sunset,
 The scallop-edged waves in the twilight, the ladled cups, the
 frolicsome crests and glistening,
 The stretch afar growing dimmer and dimmer, the gray walls
 of the granite storehouses by the docks,
 On the river the shadowy group, the big steam-tug closely
 flank'd on each side by the barges, the hay-boat, the
 belated lighter,
 On the neighboring shore the fires from the foundry chimneys
 burning high and glaringly into the night,
 Casting their flicker of black contrasted with wild red and
 yellow light over the tops of houses, and down into the
 clefts of streets.

4

These and all else were to me the same as they are to you,
 I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and rapid river,
 The men and women I saw were all near to me,
 Others the same—others who look back on me because I
 look'd forward to them,
 (The time will come, though I stop here to-day and to-night.)

5

What is it then between us?
 What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between
 us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place
 avails not,
 I too lived, Brooklyn of ample hills was mine,
 I too walk'd the streets of Manhattan island, and bathed in the
 waters around it,
 I too felt the curious abrupt questionings stir within me,

3. An aureole available to anyone.

In the day among crowds of people sometimes they came upon
me,
In my walks home late at night or as I lay in my bed they
came upon me,
I too had been struck from the float forever held in solution,
I too had receiv'd identity by my body,
That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I
knew I should be of my body.

6

It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,
The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality
meagre?
Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil,
I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
I too knitted the old knot of contrariety,
Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, sly, cowardly, malignant,
The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not
wanting,
Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of
these wanting,
Was one with the rest, the days and haps of the rest,
Was call'd by my highest name by clear loud voices of young
men as they saw me approaching or passing,
Felt their arms on my neck as I stood, or the negligent leaning
of their flesh against me as I sat,
Saw many I loved in the street or ferry-boat or public
assembly, yet never told them a word,
Lived the same life with the rest, the same old laughing,
gnawing, sleeping,
Play'd the part that still looks back on the actor or actress,
The same old role, the role that is what we make it, as great as
we like,
Or as small as we like, or both great and small.

7

Closer yet I approach you,
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I
laid in my stores in advance,
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking
at you now, for all you cannot see me?⁴

8

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me than
mast-hemm'd Manhattan?
River and sunset and scallop-edg'd waves of flood-tide?
The sea-gulls oscillating their bodies, the hay-boat in the
twilight, and the belated lighter?
What gods can exceed these that clasp me by the hand, and
with voices I love call me promptly and loudly by my
highest name as I approach?
What is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or
man that looks in my face?
Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you?

We understand then do we not?
What I promis'd without mentioning it, have you not accepted?
What the study could not teach—what the preaching could
not accomplish is accomplish'd, is it not?

9

Flow on, river! flow with the flood-tide, and ebb with the ebb-tide!
Frolic on, crested and scallop-edg'd waves!
Gorgeous clouds of the sunset! drench with your splendor me,
or the men and women generations after me!
Cross from shore to shore, countless crowds of passengers!
Stand up, tall masts of Mannahatta! stand up, beautiful hills of
Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! throw out questions and
answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of solution!
Gaze, loving and thirsting eyes, in the house or street or public
assembly!
Sound out, voices of young men! loudly and musically call me
by my highest name!
Live, old life! play the part that looks back on the actor or
actress!
Play the old role, the role that is great or small according as
one makes it!
Consider, you who peruse me, whether I may not in unknown
ways be looking upon you;
Be firm, rail over the river, to support those who lean idly, yet
haste with the hasting current;
Fly on, sea-birds! fly sideways, or wheel in large circles high in
the air;

4. For lines 89–91, cf. endings of "Song of Myself" and "So Long."

Receive the summer sky, you water, and faithfully hold it till
all downcast eyes have time to take it from you! 115

Diverge, fine spokes of light, from the shape of my head, or
any one's head, in the sunlit water!

Come on, ships from the lower bay! pass up or down, white-
sail'd schooners, sloops, lighters!

Flaunt away, flags of all nations! be duly lower'd at sunset!
Burn high your fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at
nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the
houses!

Appearances, now or henceforth, indicate what you are, 120
You necessary film, continue to envelop the soul,
About my body for me, and your body for you, be hung our
divinest aromas,

Thrive, cities—bring your freight, bring your shows, ample and
sufficient rivers,

Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more spiritual,
Keep your places, objects than which none else is more lasting. 125

You have waited, you always wait, you dumb, beautiful
ministers,

We receive you with free sense at last, and are insatiate hence-
forward,

Not you any more shall be able to foil us, or withhold
yourselves from us,

We use you, and do not cast you aside—we plant you
permanently within us,

We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection in you
also, 130

You furnish your parts toward eternity,
Great or small, you furnish your parts toward the soul.

