
**“[I]t is a word unsaid”: The Poet as a Namer
in Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”**

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Abstract :

This study attempts to trace the aesthetic of the act of naming in Walt Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself”. It tries, furthermore, to approach America as a geo-poetic concept and formation in the earlier American poetics of being. The literary geography of Whitman’s poetry might here be measured against the poeticity of the American con(text) or poetic dwelling, with all the nuances of the question of identity being implicated. The poet as a namer is the one who re-invents his linguistic-poetic gear to re-signify his existence in the act of renaming the second creation. Building on the Emersonian pseudo-philosophical premises, the poet Whitman thus sets himself the task of mapping out his Eden, or this *terra incognita*, by creating his textual geography and by Whitmanizing the American scene for that matter.

Keywords: Walt Whitman, act of naming, geo-poetics, America.

America has long been conceived as the far-off station of a civilization moving westward. Yet, apart from the metaphorical nuances of decline and twilight implied in the word *westward*, America has also been envisaged as the coming true of the myth of Atlantis, the lost island. The mythological foundation of America is more often than not associated in the pioneering intellects with the idea of America as the historical escape and the spiritual breakthrough, compared with the deadening and institutionalized pageant of the old continent, Europe. Hence, as a literary potential and a would-be poetics, America forms an antithesis to the Nietzschean thesis (Carlisle 2003, 2) that the intellectual and artistic West was on the verge of consuming itself and that nothing was left but dead metaphors.

The literary America seems to break free from history's vicious circle; that is, from Nietzsche's apocalyptic, self-reflexive, and cyclical vision of history and humanity in the West. This antithesis was first assumed by the American intelligentsia who, after resting on the notion of the political independence, were haunted by the question of the cultural independence and the formations of the American identity. This very question has led to there being polarized attitudes within the American literary history. In his appraisal of this history Jorge Luis Borges comes, as he tries to briefly contextualize the Whitmanic legacy, to recognize this polarity:

Whitman sang as if from a dawn; John Mason Brown has written that he and his followers represent the idea that America is a new event which poets should celebrate, while Edgar Allen Poe and his followers see it as a mere continuation of Europe. The history of American literature is to reflect the incessant conflict between these two conceptions. (1973, 33)

Emersonianism is one facet of this intellectual endeavour, among others. The chief practitioner of this Emersonianism—or here, Americanism—is, as it were, Walt Whitman. In his famous essay “The Poet,” Emerson expresses America's historical dire need of the poet whose role he is thus designating:

I look in vain for the poet whom I describe We have yet had no genius in America Yet America is a poem in our eyes, its ample geography dazzles the imagination and will not wait long for meters. (“The Poet” in Whicher 1960, 225)

Emerson's wishful thinking is wondrously fulfilled when that genius comes to the fore in the American poetic scene. To draw on Martin Heidegger's insights about the role of the poet, or the Sayer, it is apt to say that, for Emerson, the would-be poet and “poetizing” will be conducive to the American “‘poetic’ dwelling” and “the arrival of ‘another’ beginning” (Kockelmans 1972, 235, 236, 243). Tallied with this nuance of the poetic dwelling is the sense of the poetic self being dispersed into an ample mystical geography. With Whitman, it is

argued, “the sense of self achieved is ... dilated in breadth beyond a singular location” (Anna and Gosetti-Ferencei 2004, 250). To put it differently, it is part of the American *Dasein*, or the American being-there-in-the-world.

In keeping with this pseudo-mystical poetics, Whitman proves to be the “Orphic poet” (Yoder 1978, 9-10, 90-91, 97-98), the tamer and the re-builder of Emerson’s ample geography. In this sense Whitman seems to pay homage to his sage when, in his “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass*, he posits: “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (Whitman 1959, 5). The kind of the poet he would be is the one who “would ‘quell’ America with his ‘tongue.’ The artist-hero, America’s hero, ... the first of a new breed” (Bedient 1987, 25). Among the epithets that Emerson assigns to his American bard are “the namer,” “the sayer,” and “the language maker” (“The Poet” in Whicher 1960, 225). These very epithets readily apply to the kind of the poet Whitman is.

America as a paradise regained needs the poet, its new Adam, as its remembrancer. America, in Whitman’s aesthetic creed, is a poem in need of being uttered, said, and created in the very act of enunciation. Here it might be argued, along with the Nietzschean premise, that Old Adam, who has been taught the names in his prelapsarian condition, has witnessed these names turning into dead metaphors. The experience of the new Eden, or *terra incognita* for that matter, and the needed act of naming is well put in these lines by William Cullen Bryant:

These are the gardens of the desert, these
The unshorn fields, the boundless and beautiful,
For which the speech of England has no name –
(Bryant, qtd. in Bloom 2004, 128)

So the first thing the Whitmanic bard feels impelled to do is “to recognize the Muse of America” (Bloom 2004, 128). Only then, he will assume the role of “the liberating God” who renames people and things—the fauna and flora—in the new Eden. He is the new Adam who endows creation with new names, or rejuvenates the older ones,

creates them into a new context, or sees them renewed through his semi-mystical democratic vistas.

