Journal 2

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“As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life”

There was a section in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life” that made me laugh. In fact, I believe it was Whitman’s intention to have the reader laugh, considering the very topic it was covering. The second section of stanza two reflects upon his life and his career as a poet. In one word, he would describe his life as a poet as ironic, which he as well stated in the section, ironically.

This section is a confessional of the reality of poetry. There are certain aspects of poetry that seem to immortalize the author because of their ability to write down their words as well as discuss topics that may be relevant to readers past their life times. This idea of poetry, the aspects of it that Whitman defined himself with, be it his abilities with a pen or just the broad-scale thinking he possessed, is inadvertently a lie. As much as he wished to express himself and his thoughts on a page, he realizes that “all [his] arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch’d, untold, altogether unreach’d”. The next line, “Withdrawn far…and bows”, resolves this idea of not truly telling his life story by describing himself as an on-looker who knows better, and realizes that all he has expressed is not truly him. The last line of this section, “Pointing in silence to these songs, and then to the sand beneath”, uses imagery combined with the fictional on-looking self he has created to describe how simple his life really is. Whitman defined himself simply as the objects on the beach, not as “these songs” he so easily degraded. This confessional describes how poetry does not define the poet nearly as much as the poet defines his poetry.

The truth of this confessional, though, does not reduce the value of poetry. In the next section of stanza two, Whitman writes about how life is active and that the sole participation in it creates it’s own mystery. Although poetry may never truly express the feelings that exist in a poet, but rather realities that poets realize, poetry attempts to describe the things that “…no man ever can”*, things* defined as any and all mysteries sought to be explained. That is in itself the beauty of poetry that Whitman must love, for it allows him to sing the songs of things that decide to “sting” him because he has “dared to open [his] mouth to sing at all. Poetry helps describe Whitman’s thoughts, though it may not be himself he is describing (in his opinion. Whether or not they are one and the same is another question entirely).