1856

1881

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2. Ital

The box-lid is but perceptibly open'd, nevertheless the perfume
pours copiously out of the whole box.

Young Libertad! with the venerable Asia, the all-mother,
Be considerate with her now and ever hot Libertad, for you are all,
Bend your proud neck to the long-off mother now sending
messages over the archipelagoes to you, 75
Bend your proud neck low for once, young Libertad.

Were the children straying westward so long? so wide the
tramping?
Were the precedent dim ages debouching westward from
Paradise so long?
Were the centuries steadily footing it that way, all the while
unknown, for you, for reasons?

They are justified, they are accomplish'd, they shall now be
turn'd the other way also, to travel toward you thence, 80
They shall now also march obediently eastward for your sake
Libertad.
1860 1881

SEA-DRIFT

Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking¹

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,

Sea-Drift: This group of eleven poems, compiled in LG 1881, included the seven poems of the "Sea-Shore Memories" cluster in the 1871 *Passage to India*, two new poems, and two poems transferred from the 1876 *Two Rivulets*. The new group is one of the poet's most consonant arrangements, held together by the impression, deep in childhood memory, of the sea and the beach, an influence that is at the heart of his acceptance of the tragic in life.

1. First published (ms Berg) under the title "A Child's Reminiscence" in the Christmas issue (December 24, 1859) of the *New York Saturday Press*, whose editor, Henry Clapp, was WW's friend and companion in the Pfaff Restaurant coterie. The long poem, called "Pre-Verse," syntactically a single sentence, was followed by "Reminiscence," in thirty-five numbered stanzas. With concurrent revisions the poem appeared prominently in all LG or *Passage to India* editions; the present authorized text appeared in LG 1881. The revisions of 1860 merit close study, while those of 1867 greatly improved the phrasing. In LG 1860 and 1867 the title was "A Word Out of the Sea." Under its present title it headed the "Sea-Shore Memories" group in *Passage to India* in 1871 and until that supplement was consolidated with LG in 1881.

WW himself probably wrote the editorial notice of the poem in the same issue of the *Saturday Press*: "Our readers may, if they choose, consider as our Christmas or New Year's present to them, the curious warble, by Walt Whitman, of 'A Child's Reminiscence,' on our First Page. Like the 'Leaves of Grass,' the purport of this wild and plaintive song, well-enveloped, and eluding definition, is positive and unquestionable, like the effect of music. 'The piece will hear reading many times—perhaps, indeed only comes forth, as from recesses, by many repetitions.'"

In "All About a Mocking Bird" (*Saturday Press*, January 7, 1860), WW defended the poem against a charge in the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* (December 28, 1859) that the poem

Out of the Ninth-month midnight,²
Over the sterile sands and the fields beyond, where the child
leaving his bed wander'd alone, bareheaded, barefoot,
Down from the shower'd halo, 5
Up from the mystic play of shadows twining and twisting as if
they were alive,
Out from the patches of briers and blackberries,
From the memories of the bird that chanted to me,
From your memories sad brother, from the fitful risings and
fallings I heard,
From under that yellow half-moon late-risen and swollen as if
with tears, 10
From those beginning notes of yearning and love there in the mist,
From the thousand responses of my heart never to cease,
From the myriad thence-arous'd words,
From the word stronger and more delicious than any,
From such as now they start the scene revisiting, 15
As a flock, twittering, rising, or overhead passing,
Borne hither, ere all eludes me, hurriedly,
A man, yet by these tears a little boy again,
Throwing myself on the sand, confronting the waves,
I, chanter of pains and joys, uniter of here and hereafter, 20
Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond them,
A reminiscence sing.

Once Paumanok,³
When the lilac-scent was in the air and Fifth-month grass was
growing,
Up this seashore in some briers, 25
Two feather'd guests from Alabama, two together,
And their nest, and four light-green eggs spotted with brown,
And every day the he-bird to and fro near at hand,
And every day the she-bird crouch'd on her nest, silent, with
bright eyes,
And every day I, a curious boy, never too close, never
disturbing them, 30
Cautiously peering, absorbing, translating.

is meaningless. The poem is profoundly autobiographical in that its theme goes to the very center of the poet's experience—how he became a poet and how his songs awoke. Whether or not it is based on a personal loss is not known, but surely its interpretation of love and death relates it to the "Calamus" themes. Helen Price recalled that WW had read it to her family as early as 1858. (See Bucke, 29.) Swinburne called it "... the most lovely and wonderful thing I have read for years and years ... there is such beautiful skill and subtle power in every word of it." An excellent article is Leo Spitzer's "Explication de Texte" Applied to Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," *ELH* 16: 229–49.