The grass is the first thing that might catch the sight of the onlooker in the Whitmanic Eden: the grass is nature's green page; it is the poetic page upon which America the poem and America the poet are realized. Yet, Whitman problematizes the grass when he is perplexed by the child's innocent questioning; maybe because it is the "gardens of the desert .../ For which the speech of England has no name," to recall Bryant's geo-poetics. This is how the American namer proceeds with the acts of naming his geography:

A child said what is the grass? fetching it to me with full
hands;
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
more than he.
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,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we
may see and remark, and say Whose?
Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the
vegetation.
Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic. (Canto VI: 1-8)

As is usual with the Whitmanic cataloging, the plethora of propositions about what the grass is seems to go endlessly, and it actually does, as it covers within its scope of tropes the full cycle of human life from birth to death. This plethora is one condition of being a poet, a language-maker, who feels the necessity of naming things so obsessively. John Holander wonders about the significance of the titling of *Leaves of Grass* and its act of naming, and thus he asks: "And in what way are the leaves pages of grass: made of, about, for, authored by?" (2004, 260). And in a manner of answering, he states that the leaves of the grass are "hard words, putting body, life, text, presence, personality, self, and the constant fiction of some Other all together" (2004, 260). The grass is after all the poet's textual self that looks for its "authorial father" (Holander 2004, 262), but it is

uncertain as to how the poet comes to extract the voice of this authorial father or *Other*: "O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues" (Canto VI: 21). The grass is the text of America whose "owner's name" remains hidden in "uniform hieroglyphic," and makes one wonder with the poet: "Whose?". The whole of "Song of Myself" is a feverish endeavour to *say* that owner's name.

The act of naming involves "the knit of identity" (Canto III: 10) whereby the poet is simultaneously Whitmanizing and un-Whitmanizing the text of America. This is to be insinuated in the opening lines of the poem:

I celebrate myself, and sing of myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Canto I: 1-3)

Here, America the poem and America the poet is a linguistic product in which Whitman, the "lexicographer" and the "philologist" (the language-maker and the sayer), is trying to communicate an identity in the making. According to Tyler Hoffman, the poet rejects the social and representational function of language and succumbs to the shamanic and magic powers of it (2006, 374). Here reference might be made to the poet's "A Song of the Rolling Earth" where much space is allotted to the inexpressible:

I swear I begin to see little or nothing in audible words,
All merges toward the presentation of *the unspoken meanings of the earth*,
Toward him who sings the songs of the body and of the truths of the earth,
Toward him who makes the dictionaries of words that print cannot touch.
I swear I see what is better than to tell the best,
It is always to leave the best untold. (Canto III: 9-14; italics mine)

The poet's intent to keep "the best untold" and to merge into "the unspoken meanings of the earth" might be related to the geo-poetic formations of the experience that give a sense of epiphanic

immediacy as opposed to the Thoreauvian creature who stands in need of sustenance, while experiencing the deferral of being (Thoreau 1974, 5). Moreover, this deferral of being is found translated, in Whitman's hands, into a linguistic immediacy that partakes of creating the world it tries to describe.

In keeping with the question of identity and the inexpressible—the Whitmanic *Me* and *Not-Me*—that informs the body of Whitman's poetic discourse, one may have recourse to the Emersonian ideation of the issue: "the man is half himself, the other half is his expression" (Emerson n.d., 263). This sounds to be the *raison d'être* of "Song of Myself." And this also accounts for its urgency of expression as well as its virtuosity which are conveyed, Hoffman states, through "performative utterances ... which are not true or false and actually perform the utterance to which they refer; they perform the action they designate" (Hoffman 2006, 374). The poet's speech acts reveal the self-reflexive, meta-poetic caliber of his poetry:

This hour I tell things in confidence,
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you. (Canto XIX: 16)

And he goes on:

I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house,
And I swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her
who privately stays with me in open air. (Canto XLVII: 17-18)

Then he endorses this co-existence of performativity and eroticism with this note:

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of
all poems. (Canto II: 19-20)

The poet does not approach his task with any naive confidence in the power of poetry to evoke a mutually credible world. From the outset, he tries to poetically *dwell* in the space mediating between language and reality, between the Emersonian *Me* and *Not-Me* . "Speech is the twin of my vision," he says; but he continues:

[I]t is unequal to measure itself,
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,

Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of articulation. (Canto XXV: 7-10)

Words expand insight for the poet and for the reader; but because they never fully express it, the gap between I and Not-Me is never altogether closed.

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, symbol. (Canto L: 1-4)

“Do you see O my brothers and sisters?” (Canto L: 9) the poet pleads; but the finale of “Song of Myself”, shifting to images of future time and of endless pilgrimage, suggests that the path between the self and reality may be long and dimly marked. The poet tries to tame the vast geography of America, this power in motion, this metamorphosis, by his act of naming, by creating the American idiom, and thus, by internalizing it until it becomes a state of mind and soul. In the process, he feels the existence of this unnamable lacuna, or the “word unsaid,” in his textual self where the linguistic action needs to be entwined with the meditative act to fully conceive this Symbol: the self, the poem, America.

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”ما لم يقال“: الشاعر بوصفه واهب الاسماء في قصيدة

(اغنية لنفسي) لولت ويتمن

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مستخلص البحث

ترمي هذه الدراسة الى تعقب جماليات فعل التسمية في قصيدة ولت ويتمن ”اغنية لنفسي“. وهي كذلك تحاول أن تطرح مقارنة أمريكا كمفهوم جيوشعري وصيرونه في شعرية الوجود الاميركي البكر. ان الجغرافيا الشعرية لدى ويتمن ههنا ينظر لها من خلال الشعرية الأمريكية بوصفها نصا ونسقا ينطوي على سؤال الهوية بكل تضاعيفه. اذ يعيد الشاعر — بوصفه واهب الاسماء — اجترار عتاده اللغوي والشعري في محاولة منه لاعادة تسمية خلقه الثاني. بناءا على المباني شبه الفلسفية لايمرسن، يعمد ويتمن الى رسم خارطة ارضه البكر عبر خلقه لجغرافيا النص ومن خلال تقمص ذاته الشاعرة للمشهد الأمريكي.