

HOW WALT WHITMAN INVENTED THE MOVIES

The model for Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* is Solomon's *Song of Songs*.

1 I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.

2 As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

3 As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.

4 He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.

I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,

How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,

And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my bare-stript heart,

And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.

The lines in the bible are numbered and called verses, Whitman didn't number his lines but the form is the same, free verse in which the basic unit is defined, not by rhythm, but by sense. This is the key to reading Whitman. Read the lines as if they are numbered, each complete in itself, not with a poetic or biblical cadence, but with the cadence of natural speech, with a short pause at the end of each line, a longer pause after each stanza and no enjambement.

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,

The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood, her children gazing on,

The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blowing, cover'd with sweat,

The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the murderous buckshot and the bullets,

All these I feel or am.

Whitman himself, in his introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, described his poetry as 'the great psalm of the republic'. Old ways of writing were good enough to tell the stories of other nations, but not the story of America, 'for America is the race of races.'

He might have been thinking of Longfellow, his contemporary, when he wrote, 'Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted, and their eras and characters be illustrated, and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic.' In a carefully worded response to the news of Longfellow's death, he called him 'the poet of melody, courtesy, deference - poet of the mellow twilight of the past in Italy, Germany, Spain, and in Northern Europe - poet of all sympathetic gentleness - and universal poet of women and young people.' Not, by implication, the poet of grown-ups or men, not the poet of the dawn of the American republic. He was, however, kind enough to end by 'adding what I have heard Longfellow himself say, that ere the New World can be worthily original, and announce herself and her own heroes, she must be well saturated with the originality of others, and respectfully consider the heroes that lived before Agamemnon.'

Whitman and Longfellow each in his own way set out to write America's founding myth, to tell Americans how to think of themselves. Longfellow's way was the old way, that of the historian or biographer. Whitman's was the new way, that of the poet and autobiographer.

Sometimes, *Song of Myself* reads like a riddle.

My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff cut from the woods,

No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,

I have no chair, no church, no philosophy,

I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, exchange...

What am I?

My answer would be that he is both himself and America, each defining and defined by the other. The only way in which he could write about America was to write about himself.

*Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor
feed on the spectres in books,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.*

Throughout this long poem (which you think while you are reading it could go on forever, which of course, since he is America as well as himself, it could) he insists on two things: everything is contained in the present and everyone is everyone else.

*I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.*

In this eternal present and in his constant reference to other selves (so that a song of myself becomes a song of everyone) he seems in a strange way to anticipate the way films work. Whole stanzas read sometimes like screenplays, describing what we see on the screen and from whose point of view.

*The little one sleeps in its cradle,
I lift the gauze and look a long time, and silently brush away flies with my hand.
The youngster and the red-faced girl turn aside up the bushy hill,
I peeringly view them from the top.
The suicide sprawls on the bloody floor of the bedroom,
I witness the corpse with its dabbled hair, I note where the pistol has fallen.*

The stanza continues with a long list, line by line, of what might be a series of cuts from one scene to another, describing what we see and what we hear.

*The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders,
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the
granite floor;
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,
The flap of the curtain'd litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his passage to the centre of the
crowd...*

It is as if, not wanting to slow things down by using too many words, which would lose the sense of immediacy he wants to create (no talk of beginning or end, everything happening simultaneously), he uses as few words as possible to let us see in our imagination what a film-maker would simply show us. The sixty-six lines of what, on the biblical model, we might call Chapter 15, consist of similar brief descriptions of visual images.

*The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready.
The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel...*

And so on, creating the kind of effect more familiar now in documentary films than in poetry. There are instances too of more extended scenes in which the details Whitman picks out are exactly those telling details of sight and sound that a film-maker would use.

*The runaway slave came to my house and stopt outside,
I heard his motions crackling the twigs of the woodpile,
Through the swung half-door of the kitchen I saw him limpsy and weak,
And went where he sat on a log and led him in and assured him,
And brought water and fill'd a tub for his sweated body and bruis'd feet,
And gave him a room that enter'd from my own, and gave him some coarse clean clothes,
And remember perfectly well his revolving eyes and his awkwardness,
And remember putting plasters on the galls of his neck and ankles;
He staid with me a week before he was recuperated and pass'd north,
I had him sit next me at table, my fire-lock lean'd in the corner.*

In an essay about the too high regard in which he felt the classics of English literature were sometimes held by Americans, Whitman wrote, 'We have not enough confidence in our own judgment; we forget that God has given the American mind powers of analysis and acuteness superior to those possessed by any other nation on earth.' If it had not been for Whitman's ability to write screenplays before cinema had been invented, I might have been inclined to question that.

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