2. The Quaker designation for September may here suggest the human cycle of fertility and birth, in contrast with "sterile sands" in the next line.
3. WW was especially fond of this Indian name for Long Island as closely associated with his childhood memories.

*Shine! shine! shine!⁴
 Pour down your warmth, great sun!
 While we bask, we two together.*

*Two together!
 Winds blow south, or winds blow north,
 Day come white, or night come black,
 Home, or rivers and mountains from home,
 Singing all time, minding no time,
 While we two keep together.*

*Till of a sudden,
 May-be kill'd, unknown to her mate,
 One forenoon the she-bird crouch'd not on the nest,
 Nor return'd that afternoon, nor the next,
 Nor ever appear'd again.*

*And thenceforward all summer in the sound of the sea,
 And at night under the full of the moon in calmer weather,
 Over the hoarse surging of the sea,
 Or flitting from brier to brier by day,
 I saw, I heard at intervals the remaining one, the he-bird,
 The solitary guest from Alabama.*

*Blow! blow! blow!
 Blow up sea-winds along Paumanok's shore;
 I wait and I wait till you blow my mate to me.*

*Yes, when the stars glisten'd,
 All night long on the prong of a moss-scallop'd stake,
 Down almost amid the slapping waves,
 Sat the lone singer wonderful causing tears.*

*He call'd on his mate,
 He pour'd forth the meanings which I of all men know.*

*Yes my brother I know,
 The rest might not, but I have treasur'd every note,
 For more than once dimly down to the beach gliding,
 Silent, avoiding the moonbeams, blending myself with the shadows,
 Recalling now the obscure shapes, the echoes, the sounds and
 sights after their sorts,
 The white arms out in the breakers tirelessly tossing,
 I, with bare feet, a child, the wind wafting my hair,
 Listen'd long and long.*

4. Comparison with earlier versions shows WW's success in improving the lyrics (printed in italics) that resemble birdsong; especially the characteristic reiteration of phrase, the varied vocalic modulation of the cadences, and the staccato "twittering" accentuation (lines 80, 91-92, 110, for example).

*Listen'd to keep, to sing, now translating the notes,
 Following you my brother.*

*Soothe! soothe! soothe!
 Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,
 And again another behind embracing and lapping, every one close,
 But my love soothes not me, not me.*

*Low hangs the moon, it rose late,
 It is lagging—O I think it is heavy with love, with love.*

*O madly the sea pushes upon the land,
 With love, with love.*

*O night! do I not see my love fluttering out among the breakers?
 What is that little black thing I see there in the white?*

*Loud! loud! loud!
 Loud I call to you, my love!
 High and clear I shoot my voice over the waves,
 Surely you must know who is here, is here,
 You must know who I am, my love.*

*Low-hanging moon!
 What is that dusky spot in your brown yellow?
 O it is the shape, the shape of my mate!
 O moon do not keep her from me any longer.*

*Land! land! O land!
 Whichever way I turn, O I think you could give me my mate
 back again if you only would,
 For I am almost sure I see her dimly whichever way I look.*

*O rising stars!
 Perhaps the one I want so much will rise, will rise with some of you.*

*O throat! O trembling throat!
 Sound clearer through the atmosphere!
 Pierce the woods, the earth,
 Somewhere listening to catch you must be the one I want.*

*Shake out carols!
 Solitary here, the night's carols!
 Carols of lonesome love! death's carols!
 Carols under that lagging, yellow, waning moon!
 O under that moon where she droops almost down into the sea!
 O reckless despairing carols.*

But soft! sink low!
 Soft! let me just murmur,
 And do you wait a moment you husky-nois'd sea,
 For somewhere I believe I heard my mate responding to me,
 So faint, I must be still, be still to listen,
 But not altogether still, for then she might not come immediately
 to me.

Hither my love!
 Here I am! here!
 With this just-sustain'd note I announce myself to you,
 This gentle call is for you my love, for you.

Do not be decoy'd elsewhere,
 That is the whistle of the wind, it is not my voice,
 That is the fluttering, the fluttering of the spray,
 Those are the shadows of leaves.

O darkness! O in vain!
 O I am very sick and sorrowful.

O brown halo in the sky near the moon, drooping upon the sea!
 O troubled reflection in the sea!
 O throat! O throbbing heart!
 And I singing uselessly, uselessly all the night.

O past! O happy life! O songs of joy!
 In the air, in the woods, over fields,
 Loved! loved! loved! loved! loved!
 But my mate no more, no more with me!
 We two together no more.

The aria⁵ sinking,
 All else continuing, the stars shining,
 The winds blowing, the notes of the bird continuous echoing,
 With angry moans the fierce old mother incessantly moaning,
 On the sands of Paumanok's shore gray and rustling,
 The yellow half-moon enlarged, sagging down, drooping, the
 face of the sea almost touching,
 The boy ecstatic, with his bare feet the waves, with his hair
 the atmosphere dallying,
 The love in the heart long pent, now loose, now at last
 tumultuously bursting,
 The aria's meaning, the ears, the soul, swiftly depositing,
 The strange tears down the cheeks coursing,
 The colloquy there, the trio, each uttering,
 The undertone, the savage old mother incessantly crying,

5. See Robert D. Faner's *Walt Whitman and Opera* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), especially 173–77, for an analysis of WW's use of this opera form.

To the boy's soul's questions sullenly timing, some drown'd
 secret hissing,
 To the outsetting bard.

Demon or bird! (said the boy's soul,
 Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? or is it really to me?
 For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I have
 heard you,
 Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
 And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer,
 louder and more sorrowful than yours,
 A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,
 never to die.

O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me,
 O solitary me listening, never more shall I cease perpetuating you,
 Never more shall I escape, never more the reverberations,
 Never more the cries of unsatisfied love be absent from me,
 Never again leave me to be the peaceful child I was before
 what there in the night,
 By the sea under the yellow and sagging moon,
 The messenger there arous'd, the fire, the sweet hell within,
 The unknown want, the destiny of me.

O give me the clew! (it lurks in the night here somewhere,)
 O if I am to have so much, let me have more!

A word then, (for I will conquer it,)
 The word final, superior to all,
 Subtle, sent up—what is it?—I listen;
 Are you whispering it, and have been all the time, you sea-waves?
 Is that it from your liquid rims and wet sands?

Whereto answering, the sea,
 Delaying not, hurrying not,
 Whisper'd me through the night, and very plainly before day-break,
 Lisp'd to me the low and delicious word death,
 And again death, death, death, death,
 Hissing melodious, neither like the bird nor like my arous'd
 child's heart,
 But edging near as privately for me rustling at my feet,
 Creeping thence steadily up to my ears and laving me softly all over,
 Death, death, death, death, death.

Which I do not forget,
 But fuse the song of my dusky demon and brother,

105

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175

That he sang to me in the moonlight on Paumanok's gray beach,
 With the thousand responsive songs at random,
 My own songs awaked from that hour,
 And with them the key, the word up from the waves,
 The word of the sweetest song and all songs, 180
 That strong and delicious word which, creeping to my feet,
 (Or like some old crone rocking the cradle, swathed in sweet
 garments, bending aside,)
 The sea whisper'd me.
 1859 1881

As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life⁶

1

As I ebb'd with the ocean of life,
 As I wended the shores I know,
 As I walk'd where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok,
 Where they rustle up hoarse and sibilant;
 Where the fierce old mother endlessly cries for her castaways, 5
 I musing late in the autumn day, gazing off southward,
 Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems,
 Was seiz'd by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot,
 The rim, the sediment that stands for all the water and all the
 land of the globe.

Fascinated, my eyes reverting from the south, dropt, to follow
 those slender windrows, 10
 Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea-gluten,
 Scum, scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt-lettuce, left by
 the tide,
 Miles walking, the sound of breaking waves the other side of me,

6. Probably composed in 1859; first published as "Bardic Symbols" in the *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1860; in LG 1860 it appeared as No. 1 of the "Leaves of Grass" with the restoration of lines 59–60, whose realism had caused editor James Russell Lowell to request their omission from the magazine, in which WW was so eager to appear that he uncharacteristically acceded. (See *Corr.*, 1, 47–48.) In LG 1867, the title restated the first line, "Elemental Drifts," later dropped. It was so called in the cluster "Sea-Shore Memories" of *Passage to India*, 1871 to 1876, and was given its present title and position in 1881. The MSS (Houghton and Barrett) and printed variants show persistent, though minor, revision.

The poem is remarkable in its poignant admission of self-doubt and frustration; in the period of its composition WW, having left his editorial post on the *Brooklyn Times*, was unemployed and insecure. Yet the mood of this poem is not that of personal discontent so much as recognition of the "tears of things" in the human condition. It is not the poet alone who identifies himself with the sands and drift, who seeks the consolation of the father, and who at the end is thrown helpless on the shore like a drowned corpse; it is humankind. Other poems—for example, "On the Beach at Night"—make their answer.

For a helpful reading of "As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life," see Tenney Nathanson, *Whitman's Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in "Leaves of Grass"* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 444–68.

Paumanok there and then as I thought the old thought of
 likenesses,⁷
 These you presented to me you fish-shaped island, 15
 As I wended the shores I know,
 As I walk'd with that electric self seeking types.

2

As I wend to the shores I know not,
 As I list to the dirge, the voices of men and women wreck'd,
 As I inhale the impalpable breezes that set in upon me, 20
 As the ocean so mysterious rolls toward me closer and closer,
 I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd-up drift,
 A few sands and dead leaves to gather,
 Gather, and merge myself as part of the sands and drift.

O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth, 25
 Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
 Aware now that amid all that blab⁸ whose echoes recoil upon
 me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
 But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet
 untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd,
 Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs
 and bows,
 With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have
 written, 30
 Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath.

I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single
 object, and that no man ever can,
 Nature here in sight of the sea taking advantage of me to dart
 upon me and sting me,
 Because I have dared to open my mouth to sing at all.

3

You oceans both, I close with you, 35
 We murmur alike reproachfully rolling sands and drift,
 knowing not why,
 These little shreds indeed standing for you and me and all.

You friable shore with trials of debris,
 You fish-shaped island, I take what is underfoot,
 What is yours is mine my father.⁹ 40

7. The correspondence, in transcendental terms, between the "wash'd-up drift" and the poet himself.

8. Cf. the "barbaric yawp" of line 1333 of "Song of Myself."

9. Paumanok, the island, his natal land, is here the father symbol as the ocean is the "fierce old mother."

I too Paumanok,
 I too have bubbled up, floated the measureless float, and been
 wash'd on your shores,
 I too am but a trail of drift and debris,
 I too leave little wrecks upon you, you fish-shaped island.

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

45

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

50

4

Ebb, ocean of life, (the flow will return,)
 Cease not your moaning you fierce old mother,
 Endlessly cry for your castaways, but fear not, deny not me,
 Rustle not up so hoarse and angry against my feet as I touch
 you or gather from you.

I mean tenderly by you and all,
 I gather for myself and for this phantom looking down where
 we lead, and following me and mine.

55

Me and mine, loose windrows, little corpses,
 Froth, snowy white, and bubbles,
 (See, from my dead lips the ooze exuding at last,
 See, the prismatic colors glistening and rolling,)¹
 Tufts of straw, sands, fragments,
 Buoy'd hither from many moods, one contradicting another,
 From the storm, the long calm, the darkness, the swell,
 Musing, pondering, a breath, a briny tear, a dab of liquid or soil,
 Up just as much out of fathomless workings fermented and
 thrown,

60

65

A limp blossom or two, torn, just as much over waves floating,
 drifted at random,
 Just as much for us that sobbing dirge of Nature,
 Just as much whence we come that blare of the cloud-trumpets,
 We, capricious, brought hither we know not whence, spread
 out before you,

You up there walking or sitting,
 Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet.

70

1860

1881

1. Lines 59-60 were excised from the *Atlantic Monthly* copy.

Thoughts⁷

Of ownership—as if one fit to own things could not at
 pleasure enter upon all, and incorporate them into himself
 or herself;
 Of vista—suppose some sight in arriere through the formative
 chaos, presuming the growth, fulness, life, now attain'd on
 the journey,
 (But I see the road continued, and the journey ever continued;)
 Of what was once lacking on earth, and in due time has
 become supplied—and of what will yet be supplied,
 Because all I see and know I believe to have its main purport
 in what will yet be supplied.

1860

1881

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer⁸

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide,
 and measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with
 much applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

1865

1865

Perfections⁹

Only themselves understand themselves and the like of themselves,
 As souls only understand souls.

1860

1860

7. In *LG* 1860 and 1887, a six-line poem identified only as No. 2 of the cluster, "Thoughts." This consisted of the present lines 2 to 5, preceded by the couplet:

Of waters, forests, hills;
 Of the earth at large, whispering through medium of me;

In *LG* 1871 the poem became seven lines, *WW* having superimposed the present first line (previously the initial line of "Thoughts" No. 4); in *LG* 1881 *WW* dropped the couplet (the initial lines of 1860, seen above), reducing the poem finally to the present five lines. The original poems, "Thoughts" No. 2 and No. 4, will be found in this volume under the heading "Poems Excluded from *LG*."

8. A *Drum-Taps* poem in 1865 and 1867, this much-authologized piece was in the "Songs of Parting" group of *LG* in 1871 and 1876 and was included in the present group in 1881.

9. This poem first appeared in the 1860 edition and was reprinted without change in all succeeding editions.

MEMORIES OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN

When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd¹

1

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,²
 And the great star³ early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
 I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
 Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west,
 And thought of him I love.

5

Memories of President Lincoln: The four poems comprising this group were first brought together in the 1871 and 1876 "Passage to India" annex under the title "President Lincoln's Burial Hymn." They were finally grouped under the present title in 1881.

1. This great threnody, called by Swinburne "the most sweet and sonorous nocturne ever chanted in the church of the world," was composed in the weeks immediately following Lincoln's assassination, April 14, 1865, to become the title poem of the "Sequel" of eighteen poems comprising twenty-four pages, which was printed in the fall to be bound in with *Drum-Taps*. In 1871 and 1876 it headed the group entitled "President Lincoln's Burial Hymn," which was given its present title in the final grouping of 1881. A few minor revisions were made in both 1871 and 1881. For example in 1871 the refrain—the carol of the bird—was italicized for the first time, and the felicitous phrase "retrievements out of the night" was added to line 198. In the Feinberg Collection are two ms pages containing a list of about ninety words expressive of sorrow, evidently compiled by the poet in working on his elegy, and also there are six small notebook pages of ms jottings on the hermit thrush. "He is deeply interested in what I tell him of the Hermit Thrush," wrote John Burroughs to Myron B. Benton in September 1865, "and says he has used largely the information I have given him in one of his principal poems" (Barrus, 24).

WW's observation of Lincoln as the representative democratic man, the living symbol in many respects of his own message to America, was unrelenting. See the several notations on Lincoln in *Specimen Days*, and his memorial lectures, "Death of Abraham Lincoln," *SDC* (1882), and "Abraham Lincoln," *NB* (1888). Lincoln died on the morning of April 15, 1865, and after remaining in Washington until April 21, his body was carried in the long procession through American cities, including Baltimore, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, Albany, Buffalo, Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Chicago. Interment took place at Springfield, Ill., on May 4.

2. The lilac's almost universal adaptability, combined with its beauty, made it the most familiar American dooryard shrub. In ancient design, especially in Persian art and literature, the lilac flower, with its heart-shaped leaves and its lobed, paniculated spire of blossoms, acquired erotic significance as a masculine principle. In WW's plant symbolism of male comradeship—calamus, sweet flag, maple, bearded moss, etc.—the lilac occasionally appears, but here it achieves the loftiest transcendence in its dedication to the national martyr.
 Speaking in his Lincoln lecture of the fateful day, April 14, WW said: "I remember where I was stopping at the time, the season being advanced, there were many lilacs in full bloom. By one of those caprices that enter and give tinge to events without being at all a part of them, I find myself always reminded of the great tragedy of that day by the sight and odor of these blossoms." *CW*, V, 246.

Confirming this association, without reference to WW, Julia Taft, friend from childhood of Lincoln's children, reports of her brother, the surgeon Colonel Charles S. Taft, who tended the dying President through the night, "The yard of the house . . . was full of blossoming lilacs, and as long as Charlie Taft lived the scent of lilacs . . . brought back the black horror of that dreadful night." Julia Taft Bayne, *Tad Lincoln's Father* (1931), 202–4.

3. Venus, low in the western sky at this time. See WW's comment in *SPC* (*Coll. W, Prose Works*, I, 187–88).

2

O powerful western fallen star!
 O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!
 O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!
 O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!
 O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

10

3

In the dooryard fronting an old farm-house near the white-
 wash'd palings,
 Stands the lilac-bush tall-growing with heart-shaped leaves of
 rich green,
 With many a pointed blossom rising delicate, with the perfume
 strong I love,
 With every leaf a miracle—and from this bush in the dooryard,
 With delicate-color'd blossoms and heart-shaped leaves of rich
 green,
 A sprig with its flower I break.

15

4

In the swamp in secluded recesses,
 A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.

Solitary the thrush,
 The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
 Sings by himself a song.

20

Song of the bleeding throat,
 Death's outlet song of life, (for well dear brother I know,
 If thou wast not granted to sing thou would'st surely die.)

25

5

Over the breast of the spring, the land, amid cities,
 Amid lanes and through old woods, where lately the violets
 peep'd from the ground, spotting the gray debris,
 Amid the grass in the fields each side of the lanes, passing the
 endless grass,
 Passing the yellow-spear'd wheat, every grain from its shroud
 in the dark-brown fields uprisen,
 Passing the apple-tree blows of white and pink in the orchards,
 Carrying a corpse to where it shall rest in the grave,
 Night and day journeys a coffin.

30

6

Coffin that passes through lanes and streets,
 Through day and night with the great cloud darkening the
 land,
 With the pomp of the inloop'd flags with the cities draped in
 black,
 With the show of the States themselves as of crape-veil'd
 women standing,
 With processions long and winding and the flambeaus of the
 night,
 With the countless torches lit, with the silent sea of faces and
 the unbared heads,
 With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre
 faces,
 With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising
 strong and solemn,
 With all the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the
 coffin,
 The dim-lit churches and the shuddering organs—where amid
 these you journey,
 With the tolling tolling bells' perpetual clang,
 Here, coffin that slowly passes,
 I give you my sprig of lilac.

7

(Nor for you, for one alone,
 Blossoms and branches green to coffins all I bring,
 For fresh as the morning, thus would I chant a song for you O
 sane and sacred death.

All over bouquets of roses,
 O death, I cover you over with roses and early lilies,
 But mostly and now the lilac that blooms the first,
 Copious I break, I break the sprigs from the bushes,
 With loaded arms I come, pouring for you,
 For you and the coffins all of you O death.)

8

O western orb sailing the heaven,
 Now I know what you must have meant as a month since I
 walk'd,
 As I walk'd in silence the transparent shadowy night,
 As I saw you had something to tell as you bent to me night
 after night,
 As you droop'd from the sky low down as if to my side, (while
 the other stars all look'd on,)
 As we wander'd together the solemn night, (for something I
 know not what kept me from sleep,)

As the night advanced, and I saw on the rim of the west how
 full you were of woe,
 As I stood on the rising ground in the breeze in the cool
 transparent night,
 As I watch'd where you pass'd and was lost in the netherward
 black of the night,
 As my soul in its trouble dissatisfied sank, as where you sad orb,
 Concluded, dropt in the night, and was gone.

9

Sing on there in the swamp,
 O singer bashful and tender, I hear your notes, I hear your call,
 I hear, I come presently, I understand you,
 But a moment I linger, for the lustrous star has detain'd me,
 The star my departing comrade holds and detains me.

10

O how shall I warble myself for the dead one there I loved?
 And how shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
 And what shall my perfume be for the grave of him I love?

Sea-winds blown from east and west,
 Blown from the Eastern sea and blown from the Western sea,
 till there on the prairies meeting,
 These and with these and the breath of my chant,
 I'll perfume the grave of him I love.

11

O what shall I hang on the chamber walls?
 And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
 To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Pictures of growing spring and farms and homes,
 With the Fourth-month eve at sundown, and the gray smoke
 lucid and bright,
 With floods of the yellow gold of the gorgeous, indolent,
 sinking sun, burning, expanding the air,
 With the fresh sweet herbage under foot, and the pale green
 leaves of the trees prolific,
 In the distance the flowing glaze, the breast of the river, with a
 wind-dapple here and there,
 With ranging hills on the banks, with many a line against the
 sky, and shadows,
 And the city at hand with dwellings so dense, and stacks of
 chimneys,

And all the scenes of life and the workshops, and the workmen
homeward returning.

12

Lo, body and soul—this land,
My own Manhattan with spires, and the sparkling and
hurrying tides, and the ships,
The varied and ample land, the South and the North in the
light, Ohio's shores and flashing Missouri,
And ever the far-spreading prairies cover'd with grass and corn.

Lo, the most excellent sun so calm and haughty,
The violet and purple morn with just-felt breezes,
The gentle soft-born measureless light,
The miracle spreading bathing all, the fulfill'd noon,
The coming eve delicious, the welcome night and the stars,
Over my cities shining all, enveloping man and land.

13

Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird,
Sing from the swamps, the recesses, pour your chant from the
bushes,
Limitless out of the dusk, out of the cedars and pines.

Sing on dearest brother, warble your reedy song,
Loud human song, with voice of uttermost woe.

O liquid and free and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me.

14

Now while I sat in the day and look'd forth,
In the close of the day with its light and the fields of spring,
and the farmers preparing their crops,
In the large unconscious scenery of my land with its lakes and
forests,
In the heavenly aerial beauty, (after the perturb'd winds and
the storms,)
Under the arching heavens of the afternoon swift passing, and
the voices of children and women,
The many-moving sea-tides, and I saw the ships how they sail'd,
And the summer approaching with richness, and the fields all
busy with labor,
And the infinite separate houses, how they all went on, each
with its meals and minutia of daily usages,

And the streets how their throbbings throb'd, and the cities
pent—lo, then and there,
Falling upon them all and among them all, enveloping me with
the rest,
Appear'd the cloud, appear'd the long black trail,
And I knew death, its thought, and the sacred knowledge of death.

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the
hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the
dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

From deep secluded recesses,
From the fragrant cedars and the ghostly pines so still,
Came the carol of the bird.

And the charm of the carol rapt me,
As I held as if by their hands my comrades in the night,
And the voice of my spirit tallied the song of the bird.

Come lovely and soothing death,⁴
Undulate round the world, serenely arriving, arriving,
In the day, in the night, to all, to each,
Sooner or later delicate death.

Prais'd be the fathomless universe,
For life and joy, and for objects and knowledge curious,
And for love, sweet love—but praise! praise! praise!
For the sure-enwinding arms of cool-enfolding death.

Dark mother always gliding near with soft feet,
Have none chanted for thee a chant of fullest welcome?
Then I chant it for thee, I glorify thee above all,
I bring thee a song that when thou must indeed come, come
unfalteringly.

4. In the first 1865–66 version, the song of the bird was not distinguished by italics. In 1871 the italics were used, and the song had its own subtitle, "Death Carol," which was dropped in 1881. Compare this lyrical refrain with the songs of the bird in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and the tree in "Song of the Redwood Tree."

*Approach strong deliveress,
When it is so, when thou hast taken them I joyously sing the dead,
Lost in the loving floating ocean of thee,
Laved in the flood of thy bliss O death.*

150

*From me to thee glad serenades,
Dances for thee I propose saluting thee, adornments and
feastings for thee,
And the sights of the open landscape and the high-spread sky are
fitting,
And life and the fields, and the huge and thoughtful night.*

*The night in silence under many a star,
The ocean shore and the husky whispering wave whose voice I know,
And the soul turning to thee O vast and well-veil'd death,
And the body gratefully nestling close to thee.*

155

*Over the tree-tops I float thee a song,
Over the rising and sinking waves, over the myriad fields and the
prairies wide,
Over the dense-pack'd cities all and the teeming wharves and ways,
I float this carol with joy, with joy to thee O death.*

160

15

*To the tally of my soul,
Loud and strong kept up the gray-brown bird,
With pure deliberate notes spreading filling the night.*

165

*Loud in the pines and cedars dim,
Clear in the freshness moist and the swamp-perfume,
And I with my comrades there in the night.*

*While my sight that was bound in my eyes unclosed,
As to long panoramas of visions.*

170

*And I saw askant⁵ the armies,
I saw as in noiseless dreams hundreds of battle-flags,
Borne through the smoke of the battles and pierc'd with
missiles I saw them,
And carried hither and yon through the smoke, and torn and
bloody,
And at last but a few shreds left on the staffs, (and all in
silence.)
And the staffs all splinter'd and broken.*

175

5. Cf. "askance," obliquely.

*I saw battle-corpses, myriads of them,
And the white skeletons of young men, I saw them,
I saw the debris and debris of all the slain soldiers of the war,
But I saw they were not as was thought,
They themselves were fully at rest, they suffer'd not,
The living remain'd and suffer'd, the mother suffer'd,
And the wife and the child and the musing comrade suffer'd,
And the armies that remain'd suffer'd.*

180

16

*Passing the visions, passing the night,
Passing, unloosing the hold of my comrades' hands,
Passing the song of the hermit bird and the tallying song of my soul,
Victorious song, death's outlet song, yet varying ever-altering song,
As low and wailing, yet clear the notes, rising and falling,
flooding the night,
Sadly sinking and fainting, as warning and warning, and yet
again bursting with joy,
Covering the earth and filling the spread of the heaven,
As that powerful psalm in the night I heard from recesses,
Passing, I leave thee lilac with heart-shaped leaves,
I leave thee there in the door-yard, blooming, returning with spring.*

185

190

*I cease from my song for thee,
From my gaze on thee in the west, fronting the west,
communing with thee,
O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night.*

195

*Yet each to keep and all, retrievements out of the night,
The song, the wondrous chant of the gray-brown bird,
And the tallying chant, the echo arous'd in my soul,
With the lustrous and drooping star with the countenance full
of woe,
With the holders holding my hand nearing the call of the bird,
Comrades mine and I in the midst, and their memory ever to
keep, for the dead I loved so well,
For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands—and
this for his dear sake,*

200

*Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,
There in the fragrant pines and the cedars dusk and dim.*

205

1865-66

1881